AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN THE FICTIONAL WORKS OF FIVE CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN WRITERS

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PREFACE

In this dissertation, I shall have as my objective an analysis of the theme of alienation in certain short stories and novels by five Southern writers: Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. I first became interested in this subject while teaching two courses at Southwestern State College, Weatherford, Oklahoma. One course was entitled "Literature of the South," and the other was an American authors class dealing with Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. My interest was further heightened later in English 5210 (Literature and Religion) at Oklahoma State University, taught by Dr. Harry M. Campbell. I decided that a detailed study and analysis would be interesting and profitable.

I want to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Harry M. Campbell, my major adviser, for his invaluable assistance and meaningful suggestions throughout this study; and to my other committee members --Drs. Clinton C. Keeler, William R. Wray, and Leon Munson--for their helpful criticism. I also want to thank my wife, Johnnie Faye, and our daughter, Shila, who--each in her own way--have been a constant source of inspiration and encouragement throughout my years of graduate study.

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CHAPTER I

EXISTENTIALISM, THE THEME OF ALIENATION, AND CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN LITERATURE

The mass of men lead lives
of quiet desperation.
--Henry Thoreau

Existentialism, though the term is modern, is an age-old subject; it was first handled significantly as a theme by the three great tragedians--Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides--and by the author of the book of Job. It is also a subject which has been treated by many of the most important writers of the twentieth century. When referring to existentialism, however, we must keep in mind that there are many varieties of this philosophy of life. Basically, it is concerned with human existence--and no other kind.[1] The existentialist says that the life of every man is marked by irreparable losses, by frustration. He conceives of man as a seeker, and he says that seeking is good. In fact, the existentialist denies that man desires happiness or that he desires even well-being. He says that happiness is impossible to attain. The existentialist accepts anguish and anxiety as a way of life, and he seeks to help man avoid the wrong attitude about his sufferings. The existential thinker protests against forces that destroy freedom.

In an effort to help man to overcome the conformity which results when freedom is destroyed, he tries to help him to face the basic issues of life--how to use his freedom, how to obtain the courage to accept death, how to find self. He also encourages each individual to agonize over his problems. By embracing such an approach, man does not necessarily arrive at solutions; but he comes to a fuller awareness of the human predicament. The significance of such a philosophy is that it motivates man to engage in a spiritual struggle which, it is hoped, will ultimately lead him to a better understanding of himself.

The existentialist does not regard man as a thing; he is important as a person. It is thus impossible to disregard the individual's concerns. In a search for truth and meaning, the whole man is therefore involved--which means that his emotions, will, intellect, and reason have all been engaged. It is only through this type of involvement that man can clarify what he wants to be. But it is also important to mention that man is contradictory; he is at war with himself, as David Roberts states in Existentialism and Religious Belief:

> He is free, yes; he is conscious of responsibility, of remorse, of guilt for what he has done. Yet his whole life is enmeshed within a natural and social order which profoundly and inevitably determines him, making him what in fact he is. He is finite, but he is capable of rising above the limits of any particular situation through his action or imagination. His life is bounded in time and is moving forward toward death; yet he has a strange kinship with eternity because he can rise above the present and see its relation to the past and the future. From top to bottom, as it were, man is a contradictory creature.[2]

There can thus be no simple solutions for a being that is fundamentally

ambiguous; there can be no simple answers.

Although there are several varieties of existentialism, the two basic types are the atheistic and Christian. Jean-Paul Sartre, who has been called the "Father of Modern Existentialism," expresses theories which are representative of those who call themselves atheistic existentialists. We find in a study of his philosophical works that Sartre's creed is, "Man can count on no one but himself: he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets for himself on this earth." Sartre claims to be a tough-minded optimist. However, he believes that man is identical with anguish, which is not an optimistic doctrine. He embraces the theory of "dreadful freedom, which means that even though man does not like to make a choice, he has no recourse in the matter: he must make a choice. After all, man does not have a god on whom to depend--according to Sartre--so it is up to him. In short, man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. He says, too, that there is no possibility of passing the unhappy state. He believes that man has to create everything for himself without the possibility of assistance and that he is wholly responsible for the things that happen to him. Sartre's first philosophical move, then, is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him. On the other hand, however, Sartre feels that it is very distressing that God does not exist. Man is thus forlorn; and forlornness and anguish go together.

To Sartre and the atheistic existentialists, the major common value is honesty with self--something which is not easy to achieve and which causes much anxiety. Sartre's "man of good faith" is a person who understands and accepts the responsibility involved in his human condition. The "man of bad faith" is the one who for one reason or another tries to disregard his responsibility. If he does so, he is not being true to himself, and he is in danger of losing his individuality; in addition, other people are always involved in the bad results. The man of good faith considers an action on the basis of what would happen if everyone performed the action. And even though a choice is involved, he engages himself in the task of living with others as well as himself. The atheistic existentialist nevertheless believes that man resides in a hostile universe that has not been created for him; he feels abandoned in an environment that he cannot understand. He feels as if he has lost control but that still he must struggle to attain or regain his identity. The plight of man as conceived by Sartre is epitomized in the character Orestes in "The Flies," one of Sartre's dramatic works: "You are not in your own home, intruder; you are a foreign body in the world, like a splinter in flesh, or a poacher in his lordship's forest."[3]

"The Flies" is Sartre's existential version of Aeschylus' Oresteia. Sartre has changed the play by making man more important than the gods because there is no God, according to his belief. Zeus is like a Fascist dictator in this play; he is a fake. Orestes asserts his freedom, and he says that Electra is also free. Zeus says that Orestes

is bragging because Apollo is protecting him--and that Orestes is as lonely as a leper, doomed to be the most cowardly of murderers. Orestes tells Zeus that he is not the king of man because he blundered in making man free. Zeus counters with the answer that he gave Orestes freedom so that Orestes might serve him. Sartre is developing through Orestes his idea of dreadful freedom when he has Orestes say about the people of Argos, "They're free; and human life begins on the far side of despair" (Casebook, p. 50). At the end of the play, Orestes is going off to be a "king without a kingdom, without subjects" (Casebook, p. 54). He is demonstrating Sartre's viewpoint that man is condemned to freedom. He believes that comfort and freedom are incompatible--that only slaves have the privilege of an easy life because other people make all their painful decisions. Orestes is probably also speaking for Sartre when he says, "The heavier it is to carry the better pleased I shall be; for that burden is my freedom" (Casebook, p. 39). If we can accept the view that Sartre is using Orestes as a persona, there is reason to believe that Sartre regrets his views. A good example is this speech: "That was the last time, the last, I saw my youth. Suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me and swept me off my feet. Nature sprang back" (Casebook, p. 49).

Albert Camus is another of the French existentialists. As Sartre has his "man of good faith," Camus has his "man of the absurd." Camus acknowledges man's lonely condition in the silence of the

universe. He feels that man should reject despair and live the best he can; he must abandon any illusions he might have. For Camus, the main symbol of human existence is Sisyphus. Sisyphus is best known for the punishment he received for telling Aegina's father that Zeus had raped her; Sisyphus' plight is to roll a huge stone up a hill in Hades, only to have it roll down again--which Camus sees as a symbol of man's existence. But it is important to notice that Sisyphus endured and also found some joy in his task. Camus' "The Guest" bears out some of the ideas to be found in his philosophical works. At the beginning of the story, we learn that Daru, the schoolmaster, has been born in the little village near which the story takes place; everywhere else, he feels exiled. Balducci, an old gendarme, forces Daru into an uncomfortable position: he leaves an Arab prisoner with Daru and orders him to take the prisoner to Tinguit to prison the next day. Instead, Daru gives the Arab a thousand francs and food. However, the prisoner does not know what to do with his freedom; and either out of fear or gratitude, he goes toward the prison--a sign that Daru is doomed. Ironically, Daru has treated the Arab kindly; he has fulfilled his duty only to be condemned by the Arab's brothers, who think that Daru has turned over their brother to the authorities. Each man has an ethical decision to make, and at the end of the story, Daru experiences a feeling of alienation which is foreign to him: "Daru looked at the sky, the plateau, and, beyond, the invisible lands stretching all the way to the sea. In this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone"

(Casebook, p. 38). Daru has done the best he can in facing a disaster, but inevitably it is futile. His actions have shown his feeling of involvement with mankind, but it is almost as if he is Sisyphus rolling his stone.

The approach of the Christian existentialist, on the other hand, may be represented by Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian. Even though Kierkegaard believes that human life begins on the "far side of despair," and even though the world seems absurd to him, it is possible for man to take the "leap of faith." He speaks about the "highest spiritual truth," which should be the aim of all men. But it is a truth which can be found as the individual strives to know God. As a Christian existentialist, he believes that man can never actually know God's purpose; however, it still exists and man should establish values of life in accordance with what he thinks God's purpose to be. He says that to honor every man, "absolutely every man, is the truth, and this is what it is to fear God and love one's neighbor." He is in the tradition of Tertullian, who said, "Credo quia impossibile est" ("I believe because it is impossible"). Like the atheistic existentialists, he accepts anguish as a way of life. This anguish comes partially from a realization that man can never be sure that his supposedly honest actions are wrongly based on the temptation of evil instead of rightly on his intuition of the divine. Kierkegaard at one time claimed that if God were to offer him the good things of the world in the right hand

and the bad things of the world in the left hand, he would take the left hand. He believes that man communes with God only through a lonely, agonizing experience of solitude. However, Kierkegaard's followers are fundamentally different from Sartre's.

Whereas the atheistic existentialist has the alternative of destroying himself or facing the universe alone, the Christian existentialist may make a wager about God--or a "leap of faith" toward God. Also, whereas the atheistic existentialist, believing God is dead, creates his own deity from and of himself, the Christian existentialist believes that God is merely absent (rationally incomprehensible) and thus accepts Him in faith. For Sartre and his followers, an atheistic acceptance of freedom and despair can serve to create the only answer for man since God is dead. But for the Christian existentialist, man can move toward the point that he is willing to accept faith in God after he realizes more deeply his sense of human need and human failure. For Kierkegaard, the mythic symbol of the absurd man is to be found in the story of Abraham in the Bible. Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac, and he is willing to do so for the glory of God. He is Kierkegaard's "knight of faith." He cannot perceive God rationally, but he rises above universals to act without questioning God. The individual thus becomes paradoxically superior to the universal because he has acted not by reason but by utter faith--that is, by virtue of the absurd. However, from the standpoint of God, Abraham's sacrifice would not be absurd; God would look upon it as a testing of faith.

Standing between the two positions--atheistic and Christian--is Miguel de Unamuno, a Spanish writer. We may say that he is atheist with head and Christian with heart. He would like to believe, but for him it is impossible. He says basically the same thing about God as Sartre does; but whereas Sartre evidently does not try to believe in God, Unamuno says that he cannot believe in God or an afterlife even though he tries. In Unamuno's "Saint Emmanuel the Good, Martyr," we have a symbolical study of Unamuno himself. It is a very moving story of man's search for faith and the impossibility, in this instance, of finding it. In the story, Unamuno vividly reveals his honest feelings about cosmic loneliness through his characterization of Don Emmanuel.

The story is told by Angela Carballino, a young girl and later a woman in Don Emmanuel's parish at Valverde de Lucerna. Only two people in the parish, Angela and her brother, Lazarus, know that Don Emmanuel does not have a personal belief in God. The priest does much good, however; and his people look upon him as a saint. However, Don Emmanuel is redeemed as a person because of his sympathetic interest in all of his people, and by his refusal to destroy their faith. His people are poor, and religion is all they have. However, he is not saying "Let them have their religion, and we won't have difficulty with them." He believes that they should be allowed to live with their illusion--if it is an illusion--because it makes them happy. Since there is as much evidence for belief as against, Unamuno is thus taking the gloomier side. Ironically, even though both Don Emmanuel

and Lazarus profess not to believe, Angela says of them,

> I am of the opinion that Don Emmanuel the Good, my Don Emmanuel, and my brother, too, died believing they did not believe, but that, without believing in their belief, they actually believed, with resignation and in desolation. (Casebook, pp. 112-113)

This thought is associated with what T. S. Eliot once said about Baudelaire: "The very violence of his rejection points out the closeness of his believing"; when man is so violent about his unbelief, he is sometimes on the fringe of becoming a believer.

We have seen through a consideration of these authors the distinction between those who are known as atheistic existentialists and those who are known as Christian existentialists. Each type of existentialist puts much stress on freedom, which can lead him to the point of either belief or unbelief. According to Roberts,

> One group is trying to make an atheistic acceptance of freedom and despair serve as the only possible answer. The other group is finding that the implications of human responsibility lead inescapably to a revival of religious faith. A deepened sense of human need and failure can lead toward readiness for faith in God. A keen recognition of our inability to heal ourselves through strenuous moral effort or through sustained theoretical knowledge can awaken us to the meaning of divine forgiveness. But on the other hand, the awareness of freedom may lead to the conviction that man must make himself self-sufficient, self-authenticating. It may prompt us to feel that dependence on God is no more than a form of slavery. It may cause us to take our last stand on a Stoic courage which is able to stare at emptiness, tragedy, and death unafraid. Thus existentialism has produced both the most penetrating forms of Christian faith and the most nihilistic types of human self-assertion.[4]

The fictional works of the writers who have been chosen for this study

may be used as meaningful examples of both philosophies, although the moral and spiritual implications of their presentation of alienated characters vary from author to author.

Even though the philosophy of existentialism defies exact definition, there are certain distinguishing characteristics that are always mentioned in discussions of the philosophy. One of these is alienation, a concept which has been explored to a great extent during the last few years. Sartre's Orestes is a prime example of a man who is condemned to freedom and thus to alienation. Also, when Camus' Daru feels alone even in surroundings he has previously loved, he is giving voice to the plight of existential man. And Kierkegaard's belief that man and God find each other only through the agony and loneliness of solitude is another example of the importance of alienation as a distinguishing characteristic of existentialism. Then, finally, Unamuno's Don Emmanuel is still another good example of man's despair as he meditates on cosmic loneliness.

The alienated man has indeed made his way into the works of many contemporary writers. He is a person who is not the center of his own universe. He is unhappy because of his estrangement from himself, others, and God. To review all the scholarship about the theme under discussion would be difficult; however, an attempt should be made to point out at least some of the thoughts that have been presented. For instance, Karl Menninger in The Human Mind has said that the lonely or alienated personality is one that suffers the effects of several prob-

lems: the feeling of neglect and thus a lack of appreciation, a tendency to desire perfection on the part of himself and others, a sense of inferiority, preoccupation with self, and self-criticism.[5] Another writer, Gregory Zilboorg, a scientist, indicates that alienated people seek something that they cannot really identify and something that they are never able to find; the reason for their fruitless search is that they feel annihilated in the real world.[6] And Joseph Gold indicates the scope of the theme when he says that "modern man is characterized by his awareness of his detachment, his isolation, his alienation from nature and traditional human values."[7] In addition, the thesis of The Lonely Crowd by David Riesman is that American loneliness is a recent phenomenon of a highly industrialized consumer society in which each man, lacking self-sufficiency, fears that he will be ridiculed if he is different from the crowd, and hence spends his days in quaking and uncertain efforts to conform.[8] Still another commentator on the theme, Elizabeth Bieman, who finds a Renaissance example of alienation in King Lear, says that the "mood remains the fashionable theme of the times. Alienation, estrangement, angst, loneliness, dread: call it what you will, ascribe it to causes psychological, economic, sociological, or metaphysical."[9] And Thornton Wilder says that Americans in general suffer from the disease of alienation because they cannot find an identity in their surroundings.[10] One of the most meaningful thoughts on the subject was advanced by the editor of Current Opinion many years ago; he said that a feeling of alienation

> springs from a painful sense of separation from those with whom one has a right to feel a sense of intellectual or spiritual kinship, whether they be members of a particular group, or whether we have in mind the whole of humanity or the world or even God. . . . The feeling is one of homelessness of the soul, of being an alien in the sphere wherein one belongs.[11]

Nathan A. Scott, Jr., in an article entitled "The Broken Center: A Definition of the Crisis of Values in Modern Literature," says that

> all the great literature of the modern period might be said to be a literature of metaphysical isolation, for the modern artist--and this is perhaps the fundamental truth about him--has experienced a great loneliness, the kind of loneliness that is known by the soul when it has to undertake, unaided by ministries either of Church or of culture, the adventure of discovering the fundamental principles of meaning. (Casebook, p. 169)

But the specific quality of alienation in an individual work, however much it may be illuminated by existential philosophers, is ultimately best understood in terms of its immediate literary context. Literary examples will therefore be used later in this study to enforce the significance of the theme of alienation.

Nowhere has this theme of alienation been more vividly portrayed than in contemporary Southern literature, and my purpose here is to relate the particular theme of alienation in the characters of five contemporary Southern writers of fiction to the more general theme of existentialism. The plight of the Southern characters whom I will study is that of the typical existential hero--regardless of time or place.

It is important for us to see this theme in relation to the setting in which it has been fostered. In an essay entitled "Aspects of the South-

ern Philosophy," Richard M. Weaver describes the typical American as follows:

> He had surpassed the people of every other country in amassing wealth, in rearing institutions, and in getting his values recognized, for better or for worse, throughout the world. While he is often chided for his complacent belief in progress, it must be confessed that events have conspired to encourage that belief, and to make progress appear the central theme of his history. In all sorts of senses he has never ceased to go forward; and to much of the world America has come to symbolize that future in which man will be invariably successful both in combat with nature and in his struggle with the problems of human organization. This adds up to saying that in the eyes of the world as well as in his own eyes the typical American stands for success unlimited.[12]

However, Weaver goes on to say that it is at this point that the "typical American stands for success unlimited" that the Southerner cannot be classified as an American:

> He [the Southerner] has had to taste a bitter cup which no American is supposed to know anything about, the cup of defeat. Thus in a world where the American is supposed to be uniformly successful, he exists as an anomalous American. Much of the Southerner's nonconformity and intransigence results from the real difficulty of adjusting a psychology which has been nourished upon this experience to the predominating national psychology, which has been nourished upon uninterrupted success.[13]

Even though Weaver is speaking basically of material success, he provides us with a good reason for the Southerner's feeling of alienation. There is always a direct association between what we think of in terms of material success and spiritual (or perhaps <u>mental</u>) happiness. Charles H. Bohner explains the feeling of alienation in the South by saying that the South has drawn into itself, concentrating on

its originality, because it has feelings of hostility and isolation toward the culture of other areas which surround it. As a result, it has become even more attached to its own region--its own families, its own past, its own small-town relationships.[14] This feeling of alienation is, of course, not limited to people who live in the South or to the characters who are portrayed by Southern writers. It is a feeling of all ages and all times; in fact, as we study the alienation of Southerners, we may become better acquainted with all Americans--and thus with man in general.

The five Southern writers--Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor--who will be discussed in this dissertation belong to a huge company of twentieth-century writers who develop the theme of alienation in their works. But as I have already said, their approaches vary a great deal. The authors will be discussed in individual chapters, the order of which will be determined by date of birth: Wolfe (1900), Warren (1905), Miss Welty (1909), Mrs. McCullers (1917), and Miss O'Connor (1925).

In each of the following chapters, I shall present background information essential to an understanding of the author, followed by a review of scholarship and an analysis of the use of the theme of alienation in selected representative works. Some of the sub-themes to be discussed are the following: the alienation of environment, the alienation caused by physical handicaps, the alienation of childhood, the

alienation of the Negro, the alienation of name-calling, and alienation from God.

Alienation in all areas of life has evidently always been a significant problem to man. We can better understand and appreciate man by considering some of the seemingly insoluble problems of alienation which beset him. At the same time insight may be gained on the mind and art of the writers through whose works the attitudes toward alienation will be traced.

END NOTES

[1]The material on existentialism (from pp. 1-10 of this chapter) is a synthesis--unless indicated by additional end notes--of several sources: (a) class notes from English 5210--Literature and Religion--taught by Dr. Harry M. Campbell during the fall of 1968; (b) readings for English 5210 from William V. Spanos, A Casebook of Existentialism (New York, 1966); (c) Hazel E. Barnes, The Literature of Possibility (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1959); (d) Ernest Breisach, Introduction to Modern Existentialism (New York, 1962); and (e) David E. Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief, ed. Roger Hazelton (New York, 1959).

[2]Roberts, p. 8.

[3]In A Casebook of Existentialism, ed. William V. Spanos (New York, 1966), p. 48--hereafter referred to in text as Casebook with appropriate page numbers.

[4]Roberts, pp. 10-11.

[5](New York, 1930), p. 75.

[6]"Loneliness: Its Relation to Narcissism," The Atlantic, CLXI (January, 1938), 50.

[7]"Dickens' Exemplary Aliens: Bumble the Beadle and Fagin the Fence," Mosaic, II, No. 1 (Fall, 1968), 78.

[8](New York, 1953).

[9]"The Alienation of Lear: King Lear, Act Two, Scene Four," Mosaic, II, No. 1 (Fall, 1968), 110.

[10]"The American Loneliness," The Atlantic, CXC (August, 1952), 67.

[11]"The Loneliness of the Modern Man," Current Opinion, LXXII (May, 1922), 670.

[12]Southern Renascence, eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore, 1953), p. 24.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1965), p. 20.

CHAPTER II

THOMAS WOLFE: "A STRANGER AND ALONE"

Naked and alone we came into exile.
--Thomas Wolfe

In Thomas Wolfe: An Introduction and Interpretation, Richard Walser indicates that it is not simple to present Wolfe's biography because there was not just one Thomas Wolfe. Walser develops the idea that there were at least

> five facets of the man. Wolfe was the fabulous man compacted of all the legends; he was the Eugene-George semi-autobiographical hero of the four novels; he was the many-charactered person his friends knew; he was the man he thought himself to be and so wrote himself down in his letters to correspondents; and finally he was the undiscoverable person underneath the other faces.[1]

We should add to Walser's categories another, which in a sense can be considered in a discussion of any one of these five facets of the man: the spiritual isolationist. Despite certain facts--the way in which he sometimes has his characters call out to God, his being dubbed as one who had a "Presbyterian conscience,"[2] and his funeral service being held at the First Presbyterian Church of Asheville[3]--there is no concrete reason to believe that Wolfe had a personal faith in God. At any rate, there seems to be evident in his works, in his handling of the

theme of alienation, a consistent belief in the tenets expressed by atheistic existentialists.

There has been much disagreement about Wolfe's place in American literature; however, his few works have made an important impact on American letters. His novels and short stories reveal the type of person Wolfe was (despite Walser's difficulty in describing the one man): vociferous, verbose, alienated, dejected--but personable. Of all American novelists, Wolfe is reputed to be the most heavily autobiographical, but he at one time said that "every creative act is in one way or another autobiographical."[4] Along this line of thought, Wolfe shares one experience with all his principal characters: an intense feeling of alienation. In a philosophical essay, "The Anatomy of Loneliness," Wolfe says:

> I have lived about as solitary a life as a modern man can have. . . . The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central fact of human existence.[5]

And this feeling is expressed in all the artist's works. A Wolfeian type of character thus evolves: he is different from his peers in appearance, actions, and intellectual endowment; he is doomed to be isolated because he is in every way different from everyone else; he shrinks from close personal relationships. In a letter to his mother in 1927, Wolfe bears out this feeling: "Strangers we were borne alone into a strange world. We live in it . . . and we are without ever knowing anyone."[6]

The themes which he develops in all his works are also expressive of the main current of alienation, the feeling one has of being "lost--lost--and alone." He is concerned about escape (the artistic individual longs to escape confinement of family and its attitudes); search (he looks for a father, a mother, or a body of beliefs to which he can adhere); and time (he seeks to define and control time in order to recapture the past). He is also concerned about certain motifs. Particularly in Look Homeward, Angel, we find the motif "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door," which is associated with the failure of man to prevent the loss of time and innocence. In short, Wolfe desires to be able to know and interpret life, and he agonizes over his inability to do so.

Many critics have commented on Wolfe's use of the theme of alienation in a general manner. For example, W. M. Frohock says that the presence of the theme of alienation has lately been a sign of tragedy but that "the exaggerated feeling of man's loneliness which permeates [Wolfe's] work, and which conditions his whole somewhat neurotic vision of life, prevents that vision from being a truly tragic one."[7] On the other hand, Lois Hartley says that Wolfe's statement is meaningful because he has treated well the theme of alienation, which is "highly characteristic of modern American literature."[8] Wolfe's use of this theme may be seen as the important organizing principle of his work; however, C. Hugh Holman believes that after Look Homeward, Angel, Wolfe failed as a writer and that he was still

looking for some kind of organizing principle. In a highly speculative statement, Holman indicates that "had he lived he would perhaps have found an organizing principle within which his works could find [illegible] unity."[9]

The critical ideas that have been cited cast some light on Wolfe's use of the theme of alienation, and still other critics have made references to it; but no one has analyzed to any great extent the works in which the theme appears. We shall therefore study three of the writer's representative works, one short story and two novels, in order to determine how he handles the alienated character. In this study Wolfe will evolve as a man and writer who was overcome by the powers of Nothingness. Both his characters and he evidently found themselves unable to take Kierkegaard's "leap of faith." They are most like Unamuno, who wanted to believe but still found it impossible.

The short story to be studied is "Gulliver," which appears in the collection From Death to Morning (1935). Even though this story is not one of Wolfe's best works, it is a meaningful one because of the biographical insight which it furnishes. In fact, it may be referred to as a "strictly autobiographical story." From a literary standpoint, "Gulliver" is strangely constructed. It cannot correctly be called a short story because it begins as a philosophical essay and ends with a short one-act play.

The title, of course, is an allusion to Swift's Gulliver's Travels,

and Gulliver's experience among the Lilliputians is the main frame of reference of the story. Through the use of this frame of reference, Wolfe develops a feeling of alienation which comes upon a man of "six feet six" who lives in a world of "five feet eight." He is strange and lonely, and he is a giant who

> is earthy, of the earth, like every man. Shaped from the same clay, breathing the same air, fearing the same fears, and hoping the same hopes as all men in the world, he walks the thronging streets of life alone--those streets that swarm forever with their tidal floods of five feet eight. He walks those streets forever a stranger, and alone, having no other earth, no other life, no other door than this, and feeding upon it with an eye of fire, a heart of intolerable hunger and desire. . . .[10]

In order to make more poignant this feeling of alienation, Wolfe uses a series of contrasts to show that no other person suffers as he does. As an example, he says that it is an entirely different thing to be a legendary giant of two miles high because the legendary giant

> lives in his own world and needs and wants no other: he takes a mountain at a stride, drinks off a river in one gulp of thirst . . . , [uses] a shelf of mountain as a table, a foothill as a stool, and the carcasses of whole roast oxen as the dainty morsels of his feast. (Death, p. 135)

And he says that it is another thing to be an eight-foot giant or a two-foot dwarf in the circus: "they live together in the world of freaks, and this world seems to them to have been framed inevitably by nature. . . . it is another door he cannot enter" (Death, pp. 136-137).

Throughout the story Wolfe piles up examples to develop the torturous feelings of alienation that he has experienced. He is so con-

stantly the butt of jokes that he begins to hate himself, and this makes him more withdrawn and isolated than ever:

> And this feeling of shame and self-abasement of his flesh is the worst thing that a tall man knows, the greatest iniquity that his spirit suffers. For it is during this period that he comes to hate the body that has been given him by birth and nature, and by this act of hatred, he degrades himself and dishonors man. For this loathing for his body is like the ignoble hatred that a man may have for a loyal and ugly friend whose destiny is coherent with his own, and who must endure. (Death, pp. 139-140)

About the middle of the story, Wolfe says that for the tall, alienated man, there is no change in the formula of life. Every experience of life ends in someone's stale joke about tall people, a superintending lack of understanding on the parts of the hearers, and the tall person's feeling of dejection and isolation. From this point on, the piece is a re-enactment of a bar scene in play form. The characters are The City's Child and The Tall Stranger. The questions asked by The City's Child are typical of those Wolfe has faced all his life: "I guess yuh got to sleep all doubled up, heh?" and "Wat d'yuh do about clo'es? I guess yuh gotta have everyt'ing made to ordeh, huh?" (Death, p. 148) His point is that for the tall man life is made up of a formula; however, for Wolfe, rather ironically, it is a formula that shows him

> the barren unity of life, and that finally, curiously, in a poignant and explicable fashion, gave him a faith in man, a belief in man's fundamental goodness, kindliness, and humanity, as nothing else on earth can do. (Death, p. 149)

We see at the end of "Gulliver," then, a reaction which might seem inconsistent. Does happiness come from agony? It would seem,

instead, that Wolfe is accepting the existential realization that happiness is impossible to obtain but that anguish and anxiety are a way of life. It is significant that he has come to an awareness of man's goodness, kindliness, and humanity with no mention of God in the scheme of things. This story actually shows only one aspect of Wolfe's alienation, which in his case resulted in his producing alienated characters; but it provides us with the realization that for him the universe is basically hostile. His aloneness makes it impossible for him to live a satisfying life. In this story and in others, we see the truth of what Pamela Hansford Johnson has said about Wolfe: "He knew that we are imprisoned in the shell of our flesh, and that we cannot speak the words which would set us free; that mankind is hopelessly inarticulate . . . "[11]

The first novel to be discussed, Look Homeward, Angel (1929), is also Wolfe's first published work. Anyone who is acquainted with the outline of Wolfe's life realizes that the major events of this novel are autobiographical--intentionally or unintentionally. The work is a huge one and is therefore difficult to summarize, but a short plot summary will be advantageous to the ensuing discussion.

The story deals with the first twenty years of the life of Eugene Gant (or Thomas Wolfe). Eugene, born in 1900 (which happens to be the year of Wolfe's birth) in Altamont, Old Catawba, is the eighth child of W. O. and Eliza Gant. His parents do not get along well

with each other because of different temperaments. Whereas Mrs. Gant is a very practical--even mercenary--woman, Mr. Gant, a stonecutter, is a romantic, poetry-spouting man. Mr. Gant is also inclined to drink too much, and this does not please his wife.

Eugene, like his brothers and sisters, is caught up in his parent's' struggles. As a result of not knowing to whom he owes the more allegiance, he grows up a little "odd" and awkward. He is persecuted not only at home but also at school because everyone with whom he associates senses his strangeness. He never learns to live a normal, happy-go-lucky life as a child. When Eugene is still a youngster, his plight in life is made even worse because his mother and father go their separate ways. His mother opens the Dixieland, a boarding house; and his father stays at the family home. Eugene goes with his mother, but all of the children move restlessly between the two houses. The environment is not the type that builds well-adjusted children.

Between his twelfth and sixteenth years, Eugene attends a private school operated by the Leonards. Mrs. Leonard has an important impact on the boy because she introduces him to good literature and encourages him to write. When he is sixteen, he goes to Pulpit Hill to attend the state university. He is very unhappy in the beginning because he is taunted by the other students, but he soon becomes a "big man on campus." Sandwiched into these college years are his summertime love affair with Laura James, his mother's boarder who later jilts him; and the death of his favorite brother, Ben, during an influenza

epidemic.

The underlying tone of the book, that of sadness as a result of alienation, is set in the statement of theme before Chapter 1:

> . . . a stone, a leaf, an unfound door; of a stone, a leaf, a door. And of all the forgotten faces.
>
> Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.
>
> Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?
>
> O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When?
>
> O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.[12]

This passage gives us the essence of the book; and the sub-title, "The Story of a Buried Life," makes more emphatic the search that is to be unfolded in the work. The key words here are unfound, alone, exile, prison, stranger, and lost lane-end into heaven; and all of them are words that point to man's alienated feeling. We are reminded of the Wordsworthian idea of the child's being born "trailing clouds of glory." And for Wolfe, part of his unhappiness comes as a result of his inability to restore to his life the bliss in which he thinks man must have existed prior to his earthly life or at least prior to his cognizance of an earthly life. This, then, is the nature of his earthly life: he searches for meaning, for anything--"the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door"--which

will make his restoration complete and his alienation nonexistent.

It is also significant for us to notice that the search is not merely an earthly one; it is spiritual, too. In the light of his yearning for a faith in a higher being, and in the light of his lack of a religious faith, we must also see that he is looking for and trying to identify with the Heavenly Father. The "lost lane-end into heaven" signifies this. It is possible, then, that the main organizing principle of the novel is Wolfe's development of the theme of alienation. As we analyze this theme, we will thus become better acquainted with Wolfe's mind.

Angel is a big book which is packed with meaning, and there is hardly a page in which the theme of alienation is not either implied or stated; in addition, each character is faced with his own struggle with alienation. However, since Eugene is the protagonist of the story, we will look primarily at Wolfe's characterization of him. In order to see Eugene in the proper perspective, however, we must first of all see him as a true child of his parents. If his home life had been more stable, there is a good possibility that he would have been able to cope with his feelings of dissatisfaction and even depression. But his father and mother are also both faced with problems that they find insurmountable. We learn early in the book that Mr. Gant, first of all, has never realized his true potential, which is symbolized by his desire to create a perfect angel's head: "These are blind steps and gropings of our exile" (Angel, p. 4). The first time he meets his future wife, Eliza, he gives vent to his feelings of lostness when he says,"I'm a stranger in

a strange land" (Angel, p. 10). This is true on two levels: He is a Yankee in the Southland, and he is also a stranger in the universe. Later Wolfe reflects that Gant is not only a stranger in a strange land but that he is "among people who would always be alien to him" (Angel, p. 19). These are actually just the general outlines of his alienation, however. Because of his inability to live with himself as a result of his own feeling of lostness, he at times makes life unbearable for everyone else. He rants and raves, drinks too much, and in general upsets the equilibrium of his family.

But whereas Mr. Gant tries to escape his problems by divorcing himself from them, Mrs. Gant uses an entirely different means: she loses herself in get-rich projects. However, there is a tendency to dismiss her as a silly, self-centered woman unless we realize the magnitude of her suffering:

> And what Eliza endured in pain and fear and glory no one knew. He [Mr. Gant] breathed over them all his hot lion-breath of desire and fury: when he was drunk, her white pursed face, and all the slow octopal movements of her temper, stirred him to red madness. She was at such times in real danger from his assault: she had to lock herself away from him. . . . Over the wife, over the mother, the woman of property, who was like a man, walked slowly forth. (Angel, pp. 15-16)

We must also keep in mind that she gives birth to nine children within eleven years. And at the same time, she must endure Gant's long periods of drunkenness, her children's childhood diseases, and the difficulties involved in operating a household for so many people. As a result of her unhappy married life, she clings to anyone or anything

which will give her security. She knows when she is pregnant with Eugene that this will be the last child she will ever have:

> Eliza, big with the last child she would ever have, went over the final hedge of terror and desperation and, in the opulent darkness of the summer night, as she lay flat in her bed with her hands upon her swollen belly, she began to design her life for the years when she would cease to be a mother. (Angel, p. 17)

A part of this design seems to be her tendency to overprotect Eugene. This tendency is shown in her refusal to have his hair cut until he is over three years old. To do so is to give up her security, her baby. And what is worse is that she and Eugene sleep together until the boy is almost thirteen years old. These two experiences alone are enough to create a strange, introverted child.

It is in his development of the character Eugene, however, that Wolfe best handles the theme of alienation in the novel. This is probably true because he knows Eugene best of all since there is reason to believe, as I have previously stated, that Wolfe himself is Eugene. This idea is nevertheless not directly in keeping with what Wolfe says in "The Story of a Novel":

> I can truthfully say that I do not believe that there is a single page of it that is true to fact. . . . Although it was not true to fact, it was true to the general experience of the town I came from and I hope, of course, to the general experience of all men living.[13]

But as I have mentioned throughout this study, there is a strong relationship between the work and the creator. And Wolfe's assumption that it is true to the "general experience of the town" probably gives

away more than he intended.

We have already noticed that Eugene's character is determined to a great extent by his surroundings. He is what David Riesman (The Lonely Crowd) would classify as an inner-directed child. Even though Riesman is not referring to Eugene, he gives an excellent sketch of the boy in this passage:

> The fate of many inner-directed children is loneliness in and outside the home. Both may be places for hazing, persecution, misunderstanding. No adult intervenes on behalf of the lonely or hazed child to proffer sympathy, ask questions, or give advice. . . . While adults seldom intervene to guide and help the lonely child, neither do they tell him that he should be part of a crowd and must have fun.[14]

The feelings of the inner-directed child discussed in the above passage are very well fitted to Eugene. Even his mother is able to sense that she has given birth to an odd, alienated child:

> The hour after his birth she had looked in his dark eyes and had seen something that would brood there eternally, she knew, unfathomable wells of remote and intangible loneliness: she knew that in her dark and sorrowful womb a stranger had come to life, fed by the lost communications of eternity, his own ghost, haunter of his own house, lonely to himself and to the world. O lost. (Angel, p. 66)

At the time he starts to school, Eugene's detached personality affects him even more than before. All the other children think that he is queer. After he learns to read, he allows himself to be wafted in imagination into all kinds of interesting, delightful experiences. But not even these vicarious experiences can take the place of a really happy existence. And he is so introverted that he will not even ask the

teacher if he can go to the restroom. He feels that to do so "would reveal to her the shame of nature. Once, deathly sick, but locked in silence and dumb nausea, he had vomited finally upon his cupped hands" (Angel, p. 72).

In a passage which reveals Wolfe the writer at his best, we find an excellent bit of imagery which develops poignantly the alienation experienced by Eugene:

> At school, he was a desperate and hunted little animal. The herd, infallible in its banded instinct, knew at once that a stranger had been thrust into it, and it was merciless at the hunt. As the lunch-time recess came, Eugene, clutching his big grease-stained bag, would rush for the playground pursued by the yelping pack. The leaders, two or three big louts of advanced age and deficient mentality, pressed closely about him, calling out suppliantly, "You know me, 'Gene. You know me"; and still, racing for the far end, he would open his bag and hurl to them one of his sandwiches, which stayed them for a moment, as they fell upon its possessor and clawed it to fragments, but they were upon him in a moment more with the same yelping insistence, hunting him down into a corner of the fence, and pressing in with outstretched paws and wild entreaty. He would give them what he had, sometimes with a momentary gust of fury, tearing away from a greedy hand half a sandwich and devouring it. And when they saw he had no more to give, they went away. (Angel, p. 73)

The image of Eugene as the hunted among the hunters is very appropriate for his lack of sincere acceptance by the group because despite attempts to belong, he remains an outsider.

As a result of the way he is treated by his peers, Eugene becomes a party to another type of alienation. He seeks revenge for his own feelings of isolation by striking out at two races of people who are not in a position to help themselves: the Negroes and the Jews. For

instance, he joins in pranks against romantic Negro couples. Being traditionally superstitious, the Negroes are vulnerable to attack. So as they walk home in the dark, the white boys (who have temporarily accepted Eugene in their group) jerk by a cord in the Negroes' path a stuffed black stocking that looks like a snake. Or they throw stones at a Negro boy. They have been taught that they must "take nothin' off a nigger" (Angel, p. 79). They also treat the Jews abominably:

> They spat joyously upon the Jews. Drown a Jew and hit a nigger.
>
> The boys would wait on the Jews, follow them home shouting "Goose Grease! Goose Grease!" which, they were convinced, was the chief staple of Semitic diet; or with the blind acceptance of little boys of some traditional, or mangled, or imaginary catchword of abuse, they would yell after their muttering and tormented victim: "Veeshamadye Veeshamadye!" confident that they had pronounced the most unspeakable, to Jewish ears, of affronts. (Angel, p. 79)

The time comes, however, when Eugene identifies with a downtrodden Jew because of his own loneliness. And one day when the crowd taunts a little Jewish boy because his mother "takes in washin' from an ole nigger," Eugene reacts violently:

> Eugene turned away indefinitely, craned his neck convulsively, lifted one foot sharply from the ground.
>
> "She don't!" he screamed suddenly into their astounded faces. "She don't!" (Angel, p. 81)

This feeling of alienation experienced by Eugene in his secular life is also to be seen in his feelings about religion. If the novel is accepted as one in which Wolfe uses the autobiographical, we can deduce that his indecision concerning God in Angel helps us in the task

of categorizing his philosophy. We find that Eugene arrives at the point that he feels isolated from the church of his youth:

> This starched and well brushed world of Sunday morning Presbyterianism, with its sober decency, its sense of restraint, its suggestion of quiet wealth, solid position, ordered ritual, seclusive establishment, moved him deeply with its tranquillity. He felt concretely his isolation from it, he entered it from the jangled disorder of his own life once a week, looking at it, departing from it, for years, with the sad heart of a stranger. And from the mellow gloom of the church, the rich distant organ, the quiet nasal voice of the Scotch minister, the interminable prayers, and the rich little pictures of Christian mythology which he had collected as a child under the instruction of the spinsters, he gathered something of the pain, the mystery, the sensuous beauty of religion, something deeper and greater than this austere decency. (Angel, p. 115)

In this passage, Eugene is reacting as an outsider. Colin Wilson in The Outsider says that the outsider tends to think in the terms of an existentialist. He considers the distinction between being and nothingness as the most important distinction which he faces.[15] Eugene's feeling of isolation from his church and his referring to Christian "mythology" suggest that he is a man without religious faith. Later in the story, when Ben, his favorite brother, is dying, Eugene begins to pray. He "did not believe in God, nor in Heaven or Hell, but he was afraid they might be true" (Angel, p. 464). He addresses God as "Whoever You Are." When Ben dies, the thoughts which are filtered through Eugene are those of one type of existentialist:

> We can believe in the nothingness of life, we can believe in the nothingness of death and of life after death--but who can believe in the nothingness of Ben? . . . He lived here a stranger, trying to recapture the music of the lost world, trying to recall the great forgotten language,

the lost faces, the stone, the leaf, the door. (Angel, p. 465)

As in the beginning of the novel, Wolfe is concerned about the buried life--about man's loss of identity in a hostile environment in which he does not belong.

The setting of Eugene's youth is, in addition, expressive of his feeling of alienation. He considers the mountains "his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death" (Angel, p. 158). We are reminded of Maxwell E. Perkins' description of Wolfe's hometown in Perkins' introduction to Angel:

> I think no one could understand Thomas Wolfe who had not seen or properly imagined the place in which he was born and grew up. Asheville, North Carolina, is encircled by mountains. The trains wind in and out through labyrinths of passes. A boy of Wolfe's imagination imprisoned there could think that what was beyond was all wonderful.[16]

As Eugene matures, he suffers because of his size; and he is more alone than ever, although outwardly he is one of the "Big Boys." He desires to be athletic, but he does not play games well. He wants more than anything else victory and love; however, he has neither. He can excel in the classroom, but for a child of twelve, this is not enough. It is not enough for him because he is an outsider, and he desires to be a member of the crowd. In his aloneness he reaches out for sexual experiences with Negroes (even though he at one time retreats from a Negro girl); his need has become acute. Perhaps the four happiest years of his life occur about this time, however. From the time

he is twelve until he is sixteen, he attends the Leonards' private school and finally does well. It is during this time, after a short period of alienation, that he is accepted for what he is: a sensitive, intelligent boy.

But with his first year at the state university (to which he goes at the age of sixteen), Eugene again experiences the awakening of feelings of desperation and alienation:

> Eugene's first year at the university was filled for him with loneliness, pain, and failure. Within three weeks of his matriculation, he had been made the dupe of a half-dozen classic jokes, his ignorance of all campus tradition had been exploited, his gullibility was a byword. . . . There was not one to whom he could turn: he had no friends. . . . He was alone. He was desperately lonely. (Angel, pp. 328-329)

It is at this time that he begins to feel even more vitally than ever before that he is an exile in another land and a stranger in his own land. And in his agony he cries out "O God! O God!" but the reader is not to infer that he is on the verge of religious belief. During these times of direst need, he calls out to love. He appeals to Laura, "My dear! My sweet! Don't leave me alone! I've been alone! I've always been alone!" (Angel, p. 379) But he is jilted by love just as he has been jilted in other experiences of life. Later, in an effort to identify with the universe, he thinks, "O sea! . . . I am the hill-born, the prison-pent, the ghost, the stranger, and I walk here at your side. O sea, I am lonely like you . . . sorrowful like you . . . " (Angel, p. 436). But in this experience he is also lost, far and lonely. At the end of

the novel, the stone, the leaf, the door, the forgotten faces are all still lost. Wolfe is saying that man is naked and alone in darkness: "Or, I should say, he was like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say 'The town is near,' but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges" (Angel, p. 522).

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Angel is a huge work. In fact, it may even be considered entirely too long. It is not, because of its overdeveloped, intricate detail, easy reading at times; but those few passages are soon forgiven by the reader when he experiences the sheer beauty of most of the book. It is a novel which overflows with human feelings and emotions; and while most of us do not experience the desolation, the terror, and the despair indicated within the pages of the book, we can vicariously realize and at least partially understand the dilemma of those characters like Eugene who live in a spiritual void. The feeling which we have when we finish this work may be likened to what David E. Roberts says in Existentialism and Religious Belief:

> They [writers on the subject of existentialism] are not in the slightest degree interested in purveying a set of findings like the answers to arithmetic problems which can be found at the back of the book. Rather are they interested in arousing the reader to a spiritual struggle. Hence the result of this kind of philosophy is what it does to you, not some answer which can be appropriated without going through the agony of figuring things out for yourself.[17]

Significantly, within the pages of Angel, there are many problems of life presented. There are, however, no solutions given. At the end of

the story, the protagonist is still engaging in the same search in which he was engaged at the beginning of his life: for something that will make life less enigmatic and more satisfying to him.

In order to round out the picture of Wolfe, we shall now look at one of his posthumous works, The Web and the Rock (1939). This book is often considered weak, but it fits our purpose well for two basic reasons: it is another excellent example of Wolfe's theme of alienation; and it demonstrates that even though the writer changed names (from Eugene Gant to George Webber), he is still unable to get away from biography. Like most of Wolfe's works (and this is remarkably like Wolfe's life), Web deals with a search. Wolfe says that it is

> about one man's discovery of life and of the world--discovery not in a sudden and explosive sense as when "a new planet swims into his ken," but discovery through a process of finding out, and finding out as a man has to find out, through error and through trial, through fantasy and illusion, through falsehood and his own foolishness, through being mistaken and wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused, and pretty much what every one of us is, and goes through, and finds out about, and becomes.[18]

Actually, Wolfe's statement is a bit misleading because the novel deals more with searching than it does with finding or with discovering.

Even though Wolfe uses the name George Webber instead of Eugene Gant in this novel, he still sets George's birth in that magic year 1900, the year of his own birth and Eugene's. Also like Eugene and Wolfe, George is born in a mountain town in the South. But unlike Eugene and Wolfe, George is reared by an aunt. His mother is dead,

and his father has long before entered into an adulterous affair. So George is reared by Aunt Maw Joyner, a seventy-year-old spinster. As George grows up, he becomes too large, which is a problem to him just as it is to his alter egos, Wolfe and Eugene.

George's life is centered around his mother's people, the Joyners; and he is nourished on the Joyners' tales of death, war, and superstition. But he longs to be a part of his father's world. We again have, just as in Angel, a search for an earthly father. Wolfe skips over George's first sixteen years. He develops mainly the boy's friendships and the current, as well as past, history of Libya Hill and Old Catawba. The result is that we know more about local events than we know about the protagonist. In fact, this is one of the weaknesses of the novel. If we did not already know Eugene and Wolfe so well, it would be impossible for us to know George on the basis of what we are told in the novel.

At the age of sixteen, George is able to go to Pine Rock College, a Baptist school, because his father has died and has left him a small inheritance. At Pine Rock, George is a rebel, as shown in his choice of Crime and Punishment as reading material instead of the Dickens books which his friends read. After graduating from Pine Rock, George goes to New York to become a writer. He feels for a time that he has removed himself from the "web" of the Joyners; he now feels closer to his father. But he is not happy with his writing attempts.

Because of his disenchantment with New York, he goes to Europe

for a while. It is on the trip back to America that he meets Esther Jack on shipboard. Although Esther is a wife and mother (and is also several years older than he), George has an affair with her. From Esther he receives companionship as well as love, motherly strength, and discipline. She is to him a symbol of steadfastness and security--or the "rock." The time comes, however, when George tires of the theatre people in Esther's crowd. To him, they are false artists. This feeling results in his quarrelling with Esther. He is so alienated that all of his noble plans fail. Despite Esther's help, George's novel is refused; and he blames Esther and her crowd. He feels that his ability has been stifled, and he finally dismisses her.

George tries to forget Esther by going to Europe again. But no matter where he goes--London, Paris, Munich--he remembers her. He lives riotously and one day awakes in a hospital in Munich after a drunken brawl. The novel ends with a dialogue between his spirit and body.

Throughout his life George is faced with the existentialist dilemma: what to do about feelings of insecurity and isolation. As in the case of Eugene, environment plays an important role in the young George's alienation. His childhood is dark and melancholy. Instead of being allowed to feel like a regular member of the Joyner clan and to live in the main house, he is relegated to the position of a "poor relation." Therefore, he lives in an old rundown house with the oldest person in the Joyner family, Aunt Maw. He feels that he is not worthy

of being a member of the clan:

> He felt miserably that he was tainted with his father's blood. He sensed wretchedly and tragically that he was not worthy to be a death-triumphant, ever-perfect, doom-prophetic Joyner. They filled him with the utter loneliness of desolation. He knew he was not good enough for them, and he thought forever of his father's life, the sinful warmth and radiance of his father's world. (Web, p. 9)

In his meditations he thinks of his parentage, of his being evolved into his present state. He looks upon himself as a child of darkness, and his spirit is one of loneliness and desolation. As a result, he dreams of happy experiences in "golden houses" that he cannot be a part of because he does not belong:

> The sight of these closed golden houses with their warmth of life awoke in him a bitter, poignant, strangely mixed emotion of exile and return, of loneliness and security, of being forever shut out from the palpable and passionate integument of life and fellowship, and of being so close to it that he could touch it with his hand, enter it by a door, possess it with a word--a word that, somehow, he could never speak, a door that, somehow, he would never open. (Web, p. 170)

We are reminded here of the search of Look Homeward, Angel: "a stone, a leaf, an unfound door." And we see that like Eugene, George is an alien in his own land.

There is also present in this story the alienation of name-calling, a type of alienation that we have not looked at before. George's long, gangly arms, big hands, long legs, heavy shoulders, large head, low forehead, and deep-set eyes make him a fitting subject for the nickname Monk. It begins as a cry of derision by the older boys. Susanne K. Langer in Philosophy in a New Key provides us with the basis of this

type of alienation. She says that the use of names is the

> simplest kind of symbolistic meaning. . . . Because the name belongs to a notion so obviously and unequivocally derived from an individual object, it is often supposed to "mean" that object as a sign would "mean" it. This belief is reinforced by the fact that a name borne by a living person always is at once a symbol by which we think of the person, and a call-name by which we signal him.[19]

The "pack" thus sweeps down upon the boy, pegging him with a name which sticks the remainder of his life. For George, the name Monk is a symbol of his aloneness as well as a symbol of his appearance.

Throughout his young life, Monk, in addition, is alienated from his environment. And this has something to do with historical time. He feels that an understanding of the history of the Joyner clan would help him to face himself and them; but still there are gaps that he cannot bridge. He equates Aunt Maw and everything she stands for with loneliness, death, and sorrow. He feels that "he belonged to that fatal, mad, devouring world from whose prison there was no escape" (Web, p. 83). He desires the ability to unweave himself and escape to his father's world. Later, after he has graduated from college and has moved to New York, he experiences the loneliness of the transplanted Southerner. Wolfe knows well what he speaks about when he says that the "transplanted Southerner is likely to be a very lonely animal" (Web, p. 244). This is a reflection of Wolfe's own unhappy Brooklyn years during which he felt alien to the world which surrounded him.

One of the best examples of Wolfe's development of the theme of

alienation occurs in a chapter entitled "Alone." During this time, Monk lives by himself in a little furnished room on Fourteenth Street in New York. He is alienated from any kind of experience from which he could hope to realize happiness:

> It was a desperate and lonely year he lived there by himself. He had come to the city with a shout of triumph and of victory in his blood, and the belief that he would conquer it, be taller and more mighty than its greatest towers. But now he knew a loneliness unutterable. Alone, he tried to hold all the hunger and madness of the earth within the limits of a little room, and beat his fists against the walls, only to hurl his body savagely into the streets again, those terrible streets that had neither pause nor curve, nor any door that he could enter. (Web, p. 275)

We again see the motif of the door here; it is a door that he cannot enter. It is after this lonely year that Monk decides to spend the last of his inheritance to go to Europe. He hopes that he will be able to change his soul if he changes his environment. But he discovers there, as in his native land, the aloneness that he has come to expect as a way of life.

Monk's chances for happiness--no matter how fleeting--come in his relationship with Esther Jack. However, this is an experience that is so foreign to his way of life that he finds it difficult to understand and appreciate what he has. The excitement of his association with Esther is not enough to sustain him during the times that he is not with her:

> And at the moment she had left the house, the aching, silent solitude of loneliness, for so many years before he met her the habit of his life, but now, so had she stolen his fierce secrecy away from him, a hateful and abhorrent

> enemy, settled upon his soul the palpable and chilling vacancy of isolation. It inhabited the walls, the timbers, and the profound and lonely silence of the ancient house. He knew that she had gone from him and left him in the house alone, and her absence filled his heart and filled the room like a living spirit. (Web, p. 576)

When he dismisses Esther, he ultimately alienates himself from the one experience in life that has made it possible for him, at least temporarily, to catapult himself from despair. In the light of the philosophy of discovery, which Wolfe says is at the center of this work, it would seem that at the end of the story George has found himself. However, in the dialogue between the spirit and body at the end of the book, there is one resounding declaration: "But--you can't go home again" (Web, p. 695). We must attach some significance to this declaration, aside from its being supportive of the theory that George has discovered himself. Perhaps the solution to his problem of alienation would have been his being able to go home again; but he cannot do so, either physically or spiritually.

Within the brief outline of this study, we can detect that Wolfe's philosophy in Web, which was supposed to be a new beginning for the author, is the same as in the other two works that we have studied. As before, he is dealing with a character who is faced with the realization that life is difficult to endure. And like his "brothers," he strives to drain meaning from life through his own means. Throughout the work, George is engaged in self-examination; but he emerges without ever finding any spiritual truth. We get the feeling at the end of the

novel that he will be able to go on, but it is not because he has "discovered" a spiritual law to live by. So there is possibly hope; but if there is (as Wolfe would evidently have us to see it), it has evolved from the individual spirit of man. It is from his internal groanings, his agony, that meaning has come; and it is he who will be responsible for what comes of it.

END NOTES

[1](New York, 1961), p. 16.

[2]Ibid., p. 32.

[3]Ibid., p. 51.

[4]"Something of My Life," in The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge, 1953), p. 6.

[5]American Mercury, LIII (October, 1941), 467-475.

[6]Monroe M. Stearns, "The Metaphysics of Thomas Wolfe," in The Enigma of Thomas Wolfe, ed. Richard Walser (Cambridge, 1953), p. 201.

[7]The Novel of Violence in America--1920-1950 (Dallas, 1950), pp. 52-53.

[8]"Theme in Thomas Wolfe's 'The Lost Boy' and 'God's Lonely Man,'" in Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Leslie A. Field (New York, 1968), p. 267.

[9]Three Modes of Southern Fiction (Athens, Georgia, 1966), p. 67.

[10]Thomas Wolfe, "Gulliver," in From Death to Morning (New York, 1935), p. 137--hereafter referred to in text as Death with appropriate page numbers.

[11]The Art of Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1963), pp. 152-153.

[12]Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (New York, 1929), p. 1--hereafter referred to in text as Angel with appropriate page numbers.

[13]Saturday Review, XII (December 14, 1935), 14.

[14](New York, 1953), pp. 68-69.

[15](Boston, 1956), p. 27.

[16]Maxwell E. Perkins, ed., Look Homeward, Angel (New York, 1929), p. xiii.

[17](New York, 1959), p. 5.

[18]Thomas Wolfe, The Web and the Rock (New York, 1939), p. v--hereafter referred to as Web with appropriate page numbers.

[19](Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951), p. 61.

CHAPTER III

ROBERT PENN WARREN: TOWARD SELF-IDENTITY

> But for the present . . . isolation
> wrapped him like a blanket.
> --Robert Penn Warren

We have viewed Thomas Wolfe as a pessimistic writer who rarely allows his characters to show themselves through the dark shadows. But Robert Penn Warren is revealed in a quite different way. We shall find that Warren is concerned with many themes in his works but that he is most often concerned with self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. In fact, Eric Bentley has referred to self-knowledge as the "alpha and omega"[1] of Warren's fiction. We see in Warren's principal works that man's plight is to be alienated. Warren himself says, "We look into our past to find out who we are."[2] However, more often than not, his hero has difficulty finding meaning in his past as related to the present and future. His obsession is to know himself, but fulfillment and self-definition are hard for him to achieve. He is beset by an overwhelming sense of alienation; he is a man locked in the darkness of his _self_. In his long narrative poem, _Brother to Dragons_, Warren develops the idea that the story which he tells is of man's abandonment--because of estrangement and alienation--"in some blind lobby . . . or corridor

of Time. . . . And in that dark, no thread."[3] In relation to this idea concerning alienation, there seems to be a basic plot line running through many of Warren's major works: Uncorrupted man encounters corruption; no matter how hard he tries to reorient himself, he is corrupted; then there evolves a long search for meaning, for self-fulfillment. Sometimes he finds it; sometimes he does not.

In order to be accepted by others, and in his search for himself, he engages in activities for which he feels little conviction and interest. He is a dual character searching for an end to his alienation but ultimately finding that it is not entirely possible. He finds that, despite his attempt to rebuild his life, the past is at times a burden--that not even the innocence of a past time is enough to overcome the harsh realities of the present. As Leonard Casper remarks,

> Even his wife cannot pierce his essential isolation. Man's is the hard, the lonely, the devious and enduring way; worse, man is his own adversary. Those characters who claim to have been reborn and consequently to have found release are the ones who invite suspicion, seeming to be outside the living process.[4]

The truth that seems to be reverberating throughout Warren's works is that finding self-identity is the only solution to the problems faced by alienated man; and in order to find that identity, he must stop being a prisoner of history and learn to live with himself. In short, he must accept his past and build his future. As we study Warren's works, we discover that he is basically a humanist. We see that he considers man capable of a certain amount of dignity as he faces his alienation

and as he strives for self-fulfillment. He is concerned about human values, such as freedom and love.

Of all the important contemporary literary artists of the South, Warren is surely the most versatile. He has earned distinction as a teacher, poet, short-story writer, novelist, and critic. However, Charles H. Bohner believes that Warren's versatility is responsible for the lack of critical attention that the writer has received:

> The literary critics, with their penchant for categorizing writers by genre, have often referred to Warren as if he were a genial and talented interloper who had trespassed momentarily on their preserve but who was really committed to a genre other than the one they were discussing.[5]

Critics have reacted basically the same way in regard to Warren's development of the theme of alienation in his works. For example, Louise Y. Gossett says merely that his characters' "search for identity directs the course of the plot,"[6] and this is to be seen as a type of alienation. And William Van O'Connor says that in Warren a "moral issue . . . is central."[7] In addition, John L. Stewart has interpreted this theme of alienation in relation to the problem of evil. He says that Warren develops

> the story of man's efforts to flee from the problem of evil and of his ultimate return to that problem. . . . Man cannot re-enter Paradise; he must learn to live adequately without hope of recovering his lost innocence.[8]

I also think that it is an important theme, and I hope to show that my theory is justified by analyzing one of the writer's short stories and two of his novels, all of which are typical of his work in prose fiction.

Warren's other works, in addition to those which will be discussed, also develop the theme of alienation. A good example is At Heaven's Gate (1943). Two of Warren's fullest characterizations are to be found in this story: Sue Murdock and Jerry Calhoun. Sue desires to know herself, but she seeks self-knowledge through avenues that ultimately bring desperation. Both she and Jerry strive to cope with their allegiance to Bogan Murdock, Sue's father; and they find that all their efforts end in failure. For all the characters of the story, life represents an endless search for meaning in isolation. In another of his works, World Enough and Time (1950), Warren reworks the historical account of "The Kentucky Tragedy," the story of the idealistic Jereboam Beauchamp. Warren gives Beauchamp the name Jeremiah Beaumont. Beaumont is an idealist entangled in the realities of a harsh world, and ultimately his idealism betrays him. Despite his idealism, he is a betrayed, lonely person who must live with soul-engulfing doubts. Like many of Warren's characters, in an attempt to live in the world--for the world--he fails.

We also find the theme of alienation in one of Warren's weakest works, Band of Angels. Despite the melodramatic plot, the story seems basically faithful to history. Throughout the novel, Amantha Starr is beset by the problem of identity. As a daughter of a Negro slave and a Kentucky planter, she seeks to "make . . . [herself] come true." Implicit throughout the work are her question "Who am I"? and her cry "If I could only be free." Again, in three of his later works--

The Cave (1959), Wilderness (1961), and Flood (1964)--Warren has developed this same theme. In the first of these works, The Cave, The Allegory of the Cave becomes an important image. Each character is seen in relation to his failure--in his alienation--to emerge from the cave of self and see the light of truth. As each major character stands around the cave in which Jasper Harrick is entombed, he reflects on his own entombment in self. In Wilderness, Warren treats another idealist much like Jeremiah Beaumont. Adam Rosensweig, although he has a deformed foot, wants very much to amount to something. He lives in Bavaria, but he wants to go to America to fight for freedom in the Civil War; his attempt becomes a personal pilgrimage of faith. He is finally able to question himself, "Am I different from other men?" Flood, which is Warren's last published novel, deals with several people who are prisoners of self. The central image of the story is the penitentiary, and it has a complex meaning for each major character. The story centers around Brad Tolliver, a novelist and a screen writer, who has returned to Fiddlersburg, Tennessee, his hometown, to write a screenplay about the town before it is covered by the waters of a huge reservoir. Like the town, most of the characters--because of alienation--seem bent on intentional destruction.

The short story to be studied is "The Circus in the Attic," which was published in 1948 in a collection entitled The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories. Critically speaking, "Circus" is not a very well-written short story; in fact, it shows that Warren and Wolfe are "broth-

ers under the skin" as far as short fiction is concerned. Neither writer was at his best as a short-story writer. Both writers were cramped by such a short fictional form.[9] The setting of this story is Bardsville, Kentucky; and in order to give the reader a feeling of place, Warren ranges backward to the founding of the town and also discusses the role of Bardsville in the Civil War.

The protagonist of the story is Bolton Lovehart; but in order to portray him, the author introduces us first of all to Bolton's great-great-grandfather, Lem Lovehart, who came to Bardsville when he was thirty-five. Bolton is a young boy when we first meet him and then later a man lost in time. He is dominated by his mother, and he has a father whom he does not know very well. After many years of caring for his mother (after his father's death) and hiding in the attic with his toy circus, Bolton finally realizes some meaning in life. He finds this meaning in his stepson, Jasper Parton, who is posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in World War II. After the ending of the war and the death of his wife and stepson, Bolton again retreats to his attic to live out his years.

Even though Warren may be criticized for using a too big outline for a short story, there is a good reason for his portraying the great-great-grandfather, Lem Lovehart, as he does: he makes feasible the idea that there is a strain of alienation in the blood of the protagonist. Throughout his life, Lem has been alone, and he is greatly affected by it. He settles near the place which is later to be called Bardsville:

> He found a spring down the bluff, shot two squirrels, cooked them over a handful of fire, and ate his supper as sunset drew on and the light reddened and leveled across the miles of canebrake to the west. Then he lay down on the grass, in the great stillness, broken now and then by the liquid, somnolent ripple of a robin's note or a last, lost burst of birdsong from the cedars down the bluff, and for no reason his leathery heart suddenly softened and swelled in his breast and he wept.
>
> He did not weep because he remembered home and the brief time of softness and affection before the years of loneliness and compulsion and hardship and violence and death began. As a matter of fact, he remembered nothing at that moment, and thought of nothing. His feeling was one of mild surprise that he should weep at all. But the tears came. Then he felt relaxed and happy, and, as the night came on, slept like a child.[10]

However, in spite of the theme of alienation which we find here, and which runs throughout the story, we do not see the same approach that we see in the works of Wolfe. Instead, here we find "Then he felt relaxed and happy . . . and . . . slept like a child." As we study this story, we will detect that at times the character is able to overcome his feelings of alienation.

The young Bolton Lovehart is the only child of two strange people. His mother seems at times to be incapable of love, and his father seems bloodless. They are devoted to the Episcopal Church; in fact, the father has been a minister. The boy suffers from a desire to know his father, but his father is caught in a desire to know himself and his family. Consequently, he knows no one:

> He is, however, aware of them [his wife and son] at times, in the middle of the night or on the spring street, aware of the powerful, vibrating, multitudinous web of life which binds the woman and child together, victor and victim (but which is which? he asks himself: is the present the victim

> of the past, or the past the victim of the present?), and when he is aware of that web and the million dark, pulsing tentacles, he feels that he stands at the end of something, on a promontory, lost, with a distant wind rushing somewhere in the night far behind him. (Circus, p. 17)

As a result of his environment, Bolton loses himself in his work. He is a very serious student, and he is also a devoted child--up to the time he is twelve. One Sunday afternoon he goes out to the creek; he tells himself that he wants to hunt arrowheads. He is infuriated by a hound that follows him, and he picks up some rocks and hurls them at the dog. He is sick with rage; and as he stands there, he suddenly feels "lost, bewildered, and friendless. He felt that he had no place to go in the wide world, that nobody knew his name" (Circus, p. 20). It is about this time that he hears some singers, and he discovers that the local Baptists are having a baptismal service in the creek. When he sees what is taking place, he decides to participate.

If Warren had not built up the rage, the despair, and the lostness of the boy to such an extent, we might dismiss this episode as a childish prank. However, I think we cannot. Bolton is looking for a means of securing an identity; however, he does not find it at this point:

> And then Bolton Lovehart was there at the very edge of the water, waiting, and the man's hand took him and led him forward in the midst of song.
>
> Immediately after his baptism, Bolton Lovehart left the crowd at the creek. But he did not go home immediately. He wandered across the field, then back to the grove near the old mill. He was not yet dry, but he hid in the thicket, under the shag-barks, and waited, for what he was not

> sure. He could not bring himself to think of going home nor of the night coming on. He could not bear to think of being here alone all night, in the darkest darkness under the trees. He wished that he were dead. (Circus, p. 22)

After the embarrassment of being from a staunch Episcopalian family and being baptized as a Baptist has subsided, Bolton settles down to his studies.

But when he is sixteen, the circus comes to town; and he carefully plans his escape. He leaves with a well-packed suitcase. Within a week, however, his father and a detective come for him. Things do not change for Bolton after this. He is still restless but well-behaved. When he graduates from high school, he looks forward to going away to a university; but his father dies. Worse than his father's death, however, is Bolton's realization that the two of them were alienated from each other. An hour before his father's death,

> He felt that he had to ask his father those questions, now, now before it was too late: Father, what was the name of that old coon dog you had when you were a boy--I forgot his name, Father--Father, what was the name of the Wilcox boy, the boy you played with when you were little--Father, did it hurt when you were shot, Father--Father, what book did you like best when you were growing up--Father, did you ever talk to General Forrest--Father, did you hunt arrowheads when you were a boy--Father--But he knew that it was too late, he would never know those things, for they were slipping through his fingers like a handful of water dropping onto dry sand, and he heard the distant voice again, saying: "Be good--to your mother--son. She is a--good woman--she means--everything--for your good --son--" (Circus, pp. 28-29).

Bolton is grabbing at anything that will help him to fill the void that has been left by a father who never knew him and whom he never knew.

As a result of his father's death, Bolton stays at home the next year to care for his mother. His only meaningful experiences are those he gets from books. The next year he goes away to school; after six months of relative success, however, he is forced to return home because his mother has had a heart attack. He feels isolated from his mother as well as the young people he had once known:

> So the next four years passed, the parties fewer and fewer for him each summer and Christmas vacation, as the faces changed, as the boys and girls he had known married and settled down, or moved away. He could not talk to the younger boys, and the young girls were like strangers. And he was strange to them, a lanky young man with thinning black hair and very clean, unfashionable clothes that always looked awry on his nervous bones. (Circus, p. 31)

He teaches for a time at Professor Darter's academy and loses himself in what promises to be a history of Carruthers County. But he never finishes it. He has a fleeting love affair with Sara Darter, and he takes tickets at a theater for a couple of weeks before his mother finds out and insists that he stop. In short, his life is unfulfilled. But the turning point of his experience occurs the year he is thirty-three. He has by now moved a table to the attic in order to work on his book. But he still is not successful. However, one day just before Christmas he sees a toy exhibit--a circus--downtown. He afterwards begins to work at night in the attic on the task of carving his own circus exhibit out of soft pine. The thing that gives him joy is that he has to lie to his mother so that she may not know; he feels no guilt because at last he has something of his own. His alienation from the world

has become for him a source of self-identity:

> Nobody knew what went on up there, behind the always bolted door, in the big room where shadows and cobwebs massed in the corners and hung from the slanting, damp-ringed ceiling, where the arrowheads, long since washed clean of whatever hot blood had stained them, lay in orderly rows on sagging shelves with the albums of stamps, where the notes and books were stacked on a table, where the saber and the faded regimental colors of Simon Lovehart's regiment hung on the wall at the end of a gable. People going home late at night would see the light in the Lovehart attic, a faint gleam beyond the dense oak boughs, and would say, "That Lovehart boy's working on his book. He's a hard worker. Maybe he will amount to something." (Circus, pp. 41-42)

But by this time, the writing is going even more slowly than before. When World War I comes, Bolton is so caught up in his own world--and seemingly happy in it--that he does not establish any contact with the war. He doesn't even read the papers. He has become more attentive toward his mother, and he is tender toward her. Ironically, when the old lady dies at the age of eighty-seven, Bolton is very much concerned about her aloneness at the time of her death (this is especially ironical when we consider the happiness that his seclusion has brought him):

> "She died--look, she died in here, all alone, at night, by herself at night--"
>
> "It was probably very sudden," the doctor said, with a faint hint of irritation. "Very little pain, probably. And at her age--"
>
> "She died," Bolton Lovehart whispered, "at night--all by herself."
>
> And he saw himself alone. (Circus, p. 45)

Now that his mother is dead, he has no pleasure in his seclusion, however. He has no compulsion to keep up with his attic routine

because there is no longer a need for him to lie. As a result, he loses himself in the church without being basically any more religious than before. But he meets his future bride, Mrs. Parton, at church. When he marries her, he gets a built-in reason for living--a temporary replacement for the circus: Jasper Parton, his stepson. Jasper is a soldier, and Bolton spends all of his time reading newspapers and books and listening to radio broadcasts. He becomes such an authority on World War II that he is often asked to make speeches about it. In addition, he opens his home to the boys from the army post near Bardsville.

When Jasper is killed in Italy, it is a great shock to Bolton. But he absorbs the grief by beginning another project. He learns that one of the ladies' organizations of his church is holding a bazaar. He again goes to his attic and locks the door--this time to get away from his wife. His plan is to retouch his wooden circus and give it to the bazaar. The circus is a great success:

> The death of Jasper had brought the secret circus out into the world to live, to be enjoyed, to be used and broken in the end. There was some kind of atonement in this, Bolton Lovehart felt, for the long lie, for all the past, and he felt resigned now even to the death of Jasper. (Circus, pp. 55-56)

His life's experience has come full circle at the end of the story. News of victory is overshadowed by the death of his wife. She and an army captain are killed in an automobile accident after an evening of drunkenness. Bolton has been able to overcome his grief over Jasper's

death by losing himself in service, but this last shock makes him retreat to the shadows of the attic:

> It [the end of the war] meant nothing, however, to Bolton Lovehart. For some time now, all day long and far into the night, he had sat in the attic, leaning over his table, where lay the block of soft pine, the glue pot, the wire, the awl, the knife, the paint tubes and brushes, the bits of cloth and needles and scissors. Finally, he had found his way back. (Circus, p. 60)

The ending of "Circus" contains an ironical twist in Warren's use of the theme of alienation. Bolton, we are told, has found his way back. But now, as opposed to before, his going to the attic symbolizes a departure from the world; nor does this departure seemingly give him any satisfaction. We get a picture of a dejected, lonely man who stays bent over his table far into the night--evidently not working since no mention is made of it. In earlier days, he had experienced temporary seclusion and had enjoyed it because it represented the joy of a lie which he had told his mother. But now, as for Hemingway's Old Waiter, life is "nada y pues nada."[11]

Another of Warren's works in which the theme of alienation may be seen is Night Rider (1939), his first novel. Like "Circus in the Attic," Night Rider is set in Bardsville, Kentucky. The novel deals with Percy Munn's search for identity. The story begins with Mr. Munn, as Warren refers to him throughout the book, on a train on his way to Bardsville; he is surrounded by farmers who are going there to attend a rally for tobacco growers. Actually, he is not very much interested in the

activities of the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco because he spends most of his time practicing law. He has a small tobacco farm on the side.

But he is caught up in the action and is gruffly persuaded by a planter named Bill Christian to attend the meeting. He is also persuaded to sit on the platform. The speaker of the day is Senator Tolliver, a silver-tongued orator. And then Mr. Munn is unexpectedly called upon to speak. Even though he improvises, he impresses the crowd very much by his sincerity. From this time on, he is seen as the logical choice as a member of the board because he has such powers of persuasion. He is hesitant, but he finally agrees to serve. However, he finds that his work is not easy because many of the small planters refuse to sign over their crops to the board.

Before he becomes a member of the Association, Mr. Munn's life is mostly uncomplicated. But now his private life begins to disintegrate; his marriage, which has been mostly satisfying, dissolves when his wife, May, leaves him. She is unable to understand the type of man that Mr. Munn has become. This is easy to discern because much has happened to him in his public life: Senator Tolliver betrays the Association; Mr. Munn becomes a member of the Free Farmers' Brotherhood of Protection and Control, which operates much like the Ku Klux Klan by destroying the crops of reluctant planters; and Mr. Munn murders Bunk Trevelyan, whose life he had once saved in court when Bunk was being tried for murder.

After murdering Bunk, Mr. Munn returns to his home and assaults May; it is then that she leaves. Despondent, Mr. Munn turns to Lucille, Bill Christian's daughter, and has an affair with her--even though both of them are incapable of love. Later, when Bill Christian learns that Lucille has been sleeping with her lover in the Christian home, he has a stroke. When Al Turpin, an informer on the activities of the night riders, is shot and killed, Mr. Munn is charged with the crime. He flees to the hill home of Willie Proudfit. While he is there, Lucille comes to visit him in his room at night. Willie misinterprets the motive and rebukes Mr. Munn. Mr. Munn then leaves Willie's house, intent on murdering Senator Tolliver as a final act of expiation. But when he sees the emaciated senator, he is unable to murder him. As he flees the senator's house, he is shot down. Bohner meaningfully points out that Mr. Munn is ironically

> innocent of the particular acts for which he dies. Sylvestus [Willie's nephew, who informs on Mr. Munn and Lucille] was mistaken in believing that Munn had committed adultery with Lucille at Willie's house, yet Munn is an adulterer. Similarly, Munn is not guilty of the murder of Al Turpin for which the posse kills him, yet Munn is a murderer.[12]

In this episode, we see the revelation of a typical Warren character. At the beginning of the novel, he is basically good. But he is dragged into an experience which is to be his undoing. As the story unfolds, we observe his disintegration; he is never able to regain the dignity with which he began. Also, throughout the story he is beset by alienation. At times, he looks upon his temporary physical seclusion as a

comfort; but most of the time, his seclusion takes the form of alienation, which is a heavy cross for him to bear. He desires meaning in his life, but he makes the mistake of allowing himself to be pulled into a whirlpool; he "embraces a false solidarity, and, paradoxically, in so doing only increases his sense of isolation."[13] Despite his drawing breath in a dark night of the soul during which he agonizes over his dilemma, he is never able to realize an identity that will last. He is outside the grace of God, and he is without hope.

This sense of alienation which besets him can be seen by an examination of passages throughout the novel. Our first glimpse of Mr. Munn presents us with the feeling that here is a man who is lost, lost, and alone; and the feeling becomes even more intense as the story progresses. One of the best examples of his alienation occurs early in the novel when he rushes home to tell May that he has been elected a member of the board of the Association:

> "I wanted to come home and tell you something." He felt convinced, as the words left his mouth, of his own stupidity. He had not come home for that. He had come home, putting his mare in a lather, not because he wanted to tell her that he was a member of the board, but because her words or expression, or even her mere presence, might help explain himself to himself. Obscurely, he felt that he might discover from her something about the meaning of the nameless impulse that had first prompted him to blurt out his refusal to the Senator. The conviction of weakness and shame which he had experienced after the men left was still fresh to him, and she might banish it for good, or, failing that, give him some hint whereby he could realize and master his own nature.[14]

But he is placing too much of a burden on May. He doesn't at this

point see her as the dull, simple person she is. And instead of helping him, she merely serves to heighten his sense of alienation. Early in his association with the tobacco growers, he senses that the cause "was useless. He was fighting in himself a conviction of futility, a presentiment of despair" (Night Rider, p. 39). But May cannot understand this feeling.

Even though this sense of despair, of being cut off from the world, is ordinarily a feeling that leaves him distressed, there are times that he enjoys being by himself--just as it is for Bolton Lovehart. This happens as Mr. Munn returns one night from a meeting at which he has spoken to a small crowd:

> He thought of the men, by this time asleep, alone or with their wives; the walls and roofs of their houses would conceal them and protect them. But the awareness of the fact of their comfort and his own wakeful isolation gave him no envy. Nor did the apparent failure or his effort that night disturb him now. It had gone black out for him, as suddenly and as irrelevantly as the man's face above the lamp the instant the flame was extinguished. He might feel differently tomorrow, as he had felt differently in the past. At what moment could a man trust his feelings, his convictions? At what point define the true and unmoved center of his being, the focus of his obligations? He could not say. And who could say? But for the present the comfort of the night and isolation wrapped him like a blanket. (Night Rider, pp. 40-41)

A key statement concerning Mr. Munn's alienation is seen in the above passage: "He could not say." Whereas some of the time there is hope for him, most of the time there is merely a pervading blackness:

> And then it came to him that all he knew was the blackness into which he stared and the swinging motion and the beat of the blood. But was he staring into blackness, a black-

> ness external to him . . . or was he the blackness? (Night Rider, pp. 108-109)

He is seen as a man lost in time, a man searching for identity. But he does not know where to find it. He seeks to know himself, but some of his actions make self-knowledge difficult.

Mr. Munn is alienated from the very actions which fill his days and his nights, thus making self-identification all the harder. We see this attitude, for example, in his reflections on the scraping of tobacco beds:

> When Mr. Munn read in the newspapers about the very actions in which he had participated, he felt, almost always, as if he were reading of something in which he had had no part, of something that had happened a very long time before. The event in the print there on the page, was meaningless and ghostly, for he would recall, for instance, how one man had said, riding along, "Hit's gitten right seasonable." That made it all very different from what was on the page, deeds done by men for reasons that involved their flesh and blood, their hunger, pride, and hopes, their whole beings. The definition of things on a page was different. Or when he read the statement made by a victim he felt the same unreality, the same lack of conviction. (Night Rider, p. 173)

He is attempting to divorce himself from an experience to which he feels strongly opposed, but he does not have the courage of his conviction. It is not unusual in the novel for Warren to describe Mr. Munn as being "locked inside the darkness that was himself" (Night Rider, p. 177). He gets to the point that the mere thought of people "validated his own isolation; and validated the isolation of those other persons" (Night Rider, p. 327).

Mr. Munn might have found his salvation in love, as Warren's

characters frequently do. But we find that his two attempts to love somebody serve only to increase his awareness of his essential alienation. He wants badly to be able to communicate with May, to explain himself (as he understands himself) to her:

> He had failed again in his attempt to explain himself to May, and to himself. The explanation, the thing that made him wake up suddenly in the morning as at the sound of a voice, the imminence of revelation--these things were real to him, certainly, but elusive. He was aware of them as of something seen out of the corner of the eye; when he turned his gaze directly, it was gone. . . .
> . . . standing with her before the fire at night, or in the yard under the unleafing trees on a Sunday afternoon, he might suddenly grasp her with her shoulders between his two hands and hold her out from him, staring into her eyes, and shake her a little, as one shakes a sullen child to make it speak and tell the truth. But there was nothing for her to tell. He did not even know what he wanted to hear her say. What she actually would say was, "I love you, Perse." That was enough, and not enough. (Night Rider, pp. 48-49)

This feeling is enhanced later in the novel when he is thinking about Buck Trevelyan's wife. Mrs. Trevelyan has been to Mr. Munn's office to talk with him about her husband's impending trial. Later in the afternoon Mr. Munn is caught up in an overpowering curiosity about what Mrs. Trevelyan is like. However, he finally decides, "But how was it possible . . . when he could not even know about May, and could only guess?" (Night Rider, p. 55) This feeling of alienation from his wife is one which is likely to bother him at unexpected moments. For instance, when Senator Tolliver resigns from the Association, Mr. Munn finds himself thinking about May:

> Then, incongruously, while he tried to penetrate to the nature of the Senator's motives, he thought of May, how

> sometimes when he looked at her most intently, into the very depth of her eyes, she seemed to be withdrawing from him, fading, almost imperceptibly but surely, into an impersonal and ambiguous distance. (Night Rider, pp. 123-124)

When Mr. Munn and May part, however, the lawyer has still not solved any problems. Despite the thrill involved in having a clandestine affair, he soon finds that it is not love but Lucille's spiritual emptiness which has drawn him to her:

> He knew a loathing, suddenly, of himself for the emptiness of the act he had performed: a vicious and shameful pantomime, isolated from all his life before it and from any other life, cut off in time, drained of all meaning, even the blind, fitful meaning of pleasure. He was infected by her emptiness. Or her emptiness had discovered to him his own. She had held it up to him like a mirror, and in her emptiness he had seen his own. (Night Rider, pp. 325-326)

Therefore, we discern that this kind of love does not help to remove the feelings of alienation which beset Mr. Munn and which make it impossible for him to know himself. The experience of love is basically that which R.P.W., a persona with autobiographical overtones,[15] reveals in Brother to Dragons:

> For love was all he asked, yet love
> Is the intolerable accusation of guilt
> To all the yearning Lilburns who cannot love,
> So must destroy who loves, and achieve at last
> The desiderated and ice-locked anguish of isolation.
> (Brother, p. 113)

In the usual story by Warren, we might expect fulfillment to come through a knowledge of the past. As I have mentioned, Warren believes that we must look into the past to find out who we are. This proves to

be a meaningful experience for Bolton Lovehart, as we have seen; and for Jack Burden, as we will see later. However, for Mr. Munn a consideration of the past serves only to intensify his feelings of alienation. He remembers, for instance, going to see a distant cousin, Ianthe, while he was attending college in Philadelphia:

> When he first began to come to see her, he tried to lead her into talking of his mother, and of herself. The sight of her, at first, stirred to a kind of painful and reproachful life those boyhood notions that had clustered about her name. He had completely forgotten those notions. Now, the sight of her revived them, and shocked them. He was like a man who puts his leg down unexpectedly and feels the twinge of an old wound, or fracture. As in a last, desperate or thrifty, automatic effort to salvage something of his own past being which was inherent in those notions, he tried to make her picture for him the self she had been, that summer a long time back, before his birth, when his mother had been a young girl. But it was no use. She could not do it. (Night Rider, pp. 210-211)

He finds, then, that his desire to use Cousin Ianthe as a link to the past is of no consequence. At this time he also remembers the experience of seeing great flocks of grackles as a young boy. He remembers that he also had seen some grackles one day in Philadelphia:

> He stopped stock-still, one hand on the iron fence in front of a narrow dooryard. Then, slowly, he walked on down the street, toward the little park where the grackles were. In the overmastering loneliness of that moment, his whole life seemed to him nothing but vanity. His past seemed as valueless and as unstable as a puff of smoke, and his future meaningless, useless--and the thought was a flash, quickly dissipated--he might by some unnamable, single, heroic stroke discover the unifying fulfillment. (Night Rider, pp. 207-208)

Ironically, there is no past and there is also no future because that

heroic stroke which might serve to "discover the unifying fulfillment" does not come to Mr. Munn.

Even before Mr. Munn is shot to death, we realize that there is no hope for him to remove the shackles of alienation and enter into a happy, satisfying experience. We learn during his moments of reflection that he could not think beyond the moment--no matter how hard he tried: "He did not have the seed of the future in himself, the live germ. It had shriveled up and died, like a sprouting grain of corn that has been washed out of the hill to lie exposed to the sun's heat" (Night Rider, p. 390). He has attempted to find meaning in the meaningless, and he has not been successful. Like Jefferson, another of Warren's characters, his only reality is pain:

> We are born to joy that joy may become pain.
> We are born to hope that hope may become pain.
> We are born to love that love may become pain.
> We are born to pain that pain may become more
> Pain, and from that inexhaustible superflux
> We may give others pain as our prime definition--
> (Brother, pp. 131-132)

The result of Mr. Munn's wasted life is the feeling that there is nothing to live for; in fact, death is merciful. The past, present, and future have little or no meaning except isolation:

> and because the future was dead and rotten in his breast, the past too, which once had seemed to him to have its meanings and its patterns, began to fall apart, act by act, incident by incident, thought by thought, each item into brutish separateness. Sometime he would try to build up some old scene of happiness or distress, to try to make the image communicate to him again the verity of his past feelings. But it was no use. . . . There was only the new numbness, the new isolation. (Night Rider, p. 390)

Warren's view of life that we get here is not an entirely hopeless one. Instead, Percy Munn seems more than anything to be an example of the wrong motives which can lead to disaster and to the complete annihilation of man. Percy Munn has paid the price for living a life that is not motivated by the right ethical standards. He is a man who bends too easily and too freely with the winds of violence. He is not humane in his approach to life, and Warren seems to be saying that he suffers because he isn't. He is an object lesson in himself because he goes into a new experience untainted; but instead of spreading good, he is tainted with evil.

The strength of this first novel may be partially attributed to its closeness to Warren's experience. In Night Rider, the author effectively uses his home state, Kentucky, as the setting. He reveals himself to be an excellent literary technician in the way he handles point of view and imagery.

At first glance, we might think that Warren is not wise in making Percy Munn his "central intelligence" for the story. We learn early that Munn is unable to make up his own mind about the issues in which he is involved and that he seems to be a confused person. But we find that Warren's detached attitude toward his character alleviates the possibility of confusion. He refers to Munn as Mr. Munn, thus establishing a sufficiently remote feeling on the part of the reader. It could be, however, that Warren feels that he is not completely successful in his use of Mr. Munn's point of view. Toward the end of the

story he uses an exemplum by Willie Proudfit to show how man can gain meaning from life if he can attain self-confidence. Willie does not know exactly how he attained it, but he has it.

In his use of light-dark imagery, Warren also excels in this work. The central image is the "dark night of the soul," and he shows a contrast between the light and dark. Excellent examples are: the riders scrape the tobacco beds of recalcitrant planters in the dark (later in the light, Mr. Munn is unable to imagine that he has been a part of these activities); Bunk is killed in the dark; Lucille and Mr. Munn meet at night (this is in contrast with Mr. Munn's association with May, which usually occurs in daylight); and Mr. Munn dies in the dark. Throughout the novel the interplay of these two images points out the need for light in a spiritual void.

The novel ordinarily considered Warren's best, All the King's Men (1946), is another good example of the theme of alienation. The work is usually thought to be based on the legend of Huey Long, but this is considered by some critics to be the least important thing about the novel.[16] They are possibly referring to something that is fairly evident even after a cursory reading: that the plot has a "broken back." Willie Stark is supposedly the protagonist at the beginning of the story; but Jack Burden, the narrator, evolves as the most important character.

Before we can do anything toward analyzing the theme of alienation, we must look--at least briefly--at the plot of the story. We

should mention in the beginning, however, that it is not an easy plot to summarize. The story is seen through the eyes of Jack Burden, Willie Stark's "right-hand man," and it is presented in first person. Willie Stark begins his political career as a country-hick lawyer; he initially has great plans for his kind of people. He is very much interested in bettering their state of life. However, through the help of Burden and Sadie Burke, he is soon a powerful political figure.

Burden flits at will from past to present; and when the novel opens, Willie is already governor of Louisiana. Burden has the task of "digging up dirt" on the people who are threats to his boss--and notably Judge Irwin. As Willie gains power, his personal life changes. Whereas he does not drink in the beginning, he finally begins to drink too much. Also, in the beginning, he is happily married to Lucy, a schoolteacher; but he soon begins to have affairs with other women. His son, Tom, who could have been an outstanding person, is spoiled and arrogant.

As the book progresses, the plot becomes more involved through Burden's treatment of several episodes: Lucy leaves Willie because she cannot stand what he has become; Tom gets his neck broken in a college football game; Anne Stanton, whom Jack has always loved, becomes Willie's mistress; Adam Stanton, Anne's brother, agrees to direct the medical center which Stark is building; Jack uncovers fraud in the past life of Judge Irwin, and the Judge commits suicide; Jack then learns that the Judge was his real father; Adam kills Willie and Willie's

bodyguard kills Adam; Jack and Anne pick up the pieces of their lives and try to make something of them.

A discussion of the theme of alienation in this novel will help to reveal the genius of the book and its construction. A consideration of Warren's use of humorous, homespun imagery alone could provide us with material for a separate study. However, I hope to reveal at least an awareness of the high feelings and human emotions which pervade the book by looking briefly at the alienation of Willie Stark and then more thoroughly at Jack Burden's alienation. Seen in the light of his alienation from the people with whom he really wants to associate, Willie may become more understandable. We see this when he, early in his political career, is made a decoy candidate for governor:

> He wasn't really in touch with the world. He was not only bemused by the voice he had heard. He was bemused by the very grandeur of the position to which he aspired. The blaze of light hitting him in the eyes blinded him. After all, he had just come out of the dark, the period when he grubbed on the farm all day and didn't see anybody but the family (and day after day he must have moved as though they weren't half-real) and sat at night in his room with the books and hurt inside with the effort and the groping and the wanting. So it isn't much wonder that the blaze of light blinded him.[17]

We can come to grips with the agony which Willie must have endured as he prepared for the bar examination. And when we realize what a struggle he has had, we can perhaps be more reconciled to what he ultimately becomes. The real climax in his life, however, occurs when he makes the discovery that he has been made a decoy. In this passage, we can observe that Willie is experiencing several reactions;

but the chief among them are hatred and disgust:

> "It's a funny story," he said. "Get ready to laugh. Get ready to bust your sides for it is sure a funny story. It's about a hick. It's about a red-neck, like you all, if you please. Yeah, like you. He grew up like any mother's son on the dirt roads and gully washes of a north-state farm. He knew what it was to get up before day and get the cow dung between his toes and feed and slop and milk before breakfast so he could set off by sunup to walk six miles to a one-room, slab-sided schoolhouse. He knew what it was to pay high taxes for that windy shack of a schoolhouse and those gully-washed red-clay roads to walk over--or to break his wagon axle or string-halt his mules on."
>
> . . .
>
> "And it came to him with the powerful force of God's own lightning on a tragic time back in his own home county two years ago when the first brick schoolhouse ever built in his county collapsed because it was built of politics-rotten bricks, and it killed and mangled a dozen poor little scholars. Oh, you know that story. He had fought the politics back of building that schoolhouse of rotten brick but he lost and it fell. But it started him thinking. Next time would be different."
>
> "People were his friends because he had fought that rotten brick. And some of the public leaders down in the city knew that and they rode up to his pappy's place in a big fine car and said how they wanted him to run for Governor."
>
> . . .
>
> "Oh, they told him," Willie was saying, "and that hick swallowed it." (All, pp. 91-92)

With this speech and this day, Willie Stark begins a career of infamy. He joins a host of other characters created by Warren who started out uncorrupted but became corrupted by the world. His corruption ends with his untimely death.

Warren does an even better job of rounding out the characterization of Jack Burden, as it relates to the theme of alienation. One of the first things that we notice about Jack's alienation is the relation-

ship that it has to a search often encountered in literature, the search of a son for a father. He has had a long string of fathers, but the Scholarly Attorney, for whom he feels mostly hate, is supposedly his real father. For some reason which Jack does not understand, the Scholarly Attorney spends all his time now helping in a mission for bums: "Look here, what can I say to him? And God knows, he hasn't got anything to tell me. Nobody made him live like that" (All, p. 105). Because of the number of men whom his mother has married over the years, Jack is insecure even as an adult. He remembers the string of husbands and consequently his identification through the years with Judge Irwin, who is more like a father than anyone else. We sense something of this feeling when Jack goes to Judge Irwin's house to present him with the evidence that he has found:

> I looked at him over there in the shadow and saw something was keeping the old shoulders straight and the old head up. I wondered what it was. I wondered if what I had dug up were true. With all my heart, I discovered, I didn't want it to be true. And I had the sudden thought that I might have his drink of gin and tonic, and talk with him and never tell him, and go back to town and tell the Boss that I was convinced it was not true. (All, pp. 341-342)

This passage becomes more important when we remember that Jack is not very free in showing love and respect for anyone; therefore, there must be some special significance in the way that he feels about Judge Irwin. Later when he realizes that he is the cause of the Judge's suicide, he meditates on his aloneness:

> I had dug up the truth and the truth always kills the father, the good and weak one or the bad and strong one, and you

> are left alone with yourself and the truth, and can never ask Dad, who didn't know anyway and who is deader than mackerel. (All, p. 354)

In this passage, we detect the flippant attitude which Jack frequently uses when he is touched by something. At one time after he has visited his mother and her current husband, the Young Executive, however, Jack seems to welcome temporary physical seclusion:

> There is nothing more alone than being in a car at night in the rain. I was in the car. And I was glad of it. Between one point on the map and another point on the map, there was the being alone in the car in the rain. They say you are not you except in terms of relation to other people. If there weren't any other people there wouldn't be any you because what you do, which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people. That is a very comforting thought when you are in the car in the rain at night alone, for then you aren't you, and not being you or anything, you can really lie back and get some rest. (All, p. 128)

In this passage, Jack seems to point out the idea that there is a time in a man's life when aloneness helps him to collect his thoughts.

As in the case of Bolton Lovehart and Percy Munn, the past--and its relation to the present--is an important consideration in the characterization of Jack Burden. It is particularly important to our study of alienation. We learn that during the time Jack was working on a Ph.D. in history, he was hiding from the present:

> The difference was in what they were hiding from. The two others [his roommates] were hiding from the future, from the day when they would get degrees and leave the University. Jack Burden, however, was hiding from the present. The other two took refuge in the present. Jack Burden took refuge in the past. (All, p. 160)

The time comes, however, when Jack no longer seeks refuge in the

past. He has been working on a journal done by a distant relative, Cass Mastern. But he casts aside the journal and thus gives up the idea of a Ph.D. because he has been editing the journal for a dissertation. He reflects that "perhaps he laid aside the journal of Cass Mastern not because he could not understand, but because he was afraid to understand for what might be understood there was a reproach to him" (All, p. 189). During the next few days, he alienates himself in what he calls the Great Sleep; this is his escape from responsibility --from self-knowledge. However, the time comes when he is able to discern that the "answer was in all the years before, and the things in them and not in them" (All, p. 325).

His embracing and acceptance of the past help him to come to grips with himself at the end of the story. In two experiences, he shows that he has gained some knowledge of himself--that he has experienced a dark night of the soul in his alienation and that he has come out with something worthwhile. The first experience centers around his saving Tiny Duffy's life. He makes the choice of not telling Sugar-Boy, Willie's former bodyguard and chauffeur, that Tiny is responsible for Willie's death. To do so would mean instant death for Tiny--at the hands of Sugar-Boy. And then later Jack lies to his mother. She has asked him if he knows the real reason that Judge Irwin killed himself. Realizing that the Judge was his mother's one real love, he answers:

"No," I said, "he wasn't in any jam. We had a little

> argument about politics. Nothing serious. But he talked about his health. About feeling bad, That was it. He said goodbye to me. I can see now he meant it as the real thing. That was all." (All, p. 431)

Jack afterward reflects that he has given his mother a present, a lie. But she has given him a present, too: the truth about herself. Now that he sees his mother in a new light, he feels that he has an entirely new picture of the world:

> And that means that my mother gave me back the past. I could now accept the past which I had before felt was tainted and horrible. I could accept the past now because I could accept her and be at peace with her and with myself. (All, p. 432)

Jack's new realization has made an entirely different person of him. It is what happens in his thinking that keeps this novel from being naturalistic in its approach. He is seemingly no longer beset by petty jealousies; in fact, he has taken in the Scholarly Attorney. Jack considers it strange that the three of them--Anne, his wife, the Scholarly Attorney, and he--should be there together. But they are there in harmony. He has come to the realization that if a person cannot accept his past and its burden, he can have no future--because only out of the past can a future be made.

Still another aspect of Jack's alienation has to do with his views about God. One of the earliest views comes during the time he is working on the Ph.D.:

> But for the present I would lie there and know I didn't have to get up, and feel the holy emptiness and blessed fatigue of a saint after the dark night of the soul. For God and Nothing have a lot in common. You look either one of Them straight in the eye for a second and the immediate effect on the human

constitution is the same. (All, p. 100)

Throughout the novel, he makes flippant reflections on God. And even after he has come to grips with his past and with the feelings of doubt that he has had about his mother, it is still not clear whether he has deepened his spiritual experience. He does say that there was a time when he came to believe that "nobody had any responsibility for anything and there was no god but the Great Twitch" (All, p. 435). This is somewhat negated later, however, when he says that he "woke up one morning to discover that he did not believe in the Great Twitch anymore" (All, p. 436). The closest he comes to saying that he accepts God occurs when the Scholarly Attorney asks him if he believes in God's foreknowledge, his omnipotence, his glory: "I nodded my head and said yes. (I did so to keep his mind untroubled, but later I was not certain but that in my own way I did believe what he had said.)" (All, p. 437).

In addition to Warren's handling of characterization in this novel, which we have already discussed, there is also a good handling of point of view. The story is told through the consciousness of Jack Burden. But Warren has utilized a technique in this novel which he frequently uses: the "you" point of view, which helps the reader to identify more readily than he might with the action. A good example occurs toward the beginning of the novel:

> It looked like those farmhouses you ride by in the middle of the afternoon, with the chickens under the trees and the dog asleep, and you know the only person in the house is the

> woman who has finished washing up the dishes and has swept the kitchen and has gone upstairs to lie down for half an hour and has pulled off her dress and kicked off her shoes and is lying there on her back on the bed in the shadowy room with her eyes closed and a strand of her hair still matted down on her forehead with the perspiration. She listens to the flies cruising around the room, then she listens to your motor getting big out on the road, then it shrinks off into the distance and she listens to the flies. That was the kind of house it was. (All, p. 22)

Another integral part of the point of view is the use of humor, which Warren does not ordinarily utilize to a great extent. Despite the seriousness of Jack Burden's position as Willie Stark's man, Jack colors his narration with wit, as in this passage:

> I was supposed to do a lot of different things, and one of them was to lift up fifteen-year-old, hundred-and-thirty-five-pound hairy white dogs on summer afternoons and paint an expression of unutterable bliss upon their faithful features as they gaze deep, deep into the Boss's eyes. I got hold of Buck's forelegs, as though I were girding myself to shove a wheelbarrow, and heaved. It didn't work. I got his front end up for a second, but just as I got him up, he breathed out and I breathed in. One gust of Buck was enough. It was like a gust from a buzzard's nest. I was paralyzed. Buck hit the porch boards and lay there like the old polar-bear rug he resembled. (All, p. 26)

Other examples of the refreshing use of language are Jack's comments "But it was her fudge and I let her cook it" (after Sadie Burke tells Willie that he has been framed) and "All of that, and me without a camera" (after Willie has shoved Duffy off the stage, following a heated political rally).

Robert Penn Warren says that the philosophical novelist is "willing to go naked into the pit, again and again, to make the same old struggle for his truth."[18] This statement, I believe, adequately sum-

marizes the approach which we have seen in the three works by Warren. Particularly in the character of Jack Burden, we see the writer's desire to arrive at some sort of spiritual truth. For Jack it is the realization of the importance of the past in relation to the future, and his awakening causes him to accept a whole new concept of life--a life which is relatively free of feelings of alienation. This freedom has evolved from an important affirmation concerning fulfillment and self; this is the type of affirmation R.P.W. makes in Brother to Dragons:

> The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.
> The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.
> The recognition of the direction is the death of
> the self.
> And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.
> All else is surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit.
> (Brother, pp. 214-215)

Jack Burden stands alone among the other characters whom we have discussed as the victorious man. In him, Warren has shown that man may be corrupted but may later reorient himself and learn about himself to the extent that he is able to catapult himself from the ashes of defeat and live a meaningful life. The approach is basically that of a humanist. Warren is a great deal like Camus in his approach to loneliness. Despite his development of a humanistic philosophy, the despair of his characters reflects Camus' "man of the absurd," who--like Sisyphus--must roll his stone to the top of the hill, only to see it roll down again. We especially see this viewpoint in Warren's development of the characters of Percy Munn and Bolton Lovehart; but as I have indicated, Jack Burden is a special case because, unlike

Warren's other characters we have discussed, he will probably be able to continue to live meaningfully.

END NOTES

[1]"The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novels," Kenyon Review, X (Summer, 1948), 408.

[2]Robert Penn Warren, as quoted by Susan Braudy, "Robert Penn Warren: Voices in My Blood," Yale Alumni Magazine (March, 1968), n. p.

[3](New York, 1953), p. 7--hereafter referred to in text as Brother with appropriate page numbers.

[4]Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground (Seattle, 1960), p. 4.

[5]Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1964), p. 17.

[6]Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, North Carolina, 1965), p. 53.

[7]"The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction," College English, XX (April, 1959), 344.

[8]"The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren," South Atlantic Quarterly, XLVII (October, 1948), 562.

[9]I should mention, however, that "Blackberry Winter," which appears in Circus, is ordinarily considered Warren's best short story; and it is a highly respected work.

[10]"The Circus in the Attic," in The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories (New York, 1948), p. 14--hereafter referred to in text as Circus with appropriate page numbers.

[11]"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," in The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (New York, 1953), p. 383.

[12]Bohner, p. 64.

[13]Alvan S. Ryan, "Robert Penn Warren's Night Rider: The Nihilism of the Isolated Temperament," in Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Essays, ed. John Louis Longley (New York, 1965), p. 50.

[14]Night Rider (Boston, 1939), p. 35--hereafter referred to in text as Night Rider with appropriate page numbers.

[15]In Brother to Dragons, Warren lists the speakers in order of appearance. He identifies R.P.W. as "the writer of this poem" (Brother, p. 2).

[16]Bohner, p. 84, notably. And even Warren says, "Willie Stark was not Huey Long. Willie was only himself, whatever that self turned out to be, a shadowy wraith or a blundering human being" (Bohner, p. 86, quoting Warren).

[17]All the King's Men (New York, 1946), p. 69--hereafter referred to in text as All with appropriate page numbers.

[18]"Introduction" to Joseph Conrad's Nostromo (New York, 1951), p. xxxviii.

CHAPTER IV

EUDORA WELTY: HARSHLY, WITH FEELING

> Of course, you know how it is with them--
> Negroes--band leaders--they would play the
> same way . . . for an audience of one. . . .
> When somebody, no matter who, gives every-
> thing, it makes people feel ashamed for him.
> --Eudora Welty

"Harshly, with feeling" summarizes well the approach used by Eudora Welty, the next writer in this study, although her works defy any kind of strict categorizing. Miss Welty is unlike Thomas Wolfe and Robert Penn Warren in that she oftentimes uses the ludicrous situation and breathless, witty dialogue to delineate alienated characters in her works. She develops with pathos the experiences of tragic souls who are alienated from life (a form of imprisonment in itself) in the midst of happy experiences that are being shared by others around them. As we study her works, we will observe that in many of the stories the characters are trying to cope with their alienation and that it is brought on by a variety of reasons--such as the indifference of other people, racial discrimination, poverty, or fate. We will also find that in an attempt to bridge the gap that exists between happiness and unhappiness, Miss Welty's characters resort to the weaving of

fantasies. Miss Welty has presented an excellent picture of the South; and even though she is a humorist, she is more than a writer who seeks to amuse. Young, Watkins, and Beatty present the "key" when they say that Miss Welty "portrays lonely, sensitive characters with sympathy and humor against a detailed backdrop of family, community, tradition, and place."[1]

Miss Welty's own life is important--but not for the usual reasons. In other words, there is seemingly nothing in her background (like Wolfe's intense feelings of alienation; and like the recurring illnesses of Flannery O'Connor and the recurring illnesses as well as the marital difficulties of Carson McCullers, both of whom will be discussed in subsequent chapters) which would make her want to paint a dismal picture of life. In fact, according to Katherine Anne Porter, who did an introduction to Miss Welty's Selected Stories, Miss Welty

> considers her personal history as hardly worth mentioning, a fact in itself surprising enough, since a vivid personal career of fabulous ups and downs, hardships and strokes of luck, travels in far countries, spiritual and intellectual exile, defensive flight, homesick return with a determined groping for native roots, and a confusion of contradictory jobs have long been the mere conventions of an American author's life. . . . Family life was cheerful and thriving; she seems to have got on excellently with both her parents and her two brothers.[2]

If we can accept this statement, there would seem to be nothing in her private life which would give a demented view of existence. And to support the idea that she has been treated well, we should summarize her awards. She received the O. Henry Memorial Prize for short

stories in both 1942 and 1943. And in 1944, she received an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; she was cited for her skill in portraying characters.[3] Then in 1952, she was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and received the William Dean Howells Medal for "the most distinguished work of American fiction" of the period from 1950-1955. And since the 1950's she has lectured at the Conference on American Studies at Cambridge University, has served as an honorary consultant of the Library of Congress (1958-1961), and has been awarded honorary doctorates from the University of Wisconsin (1954), Western College for Women (1955), and Smith College (1956). She was also the William Allan Neilson Professor of English in 1962 at Smith College.[4] In short, Miss Welty has been an honored and respected literary artist; and by her own admission, she has had good luck. It seems, then, that we must look at her handling of the theme of alienation, not as an attempt to wield a switchblade at the world, but to portray life as it sometimes is in the Delta Country (and everywhere)--grotesque, unhappy, bitter, lonely--and to do so with pathos and feeling.

A study of Miss Welty's fiction reveals that she does not develop just one theme, that of alienation, however--despite the importance of this theme in her works. Instead, as Robert Daniel suggests, her works also "develop a consistent attitude towards the world in which she lives--towards her shaped experience of that region whose present she knows directly."[5] This idea of a "consistent attitude

towards the world in which she lives" is well developed in an essay entitled "How I Write" by Miss Welty. She says in the essay that all stories written by the same person spring from the same source within the writer. And even though they do vary in approach or in subject, all stories by the writer will carry his signature because of

> one characteristic, lyrical impulse of his mind--the impulse to praise, to love, to call up, to prophesy. But then what countless stories share a common source! All writers write out of the same few, few and eternal--love, pity, terror do not change. . . .
>
> Surely, for the writer this is the world where stories come from, and where their origins are living reference plain to his eyes. The dark changes of the mind and heart, where all in the world is constantly <u>becoming</u> something--the poetic, the moral, the passionate, hence the <u>shaping</u> idea--are not mapped and plotted yet, except as psychiatry has applied the healing or tidying hand, and their being so would make no change in their processes, or their climates, or their way of life and death (any more than a map hung on the wall changes the world); or schedule or pigeonhole or allot or substitute or predict the mysteries rushing unsubmissively through them by the minute; or explain a single work of art that came out the other side.[6]

This is a beautiful statement of the artist's mind, especially Miss Welty's mind. It helps us to understand why she sometimes, but not always, dwells on despair. She writes stories like "The Whistle" and "The Key"--stories that are fraught with despair, alienation, desolation--because she has to. They are stories which must be told because of love, pity, and terror--and not necessarily because of hatred, bitterness, and despair in the artist's heart.

As we begin this study, we should consider the sensible analogy that Ruth Vande Kieft uses to point out Miss Welty's brilliance as a

writer. It is a tribute which well fits her art:

> Reading a story by Eudora Welty is not like rowing across a lake, with your destination on the other side dimly or clearly perceived. It is more like climbing into a small, well-designed craft, cutting your moorings, and then abandoning yourself to a trip down a changing stream to an unknown point. You have no notion what will happen, but you soon discover that someone with great skill is steering and guiding the craft, determining the pace according to or perhaps despite the current. She seems to say "Watch, be alert, trust me." The stream rushes and changes; now you are hurtled through foaming rapids and bumps against a rock; now you are brushed in the face by an overhanging bough; now you open onto a luminous pool, where the boat dallies and you gaze into quiet depths in which strange hidden life is drifting down under, and maybe, half dreaming, you see your own pensive face reflected on the surface; then you are off again and away. Everywhere there are fearful and pleasing events to shock and surprise; shy, elusive creatures to be detected behind the curtain of green; fascinating details to be seen up, down, and all about. When you reach your destination, <u>that</u> may seem, finally, the culmination of your trip; but sometimes you will want to look back and ask, "Where are we now, and what am I to think?" The helmsman, who has never been visible <u>as a person</u>, may never answer; and only then you may reflect that the significance of the journey was in the process, and that the parts of the process together make the experience a whole.[7]

Two points, especially, stand out in this analogy when we think of Miss Welty's handling of the theme of alienation, which at times seem to fit her dialectic: "The stream rushes and changes" and "Everywhere there are fearful and pleasing events to shock and surprise." These thoughts should be kept in mind as we begin our study of the works and as we notice the way the handling of the theme of alienation varies from work to work.

The theme of alienation is a subject which ultimately comes into any discussion of Miss Welty's works. However, at this time no

really thorough analysis has been done. The writer herself, for instance, probably gives the key to her use of the theme when she says that there are two things, beauty and sensitivity, in art that cannot be imitated: "But there is only one of them we can strive for. Sensitivity in ourselves. It is our technique. In the end, our technique is sensitivity, and beauty may be our reward."[8] In all of her works, she uses an approach which is expressive of a human's desire for sensitivity. This is the reason that she is able to portray the alienated person with such dignity and understanding. Robert Penn Warren, in an essay entitled "The Love and Separateness in Miss Welty," says that most of the stories in A Curtain of Green and The Wide Net are about people who are "cut off, alienated, isolated from the world."[9] And John Edward Hardy, in "Eudora Welty's Negroes," says that her themes, whether she is dealing with whites or blacks, are the "themes of human loneliness and alienation, of recognition, of the rarity and brevity of the moments of real awareness in which we awaken from the troubled dream that is the usual state of our existence."[10] Another person who writes in the same vein is Marvin Felheim ("Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers"); he says that "Miss Welty weaves the threads of her constant themes: loneliness, awareness, love."[11] Two other writers, Alfred Appel, Jr.,[12] and Ruth M. Vande Kieft,[13] also feel that Miss Welty develops the theme of alienation in her works. I hope to lend support to all of the above viewpoints by analyzing several of Miss Welty's short stories and one short novel, all

of which are typical of her work in prose fiction.

We will first of all deal with several stories from Miss Welty's earliest collection, A Curtain of Green (1941). In "A Piece of News," Miss Welty portrays Ruby and Clyde, two isolated characters who could have been tragic; but the writer's humorous approach has made them semi-comical. Ruby Fisher is an apparently unfaithful young wife who lives in the backwoods country. During her most recent "excursion," she has been given coffee wrapped in a Tennessee newspaper. She sees in the newspaper a story about a woman named, oddly enough, Ruby Fisher, whose husband shot her in the leg. Ruby cannot imagine Clyde's doing any such thing even though he knows that she is occasionally unfaithful to him, but still she is struck by the possibilities of such a situation. She begins to dream, as she lies on the unfolded newspaper, of dying in a beautiful new nightgown--with Clyde, very remorseful, leaning over her. She later tells Clyde about the article. It is at this point in the story that the hopelessness of their situation is revealed to them:

> Then he made a sound in his throat and said, "It's a lie."
>
> "That's what's in the newspaper about me," said Ruby, standing up straight. She took his plate and gave him that look of joy.
>
> He put his big crooked finger on the paragraph and poked at it.
>
> "Well, I'd just like to see the place I shot you!" he cried explosively. He looked up, his face blank and bold.
>
> But she drew herself in, still holding the empty plate, faced him straightened and hard, and they looked at each other. The moment filled full with their helplessness.

> Slowly they both flushed, as though with a double shame and a double pleasure. It was as though Clyde might really have killed Ruby, and as though Ruby might really have been dead at his hand. Rare and wavering, some possibility stood timidly like a stranger between them and made them hang their heads.[14]

This is a story in which the alienation is mostly physical. The backwoods setting is indeed significant. Not only are the characters isolated from other people in the region in which they live, but they are also alienated from law and order since Clyde has a whisky still. The rifle which he carries effectively symbolizes his separation from mankind. We are told at one point that Ruby "must have been lonesome and slow all her life, the way things would take her by surprise" (Curtain, p. 22). The storm which rages throughout the story also serves to accentuate the sense of isolation. We thus feel the darkness and vagueness of the situation. And even though Clyde has good-naturedly spanked Ruby, at the end of the story we see Ruby folding "her still trembling hands into her skirt" (Curtain, p. 30).

"The Key" gives us another glimpse of Miss Welty's handling of the theme of alienation. This time, it is alienation which comes through physical infirmity. But there is irony in the subsequent alienation of those who look upon the principal characters, two deaf-mutes, as oddities. Albert and Ellie Morgan are middle-aged deaf-mutes who are dramatically alienated from the world around them. At the beginning of the story, they are waiting in a railroad station for a train that is to take them to Niagara Falls. In the beginning, Ellie

seems to be the strength of the marriage because she is a large woman who seems able to meet the world on her own terms. Albert, on the other hand,

> looked home-made, as though his wife had self-consciously knitted or somehow contrived a husband when she sat alone at night. He had a shock of very fine sunburned yellow hair. He was too shy for this world, you could see. (Curtain, pp. 57-58)

But we later find that he is not, after all, the submissive type. A young red-haired man drops a key at Albert's feet. This key seems to be the thing that Albert has been waiting for because he refuses to return it. It gives him hope, which he tries to convey to Ellie. In fact, they become so engrossed in their sign language that they miss their train. At the end of the story, the young man gives Ellie the key to his room; she, too, is not to be left out.

This is a highly symbolical story. The young man's compassionate understanding of the Morgans seems to indicate that he is a symbol of an understanding God; however, such an interpretation is not reconcilable with his apparent lostness. The young man cannot understand sign language, but he instinctively feels the frustration of Ellie and Albert because of their isolation from the outside world. He is also able to detect the domination of Ellie in the marriage relationship--and the unhappiness wrought by her dominance. To the people around them, the Morgans are grotesque because of their alienation:

> And still the young man waited, as if the strange joy of the little man took precedence with him over whatever need he had for the key. With sudden electrification he saw Ellie

> slip the handle of her satchel purse from her wrist and with her fingers begin to talk to her husband.
>
> The others in the station had seen Ellie too; shallow pity washed over the waiting room like a dirty wave foaming and creeping over a public beach. In quick mumblings from bench to bench people said to each other, "Deaf and dumb!" How ignorant they were of all that the young man was seeing! Although he had no way of knowing the words Ellie said, he seemed troubled enough at the mistake the little man must have made, at his misplaced wonder and joy. (Curtain, pp. 61-62)

But, ironically, the bystanders are also alienated. When Albert begins to "speak" to Ellie, everyone looks at him: "They were embarrassed, vaguely aware of some crisis and vaguely affronted, but unable to interfere; it was as though they were the deaf-mutes and he the speaker" (Curtain, pp. 62-63). We have here an excellent example of two types of people (those who hear and speak and those who do not) who are strangely repelled by each other. Those around Ellie feel the alienation of the woman: "And how her eyes shone! Who would ever know how deep her suspicion of the whole outside world lay in her heart, how far it had pushed her!" (Curtain, pp. 66-67) And even despite their likenesses, she and Albert are unable to communicate with any real understanding. Their difficulty is implied by Appel when he says, "Even if a shared isolation forces or draws them together, people must still be able to keep their secret key--in whatever form it may take."[15]

One of the most humorous stories ever written by Miss Welty is "Why I Live at the P.O." But in spite of the humor of the situation, it is also one of the best examples of alienation in the works of the

writer. The narrator, Sister, is an alienated creature because she is a rigid, unmovable object. Katherine Anne Porter says that she is a "terrifying case of dementia praecox,"[16] and Vande Kieft says that Sister acts and thinks with the

> insane logic of a paranoid . . . [but] is not felt to be so because of the marvelous energy, self-possession, and resourcefulness with which she carries out her revenge (so that our pity is not aroused), and because of the inescapable comedy in her situation, the members of her family and their behaviour, and her mode of telling her story.[17]

This comment fails to indicate the seriousness of Sister's alienation, however.

Sister wants everything her way; she is obsessed by feelings of jealousy toward her sister, Stella-Rondo, who has just returned home after an unsuccessful marriage--bringing with her a two-year-old "adopted" child, Shirley-T, who, Sister implies, is illegitimate. Sister thinks that Stella-Rondo (who had run off and married Mr. Whitaker, Sister's gentleman friend) has come back to set the whole family against her. And the entire story is built around Sister's supposed alienation which has resulted. The "straw that breaks the camel's back," to use a typical Sister-like expression, occurs when Mama asks where Mr. Whitaker went. Sister answers:

> "Probably to the North Pole, if he knows what's good for him."
>
> But Stella-Rondo just bawled and wouldn't say another word. She flew to her room and slammed the door.
>
> "Now look what you've gone and done, Sister," says Mama. "You go apologize."
>
> "I haven't got time, I'm leaving," I says.
>
> "Well, what are waiting around for?" asks Uncle Rondo.

> So I just picked up the kitchen clock and marched off, without saying "Kiss my foot" or anything, and never did tell Stella-Rondo goodbye. (Curtain, pp. 108-109)

Despite the humor of Sister's actions and the difficulty involved in separating truth from fantasy, the reader is able to detect a special type of alienation in the story. We have previously discussed this type of alienation in the analysis of Thomas Wolfe's The Web and the Rock. Sister, like Monk, is treated in accordance with the name by which everyone knows her. She belongs to a special class--the oldest child in the family. She is alienated by this fact. We can infer from the situation that all her life she has been the one who has had to do the jobs that no one else has wanted to do. It is significant, too, that she doesn't even have a name. Her sister is called Stella-Rondo, which identifies her with another member of the family, Uncle Rondo--who is also not nameless. But Sister remains nameless--thus a universal representative of the oldest child in a family who bears the punishment for the misdeeds of the other children and also carries the bulk of the workload. It is almost as though what James George Frazer says in The Golden Bough has been interpreted in reverse. This is what Frazer says:

> Unable to discriminate clearly between words and things, the savage commonly fancies that the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but a real and substantial bond which unites the two in such a way that magic may be wrought on a man just as easily through his name as through his hair, his nails, or any other material part of his person.[18]

As it turns out for Sister, however, the "magic" of which Frazer speaks means only that Sister will do all the dirty work--if we can take her word for it, that is. At the end of the story when Sister says, "I want the world to know that I'm happy" (Curtain, p. 110), she is indirectly revealing the feelings of frustration that her self-imposed isolation has caused her. She also seems to be compensating, and we therefore detect that things are not as wonderful as she would have us and her family to believe.

In "The Whistle," we see an example of the alienation of poverty. Not only are Jason and Sara Morton alienated from the people around them, but they are also alienated from each other. Miss Welty has pointed out in this story the truth that people may live together and may thus share an experience (good or bad) and still live and breathe separately. These two defeated individuals are seen as totally alone without hope, though they work together against poverty. Briefly, the story tells of the struggle endured by these two people as they seek to exact a living from the soil. They have already put out their tomato plants, but the cold weather has not completely ended; very early in the morning, the village whistle sounds. This is their warning that a freeze is coming. They have nothing to use to cover the plants except the bedclothes which they take from the floor in front of the fireplace, where they have been sleeping. Before all the plants are covered, they run out of bedding, and Sara pulls off her dress and covers the remaining plants with it. When they return

to the house, they are so cold that Jason first burns the cherry log which they have been saving for the very last of winter, and then a split-bottomed chair, and finally the four-legged kitchen table.

The story is filled with statements of gloomy alienation. It is sad that Jason and Sara are thought of as old even though they are only fifty:

> Still their lives were filled with tiredness, with a great lack of necessity to speak, with poverty which may have bound them like a disaster too great for any discussion but left them still separate and undesirous of sympathy. (Curtain, p. 113)

At the end of the story, we have no reason to think that they, unlike some of Miss Welty's characters, have anything to look forward to:

> Sara trembled, again pressing her hard knees against her breast. In the return of winter, of the night's cold, something strange, like fright, or dependency, a sensation of complete helplessness, took possession of her. All at once, without turning her head, she spoke.
>
> "Jason . . . "
>
> A silence. But only for a moment.
>
> "Listen," said her husband's uncertain voice.
>
> They held very still, as before, with bent heads.
>
> Outside, as though it would exact something further from their lives, the whistle continued to blow. (Curtain, p. 120)

The bleakness of their existence is unbearable. They are like the typical naturalistic heroes who are caught; in fact, at one point in the story we are told that the cold grips them "like the teeth of a trap." And their alienation is made even more intense when we realize that, like the four-legged table that had "stood thirty years in one place [and is now] consumed in such a little while" (Curtain, p.

119), their personal dreams and possessions have been destroyed.

The alienation encountered in Miss Welty's "The Hitch-Hikers," which will now be considered, comes as a result of the protagonist's not really having a place in the world. The character, Tom Harris, a traveling salesman, is engulfed in a meaningless existence. We are reminded of Wolfe's and Warren's characters when we think of his lack of identity. Harris' feeling of alienation is detected early in the story in this passage:

> On the road he did some things rather out of a dream. And the recurring sight of hitch-hikers waiting against the sky gave him the flash of a sensation he had known as a child: standing still, with nobody to touch him, feeling tall and having the world come all at once into its round shape underfoot and rush and turn through space and make his stand very precarious and lonely. (Curtain, pp. 121-122)

But in a sense he is oblivious of the people around him. A good example occurs when he picks up the two hitch-hikers. Later, while Harris has gone into a hotel, one of them kills the other one in Harris' car. And Harris merely reflects that all kinds of things had happened in his car. Even though this is a story in which people are constantly together, everyone appears to be lonely--with the exception of the guitar player who is murdered. However, even he is pathetic because of his selfishness. This is revealed when Harris asks him about playing the guitar: "Couldn't you stop somewhere along here and make money playing this? . . . The man hit it flat with the palm of his hand. 'This box? Just play it for myself'" (Curtain, p. 126). He evidently has been able to close people out of his life.

At the end of the story, we see a faint bit of hope for Harris. He has been very much concerned about the guitar player, and he is bothered when the news comes that the man has died. He is also able to identify with another alienated being, the little colored boy:

> "Mr. Harris," said a little colored boy who stayed. "Does you want the box?"
>
> "The what?"
>
> He pointed, to where it lay in the back seat with the sample cases. "The po' kilt man's gittar. Even the policemans didn't want it."
>
> "No," said Harris, and handed it over. (Curtain, p. 146)

And the story ends at this point. Perhaps Harris' reaction to the small boy indicates a bit more self-awareness than he has exhibited before.

In the title story of the collection, "A Curtain of Green," we see a study of the alienation which is caused by the death of a loved one. Mrs. Larkin's husband has been killed by a falling chinaberry tree. We see the forceful type of person Mrs. Larkin is in this scene:

> It was a summer day, a day from the summer before. In the freedom of gaily turning her head, a motion she was now forced by memory to repeat as she hoed the ground, she could see again the tree that was going to fall. There had been no warning. But there was the enormous tree, the fragrant chinaberry tree, suddenly tilting, dark and slow like a cloud, leaning down to her husband. From her place on the front porch she had spoken in a soft voice to him, never so intimate as at that moment. "You can't be hurt." But the tree had fallen, had struck the car exactly so as to crush him to death. She had waited there on the porch for a time afterward, not moving at all--in a sort of recollection--as if to reach under and bring out from obliteration her protective words and to try them once again . . . so as to change the whole happening. It was an accident that was incredible, when her love for her husband was

was keeping him safe. (Curtain, pp. 213-214)

But she had been powerless, despite her love. And now she works constantly in her garden, concealed by a "curtain of green." She does not work there in order to create beauty, but to enclose herself in a wall of green:

> Just to what end Mrs. Larkin worked so strenuously in her garden, her neighbors could not see. She certainly never sent a single one of her fine flowers to any of them. They might get sick and die, and she would never send a flower. And if she thought of beauty at all (they regarded her stained overalls, now almost of a color with the leaves), she certainly did not strive for it in her garden. It was impossible to enjoy looking at such a place. To the neighbors gazing down from their upstairs windows it had the appearance of a sort of jungle, in which the slight, heedless form of its owner daily lost itself. (Curtain, p. 212)

Mrs. Larkin has thus closed out everyone, and she has attempted to do so by drawing the protective "curtain" around her. Hers is a self-imposed isolation; however, it is ironic that she has not been able to close out one thing: her remembrance of her husband and of his death. She has thus been able to accomplish only one thing: almost total separation from the people around her. When the rain comes at the end of the story, she drops her hoe and sinks, into a half-sleep, to the ground with a look of resignation. This last action suggests that she will be able to recover her self-identity and to find meaning in her life only by sinking into oblivion:

> Then Mrs. Larkin sank in one motion down into the flowers and lay there, fainting and streaked with rain. Her face was fully upturned, down among the plants, with the hair beaten away from her forehead and her open eyes closing at once when the rain touched them. Slowly her lips began to

> part. She seemed to move slightly, in the sad adjustment of a sleeper. (Curtain, p. 219)

Miss Welty wrote the next story, "Powerhouse," very rapidly after she had been to a dance at which Fats Waller, the Negro jazz musician, and his band had played.[19] Miss Welty is obviously enthralled by Powerhouse and by his story. The work begins in an enthusiastic, exuberant way which we do not often see in her openings: "Powerhouse is playing! He's here on tour from the city--'Powerhouse and His Keyboard'--'Powerhouse and His Tasmanians'--think of the things he calls himself!" (Curtain, p. 254) Not only does this story mark a difference in her technique, but it is also one of her most poignant treatments of the theme of alienation. However, it is handled on more than one level.

Powerhouse, first of all, is alienated from the people who have come to dance to his playing. Miss Welty makes it clear in the beginning of the story that this is a white dance. The white people are engrossed by his technique--by his mannerisms--but it is impossible for them to forget that he is a Negro:

> Everybody just stands around the band and watches Powerhouse. Sometimes they steal glances at one another, as if to say, Of course, you know how it is with them--Negroes--bandleaders--they would play the same way, giving all they've got, for an audience of one. . . . When somebody, no matter who, gives everything, it makes people feel ashamed for him. (Curtain, pp. 258-259)

This last phrase, "somebody, no matter who," presents another level of Powerhouse's alienation. He is out of touch with people because

as a performing artist, he is not approachable. He can be enjoyed, and he can entertain people; but there is a sort of "curtain of green" between his audience and him. And this has nothing to do with his race or his color. He is a spectacle more than he is a human being; and, as we will discuss later, he feels strongly a lack of love. He is a representative of the typical performer:

> When any group, any performers, come to town, don't people always come out and hover near, leaning inward about them, to learn what it is? What is it? Listen. Remember how it was with the acrobats. Watch them carefully, hear the least word, especially what they say to one another, in another language--don't let them escape you; it's the only time for hallucination, the last time. They can't stay. They'll be somewhere else this time tomorrow. (Curtain, p. 255)

Implicit in this passage is the separation of the members of the band from one another. Powerhouse recognizes only Valentine and Little Brother, and he does not actually communicate with them very well.

There is also alienation which has to do with love in this story. There is special significance in the playing of "Pagan Love Song" late at night because it provides the framework for the story (it may or may not be true) about Powerhouse's wife and Uranus Knockwood. It increases the feeling of identification which Miss Welty produces within the reader. Powerhouse seems to be begging, crying for love--for understanding. Later, at the end of the story, this motif is continued when someone requests "Somebody Loves Me." Powerhouse does twelve or fourteen choruses,

> piling them up nobody knows how, and it will be a wonder if

> he ever gets through. Now and then he calls and shouts, "Somebody loves me, I wonder who!" His mouth gets to be nothing but a volcano. "I wonder who!"
>
> "Maybe . . . " He uses all his right hand on a trill.
>
> "Maybe . . . " He pulls back his spread fingers, and looks out upon the place where he is. A vast, impersonal, and yet furious grimace transfigures his wet face.
>
> ". . . Maybe it's you!" (Curtain, pp. 273-274)

It is on this note that the story ends, and it cannot be dismissed lightly. There must have been an attempt on the part of the author to portray the agony and despair of the Negro--and specifically the Negro entertainer.

There is still another level of operation for the theme of alienation in the story. Powerhouse also experiences a deep sense of alienation in his association with his own people. He is a big uptown Negro, and there are no lines of communication drawn between him and the country "nigger" who tries to impress him. This, of course, is Sugar-Stick Thompson, who is introduced to Powerhouse and his group when they go to the World Café in Negro town during their intermission. Sugar-Stick is a local hero because he has "pulled up" from the bottom of July Creek fourteen "drownded white people." But Sugar-Stick finds speaking an impossibility, and Powerhouse can do nothing but look at him. In fact, he looks at him seekingly; and to break the monotony of the experience, he begins anew with his story about Uranus Knockwood. Little Brother pleads with him not to start again, but he continues. Finally, the waitress says that it must be the real truth, to which Powerhouse responds:

> "No, babe, it ain't the truth." His eyebrows fly up, and he begins to whisper to her out of his vast oven mouth. His hand stays in his pocket. "Truth is something hasn't come to me, but I ain't saying it won't. And when it does, then want me to tell you?" He sniffs all at once, his eyes come open and turn up, almost too far. He is dreamily smiling. (Curtain, p. 270)

These levels of Powerhouse's alienation reveal him to be one of the most troubled of Miss Welty's characters. A short story which could have been merely a melodramatic work has evolved as a dramatic story. This is attributable in part to the author's use of a very realistic, carefully drawn setting; a feeling of involvement which the reader has from the beginning to the end because of realistically delineated characters; and a sensitive handling of an important theme.

Still another story which treats the theme of alienation is "A Worn Path"; this story is based on one of Miss Welty's experiences:

> One day Miss Welty took a book and went along for company on a little excursion to the country with a painter friend. While the two were quietly engaged, an ancient Negress with a bright, weathered face, chanced along. She asked Miss Welty to tie her shoes, a few words were exchanged, and the old woman, when asked about her age, said, "I was old at the Surrender." She became, of course, Old Phoenix, caught, fully rendered, on the worn path of her Natchez countryside "place," in serene and timeless ceremonial.[20]

"A Worn Path" is about Old Phoenix, an ancient Negro, who walks into town (a distance of over five miles) in order to get throat medicine for her little grandson. The child has trouble breathing because he drank lye a couple of years before.

Old Phoenix is another example of Miss Welty's alienated

characters. Her problem is twofold: first of all, she is a Negro; and second, she is an old, poverty-stricken woman. Like many of Miss Welty's characters, however, she in a sense rises above her alienation by doing good works. In doing so, she also has a tendency to let fantasy triumph in her life. A good example of this occurs when she has walked several miles to town in order to get her grandson's medicine. She is asked by the attendant and the nurse what she wants and then ultimately how her grandson is, but she does not answer. Finally, however, there comes

> a flicker and then a flame of comprehension across her face, and she spoke.
>
> "My grandson. It was my memory had left me. There I sat and forgot why I made my long trip."
>
> "Forgot?" The nurse frowned. "After you came so far?" . . . [And Old Phoenix later says] "I remembers so plain now. I not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation." (Curtain, p. 287)

We find in this story that the alienation is not alienation of the spirit of Old Phoenix, however. The alienation lies in the hearts of the people with whom she deals--those who are unwilling to look beyond the physical into the real person. Old Phoenix is consumed by love--not hate. Miss Welty reveals this beautifully in several ways. First of all, we see Old Phoenix as a self-sacrificing person who is willing to become a "charity case" in order to provide her little grandson with the medicine that he needs. And because she is a proud woman, this takes nerve on her part. She is also revealed as a person who is "at one with nature." As she goes through the woods on

the "worn path," she talks to the animals. In addition, she is revealed to be a woman of faith; she is concerned about her sin (she picks up a nickel that a man in the woods drops and does not give it back to him). And she is made to be a very witty person because she constantly chides herself about her physical infirmity. Not often in literature is such a person portrayed. In fact, Vande Kieft correctly compares her with Dilsey in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and speaks of her as a "completely and beautifully harmonious person."[21] It is because of the sensitive portrayal that the reader identifies solely with Old Phoenix when he hears other characters say things like "Oh, that's just old Aunt Phoenix" (Curtain, p. 286) and "A charity case, I suppose" (Curtain, p. 285).

By looking at a few of the stories in Miss Welty's first short-story collection, we have discovered a significant handling of the theme of alienation. This study should help us to discern that the charming lady from Jackson is not just a witty, breezy writer--but also a writer of pathos, sentiment, and sensitivity. And even though the tragedy of the situation is sometimes relieved through laughter, Miss Welty has presented some very realistic, terror-filled characters. A good example of her technique is found in "The Key." Everyone in the railroad station looks in a condescending manner at the "deaf and dumb" Morgans, not ever realizing the strength of character that makes up these two people. And who can ever forget the picture of Sara Morton in "The Whistle" using her dress to cover the last

of the tomato plants? It is a picture etched by the pathos and understanding of a sensitive writer. And who can fail to identify with the mighty Powerhouse, who has been portrayed so beautifully and despairingly through Miss Welty's viewpoint? We see her characters through compassionate eyes, and this makes them all the more real to us. But compassion alone does not make fine art; we find as we look at her works that she is also a conscious technician whose awareness of natural Southern speech rhythms is clear and distinct. It is this awareness of Southern speech which makes possible her good use of idioms. For example, Ruby, in "A Piece of News," "must have been lonesome and slow all her life, the way things would take her by surprise" (Curtain, p. 22). And in "The Key," Miss Welty says of Albert, "He was too shy for this world, you could see" (Curtain, p. 58). Also, she speaks of the "shallow pity [that] washed over the waiting room like a dirty wave foaming and creeping over a public beach" (Curtain, p. 62). In addition, in "The Whistle," Jason and Sara are "no more communicative in their misery than a pair of window shutters beaten by a storm" (Curtain, p. 112), and the "calm cold sink[s] into them like the teeth of a trap" (Curtain, p. 118). This knowledge of her materials has made possible great versatility in the handling of point of view in her works; good examples may be seen in "Why I Live at the P.O." and "Powerhouse." As an artist Miss Welty seems to realize instinctively that any approach other than Sister's first-person point of view would have diminished the effectiveness of

her story--just as the effectiveness of "Powerhouse" would have been diminished by the use of the past tense instead of present tense. Through Miss Welty's careful handling of fictional techniques, we are thus able to see through the attitudes of those who alienated the poor and the oppressed to the real selves of those who are alienated. And we are further impressed by some of the characters because they challenge their isolation, which shows that they are clinging to hope for a better life.

Miss Welty has also dealt meaningfully with this theme of alienation in the stories from The Wide Net (1943), one of which we will study. This story is "Livvie." It is the story of a very unhappy Negro girl named Livvie, who is married to Solomon, an old man. In this work, the writer has not portrayed alienation through cause of race; Livvie is alienated from a meaningful life because of her husband. And her color has very little significance. When Solomon and Livvie marry, Livvie is only sixteen, and Solomon takes her twenty-one miles away from her home to his isolated place. She is not happy, first of all, because she is no longer allowed to see people:

> He told her himself that it had been a long time, and a day she did not know about, since that road was a traveled road with people coming and going. He was good to her, but he kept her in the house. She had not thought that she could not get back.[22]

But in this house she has lived nine years, and they have been nine lonely years of despair. Now Solomon has grown old, which increas-

es Livvie's despair.

Livvie is also alienated by Solomon's insistence on order. He is very proud of his station in life and of the material wealth that he has been able to accumulate. Livvie, however, cannot feel at home in such a stifled, ordered environment:

> Solomon had a houseful of furniture. There was a double settee, a tall scrolled rocker and an organ in the front room, all around a three-legged table with a pink marble top, on which was set a lamp with three gold feet, besides a jelly glass with pretty hen feathers in it. (Net, p. 154)

In short, everything is in patterns--worked out in groups of two's, three's, and four's: a three-room house; four baited mousetraps, one in each corner of the kitchen; groups of three roses on either side of the steps outside; and so on. Livvie is able to live on in this environment until one day shortly before Solomon dies; on this day, a white lady comes to sell cosmetics. Livvie, of course, has no way of buying the beautiful lipstick that she wants so badly because she never has any money of her own. This experience, as a result, has a real influence on her:

> Her hand took the lipstick, and in an instant she was carried away in the air through the spring, and looking down with a half-drowsy smile from a purple cloud she saw from above a chinaberry tree, dark and smooth and neatly leaved, neat as a guinea hen in the dooryard, and there was her home that she had left. On one side of the tree was her mama holding up her heaving apron, and she could see it was loaded with ripe figs, and on the other side was her papa holding a fish-pole over the pond, and she could see it transparently, the little clear fishes swimming up to the brim. (Net, pp. 165-166)

Solomon has indeed "built a lonely house, the way he would make

a cage" (Net, p. 173), and Livvie tries to escape it. However, when she leaves, she meets up with Cash McCord, a dandy-type Negro. So at the end of the story, the reader is left with the feeling that perhaps Livvie has not alleviated her unhappy condition. She thus joins a long line of Miss Welty's characters who desire fulfillment but ironically escape from one trap into another.

As we have already seen in "Why I Live at the P.O.," however, Miss Welty sometimes deals with the theme of alienation in a light, humorous manner. She uses this same type of approach in The Ponder Heart (1954). The narrator of this novel (if it may be called a novel) is Edna Earle Ponder, who is enough like Sister, the postmistress, to be closely related to her. Edna Earle is the owner of the Beulah Hotel in Clay, and she tells her story (in 156 pages) to a female guest. Through her comic monologue we learn much about the Ponder family: herself, her grandfather, and her Uncle Daniel--notably.

The monologue may be divided into two parts, the first of which deals with the events which lead up to Uncle Daniel's trial. Edna Earle's grandfather, a persistent old man, decides that many of his problems would be solved if he could find a wife for his son Daniel. So he assumes the role of Cupid. Before long, Daniel himself is caught up in the magic of courtship. He decides almost immediately that Miss Teacake Magee is the woman for him. The marriage does not last long; and he then finds Miss Bonnie Dee Peacock, a young "poor white" girl several years younger than he is. He definitely

marries beneath himself. During the excitement of this marriage, Grandpa Ponder dies, leaving Daniel a very wealthy man. Everything is going well until Bonnie Dee leaves Daniel after almost six years of marriage. Edna Earle is able to persuade her to come back; but on the evening of Daniel and Bonnie Dee's reunion, Daniel tickles Bonnie Dee to death during a lightning storm. Her funeral is held at the Peacocks' house, and everything goes well for the Peacocks because Uncle Daniel is in a giveaway mood. Edna Earle learns soon, however, that the Peacocks are charging Uncle Daniel with murder.

The second part of the story is devoted mostly to the trial. Despite the seriousness of the charge, this part of the book is riotously humorous. When the jury members are sent out, for instance, they come back into the courtroom almost immediately with a verdict of "not guilty" because they don't want to miss anything. Everyone leaves the courtroom, and Daniel moves into the Beulah Hotel. Edna Earle tells her captive audience of one that she is the first person who has come near the hotel during the past three days.

We cannot hope to capture the sheer delight of The Ponder Heart by summarizing the plot; it is a book which demonstrates well the writer's interesting style of writing. And in this work Miss Welty has also treated the theme of alienation in a meaningful, humorous manner. As we read Miss Welty's works, we are usually impressed by the compassionate way in which she treats the Negro. Notable examples are Old Phoenix, Powerhouse, and Livvie. However, in

keeping with a more humorous tone, in The Ponder Heart, she has shown the alienation of the black person in a typically Southern manner. For example, she says that "they [Negroes] don't know anything, but you can try telling them and see what happens."[23] And when Narciss, Uncle Daniel's maid, gives evidence in the trial which does not support the Ponders, Edna Earle says, "She just washed her hands of us. You can't count on them for a single minute" (Heart, p. 103).

We also see in this story the way that Edna Earle alienates herself from other people in the way she reacts to them. Throughout the story, she sets herself up as the Guardian Angel of the Ponder family. And at one point she tells her listener, "It's always taken a lot out of me, being smart" (Heart, p. 10). However, this does not agree with what Virgil says about her (I presume that this is the same Edna Earle) in the story "The Wide Net":

> "She's [Hazel] a lot smarter than her cousins in Beulah . . . And especially Edna Earle that never did get to be what you'd call a heavy thinker. Edna Earle could sit and ponder all day on how the little tail of the 'C' got through the 'L' in a Coca-Cola sign" (Net, pp. 38-39).

Edna Earle's flippant attitude helps to place her well as the "last of the Ponders," a thought which to her is comforting.

We detect, in addition, the alienation of the Ponder family in general. The "Ponder heart" is to be construed as the type of heart which no one else has; and consequently, no one else understands it. During the trial we see that people of the town seem to respect the family but that no one really understands the Ponders. What is

more, there has to be someone to stand between the family and the world, according to Edna Earle:

> We had all that company to crowd in at the Beulah dinner table, had to serve it twice, but there was plenty and it was good; and everybody was kind enough to tell me how I did (except Judge Waite, who sat up there by me without opening his mouth except to eat) and made me feel better. I hardly had a chance to swallow my fresh peach pie. When somebody spoke to Uncle Daniel, I tried to answer for him too, if I could. I'm the go-between, that's what I am, between my family and the world. I hardly ever get a word in for myself. (Heart, p. 120)

Then later when Uncle Daniel passes out all of his money at the trial, we are made aware of the true feelings of the townspeople:

> Next, Mr. Bank Sistrunk stands up and roars out, "Daniel Ponder! Where did you get that money?"
>
> It was too late then.
>
> "Well," says Miss Missionary Sistrunk--the oldest one, returned from wildest Africa just twenty-four hours before--"the Ponders as I've always been told did not burn their cotton when Sherman came, and maybe this is their judgment."
>
> "Take that back, Miss Florette," I says over people's heads. "The Ponders did not make their money that way. You got yours suing," I says. "What if that train hadn't hit Professor Magee, where'd any Sistrunks be today? Ours was pine trees and 'way after Sherman, and you know it."
>
> "'Twas the same Yankees you sold it to!" That was Mr. Sistrunk. Why, he was beside himself. But Uncle Daniel just then got to him and gave him a single hundred-dollar bill, and shuts him up. You know, I think people have lost the power to be ashamed of themselves. (Heart, pp. 146-147)

Even though she says that she thinks people "have lost the power to be ashamed of themselves," Uncle Daniel has thus effected the total alienation of the Ponder family. And despite the humorous treatment, the tone is still one of pathos. The people have been humiliated by

Uncle Daniel's gifts:

> And Uncle Daniel had got right back to where he started from. He went from giving away to falling in love, and from falling in love to talking, and from talking to losing what he had, and from losing what he had to being run off, and from being run off straight back to giving away again. (Heart, pp. 148-149)

But he has made a bigger mistake than ever because he has given away money: "the worst thing you can give away" (Heart, p. 149). As a result, the things that Daniel has enjoyed before, he no longer enjoys:

> But he don't enjoy it any more. Empty house, empty hotel, might as well be an empty town. He don't know what's become of everybody. Even the preacher says he has a catch in his back, just temporary. And if people are going to try being ashamed of Uncle Daniel, he's going to feel it. I'm here, and just the same as I always was and will be, but then he never was afraid of losing me. (Heart, p. 154)

Even though The Ponder Heart has a basis of despair, a perspective of humor lies underneath. As we have seen in some of Miss Welty's other works, it is a type of humor which shows a sympathetic insight into human life. We have seen in this work and her other works studied that her handling of the theme of alienation shows a conscious effort on her part to show the importance of striving for sensitivity in ourselves (she says that our reward may be beauty). I have previously mentioned her use of the rhythms of speech and the versatility of her point of view. Perhaps we should also observe that her art seems to reflect her knowledge of photography; she shows a concern for atmosphere, for light, for color in the way she delineates her charac-

ters. One of the most memorable is Powerhouse:

> There's no one in the world like him. You can't tell what he is. "Nigger man"?--he looks more Asiatic, monkey, Jewish, Babylonian, Peruvian, fanatic, devil. He has pale gray eyes, heavy lips, maybe horny like a lizard's, but big glowing eyes when they're open. He has African feet of the greatest size, stomping, both together, on each side of the pedals. He's not coal black--beverage colored--looks like a preacher when his mouth is shut, but then it opens--vast and obscene. And his mouth is going every minute: like a monkey's when it looks for something. Improvising, coming on a light and childish melody--smooch --he loves it with his mouth. (Curtain, p. 254)

As a photographer, Miss Welty realizes that good descriptive writing, like good photography, is an artful combination of light and shadows. The way in which she angles in on her characters, as we have seen in the above passage, may be likened to the focus of a camera: the lens of the camera may create sharpness of focus at a wide range, depending upon the availability of light. The writer, again like the photographer, also knows that focus is increased in distance when the light is great in abundance, and the percentage of possible focus in a descriptive passage (as in a picture) becomes less and less as the light is taken away. Miss Welty has said that the artist must strive for sensitivity and that beauty may be his reward. In her characterizations we discern this striving, and implicit in each of her portrayals is the training of the photographer; this training is made evident in the writer's use of light and shadows in proper focus.[24] The result most of the time is a dignified, understanding, sensitive portrayal of man. Like Warren, she seems to be very much concerned

about man's plight; and despite some of the endings which we see in her stories, she persistently presents the hope that man will prevail.

END NOTES

[1]Thomas Daniel Young, Floyd C. Watkins, and Richard Croom Beatty, eds., The Literature of the South, Rev. ed. (Glenview, Illinois, 1968), p. 884.

[2]Katherine Anne Porter, "Introduction," Selected Stories of Eudora Welty (New York, 1954), pp. xii-xiii.

[3]Donald Heiny, Recent American Literature (Woodbury, New York, 1958), p. 258.

[4]Alfred Appel, Jr., A Season of Dreams (Baton Rouge, 1965), p. 259.

[5]"The World of Eudora Welty," in Southern Renascence, eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore, 1953), p. 306.

[6]In Understanding Fiction, 2nd ed., eds. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1959), p. 546, quoting Miss Welty.

[7]"Introduction," Thirteen Stories by Eudora Welty (New York, 1965), p. 13.

[8]"The Reading and Writing of Short Stories," The Atlantic, CLXXXIII (March, 1949), 49.

[9]Kenyon Review, VI (Spring, 1944), 249.

[10]In Images of the Negro in American Literature, eds. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy (Chicago, 1966), p. 221.

[11]In Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale, Illinois, 1964), p. 46.

[12]Appel, pp. 235-236. Appel feels that Miss Welty shows more hope in her later works than in her earlier works.

[13]Eudora Welty (New York, 1962), pp. 164-165. Miss Vande Kieft says that Miss Welty, in her handling of the theme of alienation, "has discovered that along with the primal loneliness, there is in each

person a primal joy" (p. 165).

[14]Eudora Welty, A Curtain of Green (New York, 1941), p. 30--hereafter referred to in text as Curtain with appropriate page numbers.

[15]Appel, p. 19.

[16]Porter, p. xx.

[17]Vande Kieft, Eudora Welty, pp. 67-68.

[18](New York, 1925), p. 244.

[19]Vande Kieft, Eudora Welty, p. 23.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., p. 43.

[22]Eudora Welty, The Wide Net (New York, 1943), p. 153--hereafter referred to in text as Net with appropriate page numbers.

[23]Eudora Welty, The Ponder Heart (New York, 1954), p. 54--hereafter referred to as Heart with appropriate page numbers.

[24]I am indebted to a good friend, Leon O. Sewell, formerly a professional photographer, for assisting me in synthesizing my thoughts concerning the impact that photography has had on the fictional techniques used by Miss Welty.

CHAPTER V

CARSON MCCULLERS:

THE PLIGHT OF THE LONELY HEART

> She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a we to claim, all other except her.
>
> --Carson McCullers

Of all the writers to be encountered in this study, Carson McCullers best epitomizes in her personal life the attitudes toward alienation to be found in her works. Mrs. McCullers shows in her fiction a fascination for the extreme loneliness of the individual in the presence of a world that is full of individuals. A summary of a few of the experiences of her life will help to cast light on the viewpoints which she presented in her literary works.

The writer was of middle-class parentage; her father was a watchmaker, and the family home in Columbus, Georgia, owned by the maternal grandmother, was in a state of decline. The young Carson learned early of the poverty of the workers at the cotton mill near her home, and her experiences made a deep impression on her. When she was seven, her family moved to Macon Road, which was on the outskirts of town. It was here that she spent her adolescence. Very

early in life she began to write and became fascinated by the riddle of time, which was to become one of her favorite motifs. She was always a delicate child and as a result received a great deal of attention--especially from her father.

A vital force throughout her life was music. Her father bought a piano for her when she was quite young, and she studied with a series of teachers. One of her earliest short stories, "Wunderkind," is about a young girl who has been a child-prodigy pianist. The passion and discipline which Mrs. McCullers writes about in this story show that she had surely experienced them, and they undoubtedly helped her as a writer.

One of the most important incidents of the writer's life occurred in 1935 when she went to New York to study at the Juilliard School of Music. She took with her enough money to last, but kept it with her instead of depositing it in a bank. Her roommate finally persuaded Carson to turn it over to her for safe-keeping but soon came to her with the news that the money had been lost on the subway. This unfortunate accident destroyed Carson's dreams of going to Juilliard, and she finally turned to a writing career. In order to pursue her newly chosen interest, she worked at a variety of jobs.

When she returned to Columbus a couple of years later, she met Reeves McCullers, a young army corporal whom she soon married. Reeves proved to be too much of an emotional problem for her, however; we can detect the type of person he was by looking at all the

mixed-up male characters in Mrs. McCullers' books. These characters seem to be patterned after him. Reeves wanted very much to write, but he was unable to do so.

While Reeves was trying to find himself and Carson was continuing to idealize him, Carson was becoming an established writer. Her first book, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, was published in 1940. It was followed in 1941 by Reflections in a Golden Eye. By the time Heart was published, Carson had come to realize that her marriage was a mistake. It was during this period that she suffered the first of several strokes, which would eventually lead to her death. Even after she divorced Reeves, they remained friends; and in 1945 they remarried. A year later, The Member of the Wedding, thought by many to be her greatest work, was published. Other full-length works were The Ballad of the Sad Café (1955), The Square Root of Wonderful (1957), and Clock Without Hands (1961)--plus a host of short stories.

During the years which followed the McCullerses' second marriage, Mrs. McCullers' star continued to rise--not only in the world of the short story and novel but also in the world of drama. She became a close friend of the playwright Tennessee Williams; this was to be a fruitful association because Williams persuaded her to adapt The Member of the Wedding as a play. Meanwhile her health was becoming steadily worse, and her husband was sinking further and further into alcoholism. He also began to take drugs, and his behavior was maniacal much of the time. He became particularly fasci-

nated with the possibility of a double suicide. In December of 1953, he died of an overdose of sleeping pills.[1]

Implicit in the preceding summary is an explanation of why Mrs. McCullers has incorporated into her works the plots and attitudes which she has used. Every character, every situation, seems to be a character or situation from her experience. She evidently despairs of love in her works because of her own unfortunate love experience. She dwells on the theme of loneliness and desolation because, like most literary geniuses, she has never really felt as though she belongs in the world.[2] When F. Jasmine Addams, the protagonist of The Member of the Wedding, cries out that she would like to be a part of a "we," the reader understands--in the light of Mrs. McCullers' background--that this is really the writer speaking. As Ralph McGill says, ". . . in sensitivity and interpretation of the juxtaposition of loneliness and love she excels."[3] We will encounter this juxtaposition again and again as we analyze the theme of alienation in some of her fiction.

Although the handling of the theme of alienation in her works is a subject which is ultimately broached in discussions of Mrs. McCullers' fiction, there have been no detailed studies. However, the critics are basically agreed that in her works there is a paradoxical relationship between loneliness and love. For example, Marvin Felheim says that Mrs. McCullers is primarily concerned in her fiction with the "loneliness of love and its consequent pain and suffering."[4]

Mark Schorer in The World We Imagine develops this idea further when he says that even though Mrs. McCullers' characters try to overcome their alienation through love, they feel from the beginning that it is impossible to do.[5] Along this same line of thought, Ihab Hassan says of the characters in Mrs. McCullers' fiction, "And lonely as her characters are, encased as they are in their dreams, most private of human expressions, their actions usually serve only to intensify their solitude."[6] Chester Eisinger, in Fiction of the Forties, supports these same basic opinions when he says that Mrs. McCullers "is possessed by the unceasing failures in the consummation of love, because the lover is always rejected by the beloved, who would himself be a lover, and the lover thus goes on dying . . . his spiritual death."[7] All these critics correctly imply that there is a naturalistic strain in the fiction of Carson McCullers, and the works which I have chosen for analysis--all of which are typical of her fiction--may be used to demonstrate her naturalistic handling of the theme of alienation.

In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Mrs. McCullers' first published novel, we find an excellent treatment of the theme of alienation. It is especially significant in relation to the author's avowed purpose in writing the book. In her outline of The Mute, which was later published as Heart, she indicates that her theme is developed in the first few pages. She states the theme as follows:

> . . . the theme of man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as is possible. Surrounding this general idea there are several counter themes and some of these may be stated briefly as follows: (1) There is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God. A personal God created by man is a reflection of himself and in substance this God is most often inferior to his creator. (2) In a disorganized society these individual Gods or principles are likely to be chimerical and fantastic. (3) Each man must express himself in his own way--but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, short-sighted society. (4) Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature. (5) Some men are heroes by nature in that they will give all that is in them without regard to the effort or to the personal returns.[8]

Even though she has not explicitly said anything about heredity, Mrs. McCullers in this excerpt seems to be placing a great deal of emphasis on environment. This calls to mind the dialectic of the naturalistic thinker, who feels that man is the sum total of his heredity plus his environment. His viewpoint is deterministic, mechanistic. The naturalist thinks that man is an animal that is motivated by the chemistry within himself and by circumstances over which he has no control. He believes that man is a subject of scientific, impersonal, objective investigation. Man is a case study in a laboratory; he is put in a clear white light and is studied objectively. The naturalist may or may not write about social reform. The heredity of the characters is already determined, but the environment can be changed. To point out the difficulty of the struggle facing man, the naturalist often chooses sordid, distasteful conditions as material. Nothing is

excluded. This could also account for Mrs. McCullers' use of the grotesque, the bizarre in her fiction.

The general outline which she establishes for Heart is somewhat typical of the aimlessness of most of her alienated characters. The story deals with

> five isolated, lonely people in their search for expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves. One of these five persons is a deaf mute, John Singer--and it is around him that the whole book pivots. Because of their loneliness these other four people see in the mute a certain mystic superiority and he becomes in a sense their ideal. Because of Singer's infirmity his outward character is vague and unlimited. His friends are able to impute to him all the qualities which they would wish for him to have. Each one of these four people creates his understanding of the mute from his own desires. Singer can read lips and understand what is said to him. In his eternal silence there is something compelling. Each one of these persons makes the mute the repository for his most personal feelings and ideas.[9]

Mrs. McCullers' statement of plan is indispensable to a study of this novel. And in order to develop her plan, we must consider at least a brief summary of the story. In the beginning of the work, Antonapoulos is the fountain from which Singer draws his strength. Like Singer, the Greek Antonapoulos is a mute; unlike Singer, he is a self-centered person. After a long period of illness which results in his insanity, Antonapoulos is sent by his cousin to an asylum. Singer is thus left alone in the world. The other characters of the novel are then drawn to him because he is always silent, and they can ascribe to him any characteristics that fit their own individual needs.

Each of them sees in him what he wants to see. Some say that

he is rich and powerful; others say that he is poor. He is a Jew or a Turk--a Catholic or a Presbyterian. He is all things to all people because he cannot speak. Mick Kelly, the twelve-year-old girl in whose home Singer has rented a room, wonders "what kind of music he heard in his mind that his ears couldn't hear. Nobody knew. And what kind of things he would say if he could talk. Nobody knew that either."[10]

Mick is one of the best studies of alienation in the book. Her alienation is partially caused by environment but partially because of her youth. She tends to alienate herself because it is impossible for her to understand the environment in which she lives. She is a gifted person, and she desires a great deal more than her deprived parents are able and willing to give her. Music becomes for Mick the symbol of both beauty and freedom:

> The hot afternoon passed slowly and Mick still sat on the steps by herself. The fellow Motsart's music was in her mind again. It was funny, but Mister Singer reminded her of this music. She wished there was some place where she could go to hum it out loud. Some kind of music was too private to sing in a house cram full of people. It was funny, too, how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house. Mick tried to think of some good private place where she could go and be by herself and study about this music. But though she thought about this a long time she knew in the beginning that there was no good place. (Heart, p. 45)

In this passage, Mick's alienation is poignantly demonstrated in the thought concerning how lonesome a person could be in a house crammed full of people. The symbol of beauty and freedom becomes more

real, however, because it is given life by Singer. He shows interest in Mick by listening to her and also by allowing her to listen to music in his room. It is ironic that he is surrounded by people who say that he is their only friend but that he writes to Antonapoulos, "My Only Friend . . . The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear" (Heart, p. 184). The irony of the situation lies in the extreme feelings of alienation that Singer experiences--even though he is helping other people to live with themselves.

It is significant that Singer inadvertently helps others--at least temporarily. Besides Mick, there are Jake Blount, Biff Brannon, and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland. Jake Blount is a five-foot athletic dwarf who drinks alcoholic beverages because "the loneliness in him was so keen that he was filled with terror" (Heart, p. 130). He feels a terrible need to be recognized; he is searching for meaning in life. But still he doesn't know who he is or what he believes; as a result, people do not like him. He is an alienated, lost soul striking out at the world and every person in it when he meets John Singer. Singer's love and understanding--as well as his willingness just to listen--help Jake to believe that he has found someone who understands him. Jake is an excellent example of the individual who is alienated by social conditions. He is the man he is because of poverty and degradation during his childhood. We learn that even when he was a child nine years old he was already working a fourteen-hour shift in a Southern cotton mill. Since he had to make his own living anyway,

he had finally left home at the age of twelve. He is so embittered by his experience that he is unable to know himself. He is indeed a contradictory person because his love for mankind continually changes to an all-consuming hatred. And even though he is befriended by Singer, he later leaves town just as he came--a stranger. Like Eugene Gant, he is lost and alone (and especially after Singer's death):

> The emptiness in him hurt. He wanted to look neither backward or forward. He walked two of his short, chunky fingers across the top of the table. It was more than a year now since he had sat at this table for the first time. And how much further was he now than then? No further. Nothing had happened except that he had made a friend and lost him. So he was left out on a limb. And now it was up to him to get out of it by himself and make a new start again. At the thought of it panic came in him. He was tired. He leaned his head against the wall and put his feet on the seat beside him. (Heart, p. 295)

We hold out no hope for Jake because nothing in his characterization serves to make us think that he will be able to make a right start.

Biff Brannon, another of the characters befriended by Singer, feels like a nobody. But unlike Jake, Biff is alienated because of a psychological problem, his loss of masculinity. He knows that he is slipping more and more into effeminate habits. He lives with Alice, his wife, but he does not sleep with her. In fact, he has decided that mankind is basically ambi-sexual, and at the age of forty-four he is prematurely impotent. He is so repulsed by the sex act and by Alice that he even changes the sheets as many ways as possible before he gets into a bed that she has slept in. But after Alice's death, Biff begins to use her cologne and hair rinse. He even has his apart-

ment done over to suit his changing tastes. His loneliness thus results from a feeling of being different from other people. But knowing that he is different, he has to keep his emotions a dark secret; and he keeps his restaurant open at night to be with his fellow man. Realizing his complex problem, he is frightened by the feelings that he has about Mick; he wants to touch her hair, but not in the way he has touched women before. Like the other characters, confiding in Singer, a man who does not have the gift of speech, is therapy for Biff. However, when Singer commits suicide, Biff is the only one who is able to look at the action in an objective manner:

> 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. More than a year since Blount had hung around the place on his first long drunk and seen the mute for the first time. Since Mick had begun to follow him in and out. And now for a month Singer had been dead and buried. And the riddle was still in 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. . . . 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 <u>was</u> 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. (<u>Heart</u>, pp. 305-307)

The novel ends on this note of hope, but it is the only note of hope that we see. For those with whom the ordinary reader tends to identify, there is seemingly nothing but despair in the future.

Dr. Copeland, the only Negro doctor in the town, also realizes some values from his friendship with Singer. Dr. Copeland's alienation is derived mostly from his feelings about his race. He is a disillusioned old man who is sick with tuberculosis. Passionate dreams for his own children and for the Negro race have dominated his life; he is more a Negro of the sixties than of the forties. His visions have not been fulfilled because his children and his race are not ready to accept the visions for their lives; they lack depth. He lives alone, sad and disconsolate. After a meeting with Singer, he knows that he has been helped:

> He lay tense and wakeful throughout the night. Then the next day was Sunday. He made half a dozen calls, and in the middle of the morning he went to Mr. Singer's room. The visit blunted the feeling of loneliness in him so that when he said good-bye he was at peace with himself once more. (Heart, p. 126)

At Singer's funeral, Dr. Copeland stands off at the side and moans to himself. He is in such desperation that Portia, his daughter, sends him away to the country, thinking that he will never be any better. She tells Jake Blount,

> "Us colored peoples have feelings just like anybody else. And I stand by what I said, Mr. Blount. Father just a sick old colored man and he had enough trouble already. Us got to look after him. And he not anxious to see you--I know that." (Heart, p. 294)

In this passage, we see the viewpoint of the alienated black person that we come to expect in Mrs. McCullers' fiction--a feeling of despair.

The main characters in this novel are thus very different from one another, but they have one common factor: They all stand on the edge of society wanting desperately to become a part of it. However, they cannot participate because of inner conflicts, or clashes with other people, or tension between the blacks and the whites. Mick is an excellent example of alienation, and thus despair, in the novel. Torn by the need of acceptance, added to her desire for a piano and a place to be alone, she asserts herself by smoking cigarettes, swearing, drinking beer, and finally by becoming promiscuous. Portia thinks that Mick is not capable of love. But Mick thinks, "What would Portia say if she knew that always there had been one person after another? And everytime it was like some part of me would bust in a hundred pieces" (Heart, p. 44).

Ironically, the mute, who seems to have no problems, is the worst troubled of all the characters. When he loses his friend to the asylum, he sinks to the depths of despair. Homosexuality is implied --but never stated--in this relationship. Singer's only pleasure is to visit the Greek or to send presents to him. Nothing that happens in between matters to him: "He was always glad to stop with anyone wishing his company. For after all he was only walking and going nowhere" (Heart, p. 170). And when his only reason for living is taken away with his friend's death, he gives up the struggle and commits suicide. His death leaves his friends bewildered, wondering about the solution to the puzzle of life.

We see in this novel, then, an effective juxtaposition of loneliness and love. Mrs. McCullers' characters move across the pages of her novel as living examples of people whom all of us have known to a greater or lesser degree. We thus understand the strengths and weaknesses which cause them to be the way they are and to do the things they do. As each of them searches for individuality, for fulfillment, for love, we feel heartbreak in his failures. The situation of the plot is ironic: alienated people spend their lives chasing after a hollow dream only to find in the end that the dream has disappeared in vapor. Mrs. McCullers has effectively shown that the ironies of life are sometimes difficult to bear. We are reminded of the refrain of Stephen Crane's naturalistic short story "The Open Boat":

> "If I am going to be drowned--if I am going to be drowned--if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?"[11]

This question has, in effect, become the refrain of every character in Heart--with the possible exception of Biff Brannon. In posing the question, Mrs. McCullers has captured the feeling of universality in the setting. To enhance this feeling of universality, she does not state the name of the town, and the reader knows only that the setting is in the Deep South. A part of the universality lies in the irony of the situation--that people should spend their lives searching for an ideal, only to find that it does not exist. As we learn, for instance, the black thoughts of Dr. Copeland are in reality just hopes born too

soon. The irony of life is sometimes hard to bear, and Mrs. McCullers has effectively portrayed this truth.

In Reflections in a Golden Eye , her second novel, Mrs. McCullers again treats the theme of alienation; she does so by portraying characters who are even more grotesque than those of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Their plight is made to seem even worse than the plight of the characters in the first novel because the characters of Reflections have no one to use as a confidant. We feel from the beginning that it is a novel of alienation produced by violence, monotony, and chaos. The tone is set well in the opening paragraph:

> An army post in peacetime is a dull place. Things happen, but then they happen over and over again. The general plan of a fort in itself adds to the monotony--the huge concrete barracks, the neat rows of officers' homes built one precisely like the other, the gym, the chapel, the golf course and the swimming pools--all is designed according to a certain rigid pattern. But perhaps the dullness of a post is caused most of all by insularity and by a surfeit of leisure and safety, for once a man enters the army he is expected only to follow the heels ahead of him.[12]

It is the monotony mentioned here that is ultimately responsible for the violence and chaos.

Like most of Mrs. McCullers' works, Reflections is basically a work of characterization. The participants are Leonora Penderton; Captain Weldon Penderton, her husband; Private Elgee Williams; Major Morris Langdon; Alison Langdon, his wife; Anacleto, a Filipino houseboy; and Firebird, Leonora's powerful horse. Basically, we have here a story of intrigue on an Army post, and the characters who

emerge are only half-people who are encompassed by boredom and unhappiness--thus making them spiritually alienated from the people with whom they associate. Leonora is a good example. She enjoys an adulterous affair with Major Langdon, seemingly without moral qualms. She may be likened to Firebird, her magnificent stallion, because she is a creature of nature who is entirely unaffected by the things that happen to her. Langdon proves to be a bit more emotional about life, especially after his wife pines away and dies:

> The Major was left quite stunned and helpless by the death of his wife. Even physically there was a difference in him. His jovial poise had deserted him, and when the three of them were sitting before the fire in the evening, he seemed to want to get himself into the most hobbledehoy and uncomfortable positions possible. . . . He was inclined to make doleful platitudes concerning God, the soul, suffering, and death--subjects the mention of which would hitherto have made his tongue grow thick and awkward with embarrassment. (Reflections, p. 122)

Despite the physical closeness of Langdon and Leonora, they are unable to overcome the boredom and unhappiness which make them feel like aliens. They are alienated by the very sex act through which they seek happiness.

The role of Elgee Williams is an important one in the story. Elgee's flaw is that he feels but does not think. The first time we see him, he is alone, and thus he remains throughout the story:

> Often in the late afternoon he could be seen sitting alone on one of the benches that lined the sidewalk before the barracks. . . .Here Private Williams would sit and wait for the call to evening mess. He was a silent young soldier and in the barracks he had neither an enemy nor a friend. . . . In the barracks he kept to himself and was something of a mys-

tery to the other men. (Reflections, pp. 2-3)

As one who is alienated by his environment, he is a great deal like Jake Blount in Heart. But the environmental conditions which alienate Elgee from a healthy view of life are not related to economic forces as in Jake's case. Elgee has been given the wrong view of sex by an ignorant father. As a result, the boy's main desire in life is to be able to get close to nature--to enjoy beauty, whether it is natural beauty or the physical beauty of a woman. He enjoys lying naked in the woods and riding a horse in the nude. This attitude toward nature evolves from his desire to see Leonora in the nude. He is drawn to her because she is also a creature of nature. From the first time he sees her in the nude, which makes his deeply buried normal sexual instincts begin to come alive, he pays nightly visits to her room to watch her sleep. It is a thrilling experience for him, and

> in the soldier's grave eyes there was at first an expression of intent curiosity, but as the moments passed a look of bliss awakened in his heavy face. The young soldier felt in him a keen, strange sweetness that never before in his life had he known. . . .
>
> On a few occasions before this Private Williams had had this look of suddenly awakened happiness in his face, but no one on the post had seen him then. (Reflections, pp. 58-59)

But he never attempts to seduce her; to watch is enough to satisfy him.

Ultimately Elgee is killed by Penderton, another alienated character, but not because the latter is a husband crazed with masculine jealousy. Penderton is alienated by his latent homosexuality. He

has always been enamored of the men who have been drawn to Leonora. Penderton desires Elgee, but it is impossible for him to understand the young private. That which Penderton cannot understand, he wants to destroy. Ironically, however, he goes to pieces when he commits murder; and his emotional life dies:

> The Captain had slumped against the wall. In his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk. Even in death the body of the soldier still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave face was unchanged, and his sun-browned hands lay palms upward on the carpet as though in sleep. (Reflections, p. 140)

The most pathetically alienated, isolated character in the story, however, is Alison. She has given birth to a malformed baby who dies, and she has become a miserably unhappy woman. She is able to relate to only one person, Anacleto. He is only a half-person, too --a eunuch. It is Anacleto who presents the basic symbol of the story:

> "Look!" Anacleto said suddenly. He crumpled up the paper he had been painting on and threw it aside. Then he sat in a meditative gesture with his chin in his hands, staring at the embers of the fire. "A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in these reflections of something tiny and----"
>
> In his effort to find just the right word he held up his hand with the thumb and forefinger touched together. His hand made a great shadow on the wall beside him. "Tiny and----"
>
> "Grotesque," she finished for him.
>
> He nodded shortly. "Exactly." (Reflections, p. 94)

It is the image seen in the bird's eye which provides the prevailing tone of grotesqueness, and thus alienation, in the novel. And Alison is one of the best examples of this grotesqueness. She has been al-

ienated from everything which might have provided happiness for her: motherhood and romantic love, primarily. As a result, she has no desire to live. Her first act of self-destruction is to cut off her nipples with the garden shears. Later she goes mad and dies. The reader feels that her death is just as much a suicide as it would have been had she pulled a trigger or plunged a dagger into her heart because she has had the will to die.

Reflections is a disturbing book which requires the reader to become interested in grotesques. But actually the approach in this work is no different from that of the typical work by Mrs. McCullers. Therefore, to condemn it because it is disturbing is to condemn the body of the author's work for the same reason. The book is technically well done, and it is this aspect that should be considered; indeed, it is the technical finesse of most of Mrs. McCullers' works which creates interest in the reader. One strength of Reflections is the writer's use of the peacock's golden eye as a unifying device. Its importance lies in the revelation that it gives of each person's life--a life in each instance that is made through reflection in the golden eye to seem grotesque. The eye is made to seem so important through both implicit and explicit repetition that the reader comes to the point that he hopes for sight instead of mere reflection for each of the characters. Still another unifying device is Firebird, who is the antithesis of most of the characters of the book. Whereas Firebird is free, his human counterparts are in a prison made by their own mag-

nified distortions of life. Also present is a closely knit story which covers a short period of time--something like one month. The small number of characters, in addition, helps the reader because he does not have to concern himself with so many people as well as their besetting problems.

The master stroke of the book is Mrs. McCullers' characterizations. Even though they are violent grotesques with whom the ordinary person does not wish to identify, he realizes that they have some basic human characteristics--like selfishness, lustful desires, the need to belong. Perhaps their very grotesqueness demands identification, which can be considered a merit of the work. We therefore detect that Reflections is a story of misfits who ironically complicate their situation in life by becoming involved with one another.

Fragmentarily, this is a story about an Army wife who has insatiable desires and thus affects the equilibrium of several other people. But when we reduce the story to a simple plot line, we do not make allowances for the despair and alienation of the characters whom Mrs. McCullers has portrayed. She has presented several square pegs that won't fit into the round holes of life. When Penderton says,

> "You mean . . . that any fulfillment obtained at the expense of normalcy is wrong, and should not be allowed to bring happiness. In short, it is better, because it is morally honorable, for the square peg to use the unorthodox square that would fit it?"(Reflections, p. 125)

he is reflecting on the predicament of each character. In short, all lines of communication are down as far as the characters are concern-

ed. Man cannot relate effectively to woman; man and woman cannot relate effectively to the environment in which they live. Even love cannot intervene to bring light and life to isolation and desolation. It is almost as if Mrs. McCullers has used the same plan in the writing of this novelette as she used in the writing of Heart; once again she has told a story of "man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible." And once again there is a naturalistic ending; fate, or some other strong force like unrequited love, has made lasting satisfaction impossible. The only difference between the two stories is that no one in Reflections seems to have a chance for a meaningful life, whereas there is a glimmer of hope for Biff in Heart.

In her next novel, Mrs. McCullers takes her reader from the obsessed world of Reflections into the more normal world of the adolescent. Near the beginning of this work, The Member of the Wedding, Frankie, the protagonist, says, "I wish I was somebody else except me."[13] This statement offers a clue of the extent to which Frankie feels despair and loneliness, for she believes that changing into someone else will solve her feeling of frustration:

> This was the summer when Frankie was sick and tired of being Frankie. She hated herself, and had become a loafer and a big no-good who hung around the summer kitchen: dirty and greedy and mean and sad. Besides being too mean to live she was a criminal. . . . She did not know why she was sad, but because of this peculiar sadness, she began to realize she ought to leave the town. (Member, pp. 19-20)

Since she hates herself, she readily infers that everyone else hates her. She thus sets out to be sure of it.

In Member, Mrs. McCullers isn't dealing with a typical twelve-year-old girl. She is a girl with deep problems. For one thing, she is startled by her growth; she has convinced herself that at the rate she is growing, she will be over nine feet tall and, consequently, a freak. We can more readily understand her feelings about her size because we have already discussed Wolfe's "Gulliver," and we have also noticed how affected by physical growth two of Wolfe's characters, Eugene Gant and Monk Webber, are. Frankie looks even more out of place than she is because her hair is cut in a boy's style. She is frightened by life itself:

> This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid. . . . The world seemed to die each afternoon and nothing moved any longer. (Member, p. 1)

One way to describe Frankie is to say that she is an extreme Mick Kelly. She is on the outside of life's activities; she is only an observer and never a participant. The older girls have excluded her from their group, and even her cat has deserted her. Over and over again we are told of the certain tightness she feels and of her fear of not making a good impression on her brother, Jarvis. She is the prime example of the alienated adolescent. Like most of Mrs. McCullers' young characters, she is not a grotesque; but she is too

deeply distressed to be wholly typical.

There are two people who play important roles in Frankie's life. One is Berenice Sadie Brown, the Negro cook, who offers the child the only feminine guidance available to her. Berenice has never been totally alone, as Frankie is; for she has been married four times, and even now she has a well-off, proper boy friend. From the point of view of Frankie, who is blinded by self-pity, Berenice belongs to somebody:

> When Berenice said we, she meant Honey and Big Mama, her lodge, or her church. . . . But the old Frankie had had no we to claim, unless it would be the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice--and that was the last we in the world she wanted. (Member, p. 39)

Nevertheless, Berenice is perceptive enough to recognize Frankie's loneliness, and she suggests that Frankie should find a nice little boy friend. In their kitchen discussions, Berenice attempts to answer Frankie's questions and to give the best advice she can. In her own way, Berenice is a substitute for the mother Frankie does not have.

The other important person is her cousin, six-year-old John Henry. It is he whom Frankie invites to spend the night with her under the pretext that he is lonely. When he finally tells her that he does not want to spend the night with her, she screams, "Fool jackass! . . . I only asked you because I thought you looked so ugly and so lonesome" (Member, p. 40). But John Henry retorts that he isn't a bit lonesome. Frankie's invitation, although she will not admit it, has been motivated by her fear of the dark. And even John Henry can-

not fulfill completely her need for friendship because he is just a small child.

The way in which Frankie chooses to solve her problem is an interesting aspect of the story. It is interesting not only because of the way it characterizes Frankie, but also because of the way it reveals the creative ability of Mrs. McCullers. An important issue here concerns how the author makes convincing a twelve-year-old girl's expectation that she can become in reality a "member of the wedding." We suspend disbelief because even from the beginning of the novel, Mrs. McCullers has portrayed Frankie as a dreamy type of person who finds satisfaction in creating fantasies that please her. Like some of Miss Welty's characters, Frankie thus seeks to escape her alienation. As Berenice says early in the story,

> "This is a serious fault with you, Frankie. Somebody just makes a loose remark and then you cozen it in your mind until nobody would recognize it. Your Aunt Pet happened to mention to Clorina that you had sweet manners and Clorina passed it on to you. For what it was worth. Then next thing I know you are going all around and bragging how Mrs. West thought you had the finest manners in town and ought to go to Hollywood, and I don't know what all you didn't say. You keep building on to any little compliment you hear about yourself. Or, if it is a bad thing, you do the same. You cozen and change things too much in your own mind. And that is a serious fault." (Member, p. 31)

Through this example and others, we are not surprised when Frankie reveals that she is going to be a "member of the wedding."

By the end of Part One, she superficially believes that she has solved her problem of aloneness. With her name changed to F. Jas-

mine to match the names of Jarvis and Janice (Jarvis' fiancée), which both begin with "Ja," she feels that she now belongs to a group. The "Ja" is a symbol of unity, something that all three of them have in common. Her feelings of being with Jarvis and Janice and of being a part of their lives are well stated in this passage, which points up her essential alienation:

> And as she sickened with this feeling [the realization that Jarvis and Janice are a hundred miles away] a thought and explanation suddenly came to her, so that she knew and almost said aloud: They are the we of me. Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a we to claim, all other except her. (Member, p. 39)

And then after including herself in the group, she realizes feelings of happiness and belonging--at least for a while, during the time she is allowed to weave her fantasy:

> At least she knew just who she was and understood where she was going. She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. And finally, after the sacred spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid. (Member, p. 43)

We may compare her with some of Miss Welty's characters (notably Old Phoenix and Powerhouse) who weave fantasies in order to allay their feelings of alienation.

Frankie's "group obsession" occupies her actions the entire day before the wedding, for now she wants to tell everyone that she will no longer have to be alone. Her actions bring on other frustrations--Berenice's and her father's unwillingness to accept her plans to go

away, Frankie's wanting to find someone with whom she can share her elation over the wedding plans, and her traumatic experience with a soldier who tries to rape her. Even in her happiness, she finds that she is alone since she has no special friend with whom to share the plans.

F. Jasmine's attempt to break into the wedding and to go on the honeymoon is, of course, foiled. The irony of the situation is that she has not learned a lesson. She resolves nothing, for she hates herself just as much as ever; and she feels like a fool. She is still a mixed-up, confused adolescent wanting to fight the entire world. In one sense, her frustrated isolation is resolved at the end of the story, however; for now she calls herself Frances, she has a girl friend with whom to share her daydreams, and she is moving to a new house:

> Mary was coming at five o'clock to take dinner, spend the night, and ride in the van to the new house tomorrow. Mary collected pictures of great masters and pasted them in an art book. They read poets like Tennyson together; and Mary was going to be a great painter and Frances a great poet--or else the foremost authority on radar. (Member, p. 150)

At the end of the story, the despair has shifted to Berenice. She has been accustomed to a motherly relationship with both Frankie and John Henry and also her brother, Honey. But now Frankie has found a friend, John Henry has suddenly died, and Honey is in trouble with the "law." Berenice feels sure that the time will come when Frankie will no longer remember her. Her problem is further heightened by the racial issue because she seems to be wondering where she will

find someone else who will need her. Earlier in the novel, we have been prepared for this feeling of alienation on Berenice's part when Frankie and John Henry quiz her about why she considers herself to be "caught" worse than they are. She says,

> "Because I am black. . . . Because I am colored. Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself. So we caught that first way I was telling you, as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored people also. Sometimes a boy like Honey feel like he just can't breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself. Sometimes it just about more than we can stand." (Member, p. 114)

Berenice is like some of Mrs. McCullers' other Negro characters in that she has a belief in God that does not seem to help her very much in facing problems of life. Despite spiritual hope, which seems to be evidenced in her singing of "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," the racial alienation is enough to render the situation virtually hopeless.

The novel thus ends on the same note of despair and alienation on which it began, but there does seem to be a possibility that Frankie will be happier. She has a new-found association with Mary, and the future--at the present time, anyway--looks bright. She is also moving into a new house, which might represent a new beginning. Perhaps she will no longer typify the lonely, frustrated, frightened adolescent. But despite this ray of hope, the scene is somewhat overshadowed by the difficulties being experienced by Berenice and by the senseless death of John Henry. This last episode demands a

great deal of tolerance on the part of the reader. The "killing off" of John Henry seems to be an additional naturalistic jab that is not needed. Mrs. McCullers has already made her point about alienation, loneliness, and despair; this last touch is unnecessary. And what is still harder to rationalize, it has not been convincingly foreshadowed. Despite this apparent flaw, however, we are impressed by the overall excellence of the characterizations and by Mrs. McCullers' knowledge of the setting. Although the setting is in the South, the human emotions are those which may belong to anyone, anywhere. Frankie, especially, typifies the lonely, the frustrated, the frightened people of the world who would like to belong to somebody.

In The Ballad of the Sad Café, the last work to be discussed, Mrs. McCullers returns to the grotesqueness of Reflections in a Golden Eye. She describes the dreariness of the setting in this, our first glimpse of Miss Amelia, the protagonist of the story:

> Sometimes in the late afternoon . . . a face is seen like the terrible dim faces known in dreams--sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one lone and secret gaze of grief.[14]

This description portrays the aloneness of Miss Amelia; throughout the work we can also recognize the lonely, savage-like strangeness of the other characters. Miss Amelia is further described as

> a solitary person, a bootlegger, six feet two inches tall, dark, handsome, cross-eyed, flicks her muscles like a man, cares nothing for the love of men, and is a virgin after a strange and dangerous marriage which only lasted ten days. (Ballad, p. 4)

Through this description the reader is able to detect that Miss Amelia is not a normal person and is definitely more masculine than feminine. No one would describe an ordinary woman as being tall, dark, and handsome. We learn further that she spends her nights dressed like a man "guarding the low fire of the still" (Ballad, p.5). She also does not have the heart of a woman; she is interested in people only for business purposes.

Early in the story Mrs. McCullers introduces another physical misfit, Cousin Lymon the hunchback. It is in her relationship with Cousin Lymon that Miss Amelia reveals herself to be a more sympathetic person than she has been portrayed at first. It is ironic, in fact, that Cousin Lymon is able to persuade Miss Amelia that he is related to her, which results in his moving into her house. When Cousin Lymon begins his story, he is

> uneasy, almost as though he was about to cry. He rested the suitcase on the bottom step, but did not take his hand from the handle. [After a long explanation, during which Miss Amelia shows no signs of sympathy], perhaps he began to feel his dismal predicament. Maybe he realized what a miserable thing it was to be a stranger in the town with a suitcase full of junk, and claiming kin with Miss Amelia. At any rate he sat down on the steps and suddenly began to cry. (Ballad, pp. 7-9)

Miss Amelia's ultimate reaction, however, comes as a surprise to the onlookers. She

> crossed the porch with two slow, gangling strides. She went down the steps and stood looking thoughtfully at the stranger. Gingerly, with one long brown forefinger, she touched the hump on his back. The hunchback still wept, but he was quieter now. . . . Then Miss Amelia did

> a rare thing; she pulled out a bottle from her hip pocket and after polishing off the top with the palm of her hand she handed it to the hunchback to drink. Miss Amelia could seldom be persuaded to sell her liquor on credit, and for her to give so much as a drop away was almost unknown. (Ballad, p. 9)

In her display of femininity and sympathetic understanding, Miss Amelia is out of character. The significance of the change is that one rejected, alienated person has accepted another one. However, in the way it frequently happens in Mrs. McCullers' fiction, the one who gives love is ultimately disappointed.

As a result of her association with Cousin Lymon, there is for a time a change in Miss Amelia. Although she is the same in appearance during the week, on Sundays she wears a red dress that doesn't hang evenly. She attends socials and is not so ready to cheat her fellow man. She cares for Lymon in a peculiar manner; in fact, she has fallen in love and has thus realized a means of escape from her loneliness. She is perceptive enough, however, to doubt that this kind of love will last. When Marvin Macy, her former husband, returns, she realizes that the times are changing for her:

> But Miss Amelia seemed to have lost her will; for the first time in her life she hesitated as to just what course to pursue. And, like most people in such a position of uncertainty, she did the worst possible thing--she began following several courses at once, all of them contrary to each other. (Ballad, pp. 53-54)

That which she has anticipated happens. Lymon turns against her and leaves with Marvin Macy after Marvin has beaten Miss Amelia in an unfair fist fight. Not only do the two men leave together,

but they also take all the curios, break the mechanical piano, carve obscene words on the tables, pour syrup on the kitchen floor, smash several jars of preserves, wreck the still and all the equipment, and finally leave poisoned grits and sausage (Miss Amelia's favorite food) on the table for her. And so they leave her

> alone in the town. The people would have helped her if they had known how, as people in this town will as often as not be kindly if they have a chance. . . . But Miss Amelia only looked at them with lost crossed eyes and shook her head. (Ballad, p. 69)

At the end of the story, Miss Amelia is standing alone in the middle of the road--just as alienated as in the beginning. She has vanquished all the people with whom she has had contact during the years that Cousin Lymon has been there. She is like the chain gang, the twelve mortal men who are all chained together on Fork Hills Highway three miles away--with one exception: their singing is indicative of their escape from their fate. Miss Amelia, unlike them, is left to cope with her own frustration and bewilderment. Like most of Mrs. McCullers' characters, she is alienated and without hope as a result of giving herself in love. She has waited three years for Cousin Lymon to return; sometime during the fourth year, she has the premises boarded up. And inside the house she remains.

Ballad is rivaled only by Reflections as the most grotesque work ever written by Mrs. McCullers. Even though we have here her usual superb characterizations and excellent handling of theme, her use of symbols is worth noticing and analyzing. The café itself is an im-

portant symbol because there is a direct correlation between Miss Amelia's happiness and her business. At first the café is a place of happiness which is enjoyed by everyone for miles around. Then it becomes a place of desolation for Miss Amelia because there is nothing to do anymore when no one comes to the café.

The acorn is also significantly handled. When Cousin Lymon asks Miss Amelia about it, she says,

> "Why, it's just an acorn . . . just an acorn I picked up on the afternoon Big Papa died."
> "How do you mean?" Cousin Lymon insisted.
> "I mean it's just an acorn I spied on the ground that day. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. But I don't know why." (Ballad, p. 36)

The acorn is one of Miss Amelia's prized possessions, but the reader is perplexed by her attitude toward it since she had picked it up on the day of her father's death. She has this same feeling about her two kidney stones which she at first keeps in a velvet box. Later she has them set as ornaments in a watch chain that she gives to Cousin Lymon. She also gives him the acorn with a feeling of satisfaction, but she is frustrated by his questions and actions.

We have seen in this study that Mrs. McCullers' typical characters are people who know much about defeat, people who have real difficulty adjusting to themselves and to their surroundings. Mrs. McCullers' scheme of life is clearly explained in a dialectic that holds that man is in revolt against his "inner isolation" and that he has a real desire to express himself through love. We see this prob-

lem of alienation in people like Mick Kelly, who is terribly unhappy with her state in life but is still unable to make any meaningful changes; or in F. Jasmine Addams, who is tired of being herself and would like to be someone else; or in Honey, who doesn't have a chance because of the color of his skin and is alienated by it; or in Elgee, who does not understand his own sexuality and is thus frustrated by his lack of understanding; or in Miss Amelia, who is initially alienated because of her grotesque appearance and later by her emotions. We have also seen through a consideration--in each of the works under discussion--of such fictional techniques as symbolism, characterization, unifying devices, and theme that her works are more than mere clinical case studies. They are mostly aesthetically sound fictional pieces. And each of her characters, though like all her other characters in some respects, is a "type" within himself. In her portrayals, Mrs. McCullers shows that all men--in their own ways--are alienated by some aspect of life, and that fate is much more powerful than hope. Very few of them find meaning in life; most of them, as Mrs. McCullers interprets man's plight, must fall under the naturalistic "law of averages."

END NOTES

[1]Credit must be given to the following for this summary: Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers: A Biography (New York, 1966).

[2]I am not alone in this assumption; it appears in the articles and books of most of the critics who discuss Mrs. McCullers' background --but notably in Evans' The Ballad of Carson McCullers.

[3]"Carson McCullers: 1917-1967," Saturday Review, I (October 21, 1967), 88.

[4]"Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers," in Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale, Illinois, 1964), p. 46.

[5](New York, 1968), p. 276.

[6]Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, New Jersey, 1961), p. 208.

[7](Chicago, 1963), p. 244.

[8]Evans, p. 195, quoting Mrs. McCullers.

[9]Ibid., pp. 195-196.

[10]The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (New York, 1940), pp. 44-45--hereafter referred to in text as Heart with appropriate page numbers.

[11]In American Poetry and Prose, II, ed. Norman Foerster (Boston, 1957), p. 1252.

[12]Reflections in a Golden Eye (New York, 1941), pp. 1-2--hereafter referred to as Reflections with appropriate page numbers.

[13]The Member of the Wedding (Boston, 1946), p. 6--hereafter referred to in text as Member with appropriate page numbers.

[14]The Ballad of the Sad Café (New York, 1951), pp. 3-4--hereafter referred to in text as Ballad with appropriate page numbers.

CHAPTER VI

FLANNERY O'CONNOR: "A WORLD OF FUGITIVES"

> In a world of fugitives
> The person taking the opposite direction
> Will appear to run away.
> --T. S. Eliot, Family Reunion

The fiction of Flannery O'Connor has been a puzzle to many of the people who have read her works. In fact, of the writers discussed in this study, she is the most difficult. The puzzle has been partially one of classification: some critics have said that she is a member of the Southern Gothic School, while others have called her a "Roman Catholic Erskine Caldwell."[1] Still others have expressed distaste because of what they consider too much emphasis on the grotesque and have skeptically proclaimed that the theological intrusions into her works are unnecessary. Miss O'Connor, however, insists that a proper understanding of her work can come only as a result of a consideration of her Christian theology.[2] She basically portrays in her works men who cannot see and hear. She is looking at life as it often is in the South and all over the world--not as she would like for it to be. Consequently, we may feel utter distaste for her stories as we see in the characters' beliefs weaknesses which also characterize our

own pathetic attempts to be religious. We will see in this study that Miss O'Connor does not portray life as beautiful and glamorous. She shows that it is exactly what we, as God's immortal beings, make of it. Her constant belief seems to show that her characters determine whether "the violent bear it away."

Miss O'Connor, in all her works, reveals herself to be a writer seriously concerned about Christianity; her purpose in holding up to scorn any specific group seems to be to point out man's--even so-called religious man's--alienation from God. Her commitment as a Christian writer is made very clear in this interview:

> I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and that what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. I don't think that this is a position that can be taken halfway or one that is particularly easy in these times to make transparent in fiction. . . . I have heard it said that belief in Christian dogma is a hindrance to the writer, but I myself have found nothing further from the truth. Actually, it forces the story-teller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery. . . . The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to his hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock--to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.[3]

There are two really significant ideas in the passage--especially in relation to the reasons a writer who is concerned about Christianity

would emphasize so much the sins of supposedly religious people. She makes her approach clear when she says that the distortions she represents are repugnant to the Christian writer and that the writer has the task of making distortions of those things which are seen as natural by the reading audience. She also says that the techniques must differ for the sympathetic and for the hostile readers. If the reader is different from the writer in basic attitudes, then the writer must "shout" at the deaf and draw large pictures for the almost blind. Since, as Robert Drake[4] suggests, Miss O'Connor makes no concessions to a non-Christian world, the problem of alienation from God becomes even more meaningful than it otherwise is; for here we are many times dealing with so-called "good" people who are so blinded by dogmatism that they alienate themselves from other people and from God.

There is still another aspect of the approach that she uses, and it concerns her choice of certain religious sects as objects of what we might call her righteous indignation. Drake says that

> . . . other critics, while not hostile to theological considerations as such, concluded, on the basis of what must surely have been a superficial reading of her works, that as a Roman Catholic intellectual she was often condescending to, if not actually sneering at, the Southern Fundamentalists--Baptists, Holy Rollers and such like--who populated her region and her fiction. Once or twice, also, it was even suggested that she was out to get the Methodists because in several instances she gave such traditional Methodist names as "Wesley" and "Asbury" to some particularly unsavory characters.[5]

The main clue to Miss O'Connor's actual plan is to be found in Drake's

phrase "a superficial reading of her works" because a thorough reading of her fiction would prevent a reader's feeling that she is sneering at Southern Fundamentalists. The impact of her work goes much deeper than this. In fact, Miss O'Connor answers this common objection to her works in a letter written to Sister Mariella Gable when she says,

> "I am more and more impressed with the amount of Catholicism that fundamentalist Protestants have been able to retain. Theologically our differences with them are on the nature of the Church, not on the nature of God or our obligations to Him. . . . And the fanatics People make a judgment of fanaticism by what they are themselves. To a lot of Protestants I know, monks and nuns are fanatics, none greater. And to a lot of monks and nuns I know, my Protestant prophets are fanatics. For my part, I think the only difference between them is that if you are a Catholic and have this intensity of belief you join the convent and are heard no more; whereas if you are a Protestant and have it, there is no convent for you to join and you go about the world getting into all sorts of trouble and drawing the wrath of people who don't believe anything much at all down on your head.
>
> This is one reason why I can write about Protestant believers better than Catholic believers--because they express their belief in diverse kinds of dramatic action which is obvious enough for me to catch. I can't write about anything subtle."[6]

We detect in this letter an explanation of not only why she sometimes writes in a way that is offensive to the typical Catholic or Protestant reader but also why she frequently uses Protestants as her main characters. This helps us to discern in her works the basic message, which is the need for a right relationship with God.

A review of scholarship concerning Miss O'Connor's works reveals that the theme of alienation is one which is often mentioned in

critical comments regarding her approach to life. For example, Melvin J. Friedman, in "Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction," says that Miss O'Connor's characters are not

> "outsiders" in Colin Wilson's sense or "absurd" men in Albert Camus' sense. They are not introspective types who brood about metaphysical problems, nor are they very concerned with the existentialist notion of self-identification. They go about their business in a workaday manner, but it is the "business" which is usually unorthodox. Flannery O'Connor's characters are almost all fanatics, suffering from what we might diagnose as an acute sense of dislocation of place.[7]

When Friedman says that the "business" of Miss O'Connor's characters is usually unorthodox, he is in agreement with Caroline Gordon. Miss Gordon says that they are "'off center,' out of place, because they are victims of a rejection of the Scheme of Redemption. They are lost in that abyss which opens for man when he sets up as God."[8] However, Martin and Friedman are not in agreement concerning the impact of the existential viewpoint on Miss O'Connor's fiction. Unlike Friedman, Martin says that the existential choice is of extreme importance:

> The existentialist's dilemma--Kierkegaard's Christian Either/Or and Sartre's atheistic Being or Nothingness--is a theme often encountered in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. . . . [Some of her characters] struggle violently to believe in nothing, to renounce the insistent religious orientation passed on to them by a father or a father-substitute. And the choice available to them is an extreme and narrow one; they do not interpret their choice as one between vague religious belief and solid secular values based on reason, but as a choice between an all-consuming evangelical commitment to God and nothingness--the complete repudiation of <u>any</u> values at all.[9]

The above statement is a very pithy assessment of all of Miss O'Connor's fiction, and it is also very expressive of the attitudes that the writer often expounded upon in interviews concerning her dialectic--as we shall see when we consider her works. We shall see characters such as Hazel Motes, Francis Marion Tarwater, Rayber, and Joy Hopewell all rebelling against their religious orientation--all struggling violently to believe in nothing.

Irving Malin follows the same essential line of thinking in New American Gothic when he says that Miss O'Connor's fictional world is an upside-down one in which "only God lacks distortion."[10] Louis Rubin's thought that her characters spend their days ignorantly searching for God but still remain isolated from Him[11] is along the same line as Malin's. In another of his works, The Curious Death of the Novel, Rubin says that Miss O'Connor "recognizes the presence of an intense spiritual life, which however grotesque its forms is authentic and very much worthy of respect."[12] Still another critic, Jonathan Baumbach, says, in The Landscape of Nightmare, that Miss O'Connor presents in her fiction a comedy of horrors. Her world,

> encrusted by evil, is populated by the physically and spiritually deformed, distorted images of ourselves, whose redemption is possible only, if at all, through an exemplary and violent act of self-sacrifice. Though she permits us to laugh at the nightmare of our moral deformity, it is a painful laugh tortured by the agony of recognition. We are doomed, she is telling us, to the hell of our own souls unless, at the last extremity of suffering, at the risk of everything, we discover the awesome judgment (and love) of God. It is a small and terrifying hope she leaves us. The rest, the life we live, is merely a comedy, a deadly come-

dy, of horrors.[13]

Although the Christian reader may not agree with Baumbach's assertion that Miss O'Connor leaves us with a "small and terrifying hope," Baumbach is right in pointing out the mordantly comical aspect of her fiction. We shall see, by looking at some of her typical works, that she has dealt meaningfully with the theme of alienation.

One of the best examples of man outside God's grace, and thus spiritually alienated man, in Miss O'Connor's fiction is Hazel Motes in Wise Blood (1952). This, her first novel, is the story of Hazel Motes, a disturbed young man who returns to society after his service in the Army. He has supposedly been able to disregard any claim that Christ has previously had on his life, and he plans to establish his Church Without Christ. However, he fails to find satisfaction in his church and in his relations with Mrs. Leora Watts and Sabbath Hawks. He finally punishes himself brutally at the end of the story, thus showing that he is trying to do penance for his sins.

Hazel had gone into the Army believing in God but not too strongly; he was told by his Army friends that man does not have a soul. He was faced with a dilemma:

> He took a long time to believe them because he wanted to believe them. All he wanted was to believe them and get rid of it once and for all, and he saw the opportunity here to get rid of it without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of to evil. The army sent him halfway around the world and forgot him. He was wounded and they remembered him long enough to take the shrapnel out of his chest--they said they took it out but they never showed it

> to him and he felt it still in there, rusted, and poisoning him--and then they sent him to another desert and forgot him again. He had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there. When he was thoroughly convinced, he saw that this was something that he had always known. The misery he had was a longing for home; it had nothing to do with Jesus. When the army finally let him go, he was pleased to think that he was still uncorrupted. All he wanted was to get back to Eastrod, Tennessee.[14]

Haze soon feels that he has made the transition--from evil to nothing; however, he is unable to run from his commitment. Everywhere he turns, he is thought to be a preacher because he has a "preacher look" about him. Even when he goes to the home of Mrs. Leora Watts, who purportedly has the "friendliest bed in town," he feels the compulsion to tell Mrs. Watts that no matter what she thinks, he is no preacher. She answers, "That's okay, son. . . . Momma don't mind if you ain't a preacher" (Three, p. 23).

After reaching Taulkinham, which he has chosen as his home, he begins to preach his Church Without Christ. His doctrine is a strange one, and it is no surprise that he fails to win converts. He tells anyone who will listen:

> "I want to tell you people something. Maybe you think you're not clean because you don't believe. Well you are clean, let me tell you that. Every one of you people are clean and let me tell you why if you think it's because of Jesus Christ Crucified you're wrong. I don't say he wasn't crucified but I say it wasn't for you. Listenhere, I'm a preacher myself and I preach the truth." The crowd was moving fast. It was like a large spread raveling and the separate threads disappeared down the dark streets. "Don't I know what exists and what don't?" he cried. "Don't I have eyes in my head? Am I a blind man? Listenhere," he called, "I'm going to preach a new church--

> the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified. It won't cost you nothing to join my church. It's not started yet but it's going to be. . . . I don't need Jesus. . . . What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts." (Three, p. 34)

Wearing a big hat and preaching from his Essex car, he seems to have one aim: to gain recognition. But despite the facade which he presents, he is a soul in torment. Throughout the novel, as he indulges his sensual desires with Mrs. Watts and then with Sabbath Hawks, he periodically does penance. It is, in fact, the pattern of his life to do penance. This pattern was begun when he was a child; after being punished by his mother for looking at a naked woman,

> he took his shoes in secret out into the woods. He didn't wear them except for revivals and in the winter. He took them out of the box and filled the bottoms of them with stones and small rocks and then he put them on. He laced them up tight and walked in them through the woods for what he knew to be a mile, until he came to a creek, and then he sat down and took them off and eased his feet in the wet sand. He thought, that ought to satisfy Him. Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it as a sign. After a while he drew his feet out of the sand and let them dry, and then he put the shoes on again with the rocks still in them and he walked a half-mile back before he took them off. (Three, p. 39)

It is in the same kind of spirit that Haze punishes himself after his Church Without Christ has failed. His new church has been just another meaningless example in the pattern of his alienated life. He does not wish to communicate with anyone; and when he is asked a question, he does not answer or he gives as short an answer as is possible. He blinds himself with lime and lines his shoes with gravel, broken glass, and small stones. Because of the intense manner

in which Motes has searched for meaning in his life while running from God--and because of Miss O'Connor's effective portrayal of his character--such an action can be seen only as dramatic. His action is in keeping with the seething of his soul which has previously been established, and it is not to be seen as melodramatic. At this point in the story, the landlady seems to take on a new, more meaningful role than she has previously played. She becomes Haze's interrogator and his reprover; it is almost as though Miss O'Connor is using her as a persona. At one point, the landlady asks,

> "Mr. Motes, . . . what do you walk on rocks for?"
> "To pay," he said in a harsh voice.
> "Pay for what?"
> "It don't make any difference for what," he said. "I'm paying."
> "But what have you got to show that you're paying for?" she persisted.
> "Mind your business," he said rudely. "You can't see." (Three, p. 121)

On another day, she enters his room earlier than usual and finds him asleep. She is surprised at what she sees:

> The old shirt he wore to sleep in was open down the front and showed three strands of barbed wire, wrapped around his chest. She retreated backwards to the door and then she dropped the tray. "Mr. Motes," she said in a thick voice, "what do you do these things for? It's not natural."
> He pulled himself up. . . .
> "I'm not clean," he said.
> She stood staring at him, unmindful of the broken dishes at her feet. "I know it," she said after a minute, "you got blood on that night shirt and on the bed. You ought to get you a washwoman. . ."
> "That's not the kind of clean," he said.
> "There's only one kind of clean, Mr. Motes," she muttered. She looked down and observed the dishes he had

> made her break and the mess she would have to get up and she left for the hall closet and returned in a minute with a dust pan and broom. "It's easier to bleed than sweat, Mr. Motes," she said in the voice of High Sarcasm. "You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things. You must have been lying to me when you named your fine church. I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't some kind of a agent of the pope or got some connection with something funny." (Three, p. 122)

In the last part of the above passage, the landlady is saying something about Haze Motes that we must realize if we expect to understand Miss O'Connor's purpose in presenting him as she does. She gives the whole purpose of his character portrayal when she has the landlady level against him the charge that he must believe in Jesus. Otherwise he would not have a reason for punishing himself as he does. Also evident here is Miss O'Connor's use of humor when she has the landlady say that she wouldn't be surprised if Haze "weren't some kind of a agent of the pope."

Implicit in this important speech is something that Miss O'Connor says in an introduction to Wise Blood in 1962--ten years after the first publication of the book. She says that Motes' integrity lies in what he is not able to do:

> That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to. Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can

only be asked to deepen.[15]

When Miss O'Connor says that Haze's integrity lies in his not being able to rid himself of the image of Christ, she vividly points out the significance of the story. This technique fits very well into her scheme of redemption; to tell the story by pointing out the alienation of one who is outside God's grace is a very meaningful way to get across a point.

Asa Hawks is another important character in the story whom Miss O'Connor uses to develop her theme. Hawks is a hypocrite who pretends to be blind; while he preaches, his daughter, Sabbath, hands out religious tracts. Hawks begs:

> "Help a blind preacher. If you won't repent, give up a nickel. I can use it as good as you. Help a blind unemployed preacher. Wouldn't you rather have me beg than preach? Come on and give a nickel if you won't repent. (Three, p. 26)

If we can say that Hawks has any religion, we will have to say that it is self-inspired--not God-inspired. He begs by day and locks himself in his room at night. He alienates himself from any meaningful relationship with the living God.

Brainard Cheney says that Wise Blood is a satire, a "bitter parody of the atheistic Existentialism then pervading the literary and philosophical scene."[16] It is correct that the novel may be seen as a parody; however, as Miss O'Connor satirizes the characters, she is developing an underlying theme: man's need for God and his subsequent alienation from God when faith is put in the wrong things. She

shows that people need a positive faith in Christ. Her characters' religion is not constructive, and their lives show the results. Therefore, with shocking words and weird characters, Miss O'Connor gets the attention of her readers in order to develop some really sound ideas on the subject of man's redemption. Her approach may be considered "Kierkegaard in reverse" because her characters seem to run from God instead of taking a positive leap of faith toward God. Miss O'Connor points out adequately, through her characterizations of Haze and Asa, that many churches have taught false beliefs about salvation. She also shows how man lives--outside God's grace--when he decides that the universe is made up of meaninglessness and nothingness.

Miss O'Connor's second published work, A Good Man Is Hard to Find (1955), is a book of short stories. Like her short novels, these short stories are concerned with the moral life of man--humanity reacting to the problems of guilt, sin, grace, suffering, evil, and possible redemption--despite spiritual alienation. Although there are nine stories in the collection, we will look at only two of them, both of which are representative works.

The first of these stories is "Good Country People." This story contains the familiar theme of false innocence, evil, love, and frustration. The frustration evolves from alienation--alienation from God. The comic and sometimes tragic action centers around a one-legged girl.[17] She has a Ph.D., but she is very ignorant in the ways of the

world. She does not believe in anything; like Hazel Motes, she tries to convince herself of the meaninglessness and nothingness of the universe. When a Bible salesman comes to the door, Hulga is repulsed by him; and she rebukes her mother for being kind to him. Later he persuades her to go on a picnic with him. Ironically, they take no food, and they eventually go into a barn. Despite Hulga's seeming sophistication and his seeming innocence, the Bible salesman outwits Hulga and steals her artificial leg which he adds to his collection of things that he has stolen from other women. Therefore, despite all her learning, Hulga is outwitted by a stranger who becomes an agent of evil.

We are told in the beginning of the story that Mrs. Hopewell, the mother of Hulga, the Ph.D., "had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other peoples in such a way she never felt the lack" (Three, p. 244). Her favorite clichés are "Nothing is perfect" and "That's life." Ironically, her reason for hiring the Freemans is that they are good country people. A typical conversation between Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman goes like this:

> "Everybody is different," Mrs. Hopewell said.
> "Yes, most people is," Mrs. Freeman said.
> "It takes all kinds to make the world."
> "I always said it did myself." (Three, p. 245)

This is the type of intellectual wasteland in which the characters exist.

The appearance of the Bible salesman, who calls himself a

"Chrustian," begins the comic disappearance of Hulga's false innocence. Hulga decides to seduce the salesman as an intellectual experiment. This reveals her lack of knowledge and her moral immaturity. She accepts his advances but keeps intellectual control of the situation. Once they have climbed into the barn, however, her intellectual superiority proves to be inadequate for the occasion. When her leg is removed, she is no longer in control. The full irony of the situation is revealed when the Bible salesman places whisky, a deck of cards, and contraceptives before her. Hulga reveals her similarity to her mother when she asks if he isn't "good country people." She is now in contact with one who really does not believe in anything; he is not pretending as she has pretended. She has come face to face with someone who is alienated from God, and she is shocked by the impression that she receives. She has reacted differently from the way he has expected her to react:

> "Give me my leg!" she screamed and tried to lunge for it but he pushed her down easily.
>
> "What's the matter with you all of a sudden?" he asked, frowning as he screwed the top on the flask and put it quickly back inside the Bible. "You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing. I thought you was some girl!"
>
> Her face was almost purple. "You're a Christian!" she hissed. "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all --say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're . . . "
>
> The boy's mouth was set angrily. "I hope you don't think," he said in a lofty indignant tone, "that I believe in that crap! I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn't born yesterday and I know where I'm going!" (Three, pp. 260-261)

Unknowingly, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman give a very ironic final analysis of good and evil after the Bible salesman has stolen Hulga's leg and has left the loft. As he passes by, the two women wonder why he is still in the neighborhood. Mrs. Hopewell says, "I guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple" (Three, p. 261). But Mrs. Freeman, in her closing remark, reveals that not everything is as easy to solve as a person might think: "Some can't be that simple. . . . I know I never could" (Three, p. 261).

Miss O'Connor, having lived in the so-called "Bible Belt," attacks in this story the view that is held by ignorant Southern people. The idea that country people are honest, sincere, and all that they should be is a common misconception. Bible salesmen are considered trustworthy because they are the chosen people to sell the Good Book. That they are often evil and thus the opposite of what people expect is clearly shown in "Good Country People." Another simple idea which pervades this piece of fiction has to do with the "witness" of the so-called Christian. The message of this story is not nearly so hard to discern as the messages of some of Miss O'Connor's works. Hulga (or Joy) says it all when she hisses at the Bible salesman, "You're a fine Christian! You're just like them all-say one thing and do another. You're a perfect Christian, you're . . . "

"The Displaced Person" is also an excellent example of the theme which is being discussed. Christ's being driven from society is handled with great care here. Mrs. McIntyre's farm represents order

based upon economic control. Into this structured environment come the Guizacs, a family of displaced persons from Poland, whom Mrs. McIntyre has been persuaded by the local Catholic priest to hire. She agrees to the arrangement, not for the purpose of helping someone but to show the Shortleys (her poor-white employees) and her shiftless Negro workers that they are not irreplaceable. Symbolically, the "Displaced Person" is Mrs. McIntyre's savior; but in a sense he is also her undoing, economically speaking. He is the indirect cause of the Shortleys' departure, and he also unsettles the Negroes. We thus see unfolding a narrative which is built around the blind struggle of materialism against redemption. The result is a shifting of roles in which Mrs. McIntyre becomes a "displaced person." The story is basically the tale of the destruction of her innocence and self-righteousness and the final acceptance of her true self.

The way in which the characters of the story react to the Displaced Person helps to establish some basic attitudes toward spiritual alienation. For example, the hired Negroes, Astor and Sulk, are concerned about their change in status as a result of the arrival of the Guizacs. When Mrs. Shortley tells them that they must be careful about their work habits, they ask what a displaced person is. She answers,

> "It means they ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go--like if you was run out of here and wouldn't nobody have you."
>
> "It seem like they here, though," the old man said in a reflective voice. "If they here, they somewhere."

> "Sho is," the other agreed. "They here." (Three, p. 266)

The Negroes can identify with the Displaced Person, even though they fear him, because they themselves are displaced persons and have experienced alienation.

Even Mrs. Shortley, after fighting a feeling of despair and disillusionment, later begins to identify with the displaced person. When she discovers that Mrs. McIntyre is going to give her husband notice, she begins to clutch all of her belongings to her. Unknown to her family, she has experienced an inner vision that ends in death:

> They didn't know that she had had a great experience or ever been displaced in the world from everything that belonged to her. They were frightened by the grey slick road before them and they kept repeating in higher and higher voices, "Where we goin', Ma? Where we goin'?" while their mother, her huge body rolled back against the seat and her eyes like blue-painted glass, seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country. (Three, p. 280)

Before the arrival of the Guizacs, Mrs. Shortley's universe has been a well-ordered one in which she has had no qualms about keeping everyone unsettled. When the Guizacs arrive, however, she herself experiences the agony of being displaced.

Mrs. McIntyre's identification with the Displaced Person is slightly different from that of the other characters, however. In a spirit of alienation, she recognizes him as a Christ figure who can save her, but she denies him. Mr. Guizac's standards of honesty force her either to recognize her true self and face the consequences

or to seek and accept redemption. She tells herself that she is blameless for the problems caused by Guizac's presence; as a result, she assumes an air of self-righteousness which reveals her own weaknesses. When Mr. Guizac admits that he is bringing his sixteen-year-old cousin to this country to marry Sulk, the young Negro, she does not scold him because his cousin is to marry into the Negro race. She does so to protect herself:

> "Mr. Guizac! You would bring this poor innocent girl and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger! What kind of monster are you! . . . I will not have my niggers upset. I cannot run this place without my niggers." (Three, p. 287)

By this time Mrs. McIntyre and the Displaced Person are deadlocked; the final result is his death and her complete displacement. Mrs. McIntyre refuses to admit any moral obligation to anyone. She remains detached and isolated--alienated from God and man. She refuses to recognize the priest's symbolic identification of the peacock, Christ, and the Displaced Person:

> His attention was fixed on the cock who was taking minute steps backward, his head against the spread tail. "The Transfiguration," he murmured.
>
> She had no idea what he was talking about. "Mr. Guizac didn't have to come in the first place," she repeated, emphasizing each word.
>
> The old man smiled absently. "He came to redeem us," he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go. (Three, p. 291)

It is significant for us to observe that immediately preceding this passage, Mrs. McIntyre has been embarrassed by the priest's mention of Christ. We should also remember that throughout the conversation,

the priest is impressed by the peacock as a Christ figure, and he finds beauty in each. And while Mrs. McIntyre continues to complain about Mr. Guizac, the priest observes the bird. Their lack of communication is effectively revealed at the end of the conversation when Mrs. McIntyre, speaking of Guizac, says, "He didn't have to come in the first place"; and the old man, speaking of Christ, says, "He came to redeem us."

In rationalizing her belief that Guizac should not be preferred above a "man that's fought and bled and died in the service of his native land," she tells the priest, "Christ was just another DP" (Three, p. 294). The situation begins to affect Mrs. McIntyre's health. Even with the death of Guizac she cannot restore the old order. When the priest administers to Guizac the last sacrament, she feels that she is in a foreign country--that she is displaced from redemption, alienated from God. The conclusion of the story brings no hope to her:

> A numbness developed in one of her legs and her hands and head began to jiggle and eventually she had to stay in bed all the time with only a colored woman to wait on her. Her eyesight grew steadily worse and she lost her voice altogether. Not many people remembered to come out to the country to see her except the old priest. He came regularly once a week with a bag of breadcrumbs and, after he had fed these to the peacock, he would come in and sit by the side of her bed and explain the doctrines of the Church. (Three, p. 299)

As in most of Miss O'Connor's stories, we have here a tragic ending. Mrs. McIntyre is another vivid example of the person who spends her

life alienated from God. If, before she dies, she accepts the doctrines of the Church which the priest explains to her each week, she will have missed--because of her paralyzed condition--the greatest joy that man may possess: that of giving positive, dedicated service to God. She is now little more than a vegetable.

The last book published before Miss O'Connor's death was The Violent Bear It Away (1960). The title is taken from Matthew 11:12: "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away." By turning the reader's mind to the Bible, Miss O'Connor has prepared him for her story about "lost" men seeking redemption in their own alienated ways. In order to show this, the author overemphasizes the actions and conflicts of her characters so that her theme is clearly portrayed. This is a part of her scheme of "shouting" and "drawing large pictures."

Each of the characters in this story is plagued by an inner conflict which seems to have no solution. The center of all this conflict is embodied in Francis Marion Tarwater, who is to make an important decision about his salvation. According to Old Man Tarwater, already deceased, his great-nephew, Francis Marion, is the son of a whore who was injured in a car wreck and who died shortly after the birth of the boy at the scene of the accident. The young Tarwater feels that he has been set aside for special service because his mother gave birth to him and then died; to him, it is thus a miracle to be alive. Uncle Tarwater has stolen him from his Uncle Rayber in order

to rear him as a prophet. As the young Tarwater grows up, however, he is in conflict with himself: Is he called to be a prophet of God? When the old man makes a trip to town to see about some business and to baptize his great-nephew, Bishop, the young Tarwater sees the reason for his call: "When he was called, on that day when he returned, he would set the city astir, he would return with fire in his eyes. You have to do something particular to make them look at you here" (Three, p. 319).

Young Tarwater has been carefully trained so that he will give his great-uncle a proper Christian burial when he dies; but instead, determined to learn about the world, he gets drunk, burns the house, and goes to the city to see his Uncle Rayber, who had once tried to take him from the old man. Even though Rayber, a schoolteacher, decides to make an intellectual of young Tarwater, the boy thinks that his mission is to prophesy and to baptize:

> He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. . . . The Lord out of dirt had created him, had made him to bleed and weep and think, and set him in a world of loss and fire all to baptize one idiot child that He need not have created in the first place and to cry out a gospel just as foolish. (Three, pp. 357-358)

However, in spite of his knowing his mission, he does not understand it; and he is a creature alienated from God. His doubts are furthered when he is beset by a symbolical representation of himself, Conscience, who continually reminds him that Old Man Tarwater was mad. But young Tarwater is still not convinced; he slips off to a Pentecostal

meeting, where he is humiliated because Rayber follows him, wearing pajamas. The next day he makes the momentous decision to take the idiot Bishop out into a boat; he drowns the child in the process of baptizing him.

After the drowning, young Tarwater is proud of himself because, unlike Rayber, he has been able to act--not just think. He starts his journey back to the farm; he is happy because he feels that he has completed his mission. But later in the journey, he is attacked by a homosexual; and when he arrives home, the bitter welcome which he receives from the neighbors causes him to burn the woods where he has lost his innocence and received his holy sign. He then flees to the city: "His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (Three, p. 447). He remains the lost, alienated soul groping hopelessly about for an assurance that he has made his salvation.

The young Tarwater is a lost creature because he has fallen under the influence of an old man, his great-uncle, who has invented a religion and a God for himself. The old man has been unable to share that God with Rayber, young Tarwater, or Bishop, however, because his God has existed in him only. The Negro Buford summarizes Old Tarwater's life of hopelessness and helplessness when he says, "He was deep in this life, he was deep in Jesus' misery" (Three, p. 331). In the end, all he wants is to be rolled into a ten-foot grave, to have

a cross at his head, and to know that Mason Tarwater is "WITH GOD" (Three, p. 311). It is hard to imagine that a person who has lived his life outside the center of the Godly circle could be within that circle in death. His life was one of alienation from God, and there will probably be no change in death.

We see, then, that each of the main characters in Violent has a different approach in his religious life: Old Man Tarwater has formed his own God, young Tarwater is looking for his God, and Rayber says that there is no God. Rayber reasons that man's salvation comes from himself, which is like the atheistic existentialist's idea that man may depend on no one but himself. He says,

> "It's the way you take as a result of being born again the natural way--through your own efforts. Your intelligence." His words had a disconnected sound. "The other way is simply to face it and fight it, to cut down the weed every time you see it appear." (Three, p. 418)

This plan sounds good to Rayber, but the reader senses that he is not being honest. As the old man has depended on baptizing for his salvation and Tarwater has waited for a sign, Rayber has become engulfed in Bishop, his idiot son. He even tries to drown Bishop because he feels that the child deprives him of the happiness of freedom and salvation. In fact, at the time young Tarwater drowns Bishop, Rayber is contemplating the same act. Although he wants a real son, he wants to ignore Bishop, the cause of all his suffering. When he sees that Bishop has been drowned,

> He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable

> hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed. (Three, p. 423)

Bishop, the small idiot boy, is ironically the only character who is not torn by inner conflicts brought on by a feeling of alienation relating to salvation. He is quite unconcerned and contented. It is true that he may exist as the source of his father's strange love, as the purpose of young Tarwater's calling, and as the failure of old Mason Tarwater's calling; but he is quite unaware of it. His world revolves around his father and young Tarwater, and even their brutal treatment of him does not daunt his love for them. His appearance, however, is a constant source of irritation to Tarwater:

> Nothing gave him [young Tarwater] pause--except Bishop, and Rayber knew that the reason Bishop gave him pause was because the child reminded him of the old man. Bishop looked like the old man grown backwards to the lowest form of innocence, and Rayber observed that the boy strictly avoided looking him in the eye. (Three, p. 371)

But Bishop is completely oblivious of the Christless love that surrounds him, and he submits completely to the artificial kindness of young Tarwater. His innocent child love leads to his grotesque drowning.

Each of the characters in Violent embodies the need to receive justification from his sins; this need also vividly portrays each character's alienation. As the characters struggle, the reader sees the futility of their search for salvation. Their efforts seem to be guided

by the stupidity of old Mason Tarwater, the arrogance of Francis Marion Tarwater, and the pride of Rayber. The defeat of man without God is much more evident in this story than the victory of man with God because no one actually meets, recognizes, and serves a living, loving savior. Therefore, Miss O'Connor has portrayed helpless characters whose religious status has not improved when the book ends; they are still standing outside the circle of God's redemption--alienated from Him.

Miss O'Connor portrays man's search for redemption by using characters who represent the different attitudes which people have toward the church. Her universal situation is that all men choose a god, and that choice can bring hope or hopelessness; for the typical O'Connor character, it is hopelessness. The reader discovers, as he observes the characters of this work, that each character is driven by inner conflicts. On the surface, however, Rayber and Old Man Tarwater are bargaining for the soul of the young Tarwater. The result is disastrous. No one seeks and finds the truth, even though a sacrifice (Bishop) is given. Ironically, the sacrifice is an idiot. It is as if man reacts to God as Rayber reacts to young Tarwater's going to the Pentecostal meeting: "He turned off his hearing aid and pursued the dim figure as if in a dream" (Three, p. 276). This is often the way man seeks God. Later, at the meeting, Rayber cringes at the sight of the little-girl missionary because he feels that his own life has been ruined by the intervention of Old Man Tarwater. He reflects that he

can tell "simply by the sight of her . . . that she was not a fraud, that she was only exploited" (Three, p. 382). He identifies with her exploitation, but neither he nor the young Tarwater sees or hears. They are thus representatives of characters who are often seen in Miss O'Connor's fiction--characters who portray the blind stupidity of men who refuse to hear the call of Christ. Speaking of the crucifixion, the young girl says, "Their eyes were opened and they saw the glory they had killed" (Three, p. 384). Through this statement, Miss O'-Connor is showing that man often sees the glory of God only when it is too late--only after a self-imposed alienation has destroyed the spirit.

The end of the story is used to point out a very essential truth concerning the spiritual alienation of man. Young Tarwater thinks, despite his disillusionment, that everything will be all right for him if he returns to his home. However, he finds that even here he cannot be on good terms with himself: "It was the road home, ground that had been familiar to him since his infancy but now it looked like strange and alien country" (Three, p. 442). He is like Camus' Daru in "The Guest": "In this vast landscape he had loved so much, he was alone." This journey is to be seen symbolically as Miss O'Connor's portrayal of all men searching for salvation as they wander, often aimlessly, through life. It is his aimless wandering which ultimately leads young Tarwater to his last violent vision:

He felt it [his hunger] rising in himself through time and

> darkness, rising through the centuries, and he knew that it rose in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth. (Three, pp. 446-447)

In referring to Jesus, who has brought truth to the world, Miss O'Connor gives the purpose of her writing. She has portrayed distorted, grotesque, alienated characters to reveal man's repugnant attitude toward God as man obstinately refuses "to seek and to find."

We have seen that Miss O'Connor's characters are all basically the same, whether they profess religious belief or do not profess it: they are spiritually alienated souls. To all of them, service to God is terrifying. They all have a tendency to feel that they are in a foreign country--displaced from redemption, alienated from God. Miss O'Connor's philosophy is that redemption of men is possible and necessary--but that this truth must be delivered in a way to get the attention of those who do not see and hear. Her characters, like people all of us have known, tend to turn off their hearing aids and cover their eyes when God's message is delivered. As a result, man often sees the glory of God only when it is too late--only after a self-imposed alienation separates him from God's grace. In her portrayals, Miss O'Connor shows that most men--in their own ways--seek redemption. Some men find it, while others do not. But this attitude does not make Miss O'Connor any less a writer who is concerned about Christianity. We must grant that her approach is perceptive,

despite its grotesqueness. The harshness of her approach is also at times softened by the use of the comical aspect of man.

END NOTES

[1]Robert Drake, Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1966), p. 6.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 13, quoting Miss O'Connor.

[4]Drake, p. 7.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Flannery O'Connor, letter to Sister Mariella Gable, May 4, 1963, as quoted by Carter W. Martin, The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor (Nashville, 1969), pp. 20-21. Martin's source was Sister Mariella Gable, "The Ecumenic Core in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," American Benedictine Review, XV (June, 1964), 127-143.

[7]In Flannery O'Connor, ed. Robert E. Reiter (St. Louis, 1968), p. 11.

[8]"Flannery O'Connor's Wise Blood," Critique, II (Fall, 1958), 9.

[9]Martin, pp. 63-64.

[10](Carbondale, Illinois, 1962), p. 143.

[11]"Flannery O'Connor: A Note on Literary Fashions," Critique, II (1958), 17.

[12](Baton Rouge, 1967), p. 242.

[13](New York, 1965), p. 100.

[14]Wise Blood, in Three by Flannery O'Connor (New York, 1964), pp. 17-18--hereafter referred to in text as Three with appropriate page numbers.

[15]Foreword to Wise Blood, in Three, n. p.

[16]"Flannery O'Connor's Campaign for Her Country," in Flannery O'Connor, ed. Robert E. Reiter (St. Louis, 1968), p. 2.

[17]The girl, Hulga or Joy, is a "type" character in Miss O'Connor's fiction. Mary Grace, in "Revelation" (from the posthumous collection Everything That Rises Must Converge) is another, younger example of the person who is soured on religion because of the hypocrisy of Christians. The stories in this posthumous collection, all of which develop the theme of alienation, are not treated here.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIVE WRITERS AND THE TIES THAT BIND

> Alone--that worn-out word,
> So idly spoken, and so coldly heard;
> Yet all that poets sing and grief hath known
> Of hopes laid waste, knells in that word ALONE!
> --Edward Bulwer-Lytton, The New Timon, II

The common tie that binds the five writers whom we have studied here is not so much their styles of writing as their handling of a popular theme, in this case the theme of alienation. However, as I shall show, they share other likenesses. By dealing with such a theme, they also associate themselves with a large company of contemporary writers who deal with the implications involved in a study of alienated man. Indeed, no one who studies the events of our world in the daily newspaper, or those same events as they are given expression in literature, can deny that "alienation" is in vogue today. And alienation has turned to rebellion, thus producing significant changes in our environment. It is modern man's dilemma to be alienated. Ironically, even though we live closer together than ever before, we find that it is more and more difficult to know one another and ourselves. As a result of this dilemma, man is faced with what Karl Jaspers calls the "nameless powers of Nothingness."[1] Indeed, in philosophy, religion,

and the arts, we see a reflection of man facing the existential crisis. Whether atheistic or Christian, contemporary literature and philosophy are constituted largely by an encounter with Nothingness and an effort to overcome its threat to man's existence. Thus, that which was at one time in our history the attitude of an occasional outsider has become that of a generation.

It is therefore imperative for us to understand this phenomenon which has caused such a vast difference in our lives today. Alienation is a subject which is very much on everyone's mind, thus making it a problem for modern man to think about, to discuss, to agonize about, and, it is hoped, to do something about. Each of these writers studied here--in his own way--has dealt meaningfully with man's essential aloneness and his response to it.

Thomas Wolfe, for example, believes that man is a stranger in the universe in which he lives. In all of Wolfe's works that we have studied, we have seen the despair and disillusionment of a soul that is lost and alone. Wolfe's man is always searching for a meaning that he is never quite able to grasp, and his failure causes him untold agony. He is a man without spiritual hope; and he is seemingly unwilling to take any kind of "leap of faith." Although Wolfe did not, in his philosophical discourses, indicate that he was an atheistic existentialist, his works seem to establish such an approach to life. For instance, in the fictional works discussed here, we find that Wolfe's typical character is alone and abandoned on earth and that he

ultimately has no one to depend on except himself. Despite numerous attempts to find God, he has no success. It is not possible for him to achieve a happy state; he is forlorn and filled with anguish. He conceives of himself as a foreign body in the world.

The short story "Gulliver" is representative of the attitudes expressed by Wolfe in his fiction. We find in this story a clue to the despair which besets not only the protagonist (the story is told by a first-person narrator) but also the writer himself. The narrator feels alienated because he is a man of "six feet six" living in a world of "five feet eight." When he reflects on the basic goodness of mankind, however, he does not give us any reason to believe that God is a part of man's scheme of life. The main feeling to be derived from this story is that the universe is basically hostile to the man who is not like other people. And we find that it is impossible for such an individual to live a happy, fulfilled life.

Implicit in Look Homeward, Angel, another work discussed here, is Wolfe's theme of isolation. The book is centered around man's search for anything that will help him to understand the universe, anything that will help him to be restored to a feeling of worth. We see in his (Wolfe's or Eugene's) agony not only an earthly search but also one which he hopes will lead to an identification with a spiritual father. But the boy is doomed from the beginning by an indulgent father and a grasping mother. He is a "desperate and hunted little animal" both at home and at school. This is a pattern of life which he is not

able to overcome. During his early manhood, he appeals to a woman who he thinks can give him self-understanding and love, "Don't leave me alone; I have always been alone!" He even calls out to nature in his exhortation to the sea ("O sea, I am lonely like you . . . sorrowful like you . . . "), but he experiences nothing but lostness and loneliness. At the end of the story, he still lives in a spiritual void because he has not been able to take a significant step toward a higher being. Like all of Wolfe's characters, Eugene searches but does not find.

In the other work, The Web and the Rock, which we have analyzed, Wolfe again deals with man's search for something in life that will help him to find himself. Like Wolfe's other characters, Monk searches for a door; but he finds that it is closed to him. He thinks that a trip to Europe might be the solution to his problem, but in Europe he also fails to find happiness. His love for Esther Jack offers him such a chance, but it too is not enough to sustain him. At the end, as at the beginning, Monk is faced with the realization that man can do little more than endure. In all of his searching, he finds no spiritual truth; and the responsibility at the end of the story lies with the individual man. There is reason to believe that even if he finds meaning, it will be temporary because we have seen him fail many times before. When he comes to the realization that he cannot go home again--either physically or spiritually--he is giving expression to a feeling of despair and alienation typical of the existential

character.

Wolfe is unlike the other four writers whom we have studied, as I shall show later. For him, a search for God seems to play a significant role; but he says through his fiction that man cannot reach God. When he has a character to call out to God, there is never a sound reason for inferring that he is on the verge of religious belief. Throughout his writings Wolfe seems to be searching for God, but it is his plight never to find God. In the last accounting, Wolfe's characters are themselves responsible for their agonized lives. We have seen in Wolfe's works a pattern of the isolated existentialist: he is so concerned about his freedom and the struggle attending it that he is alienated from God and man. As a result, he comes to the point of total disbelief.

For the unprepared reader, a story by Wolfe may be an oppressive thing because of the writer's use of overabundant details. He had little control over the flow of words, and he had to depend on other people to do his editing because he found it extremely hard to cut out living words. In all of his works, the reader can feel the power of Wolfe's communication. As evidence of the difficulty he had in cutting down his works, we may mention the size of the original manuscript of Angel--350,000 words that filled seventeen ledger-sized notebooks. During the editing process, Wolfe said, "We are cutting out big chunks, and my heart bleeds."[2] As I have indicated previously, Wolfe's writing represented to him a search--for a word, a leaf,

an unfound door, for anything that would yield understanding. He wrote from the depths of a tormented soul, and he did so to show beauty to man. His prose is sometimes tedious, but the tedium of the long Whitman-like catalogues that he is prone to use is offset by the clear, flowing rhetoric.

We have seen in Robert Penn Warren an approach to life which is basically different from Wolfe's. Whereas Wolfe bears the marks of the atheistic existentialist, as I discussed above, Warren follows a humanistic approach--which does not reveal him to be associated with either the Christian or atheistic existentialists except in his use of the theme of alienation. He is mostly concerned about man's self-knowledge and self-fulfillment, and he seems to be saying that man can realize both of these by looking at himself in relation to his past. He deals with men who are locked within the darkness of their selves, and he occasionally allows them to see light (as in the case of Jack Burden). Warren's characters are caught up in the struggle of good versus evil; the basic plight of his "good man" is to meet evil and then be corrupted by it. As we have seen, for Percy Munn, the evil which corrupts a man who has heretofore been good is to be found in Mr. Munn's involvement with the tobacco growers' association; for Jack Burden and Willie Stark, it is found in corrupt politics. When the so-called good man encounters evil, he tries unsuccessfully to attain self-fulfillment, but it is not easy to achieve.

A case in point is Percy Munn in Night Rider. Warren shows his respect for this character by never referring to him by his first name or his last name alone; he calls him Mr. Munn throughout the novel. Mr. Munn is an excellent example of the good man who meets evil and is unable to overcome corruption, but the reader feels throughout the novel that Warren wishes it to be otherwise. Munn becomes a member of an association that he has never felt strongly about; and ultimately he even commits murder, which is unlike him. He also becomes an adulterer and is finally killed for a crime that he has not committed. By the end of the story, a person who started off as a respected citizen has become a totally disintegrated character. He agonizes over his problems, but he is without hope. Like Wolfe's typical character, Mr. Munn has also attempted to find hope in love; but he has failed. And unlike most of Warren's characters, he is also unable to find meaning in the past.

The view of life which we get from Night Rider is nevertheless not an entirely hopeless one, as in most of Wolfe's works. Instead, Warren seems to be saying that Mr. Munn is merely an example of a man who has failed to live by the right ethical standards. He has allowed himself to be motivated by ideals which are not humanistic, and this to Warren is Mr. Munn's big error. He has not helped mankind; instead, he has contributed to its deterioration.

We see this same kind of attitude in Warren's other works. For example, in the story "The Circus in the Attic," Bolton Lovehart is

able to escape his attic, and thus alienation, and involve himself in wartime activities. By doing so, he helps himself; but most of all, he helps the people who live in his hometown. At the end of the story, we feel--because of the "might of the spirit" which Bolton has previously demonstrated--that his alienation is merely "temporary seclusion." He has fought his way to freedom before, and there is a possibility that he can do so again. If this is true, he serves as a good example of the prevailing power of man in Warren's works.

Another example of Warren's humanistic handling of the theme of alienation is found in All the King's Men, as we have seen. Willie Stark may be seen as a negative example, like Percy Munn, because Willie started out innocent and became corrupted. In the beginning, Willie is a simple country lawyer who wants very much to help his kind of people. But he is forced by his pride to become a powerful, unprincipled politician when he discovers that he has been set up as a decoy candidate for governor. His political life, as well as his personal life, from this time forward bears heavily the taint of corruption. But Jack Burden is an example of the man who agonizes over his problems and ultimately arrives at a better understanding of himself. In the beginning, he seeks refuge in the past, but he finally realizes that the purpose of the past is to help him understand himself in the present. He finds himself in harmony with man, and there is even a possibility that he is approaching the point at which he can be in harmony with God. At least he does not believe in the Great

Twitch anymore.

Warren's portrayal of Jack Burden may thus be taken as the writer's attempt to show that a man may realize self-fulfillment through self-knowledge. He has reached the point at which he is able to look at his fellow man, and at himself, humanistically. He has thus become basically free; Warren shows through his portrayal of Jack that it is possible for a man to find himself if he emphasizes in his life's search the right values.

Although Warren's message reveals the possibility of attaining a good life through a pursuit of right values, his style is at times coarse and shocking in detail. Such detail is to be seen, for example, in the scraping of tobacco beds and the accompanying violence in Night Rider. The hardness of his style makes unlikely a sentimental approach, something which is seldom found in Warren's fiction. He treats his subjects with detachment, but not with indifference. He is a moral writer; and although his philosophical intrusions sometimes hamper plot development, he analyzes the moral issues with efficacy. An example of the hampering effect of philosophical intrusions comes in Men when Jack Burden tries to work out his personal philosophy. Such an example can also be seen in Mr. Munn's desire to resolve his moral problems. Mr. Warren is a writer of great imagination, and if there is any one flaw in his writing, it is the same one that befell Wolfe: difficulty in limiting the picture. In Men, we find this difficulty evident in the subplot concerning Judge Irwin, an episode which

dominates the novel too much.

Of the writers who have been discussed here, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty are most alike in their approach to life, which is humanistic. Like Warren, Miss Welty does not belong to either Sartre's or Kierkegaard's group of existential thinkers. However, a basic difference between Warren and Miss Welty exists: whereas Warren is a writer not given to an extensive use of humor, Miss Welty's writing has a solid comical dimension. As I have shown, she develops a juxtaposition of alienation and the ludicrous situation to delineate meaningful characters. We have seen that Miss Welty's personal background has been a happy one and that she is not presenting a pessimistic view of life by writing about unhappy, alienated characters--as a writer who has had an unhappy life might tend to do. She gathers her material from life, and she treats it with great understanding and feeling. Each of her stories is a work of art containing well-developed characters, a believable plot line, a unique situation, and an overall descriptive technique which appeals soundly to the ear and eye. She is indeed a careful writer. Her dialogue is colorful and unrestrained because it is a precise example of the rhythms of Southern speech. Throughout her works, the training which she has had as a photographer is evident in her handling of atmosphere, her compression of narrative events, her use of colorful details. In each story she seems to work for a unique effect; in one, like "The Whistle," it may be a feeling of defeat. In another, like

"A Worn Path," it may be the indomitable spirit of man. Whatever the work, it is distinguished by Miss Welty's remarkable diversity.

In all her stories we find beauty and sensitivity, no matter what kind of characters she is portraying. A prime example of her work is "The Key," which treats of alienation caused by a physical infirmity: the protagonists are deaf mutes, but they are revealed as knowledgeable individuals. Ironically, those who stand by and ridicule the Morgans, the deaf mutes, are also outsiders because they cannot understand the communication that constantly passes between Albert and Ellie. We see this in the story when Ellie begins to reprimand Albert for keeping the young man's key. The people in the waiting room pity the couple, at least in a shallow manner, but they are ignorant of the message that is passing between the deaf-mutes in sign language. The people thus react in the only way they know: From bench to bench they "said to each other, 'Deaf and Dumb!'" (Curtain, p. 62)

Two of Miss Welty's most pathetic characters are found in "The Whistle." Their alienation is caused by poverty, which eats at their very being. But as in most of her stories, Miss Welty also reveals that perhaps the saddest thing about their existence is that they do not share a deep love for each other; such a love could have helped them to bear their problems. Instead, they are defeated by a bleak, naturalistic realization that they are caught as in the teeth of a trap. We see that Jason and Sara are alienated by forces beyond their

control, but such is not the case with Mrs. Larkin in "A Curtain of Green." Her alienation is self-imposed. She works in her garden in order to close herself within a wall of green, and not in order to create beauty. She thus accomplishes almost total separation from the people around her.

Miss Welty also deals in a poignant manner with the alienation of the Negro. She occasionally uses the shortened form "Nigger" in reference to the black man, but she basically reveals herself to be a humanist in the way in which she treats him. A good example is her portrayal of the Negro jazz musician, Powerhouse. Powerhouse is alienated from the people for whom he plays, the members of his band, and other members of his own race. He desires love, but he doesn't know how to seek it. He evolves as one of Miss Welty's most troubled characters. In "A Worn Path," we see Old Phoenix, still another of the writer's Negroes. Old Phoenix is one of Miss Welty's most sensitive portrayals; the reader identifies with the old Negro because of the pathos of her characterization.

On the surface, these characterizations may not seem to be good examples of Miss Welty's use of humor; however, such a discussion passes over passages like those which deal with Old Phoenix's comical treatment of what she considers her worthlessness and Powerhouse's wrapping a towel around his head and acting like the Sheik of Araby--and Ruby's bandying with Clyde about her excursion into the city (in "A Piece of News"). However, there is no chance of mistaking

the blending of pathos and humor in such works as "Why I Live at the P.O." and The Ponder Heart. The narrators of the two stories, by the way, are enough alike to be the same person; they are both semicomical, semipathetic heroines who well represent Miss Welty's power to deal with serious subjects in a humorous way.

She basically probes into the same problems that we have seen in the works of Warren; she is preoccupied with the idea that despite man's alienation, he may attain a meaningful life through love--and the communication of love. Also like Warren, not all of her characters fail. Some of them are like Bolton Lovehart and Jack Burden in their ability to challenge their isolation. However, unlike Warren's characters, Miss Welty's characters sometimes escape isolation by weaving fantasies. They desire to remove themselves from the bonds of alienation, thus demonstrating that they want something better. Miss Welty's sympathetic insight toward these characters also exemplifies to the reader that she is aware of the sad plight of many people and that she, like most writers, desires that man be able to overcome his problems--that he be able to prevail.

In the way that she treats the themes of love and separateness, Mrs. McCullers, the next writer, is most like Miss Welty. However, it is with this similarity that the two writers begin to move in basically different directions. Mrs. McCullers' view of life is mostly within the framework of the naturalistic thinker. Whereas Miss Welty de-

velops the thesis that love can serve as a solution for existing problems, for Mrs. McCullers' characters, love frequently results in pain, suffering, and loneliness. In her stories there is therefore a paradoxical relationship between loneliness and love. I have previously developed the thesis that there is a strong correlation between the life of Mrs. McCullers and the feelings of alienation that beset her characters, and this is indeed correct. In her own life, Mrs. McCullers experienced what it was like to be rejected by love; in her experience she is much like Thomas Wolfe.

Mrs. McCullers emphasizes to a great extent the sometimes sordid, the sometimes bizarre, the sometimes monotonous surroundings of her characters; and she is thus making commentary on the moulding influence of environment in determining the actions and attitudes of her characters. We see the deprivation of poverty as a shaping force, for instance, in the character of Mick (The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter). Desiring to have much more than she has and realizing that her parents can give her very few of the material things she wants, she does the only thing she knows to do: she withdraws within herself first and finally asserts herself in worldly actions. The other characters of the novel experience their own types of withdrawal, and Mr. Singer, who serves as the confidant of all of them, is perhaps the saddest one of all. At the end, in bewilderment, he commits suicide. He sees this act as the only way of solving the problem of his alienation. All of the characters of this work are typical creations of the author

because of the way they search for the fulfillment of love and perhaps find it for a time--only to be deprived of it. Their dream of happiness can be likened to a hollow dream that disappears in vapor. The effect created is that of a man in a sinking vessel in the middle of an ocean. The only hope seen in this novel is in the possibility that Biff will find meaning in life.

We also see the despair of love in Mrs. McCullers' other works. A good example is Reflections in a Golden Eye; this is a story in which the author develops the thesis that despite man's search for love, isolation and desolation are not overcome. The characters have played at the game of love, but lasting satisfaction is not to be found. Such is also the case in The Ballad of the Sad Café and The Member of the Wedding. Desire for love does nothing for Frankie in Member except make her look ridiculous. She goes from Frankie, to F. Jasmine, to Frances; and each character is searching for identification, for association that only love can bring. Even though at the end of the story there seems to be at least temporary hope for Frances, the despair has shifted to Berenice. Berenice is a good example of the McCullers character who has given freely of love but has ended up virtually hopeless. She has loved Frankie, John Henry, Honey, and God; but now she is alone. Amelia in Ballad is still another example of a woman who dreams of love but who finds in it only temporary fulfillment. She is first portrayed as a harsh, cruel, crass woman; but love, at least for a time, makes her react sympathetically. Finally,

however, that which happens to most of Mrs. McCullers' characters must happen to Amelia: she must accept the loneliness of love. At the end of the story she is frustrated and bewildered, and we are led to believe that it is because she has given herself indiscriminately to love.

As I have said previously, Miss Welty and Mrs. McCullers are alike in that they both deal with the themes of love and separateness; however, I have developed the idea that whereas Miss Welty is humanistic in her approach, Mrs. McCullers follows a naturalistic dialectic. In fact, the only time that Miss Welty ever makes the reader feel that man is caught in the "teeth of fate" is in her story "The Whistle." On the other hand, most of Mrs. McCullers' characters are accustomed to defeat. There seems to be an inner force which makes impossible lasting happiness and success for them. We see that her characters revolt against their "inner isolation," but their hope is somehow overshadowed by fate.

In the chapter on Mrs. McCullers, I have developed the idea that her works are not merely clinical case studies, which they very easily could have become. Mrs. McCullers has shown her knowledge of certain tools of fiction such as unifying devices (for example, her use of Firebird and the golden eye in Reflections) and symbolism (for example, the acorn and the chain gang in Ballad) in creating stories which are aesthetically sound. She also has effectively used grotesque characters to point up the selfishness and lust of man as well

as his intense desire to belong.

From the beginning of this study, I have considered Miss O'Connor a special case. She is in only one way like any of the other writers who have been discussed: she shares with Miss Welty a fascination for the humorous. Miss O'Connor is a writer who is seriously concerned about Christianity, and she deals meaningfully in her works with the motivation behind the Christian life. She is preoccupied with moral issues, which she deals with in a perverse way--thus making even stronger the impact that she wishes to make. In short, she shocks her reader in order to get his attention. The distortions which she uses are for the purpose of emphasis. She feels that the people who need her message are those who cannot see because they are caught up in their own self-righteousness; they are thus alienated from God and man. She is, in short, making examples of them; and she firmly believes that for a reading audience different in basic attitudes from her she must sometimes use grotesque images to shock and impress. She does not sneer without reason, and she is not attacking Southern Fundamentalists; her main purpose is to say that all men need a right relationship with God. She writes about the plight of the alienated man who is outside God's grace.

Miss O'Connor's characters are outside God's grace because they have not accepted His Scheme of Redemption. In fact, most of them have tried to set themselves up as God, and Miss O'Connor wants us to see this as the worst kind of sin--one which leads to the alienation

of the spirit. Hazel Motes in Wise Blood is an excellent example of the alienated man. He concerns himself throughout most of the novel with the transition from belief, to evil, to nothingness. However, he is never able to rid himself of the "taint" of the preacher. Even in his creation of the Church Without Christ, he is unable to get away from God. He keeps feeling the need for punishing himself by putting glass, stones, and rocks in his shoes; by wrapping himself in barbed wire; and finally by putting out his eyes with lime. For Miss O'Connor, Hazel Motes serves as an excellent example of man and his relationship to God. She feels that his integrity lies in his inability to completely free himself of God. He is outside God's grace, and he is miserable; Miss O'Connor has thus made her point.

We have also seen that she deals with this same kind of interplay between God and man in the stories collected in A Good Man Is Hard to Find. Joy (Hulga) Hopewell, in "Good Country People," is a good example of the person who pretends to believe in nothing besides Nothingness; but when she encounters someone who really does not believe, she is shocked by his reaction to life. Before she learns that he does not believe in God, she tells him that he is like all of them--that he says one thing and does another. Also, in "The Displaced Person," the writer deals symbolically with a person who encounters Christ. And in order to make her point more emphatic, Miss O'Connor focuses on her protagonist's despair, as she frequently does: There seems to be nothing in the future for Mrs. McIntyre

except the experience of total alienation from God.

In her last published work before her death, The Violent Bear It Away, Miss O'Connor again deals with people who are not able to make meaningful decisions about Godly service and are thus alienated from God. The four principal characters--Old Man Tarwater, Francis Marion Tarwater, Rayber, and Bishop--each represent a type of relationship with God which Miss O'Connor uses to get across her point about Redemption. Old Man Tarwater has created his own God, young Tarwater is trying to find the real God, Rayber insists that there is no God, and Bishop represents the innocent person who is oblivious of the love of God. The writer uses these characters to develop her thesis that all men are in need of God, and the spiritual defeat of each individual in the story points up the alienation of man outside the circle of God's redemption.

Miss O'Connor thus develops characters for whom service to God is a terrifying thing. She uses a special kind of "reverse theology" to show that even though man needs redemption and it is possible for him to attain it, he quite frequently does not listen as carefully as he should to God. In fact, oftentimes man refuses to recognize God's redemptive plan until it is too late for him to act positively; such is the case of Mrs. McIntyre, for example. However, even though at first glance such a technique might seem to negate the significance of Christianity, this is not Miss O'Connor's plan. Many of her characters are like Unamuno's Don Emmanuel and Lazarus in their attitudes

toward God. Even though they profess not to believe, there is reason to think that, paradoxically, without believing in their belief, they actually believe. Her characters are also always faced with the dilemma concerning the existence of God. Nevertheless, in all of her works, Miss O'Connor is revealed as a writer who is very much concerned about the propagation of Christianity.

Flannery O'Connor is a conscious literary artist who uses comical situations to express her viewpoint. For instance, in an atmosphere which breeds in Hulga deep questioning of man and God, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman carry on mundane conversations which have comical effects. She also produces sometimes subtle effects through the use of symbolism. Name symbolism is particularly effective. The ironic use of the name Joy Hopewell is too symbolic not to have been used purposely; and there is significance in Joy's changing her name to Hulga, a name that has connotations of ugliness. We have said that Warren's and Wolfe's flaw is in their inability to limit their picture of life. The converse might be said of Miss O'Connor because she had only one story to tell: the story of man's redemption. We must admit, however, that she had diverse ways of telling it.

We have seen here that in approach, there is something unique about each writer's technique even though all of the writers deal with the common theme of alienation. Of the five, Thomas Wolfe and Carson McCullers present the most hopeless view of man. We cannot

forget the towering figures of Wolfe and his protagonists and the way in which they exemplify the idea that man is a stranger in the universe in which he lives. Carson McCullers, on the other hand, is a writer in whose works naturalistic forces have such a strong power over man that he is unable to realize lasting happiness. Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty have been considered basically as humanists; they both hold to the viewpoint that man will prevail. Their difference lies in Warren's emphasis on the importance of the forces of good and evil in man's life not to be found to any great extent in Miss Welty's works and in Miss Welty's use of a comical dimension to be found only here and there in Warren. And, finally, Flannery O'Connor stands alone in this study as a writer who is primarily concerned with man's spiritual redemption. The works of the five writers thus emerge as excellent examples of the diverse ways in which the important theme of alienation is treated in contemporary Southern fiction.

END NOTES

[1]Man in the Modern Age, trans. by Eden and Cedar Paul (Garden City, New York, 1957), p. 191.

[2]According to Elizabeth Nowell (Thomas Wolfe: A Biography [Garden City, New York, 1960], p. 136.), Wolfe made this statement in a letter to his sister Mabel.

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VITA

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Thesis: AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEME OF ALIENATION IN THE FICTIONAL WORKS OF FIVE CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN WRITERS

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Biographical:

Personal Data: Born near Mangum, Oklahoma, April 2, 1934, son of John Elmer (d. October 15, 1955) and Margaret Emma Thomas. Married Johnnie Faye Williams on July 3, 1955, in Mangum, Oklahoma. Daughter: Shila Renee, born on August 14, 1959, in Thomas, Oklahoma.

Education: Graduated from City View High School, near Mangum, Oklahoma, in May, 1952; attended Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma, 1952-1953; received the Bachelor of Arts in Education degree from Southwestern State College, Weatherford, Oklahoma, with majors in English and business education, in January, 1956; received the Master of Arts degree with a major in English from Oklahoma State University in August, 1959; attended the University of Oklahoma during the summers of 1960, 1961, and 1964, and during the 1963-1964 school year; completed requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Oklahoma State University in May, 1971.

Professional Experience: Taught at Lakeside High School in the Oklahoma State Reformatory, Granite, Oklahoma, from January, 1956, to September, 1956; entered the United States Army on September 10, 1956; received a medical discharge on October 25, 1956; taught at Southwestern State College from November, 1956, to June, 1957; served as a graduate

assistant at Oklahoma State University from September, 1957, to January, 1959; taught at Southwestern State College from January, 1959, to the present time--except while on leaves of absence; served as a graduate assistant at the University of Oklahoma during the 1963-1964 school year; served as a graduate associate at Oklahoma State University from September, 1968, to June, 1970.

Professional Organizations: Oklahoma Education Association; Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English--College Section; National Council of Teachers of English.

Professional Honors: Southwestern State College "Teacher of the Year," 1966.