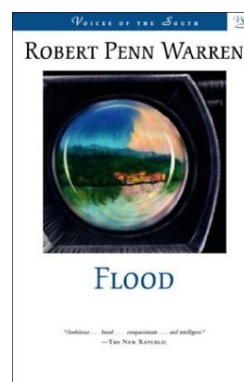
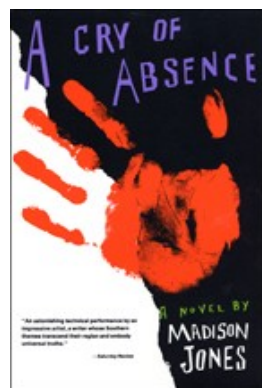


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Visions of Change in Madison Jones' *A Cry of Absence* and Robert Penn Warren's *Flood* – A Romance of Our Time



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Introduction

The question of the American South's distinctiveness has been the object of many scholarly studies. An example of early research on the subject is W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, published in 1941, and beginning with these lines: "There exists among us by ordinary – both North and South – a profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation, and exhibiting within itself a remarkable homogeneity." (Cash vii) Today, the South continues to fuel scholarly research and debates; let us cite *The Routledge History of the American South*, edited by Maggi M. Morehouse, in 2017, whose third chapter written by Orville Vernon Burton and Anderson R. Rouse is dedicated to "Southern Identity" and reflects on the role of the Confederate loss in the Civil War (1861-65) in the shaping of a specific Southern consciousness. Indeed, the South's distinctiveness, either real or wished for by supporters of cultural separatism, was paradoxically reinforced in the minds of many white Southerners at that time, and for several decades. Virginian Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), elected President of the United States in 1913, is one of many defenders of a distinct Southern culture; for example, he considered segregation as "not a humiliation but a benefit, [which] ought to be so regarded by" everyone. (Norton qtd in Brooks & Starks 96) After the Civil War, white Southerners were confronted with death, the devastation caused by war, and the utter failure of their political objectives; and they tried to deal with their sense of loss by spawning a myth that came to be known as the Lost Cause myth, glorifying the antebellum society based on the plantation system and the exploitation of black slaves as an ideal one, protected and favored by God. Burton and Rouse even argue that "[t]he Lost Cause provided a way for southerners to understand their past, their present, and their future." (Burton & Rouse 45) Interestingly, most ex-Confederates did not stop upholding their beliefs after losing the war:

[they] did not believe they had fought for an unworthy cause. During the decades following the surrender at Appomattox, they nurtured a public memory of the Confederacy that placed their wartime sacrifice and shattering defeat in the best possible light. [...] / The architects of the Lost Cause [...] collectively sought to justify their own actions and allow

themselves and other former Confederates to find something positive in all-encompassing failure. They also wanted to provide their children and future generations of white Southerners with a ‘correct’ narrative of the war.” (Gallagher & Nolan 1-2)

So it appears that the Lost Cause myth sought to revise the narrative of the war and to exalt the old ways. The myth quickly became a widespread one, fueled by white Southerners who resented Northern authority during the Reconstruction, with soldiers of the Union remaining on Southern soil up until 1877 in order to supervise the defeated region. The Lost Cause myth, however, as a defense against defeat and the crushing of separatist ideas, continued to progress after 1877, supported by ex-Confederates’ children and grandchildren. If slavery was abolished at the end of the war, white Southerners still took advantage of the end of Reconstruction to implement the Jim Crow laws, “a series of laws and ordinances [...] legalizing segregation (the physical separation of individuals based on race, gender, religion, or class) within their boundaries.” (Tischauer 1) The name “Jim Crow” is a reference to a nineteenth-century traveling show in which a white actor portrayed a black slave by “darkening his face and hands with burnt cork, [wearing] shabby overalls, [shuffling] across the stage in bare feet, and [carrying] a banjo.” (Tischauer 1) The stereotypical impersonation of the black slave by a white actor, and the fact that segregation laws came to be known as Jim Crow laws, point to a racial divide that largely survived Reconstruction and was perhaps even made starker because of it.

In this way, institutionalized racism, segregation and the Lost Cause myth flourished well into the twentieth century. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, segregation was increasingly challenged, by Southern activists as well as important Supreme Court decisions, such as *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) according to which the separation of black and white students in the school system is unconstitutional. As a consequence of the many changes that took place in the 1950s and 1960s, Southern exceptionalism slowly began to decline. Byron E. Shafer and Richard Johnston extensively explore the matter in *The End of Southern Exceptionalism*, first published in 2006.

The choice of the two novels under study in my dissertation, *A Cry of Absence* (1971) and *Flood* (1964), was first motivated by a keen interest in the possible lingering echoes of the Lost Cause myth in the 1950s and 1960s, and how it became more and more challenged by several societal phenomena and the rise of new ideologies, as well as federal political changes at the time.

Let us cite the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, led by blacks and some whites throughout the country, seeking to end segregation and more generally “to transform American social and legal structures from ones wrought with racism to systems based on equality.” (Jamie J. Wilson 67) Concomitantly, the New South creed gained momentum as an outlook counterbalancing the Lost Cause myth. Far from championing a Southern cultural exception, the supporters of the “New South” doctrine promoted “harmonious reconciliation of sectional differences, racial peace, and a new economic and social order based on industry and scientific, diversified agriculture” (Gaston 28) or, in other words, the cultural assimilation of the South to the rest of the country. Progressive and national influence steadily grew in the South, seeking at once to end racial injustice, to favor the importation of new technological means and to implement a new economic system there.

My interest was first and foremost in exploring the 1950s and 1960s period through the lens of literature, and more specifically Southern white literature. Undeniably, literary writings have the capacity to mirror the world in which they are produced; in this specific example, I will focus on the way *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* reflect the ideological and social changes of the 1950s and 1960s, and simultaneously portray resistance or hostility to these changes. Madison Jones was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1925; Robert Penn Warren is a little older, born in 1905 in Guthrie, Kentucky. As Southern white writers from the twentieth century, they offer a unique perspective on the South caught in the midst of multifaceted transformation. Moreover, their novelistic texts prove to be polyphonic ones, effectively rendering diverse and conflicting points of view on change. Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theory can be cited here; in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, first published in 1975, he introduces his “revolutionary concept of ‘dialogism’ (polyphony)” (Holquist in Bakhtin 27) and is more precisely interested in how dialogism manifests in the novel, “the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted” (Bakhtin 44) and whose “skeleton [...] is still far from having hardened, [so that] we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities.” (Bakhtin 44) Because of this plasticity put forward by Bakhtin, we see how the novel seems to be the perfect medium with which to express polyphony and conflicting standpoints on a given subject.

Jones’ novel *A Cry of Absence*, set in 1957, focuses on a white Southern woman faced with racial, economic and industrial change in her small hometown, Cameron Springs. What is first described as Her core identity is put to the test as her friends gradually turn to progressive ideals and her two children both drastically stray from the path she intended them to follow. Hester’s core ideology is a conservative one, upholding segregation and white supremacy, while her eldest son leans towards a more progressive view on Southern society. It follows that the novel stages a perpetual quest for a compromise, a middle-ground between those two ideologies. The South and its

distinct identity seem to be a prominent theme in Jones' whole writing; from *A Buried Land* (1963) dealing with a lawyer from Tennessee who is haunted by his past, to *Season of the Strangler* (1982) taking place in a small Alabama town hit by a series of murders, to *Nashville 1864: The Dying of the Light* (1997) following a white Southern boy and his slave in the midst of the Civil War, a major preoccupation with the South is obvious throughout his long literary career. Interestingly, Jones also "studied under Agrarian poet and critic Donald Davidson, whose lectures have had a lasting influence on him." (Gretlund 478) Davidson was part of a congregation of twelve Southern authors who, in 1930, issued the famous agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, composed of a collection of twelve articles, each written by one of the twelve authors. They "all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, Agrarian *versus* Industrial." (Davidson & Fletcher, Kline, Lanier, Lytle, Nixon, Owsley, Ransom, Tate, Wade, Warren, Young xli) We can then wonder whether Davidson's agrarian influence as a teacher is reflected in Jones' writing and, if so, how? In connection to this, we can also wonder whether Jones' writing reflects not only a specific Southern identity, but also gives us access to a fictional representation of change, distancing itself from a fixed, idealized agrarian identity, and from the hostility to change that is at the core of this identity? As evoked earlier in this introduction, Bakhtin's dialogism will help me in the analysis of both *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood*, as narratives potentially presenting not only social and ideological change in the region, but also diverging views on the subject. Indeed Warren's 1964 novel *Flood* is also heavily concerned with the changing South; it takes place in the 1960s and is concerned with the difficult homecoming of a white Southern man trying to come to terms with changes in his hometown, Fiddlersburg, as well as its soon-to-be flooding due to the construction of a dam by Northern engineers. The novel is an allegorical narrative about the dissolving of the individual identity of the characters, linked to the disappearance of the collective identity of a region and the death of its myths and traditions. It fits in the "concern with human relationships and power dynamics, set in the historical context of the South" (Grimshaw 5) that is pervasive in Warren's whole fictional work. His writing appears of particular interest, as he co-authored the renowned agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. The same question can then be applied here: does Warren's 1964 novel *Flood* suggest an evolution from the agrarian ideology that pervaded his 1930 text? To what extent does *Flood's* narrative represent (ideological, cultural, social, technological) change in the South?

My decision to devote a comparative literary analysis to *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* was then motivated by Jones' and Warren's apparent interest in the South and the agrarian tradition, as

well as by a concordance of the themes enclosed in the two narratives and the historical period and geographical situation in which they take place. It was also resolutely encouraged by the focalization system used by Jones' and Warren's respective narrators. In fact, with the exception of a white Northerner who is a minor focalizer in *Flood*, the totality of the focalizers in *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* are white Southern characters, so that we can truly say the stories are told from white Southerners' perspective. This will enable me to explore, not an external point of view on the South and its transformations, but the perspective of white Southerners themselves on their direct environment. This is a study of white Southern perspective on the evolution of white Southern identity.

In order to better analyze such perspective on technological, racial, cultural and economic change in the 1950s and 1960s South, I have chosen to confine the subject of this thesis to the "visions of change in Madison Jones' *A Cry of Absence* and Robert Penn Warren's *Flood*." Focusing on the "visions" of "change" will enable me to explore the possible conflicting perspectives about the South's transformations, in accordance with Bakhtin's notion of dialogism (or polyphony). While the conflicting visions might emanate from different characters, we may also wonder whether the narratives of *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* stage inner conflict within the perspectives of their focalizers. Let us underline again that all of Jones' and Warren's focalizers, except a minor one in *Flood*, are white Southerners confronted to the reshaping of their environment. In fact, the focalizers' perspective on change will be particularly interesting to focus on, as it will most likely prove to be ambiguous and, therefore, complex.

The analysis will consist in four parts. The first part will be concerned with "resistance to change as a tenet of Southern identity;" in other words, I will explore the way in which attachment to tradition and to the Southern natural environment is represented by the narrator in *A Cry of Absence*, while *Flood*'s narrator underscores the "loss of identity and general social wreckage" (*Flood* 6) brought about by change. In the second section, I will examine how technological change and novelty itself are staged, and be more precisely interested in the "negative vision of progress" presented by the narrators, putting an emphasis on the destructive effects of change and crystallizing a dichotomy between old and new through descriptions of the Southern landscape. In the third part of this study, a reflection on the "dynamics of conflict" will be led, underlining the many groups of population set in opposition to each other in both novels, such as blacks and whites, Southerners and Northerners, old and young people... I will also be interested in the dynamics born out of such conflicts and their consequences for the narratives and the characters. The fourth and final part of the dissertation will be dedicated to the "efforts at accepting the reality of change" on

the characters' part, and to the broader study of hybridity, in the characters and the narratives alike, bringing about a quest for reconciliation and closure.

Part One: Resistance to Change As a Tenet of Southern Identity

The first facet of *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* that will be examined in this first part will be the way Southern identity is described in the two novels, and more specifically how it is described as a rather monolithic entity, resisting any change happening within the definition of its identity. Indeed, many examples suggest that Southern identity is thought of as an intrinsically static one. Unsurprisingly, it is mostly set in contrast to the transformation of the American society during the 1950s, under an impulsion encouraged and upheld by the federal government. In order to explore different facets of this general description of a static Southern identity in both novels, the first part of this section will more precisely analyze the emphasis put on nature, as opposed to the process of industrialization. The second part will focus on traditional values put forward by characters who are seemingly supportive of a specific Southern culture, and here again in opposition to novelty.

1. Nature Versus Industrialization

Nature is probably one of the key elements to have in mind when thinking about novelistic representations of the South of the United States. Unsurprisingly, both Warren and Jones, in *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* respectively, highlight natural elements as defining features of a distinctive region. But before delving into the literary analysis, let us already say that, historically, a keen interest in, and defense of, nature on the part of many white Southerners can be traced back at least to the 1830s. The Old South's agrarian society, based on the plantation system and untouched by technology, was considered closer to the natural order. In fact, maybe we can distinguish two main aspects to an idealized agrarian society. On the one hand, this kind of society is considered by its supporters, in the South, as closer to nature and to the intact natural order, in complete opposition to a much more industrialized North. On the other hand, and it is most likely linked to the perceived natural purity of the land, the inhabitants of an agrarian society can be led to perceive themselves as purer, more honest, and retaining ideals that are nobler or even chivalric: Charles Reagan Wilson uses the word in his *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*, saying that “[b]y 1830 [...] [the South] developed a new image of itself as a chivalric society, embodying many of the agrarian and spiritual values that seemed to be disappearing in the industrializing North.” (Wilson 3) This consciousness of themselves as a chivalric people contributed to the birth of a

“distinctive cultural consciousness” in the South, and to the image of the seemingly ideal plantation system put forward by some white Southerners. In fact, many argued that the Civil War (1861 – 65) was not primarily about the defense of slavery, but rather about the defense of freedom and of a form of society they deemed higher and purer, while the North became more and more materialistic and industrialized, turning into “a monster symbolizing evil.” (Wilson 57) This description highlights an unmistakably religious quality in the contrast drawn between a Southern agrarian society and an industrialized Northern one.

In the literary field, the attachment to nature and the refusal of any industrialization process or, indeed, the refusal to consider industrialization as a form of progress, in the face of such a process happening in the rest of the nation, are apparent through the movement of the Southern Agrarians. The Southern Agrarians, a group of twelve authors from the South, gathered in 1930 to publish their manifesto entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The title itself suggests a link between the South and an agrarian way of life. Twelve articles and an introduction constitute the manifesto. In their introduction they grant a moral dimension to the cultivation of a closeness to nature, as they believe Southern agrarianism is the source of a “genuine humanism.” (Davidson & Fletcher, Kline, Lanier, Lytle, Nixon, Owsley, Ransom, Tate, Wade, Warren, Yound xlvii) In defense of agrarianism, and of a separate Southern culture, they write:

Opposed to the industrial society is the agrarian [...]. An agrarian society is hardly one that has no use at all for industries, for professional vocations, for scholars and artists, and for the life of cities. Technically, perhaps, an agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation [...]. The theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations. (Davidson & Fletcher, Kline, Lanier, Lytle, Nixon, Owsley, Ransom, Tate, Wade, Warren, Yound xlvii).

We see here how they nuance the idea of an agrarian society as solely based on nature and the countryside, but also put agriculture in the center of what life, according to them, should be in the South. It is equally noteworthy that the Agrarians fall within the broader tradition of pastoralism, which Leo Marx closely associates with America in his book *The Machine in the Garden*. He writes:

[t]he pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery. [...] The ruling motive of the good shepherd [...] was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. [...] With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy. Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society. (Marx 3)

Because settlers thought of America as a virgin land, it gave them the possibility to start anew and try and create a utopian society. Marx compares them to “shepherds” in search of “green landscape,” emphasizing their wish for a society based on nature and the cultivation of the land. The Agrarians supported this view in an age where they apparently believed these characteristics to have become specific to the South.

a) Visions of Industrialization in *Flood*

Let us now move to an analysis of the place of nature in relation to industrialization in the novel *Flood - A Romance of Our Time* (1964) written by Robert Penn Warren. Warren co-authored the Agrarian Manifesto in the 1930s; we can therefore conjecture that his literary work bears some link to his theoretical thinking on Southern society and identity. Although Warren’s position may have changed and evolved from the 1930s to *Flood*’s publication in 1964, a link to agrarianism seems implicitly present in the quote at the beginning of the novel, taken from the *Book of Amos* in the *Old Testament*: “And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled out of their land which I have given them, saith the Lord thy God.” (Amos 9:15) Land, and identity defined in relationship to the land, seems to be at the center of the narrative. A lingering echo of the manifesto is likely confirmed by the fact that another member of the Twelve Agrarians, John Crowe Ransom, is cited by one character. When Bradwell Tolliver and Yasha Jones drive past Vanderbilt University, Yasha remarks, “‘Ransom,’ he said, ‘Crowe Ransom – he was there once, wasn’t he?’” (*Flood* 23) The adverb “once” is ambiguous; on the one hand, it implies that Ransom was in the South a long time ago and is part of the past. On the other hand, the fact that Yasha mentions him suggests that Ransom’s memory, and possibly his agrarian thinking, are still present in the South. It is also significant that *Flood*’s main character is Bradwell Tolliver, a Southerner who goes back to

his hometown in the South and tries to come to terms with the changes having happened there, the origin of which lies in the slow but inevitable incorporation of Northern and modern values in the region. As a character, Brad is connected to a fondness for nature, either altogether untouched by the human hand, or corresponding to an agrarian society based on agriculture.

Before studying Brad's attachment to nature in the novel, let us underline that the prominence of nature is first supported by the system of focalization. Brad is the main focal character throughout the novel, and his point of view as a Southerner gives the reader access to a specific view on nature and its importance in the conception of a distinct Southern identity. In *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modeling Mediation in Narrative*, Alain Rabatel notes that "Point of view (POV) is defined, in an enunciative approach, in terms of the linguistic means with which a subject envisages an object [...], whether the subject be singular or collective and the object concrete or linguistic." (Rabatel 79) We see how the reader has access to the story and its elements first and foremost through the focalizer's point of view. In *Flood*, we can say that the "object" affected by such focalization is Southern identity and culture. Rabatel adds that the subject

expresses his POV either directly, in explicit commentaries, or indirectly, through the construction of referential values, in other words through choices concerning the selection, combination, and realization of the linguistic material, and does so in most circumstances, ranging from the most subjective choices to those which appear to be the most objectivizing, and from the most explicit markers to the most implicit clues. (Rabatel 79)

In other words, the point of view shapes the whole story and the way information is given to the reader; Brad – as well as other less central focalizers – deeply affects how the information is arranged and given. Studying and defining focalization is essential; Brad is not only a Southerner but also a writer, therefore an artist with a personal vision, and his trip back to the South is motivated by the wish to make a film about his hometown, Fiddlersburg, before it is flooded. His aim is to capture the South's essence, and perhaps we can find in this wish to portray something that is about to disappear the conviction that it is distinct from what exists elsewhere. One way to show the distinctiveness of the region is to emphasize the central presence of nature within it. Brad's particular vision of nature is implied in the very first sentences of the book: "It had to be the place. There was the limestone bluff jutting abruptly up, crowned by cedars. It was bound to be the place."

(*Flood* 3) The anaphoric repetition of “the” suggests that the place referred to has already been defined; it is not any place, but a very specific and familiar one, already known and referred to by the character. His point of view is made obvious precisely because of the repetition of “the;” coming back to the South after having lived in the North, tries to locate “the place” first thanks to its natural elements and characteristics.

Another excerpt from the first pages of *Flood* evidently displays Brad’s point of view and, at the same time, his value of untouched nature: he imagines,

 somewhere an old man by an unpainted picket fence would be leaning crookedly over to gather jonquils to surprise his old wife [...], and somewhere, in an empty field, boys would be throwing a baseball and uttering distant cries sad and sweet as killdees, and somewhere a boy and a girl, hand in hand, would be walking up a path into the green gloom of woods, and somewhere an old Negro woman with a man’s felt hat on her head [...] would be throwing a fishing line into a creek; and bird-song filled the ears, and heart, of Bradwell Tolliver, and he tried not to feel anything.
(*Flood* 8-9)

The “empty field” suggests the countryside envisioned by Brad is a virgin one, mostly untouched and unchanged by the human hand; while the “unpainted picket fence” introduces a human construction to the scene, albeit a minimal one, as it is still “unpainted.” Moreover, the image of the “bird-song” filling “the ears, and heart, of Bradwell Tolliver,” is one where a natural element takes over the human presence. In this way, the natural world is pictured as having the upper hand over the human tendency to change it. The “killdees” - a dialectal variant of “killdeers” - and the “jonquils,” as a wild bird and wild flowers respectively, also evoke the wilderness as opposed to We recognize Brad’s point of view thanks to the mention of his name and his “feel[ings],” (*Flood* 8-9) and also thanks to the iterative use of the modal “would” which creates a reassuring repetition all throughout the passage; here it also indicates that the scene is pictured by Brad, in his mind’s eye, and not really present in front of him at that moment. It is then his ideal, even idealized, and idyllic vision of Southern virgin land that we read. Furthermore, the “boy and [the] girl, hand in hand” hint at balance and at the complementary aspect of the scene, but also at innocence, thanks to the youth of the characters. The “old Negro woman” shows that black people

are part of the Southern scenery, and the fact that this woman is “old” presumably turns her into a reassuring figure. The apparent perfection and harmony are reminiscent of a romantic vision of the Old South.

Later, Brad pictures in his mind “the river, which would be sliding past like molten copper, copper-colored with the spring burden of clay coming up from Alabama and with the reflection of the red sunset.” (*Flood* 16) The excerpt potentially holds alchemical connotations, as “copper” is mentioned twice, followed by “clay.” Eric John Holmyard explains in *Alchemy*, “alchemy is concerned with attempts to prepare a substance, the philosopher’s stone [...], endowed with the power of transmuting the base metals lead, tin, copper, iron, and mercury into the precious metals gold and silver.” (Holmyard 15) The image of “molten copper” with the metal in a transformed, liquid state, thus bears a double reference to the process of changing copper into metals that are considered more precious. From this, we can infer that the Southern river holds the possibility to transform into a noble material and, by extension, to transform the regions that it crosses. The passage also mentions clay. Clay is an essential part of the alchemical process, as metals such as copper or iron “or other things to be calcinated, must be put into dishes or pans of most strong clay, [...] that they may persist in the asperity of fire.” (Geber qtd in Holmyard 47) It underlines the impression of power that pervades the description. The mention of a Southern state, “Alabama” (*Flood* 16) embeds the alchemical description of nature, charged with transformative power, in the Southern region specifically, so that the South is associated with an ability to transcend itself and its traditions.

Interestingly, another focalizer, Yasha Jones, who is from the North but, as an artist himself, similarly wishes to capture a “vision” (*Flood* 102) of Fiddlersburg, also marvels at the beauty of nature: “He looked at the hills around and saw the white bursts of dogwood, the crimson of the Judas tree. He thought: *The hills are beautiful*. He thought how beautiful the world is.” (*Flood* 33) Dogwood and the Judas tree connote Spring, a season associated with rebirth and fertility. Yasha being from the North, the subjective vision of the beautiful, regenerating Southern nature seems to transcend the characters’ geographical origins. However, to Yasha it is “the world” which is beautiful rather than the South alone, and this is probably not accidental if Yasha’s vision is explicitly not limited to Fiddlersburg, and the South on the whole. In another description of the river under Yasha’s point of view, the river, “sliding northward,” is now looking “cold and gray as steel.” (*Flood* 39) Put in relation to the North, it loses its idyllic quality and, given the mention of “steel,” is even reminiscent of the industrializing process.

This leads me to argue that the luxurious, abundant nature contrasts with industrialization and a generally more modern world. First, the changes having happened in Fiddlersburg bring with them a sense of disorientation for Brad, the protagonist and main focalizer: “After all the years since he’d been there, he might not even be able to find his way through town any more, they might have changed things so much.” (*Flood* 12) Yasha himself, despite his northern identity and background, tries to project himself into the minds of Southerners and to imagine what their experience with change is like: he “wondered what it would be like to have walked down River Street every day of your life, watching the seasons swing over, noting the changes on each face, in time. Feeling your own face change, day by day, in Fiddlersburg.” (*Flood* 94) While Yasha is probably referring to changes due to the passing of time, we can also interpret it as changes happening within individuals confronted with a form of evolution in their society. The massive growth of industrialization in the 1950s causes not only external changes in nature and the town, but submits people to a kind of transformation, just like society itself is transformed. If we go back in time, we find that the fear of change has been rooted in Southerners’ minds at least since the end of the Civil War. Wilson dedicates the fourth chapter of his book *Baptized in Blood* to the critique of the New South by supporters of the old society in the South, based on agriculture and the plantation system. Partisans of the New South, on the contrary, strove for a reconciliation with the North and the importation of Northern economic and liberal values in their region, in order to help the South grow. In the face of this movement which gained prominence in the 1880s, its detractors “warned their brethren of the dangers in abandoning traditional Southern values and failing to meet the high standards of the Confederate past” and opposed “the increase in commercial and industrial economic activity in the South,” condemning the “materialism of the New South” (Wilson 79) movement. Accordingly, the rejection of an industrial society is not new by 1960. However, in *Flood*, the represented changes really come to endanger Southern society in a new way. Not only do they lead to disorientation in a previously familiar setting, they also put the very existence of the town in jeopardy. There are many references to the new dam under construction and to the flooding that is going to erase Fiddlersburg. Industrialization and new constructions are regarded as directly responsible for the actual disappearance of the region. While nature inspires beautiful descriptions tinged with romanticism, industrialization is associated with final destruction in the narrative. Brad’s sister Maggie draws a parallel between Fiddlersburg and the ancient town of Pompeii, imagining people in Fiddlersburg “caught just as they were,” (*Flood* 337) like in Pompeii after the sudden eruption of the Vesuvius volcano. People were caught in their activities and immobilized, and Maggie ponders if something similar is going to happen to her. Thinking of his dead father, Brad wonders “with a cold flash of terror: *My father is there. Will the water come over my father?*”

(*Flood* 19) It draws our attention to the destruction not only of the town but of personal memories and identities, and insisting on its final dimension when he describes it as “a drowning, an eternal drowning, a perpetual suffocation.” (*Flood* 18) The sudden intrusion of direct speech into the narration enables readers to identify with Brad and with his point of view; indeed, it creates a proximity with the character, who is threatened at the core by the arrival of water.

More than others, two characters in *Flood* seem to embody the strong attachment and unconditional commitment to nature: Lank Tolliver, Brad’s father, and the aptly named Frog-Eye. Lank Tolliver is presented by his son as “a true-born muskrat-skinner,” (*Flood* 53) already associating him with nature instead of human society. The slang term “muskrat-skinner” is significant as it supports the idea that Lank Tolliver is animalized by the narrator. However, he is at the same time closely associated to Fiddlersburg when Brad says “he damned near owned” the town (*Flood* 53). Lank is then a kind of in-between figure navigating between human society and natural world, thus creating a link between nature and Fiddlersburg. Lank’s strong passion for nature is further expressed in what Brad and Yasha call his “nostalgie de la boue” (*Flood* 117) or, we could say, his wish and even need to become not only psychologically but physically closer to natural elements. The use of French could be a reference to the South’s pro-European sentiment put forward by the Agrarians; John Crowe Ransom states,

The South is unique on this continent for having founded and defended a culture which was according to European principles of culture; and the European principles had better look to the South if they are to be perpetuated in this country. (Ransom 3)

Although he goes on to express a specific closeness with England, the use of French might be a means to refer to the old continent.

Let us go back to Lank’s “nostalgie de la boue.” (*Flood* 117) Brad explains to Yasha that Lank used to go to the swamp, lie down in the mud and cry, a reality he has had trouble coming to terms with himself, first insisting that “It’s a God-damned lie.” (*Flood* 118) As a matter of fact, Lank seemed to be in a highly vulnerable state, crying with “dirt and mud [...] streaked on his face,” again suggesting the emotional quality associated to nature in the mind of Southerners. Brad describes his father in these terms: “In other words, [he was] outside of society. In other words, no victim of rhetoric, he, no lackey of ideology,” concluding that he was “[f]ree.” (*Flood* 122) So it is

his relationship with nature and his place at the margins of society that made him a free man, free from “rhetoric” our “ideology,” both identified as the products of the human mind. Brad even wonders a few pages later if he himself “had had to come back to Fiddlersburg, as his father had had to go back to the swamp, to lie in the mud and weep,” (*Flood* 128) following his ancestor’s footsteps. So, to a certain extent, Brad seems to identify with his father’s animal status, or at least his closeness to the natural world opposed to the civilized one.

Another element puts Lank in complete opposition to the North, in part two of the book: he “would have seen [Brad] dead on the floor and cold as a pile of drawn chicken guts before he would have let him go off to Nashville to prep school, and then up North to Darthurst.” (*Flood* 175) His violent, rigorous refusal epitomizes the extreme antagonism between South and North. Lank’s friend Frog-Eye partakes of this antagonism. His nickname suggests he belongs less to the human, civilized world than to the animal one. After Maggie has painted his portrait, Brad makes a description of the painting that is intertwined with words associated with nature: Frog-Eye’s skin is “the color of red clay”, his head is “the head of a frog.” (*Flood* 311) Brad is especially fascinated by the “eye glaring out, that eye the center of a world of green leaf and shadow and mottled gleam on black water, all the items that, one by one, seemed to rise from and then lose identity in the unmoving swirl around that angry center of animal omniscience, the eye.” (*Flood* 312) The “eye” is used anaphorically, giving a particular rhythm to the passage and constantly underlined by the repetition. It is also closely associated with the “world of green leaf and shadow and mottled gleam on black water,” as it is placed at the “center” of it. The assonance present in “green,” “leaf” and “gleam” creates an impression of harmony, while the repetition of the liquid consonant “l” adds a soft, gliding effect that could evoke the flow of the “black water.” So, the natural environment is endowed with balance and harmony, and Frog-Eye’s “eye” finds itself at the center of this world made of leaves, shadow and water, and of what the narrator describes as “animal omniscience.” The choice of the oxymoron “unmoving swirl” is interesting here, pointing at movement, but above all movement within stillness, encompassing the dichotomy between a fast-changing North and a more traditional South, wishing for society to stay the same. Brad also reads “animal omniscience” in Frog-Eye’s gaze, as though he really were an animal belonging to the woods and not a human being. Brad believes him to be “the only free man left” (*Flood* 115) just as Lank was described as a free man. I will add that Frog-Eye’s peculiar accent and attitude tend to make us think of him as uneducated in the human sense of the word, but it is easy to imagine he has an extensive knowledge of the nature in which he lives. Significantly, Brad notes that it is thanks to Frog-Eye if he “entered the dark wood of manhood.” (*Flood* 115) While the expression refers to Brad’s first carnal

experience, we can also read it more symbolically as a coming of age, from childhood to adulthood. Frog-Eye then appears to possess some secret knowledge in relation to nature, a secret knowledge he has passed on to Brad and that has enabled him to reach manhood; and the state of manhood is described as a “dark wood,” returning yet again to a vision of life as being deeply rooted in nature, far from the industrialized society.

While Lank Tolliver and Frog-Eye are crucial in our understanding of the story, and the way Southern identity is staged through two characters who seem meant to epitomize a relation to nature that is immune to the passing of (historical) time, another character, more discreet, is worthy of interest in the contrast he installs between them and himself. Digby is an engineer on the dam, and his view of the dam is quite positive: “The dam was going to be a whopper, he said, and God knows they needed something here. [...] And the towns, they ought to been drowned out long back.” (*Flood* 112-13) To him, then, the flooding is necessary. He goes on to say that the lands about to be flooded are not “good land” and concludes: “It was going to be a big industrial complex, he said. He liked the phrase, industrial complex. / He had said it again.” (*Flood* 113) Digby's wish for industrialization, at the expense of preexisting land and towns, is already apparent in his use of the phrase, which he makes sure to repeat. Under the influence of Digby's words, Brad and Yasha then “look back and see the enormous mounds of earth and stone, and the great white structure, the scaffoldings, the cranes, small in distance, swinging against the sky, the tiny trucks in unbroken procession moving on the ramps of earth and rubble.” (*Flood* 113) Contrary to the last quote, we are here confronted with more human-made devices and machines than natural elements, suggesting technological progress takes over the virgin landscape aforementioned. The accumulation of elements, “the great white structure, the scaffoldings, the cranes,” creates a staggering, smothering effect. Digby's presence and defense of industrialization lead Brad to notice the tokens of change in those landscapes; the description is not about natural elements anymore but filled with devices and machines that are purely human-made. This scenery could be seen as the embodiment of the New South creed, according to which the importation of Northern economic values in the Southern region is represented as being necessary for its survival. But, in the eyes of the narrator and of Brad as a focalizer, the vision is an ambivalent one, as the elements are pictured in a rather negative light.

b. Idealization of Virgin Nature in *A Cry of Absence*

As we have seen, in *Flood* Warren relies on the construction of his characters to convey an attachment to nature and stage it as in opposition to the process of industrialization. The choice of a main focalizer such as Brad, a Southern artist who goes back to the South after having lived in the North, is of course not accidental. It is also probably not a coincidence if his father was subject to

what is later called “nostalgie de la boue.” Indeed, Brad and his father are set in opposition; despite Brad’s fascination for Lank Tolliver, both characters are part of a system of symbolic contrast. Other characters’ point of views or discourses help highlight the ideological conflict between agrarianism and industrialization; indeed, Frog-Eye on the one hand and Digby on the other enable the reader to identify the acute differences in terms of how they are presented, and what they stand for. However, the kind of attachment to nature constructed in *Flood* often remains implicit; characters do not formulate clear judgments and it is rather in the way those elements are constructed that we, as readers, can infer their thoughts and the author’s aim.

Madison Jones’ approach in *A Cry of Absence* (1971) is perhaps more explicitly valuing nature through his narrator's use of the main focalizer. One of these focalizers enables the reader to have access to her vision of Southern nature, and more commonly the old society in the South, as an immortal and immutable society, and thus set in contrast to the changes under way in the 1950. This is mainly due to the choice of Hester’s point of view.

Here again, the study of focalization is essential in order to understand how nature is represented in the novel. In terms of focalization, the novel has a dual structure. Approximately half of the chapters are told from Hester’s point of view. Alternating between two focalizers allows the narrator to present two opposing views on the South; the focalizers are also given almost the same weight and importance, thus allowing readers to establish their own interpretation. For now, let us know analyze Hester’s point of view and the immortal, eternal dimension she confers to nature and to her vision of the South. The year is 1957, and from the first page on Hester identifies with her fellow white Southerners when she speaks in defense of segregation: “that’s the way we do here.” (*A Cry of Absence* 3) Hester employs the present tense as a way to uphold her traditions and way of life; to her, they do not belong to the past. The deictic, present through the use of the pronoun “we” and the adverb of place “here,” contextualizes her declaration; she reaffirms her belonging to a specific group, namely white Southerners, and to a specific place in the world, the South. The town she lives in is even named Cameron Springs; Hester’s maiden name is Cameron and she named her younger son Cameron to honor her family. Hester – and Cam, short for Cameron – are then perfectly at home in this town, founded by one of Hester’s ancestors. This also leads to a symbolic confusion between the place, Cameron Springs, and the Cameron family, so that all these elements are almost indistinguishable from one another. It adds a lot of weight to Hester’s thinking, actions and words, as she seems to be speaking on behalf of the whole population – or, at least, the white population in town. As in *Flood*, we find many descriptions of a luxuriant and beautiful nature: “She saw a wide street running between rows of old, quiet houses [...] screened in part by dense

maple or magnolia trees and swollen, black-green shrubbery that was boxwood or lush camelia.” (*A Cry of Absence* 8) The textual abundance created by the enumeration of elements, mirrors the abundance of nature that is described here. Nature is further depicted as fertile and fruitful thanks to the use of the adjectives “swollen” and “lush.” The mention of magnolia is also worthy of attention. *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 8* edited by Charles Reagan Wilson and Martin Melosi tells us,

The magnolia is one of the prime symbols of the romanticized South of the plantation. The phrase ‘moonlight and magnolias’ describes one of the South’s central myths – the story of the charmed and graceful society of the Old South. It is an image that appears frequently in literature and in visual portrayals of the region (Melosi & Wilson 236).

Later in the novel, magnolia is mentioned again when Ames waits for his mother “in deep magnolia shade;” (*A Cry of Absence* 103) the plant takes on a protective role when “rows of venerable houses” are “set back behind intermittent screens of maple and magnolia foliage.” (*A Cry of Absence* 77) The simple evocation of this plant in the novel refers to the mythology of the ideal plantation society put forward by defenders of the Southern way of life. It also emphasizes the idealization of nature that is at the heart of the process of mythologization of the Old South, and we can expect Hester’s vision to be similarly laden with romanticism. The specificity of Southern nature is further emphasized with the mention of “camelias and sasanquas” (*A Cry of Absence* 15) in her back garden. Later she looks at a painting depicting “a river tinted by rays of the evening sun and, on the other side, a rolling meadow that drew the eye into a hazy, limitless distance” (*A Cry of Absence* 42) and it triggers memories of her grandparents’ house at Fountain Inn and its “fields [...] rolling down to the river;” (*A Cry of Absence* 43) looking very much like the painting. Idyllic nature and scenery are present throughout the novel and are indicative of Hester’s stereotypical thinking on nature and on its importance. In *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope*, Eric FreyFogle underlines that “[o]ne way to judge a people is to look at the ways they use nature – the land, broadly defined to include its soils, rocks, waters, plants, animals [...]. A culture writes its name on land for all to see.” (FreyFogle 2) Each plant, garden, field or landscape we are given to see through Hester’s eyes would then be signatures, a means for Hester to affirm her identity as a Southerner. Perhaps one of the most interesting features is the presence of

cotton fields, which are in turn reminiscent of the old plantation system largely based on the cultivation of cotton by black slaves. Significantly, however, we do not find any mention of slavery in these idealized scenes. In *Civil Rights in the White Literary Imagination: Innocence by Association*, Jonathan Gray explains “the sentimentalized fictions of the Lost Cause” made sure they “marginalized the existence of slavery as the reason for the Civil War;” (Gray 5) it can account for the fact that, in later romanticized conceptions of an ideal past Southern society, slavery has no place either. Descriptions are centered solely on the beauty and fertility of natural elements: “There were spreads of ripe cotton bursting in a froth, green of new-sprung rye and barley and [...] the shoulder of white limestone bluff in the river bend. Viewed through the haze of October light, it seemed to come upon her like a dream.” (*A Cry of Absence* 153) Hester comparing this vision with a dream brings us back to the idealization that is pervasive in such a conception of nature; those are of course stereotypical, embellished, romanticized visions.

This state of mind causes Hester to go back in time and imagine what life was like in the plantation system: “She seemed to hear Negro voices, low and thick and mellow, like the human undertone in all this outreaching quietness. Already it was picking time. Far out in the field, so far that her vision blurred, she seemed to see their straw bonnets faintly dip and rise, barely in motion, like yellow ships on a sea of cotton foam. But her lids were shut now. She saw with other eyes.” (*A Cry of Absence* 154) There is a striking resemblance between this passage and the one in *Flood* when Brad similarly imagines black – and white - characters filling the scenery in his mind. *A Cry of Absence* goes further in the representation of an Old South that, somehow, is enclosed in the 1950s, when Hester decides to give away Cam’s clothes to black people still living in cabins near a cotton field. We cannot help but think of the Old South plantations, where the rich white family lived in the house and black slaves were confined to wooden cabins near the fields they were working in; it is like a re-enactment of old ways, in the midst of the 1950s.

The Old South is then very much kept alive in Hester’s thoughts. This is corroborated by details such as the “wreath of evergreen” (*A Cry of Absence* 203) placed on Hester’s door after Cam has died. At this point in the novel, his mother has discovered he was responsible for the stoning of Otis Stephens, a black boy, and this leads him to commit suicide when this murder fails to win her approval. As a plant that has leaves all year round, an evergreen connotes immortality, and perhaps it is used here to bring back to life who or what is dead, be it for example Cam or the Old South. As a matter of fact, Hester as a child was convinced that “the Lord had laid it out with His own hand – the patterned garden beside the house, the orchard behind, a fence here, and there a swooping

meadow half shady with water oaks.” (*A Cry of Absence* 89) Not only is there immortality in nature, but in the character's eyes it is part of a divine order also.

Hester is also very attached to her garden. Pastoralism and agrarianism here are definitely possible inspirations, underlying the fact that the garden has a central importance in Hester’s mind and in her sense of her own identity. The garden, but also her old house, can be read as allegories and metonymies for the Old South. She takes pride in her house and the fact that it “looked oldest of all,” (*A Cry of Absence* 8) and “it comforted her to see things in their places” inside her house (*A Cry of Absence* 9), referring to furniture and objects, many of them once belonged to her ancestors. But it can be read in a more figurative way and mean she prefers society not to change and upholds traditional values. Hester takes pride in her house, but also in her garden. It is first protective of her house and her world when a “dense laurel bush” obscuring the room she is in “made her think of a hiding place in deep-green, summer shade.” (*A Cry of Absence* 66-7) Hester is safely enclosed in her world. At this point in the analysis, Christopher L. Salter and William J. Lloyd’s article “Landscape in Literature”, published in *Resource Papers for College Geography*, offers valuable insight on the significance of such a relationship between the character and her direct surroundings:

Personal space [...] forms its own landscape, while telling the reader a great deal about the individual and his or her family. Although there are many elements that make up the outlines of such personal space, our focus is upon the signatures written by house types and gardens, direct links between man and the earth. We choose these two elements of landscape design from a large number of possible alternatives. If one were to be entirely arbitrary, a case could be made for virtually any visible personal expression to serve as a signature. Hair style, manner of dress, choice of car, even spirit of salutation, all communicate some essence of personality to the interested viewer. House types and gardens, however, exist as particularly useful examples because of their force in the manipulation of space. The imprint of the designer or maintainer is so clearly evident that these examples of personal space seem to be most illustrative of the ways landscape can speak directly to us through literature. (Lloyd & Salter 22)

Their point is that gardens and houses can be indicative of their owner's identity and beliefs. They also emphasize the fact that houses create "direct links between man and the earth", which is noticeably in tune with the Twelve Agrarians' thinking on the central importance of nature in their vision of an ideal society. It is no accident if Hester's house is one of the oldest houses, filled with furniture that belonged to her ancestors, or if her garden is rich, protective, luxuriant. Through them, the reader has access to her support of a traditional Southern society and her place as an important member of such a world. During the course of the novel, the garden goes through three different seasons: late summer, fall and finally winter. Subsequently, I read it as a symbol for the disappearance of the Old South and, by extension, of Hester herself, maybe foreshadowing her death by suicide at the end of the story. First nature is abundant and luxuriant; then we observe "bronze and tawny trees, and in the night it began to rain. Off and on next day and through the succeeding days and nights, the rain continued until [...] the green lawns stood in puddles and the boughs of trees hung loaded and dripping under a lowering sky." (*A Cry of Absence* 179) The change of mood is drastic and the scenery becomes slightly menacing. By the end the garden is frozen in the middle of winter. There may be a tragic dimension in this journey from fertility to death; as a cycle that never ends and always comes back, the return of winter is predictable. A certain death for the garden was therefore expected; and since there is such a close interdependence between Hester and her garden, we could imagine that the garden's journey foreshadowed Hester's own extinction, hence the possible tragic dimension in a literary sense and the existence of a fate for Hester that is inescapable. In *Tragedy: Contradiction and Repression*, Richard Kuhns highlight this inescapable quality of tragedy which fits Hester's journey rather well: "the truth tragedy tells us is that we cannot protect ourselves, neither through the wisdom of self-control nor through the magic of wish. There is no defense against the self in its fate." (Kuhns 7)

2. Traditional Values and Opposition to Novelty

As I have just argued, nature holds a prominent place in some of the characters' vision of Southern society and identity. Generally, these characters' connection to the natural environment is set in contradiction to industrialization, and even endangered by it; agrarianism and belief in progress through industrialization are two opposite and irreconcilable ideologies, that cannot coexist, and it is evident that these characters, consciously or in a more unconscious way, value agrarianism over industrialization and the inclusion of industrialist values in their region. But nature is not the only element that is contrasting with industrialization: some characters in *Flood* and *A*

Cry of Absence also uphold traditional values and a certain opposition to novelty, and especially of what novelty is seen as responsible for.

a. Exterior Influences Degrading the Traditional Southern Society in *A Cry of Absence*

Hester identifies four traits of character that she considers typically southern. They are “goodness and honor and respect. And loyalty.” (*A Cry of Absence* 191) She stresses that she tried to make them central in her sons’ education. These values are directly linked to the past and the education Hester received herself. At this point in the novel, Hester and Cam are having a conversation about the murder he committed, and Hester refuses to acknowledge the education she gave him could have led to the criminal act. However, Cam remarks that “I never have been disloyal. [...] And I’ve got respect, too. Most boys don’t respect their grandfathers, and all the old things, like I do. Like you taught me.” (*A Cry of Absence* 191) Although their vision of honor or respect might differ, both Cam and Hester seem to give much importance to these values, that are also underlined in *Baptized in Blood* in relation to the sentimentalization of the Confederacy. Indeed, in order to give legitimacy to the war, some ministers strove to turning famous figures of the Confederacy into Christian figures following God’s plan; and this representation of “a romantic Christianity” (Wilson 48) turned the traditional Southern society into an ideal, a model in the minds of its supporters. According to them, the South was pure because “the shedding of blood cleansed all of Southern society, as well as its individual soldiers.” (Wilson 44) This belief in the superiority of the South is mirrored by Hester’s conception of it and the values she places at its core, as a precious heritage from the past. In fact, honor is so important to her that she ultimately decides to kill Cam in order to restore her own conception of the family honor. Cam is an essentially ambivalent character, at once “the image of what a young man ought to look like,” (*A Cry of Absence* 10) the perfect Southern gentleman, and a murderer. Unable to cope with this ambiguity, Hester chooses to observe the following philosophy: “what could a person do except cleanse his house and shut his door against the stink of dissolution.” (*A Cry of Absence* 15) Just like some Southerners thought they were “cleansed” in blood during the Civil War, Hester metaphorically cleanses her house by ridding it of Cam’s presence – although she ultimately spares his life and leaves him to commit suicide instead. She also literally shuts her door to Ames and his progressive ideas; when Ames maintains he is going to prove his brother’s guilt, she asks him repeatedly to leave and finally “advanced straight toward him [...]. He could not but step back across the threshold. The door slammed shut in his face.” (*A Cry of Absence* 168) Family, indeed, but more precisely the need to keep the family honor safe, is a key element in Southern identity and culture,

as is again visible in Hester's parents' hesitance in her choice of a husband, Thomas Glenn. Their "reservations about the Glenns [...] were grounded largely on the feeling that the Glenns were of a kind deficient in full appropriate moral earnestness. As for the Glenns' feelings, Hester was uncertain whether [...] they were not smiling at the abundance of this quality in her parents." (*A Cry of Absence* 93) Hester later agrees with her parents' conclusion, witnessing Thomas's "manners and even his sense of responsibility decay" (*A Cry of Absence* 95) and judging that "his departure had been like a purging of her house." (*A Cry of Absence* 96) Again, what seems undoubtedly crucial to Hester, above all else, is the preservation of her family honor and status in society.

Generally Hester seems to equate change with degradation, and a degradation that endangers the seeming perfection and purity of her world. An obvious example is Hollis Handley's house, whose plan is "exactly that of her own house" (*A Cry of Absence* 47) but in a much worse condition: "There was as much lath as plaster showing on the walls and ceiling, and some new-fallen fragments of the plaster lay scattered about. In the scarred floor there were broken places, with rude boards nailed over them," (*A Cry of Absence* 47) and so on. Handley even mispronounces "Civil War" and turns it into "Silver War," (*A Cry of Absence* 49) somehow removing the meaning from the phrase. To Hester, Handley represents degradation not only because of his home, but also because he insists on the reconciliation of rich Southerners and poor ones. "You and me, Miss Hester, we're the same kind of thing. You come from rich folks and I come from poor ones, but that ain't no real difference," (*A Cry of Absence* 241) he says. But Hester sees Handley as an intruder in her personal space, metaphorically as well as literally when he visits her in her house, and refuses to acknowledge him as an equal. Likewise, Cam's actions are read by Hester as a degradation, a deformation of the education she gave him, just as Ames' ideas and problems with alcohol fill her with disapproval. Ames remarks for example that she is "disapproving [...] of his idleness." (*A Cry of Absence* 16) Hester later tries to rationalize his alcoholism as stemming from

a certain absence in him of a faith that ought naturally to have been there – faith in his family, in himself. He seemed, like so many others now, not to know what he ought to believe in. It showed up everywhere, in him and the others too, exactly as if they had been born minus some organ that had used to be part of the human anatomy. (*A Cry of Absence* 39)

Departing from family and traditional values, losing faith in the superiority of Southern tradition is then considered by Hester as a flaw, and almost a mental, as well as physical, deformity. Briefly wondering if she was not too severe in her sons' education, she seems rather to resent "permissiveness in parents, leaving their children to grow up at the mercy of every mean and impure instinct. In her own training there had been none of this softness." (*A Cry of Absence* 9) The old Southern society is then seen as endangered by new values and new ways to educate young people. Changes in religion are also seen as a problem and participating in the general and moral decay of society: the "new young preacher" does nothing except "sanction [...] the same, loose attitude that she had heard" from Mrs Delmore and her friends (*A Cry of Absence* 9).

Speaking of the Delmore family, a new stream of Northern influence is also made clear through them. The Delmores are from the North and aim at changing society by participating in the civil rights movement. A symbolic antinomy between Hester and Mrs Delmore is present in the first pages, when Mrs Delmore declares that "You will just have to change the way you do" and calling Southern ways "provincial." (*A Cry of Absence* 3) Mrs Delmore is further depicted as offensive towards Southern society and its symbols when she calls the Confederate statue in Cameron Springs "that poky little cement savior," (*A Cry of Absence* 7) belittling it. It leads Hester to think that if she "took offense at their judgments, it could only mean that the standard she held was faulty and outdated." (*A Cry of Absence* 4) She clearly wants to defend her standards, as she calls them, and continues to uphold them as relevant to the period.

In fact, Hester's efforts to retain a specific culture and identity can be put in relation to what Wilson, in *Baptized in Blood*, calls the "regional southern religion." (Wilson x) His point is that there exists in the United States an "American civil religion - a set of ideological beliefs, ritualistic practices, and organizational structures that seek transcendent meaning in the nation," (Wilson x) linked to the Revolution, the creation of a Constitution and, on the whole, to the birth of a nation. What he calls a civil religion, then, would be a celebration of one's culture through the use of rituals, symbols - such as the flag, memorials - and so on, which may evoke practices and rituals otherwise proper to religion. Wilson goes further and observes there probably exists another form of civil religion, specific to the Southern region, and distinct from the national one. Wilson demonstrates how "white southerners made a religion out of their history," pointing out that "the Civil War's legacy of defeat and loss had become the structuring feature of a distinctive southern mind." (Wilson x) Interestingly, "the dream of a separate southern identity did not die in 1865," but the "cultural dream replaced the political one: the South's kingdom was to be of culture, not of politics." (Wilson 1) Throughout the years following the end of the war, and well into the 1900s,

ministers in particular helped shape this sense of a distinct identity and supported the idea that “despite defeat, the South had not been wrong in the war,” (Wilson 22) which probably was essential in the creation of rituals to honor the regional religion. Hymns were written in defense and mourning of the Confederacy, memorials were erected, Confederate flags were displayed during special gatherings, myths were created about Confederate heroes such as Robert E. Lee and Confederate president Jefferson Davis. The Lost Cause then began mingling with Christian themes and imagery:

According to the mythmakers, a pantheon of Southern heroes, portrayed as the highest products of the Old South civilization, had emerged during the Civil War to battle the forces of evil, as symbolized by the Yankee. The myth enacted the Christian story of Christ’s suffering and death, with the Confederacy at the sacred center. (Wilson 24)

Southerners were then closely associating their history with Christianity and righteousness, in contrast to the North that represented “evil.” Hester’s attitude towards her own culture takes on a broader meaning if we consider she is upholding her “regional southern religion” against a growing Northern influence. Although it may seem a little anachronistic, since such myth-making gained momentum especially between 1890 and 1910 (Wilson 18), we should not forget that the character of Hester frequently remembers her grandparents’ house, Fountain Inn, and that she likely received such an education there. In fact it is clearly mentioned:

Her grandmother [...] told about Hester’s father when he was a little boy. About other things, too, old things, in a time that she said was different from this. There had been the War, she said. Before it, there had been a life they would never see again. But Hester doubted. She knew that it had been a real war. Over the mantel hung the shining cavalry sword that her grandfather had used in it. But *how* had the war been lost, for where was the difference it had made? The life of which her grandmother spoke seemed faraway only in time, and that sword looked as bright and flawless as any victor’s sword. And the tales of glory she had heard, of Lee and Forrest and Jackson? (*A Cry of Absence* 90)

Her grandparents evidently told her tales about the war and about the Old South they once knew. We see how the past is crucial to her; not only that, but it is kept alive and very much relevant in her mind. The passage gives us the impression that Hester did know the Old South society during the summers she spent at Fountain Inn; as a child, she did not seem to make the difference between her present and the past her ancestors told her about. As a result, Hester is depicted as character belonging to the past, not the present, from the very beginning. What she tries to preserve as an adult is the standards of the Old South as her ancestors presented it to her, motivated by a strong belief in her own specificity. It also enables the reader to see how she intended to give the same kind of education to her own children, and how the results of such an education are not what she expected – one son turning out to be a murderer, the other being friends with progressive Northerners. The narrator’s perspective on Hester seems ambiguous, as we can hardly decide whether she is characterized as a stereotypical white Southerner upholding conservative views, or if the narration retains some ambivalence and sympathy towards her and her views. If we choose the second option, we can then stress the contrast between the way Hester is characterized and the representation of Mrs Delmore as a rather unlikable character from the beginning, associated with pejorative adjectives such as “offensive,” (*A Cry of Absence* 3) “contemptuous” (*A Cry of Absence* 73) or “gross.” (*A Cry of Absence* 74)

b. Modern Times As an “age of depersonalization” in *Flood* (180)

In *A Cry of Absence*, Madison Jones's narrator emphasizes elements that are presented as typically and recognizably southern: values such as loyalty or honor, a strong sense of community, the importance of a strict religious education and presence in the community. All this is presented through Hester’s point of view. Because of her education, Hester is a fierce defender of old standards and of the Old South, putting it in contrast to everything Northern. What the character believes in is presented as endangered or degraded by outside influence from the rest of the country; Such influence is visible in the presence of the Delmore family and also in Hester’s sons’ attitude: Cam is a murderer and Ames does not share her beliefs about the South or race relations.

In *Flood* now, my goal is to underline that Warren likewise stresses an opposition to change and novelty, but an opposition that is perhaps not constructed through direct opposition in the novel of groups of population - Southerners and Northerners, mother and sons, rich and poor for example, as it was the case in *A Cry of Absence*.

One of the hints at the fact that novelty is detrimental to the South as a whole lies in the characters' sense of a loss of identity. This loss is expressed in several ways. The story probably takes place in 1960 - more precisely, twenty-five years after the publication of Brad's first book, in 1935. Then, the actions of *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* take place at roughly the same period, a period Yasha Jones describes as an "age of depersonalization." (*Flood* 180) Yasha is a Northerner, and his comment may be intended to be about the North as well as the South, since he never specifies it. But I believe the comment is relevant in the analysis of how Southern characters around him struggle to find their place and identity in an era of changes and transformation, but also of annihilation as far as Fiddlersburg is concerned. Fairly early on in the novel, Brad meditates on the "pathos of the lost man, the common man, clinging to some dignity in the midst of personal ignominy, loss of identity and general social wreckage." (*Flood* 6) This remark was triggered by his encounter with the black employee in the Seven Dwarfs Motel, a new motel built outside of town in the style of fairy tales. Brad nicknames the man Jingle Bells because of his clothes: "brown jerkin serrated at the bottom, with little bells at the points, and tights with the right leg red and the left yellow." (*Flood* 5) Brad then reflects on the "unconscious courage" (*Flood* 6) of the man and seems to identify with him in what he sees as a struggle to retain one's identity despite the unfavorable times. Jingle Bell's improbable outfit can be interpreted as a symbol for the period, the "age of depersonalization" described by Yasha. Such an outfit might be an attempt at finding one's identity through the use and combination of different styles, colors, materials, the result being a whole made of mismatched pieces sown together. However, in Brad's eyes the attempt takes courage, dignity and integrity. This is connected to the rest of Yasha's discourse about the "age of depersonalization." He adds, "That's why people try to grab something, doctrine or hope. Anything to hold on to." (*Flood* 180) What seems crucial is to find something to hold on to, to find one's bearings in the midst of change. Indeed, Brad seems to be looking for himself and this leads him to review aspects of his childhood in the South. Symbolically, he acknowledges that "I'm mixed. Confederate as hell on my mother's side – the Cottshill side. [...] But I bet it was Blue-Belly all the way with the Tollivers." (*Flood* 121) "Blue-Belly" refers to the blue color of the Union soldier's uniforms during the Civil War, thus recalling Union soldiers and their supporters. So Brad is cast as an ambiguous figure. But, interestingly, he immediately refutes what he said: "No, [...] my old man, like his grandpa before him, would not have been a Blue-Belly. No more than he would have been a Confed. He would have been like Frog-Eye." (*Flood* 121) It appears to be in accordance with the way Lank Tolliver was associated with nature, an outcast figure at the margins of society, like Frog-Eye. However, placing Lank outside of the duality between North and South, as Brad does, also means that Lank remains undefined, maybe with no clear identity of his own; and we can

reasonably think this lack of a clear definition has been literally or symbolically inherited by his son. When Brad asks Leontine Purtle, a blind inhabitant of Fiddlersburg, what it is like to be blind, she gives him a curious answer: “She had said: *Being you’s like being blind.*” (*Flood* 233) If we interpret that she was speaking about Brad specifically, we can conjecture that his lack of a strong sense of his identity makes him metaphorically blind to himself. This incompleteness seems to follow him wherever he goes; in New York “[h]e told himself that, somehow, he was outside of his own experience,” (*Flood* 143) and he manifestly continues to experience this kind of dissociation from himself in Fiddlersburg. This accounts for the fact that he seems to be engaged in a quest for himself, reviewing childhood memories and roaming Fiddlersburg. We can go a step further: just as, in *A Cry of Absence*, Ames was described by his mother as someone lacking an organ from birth, Brad “felt like a man bleeding to death from some inner wound.” (*Flood* 69) It seems to affect characters not only psychologically but also physically, when it is described as a lack of some body parts or a wound that provokes a hemorrhage, putting survival itself in jeopardy.

This quest for an identity and lack of a clear definition of such an identity for the characters is also reflected on the construction and the structure of the novel itself. Compared to *A Cry of Absence* which has two internal focalizers only, *Flood* gives voice to numerous characters, among them prominently Brad and Yasha Jones, but also Brad’s sister Maggie, Jingle Bells, or Brad’s girlfriend Lettice. All of these characters are internal focalizers at one point or another, even if it can be very brief. This proliferation of internal focalizers tends to support the idea of a fragmented consciousness, an identity that is not whole anymore, but looking for itself and to fix itself any way it can. Where *A Cry of Absence* was dual, staging two conflicting visions of the South, *Flood* is multiple, and it is thus more difficult to detect a clear or monologic rendition of the dominant ideology of the text itself. Just as Jingle Bell’s clothes are made of different colors and materials, the novel is made of different inner voices that are not necessarily in tune with one another. Yet the discrepancies themselves help create a sense of loss and confusion in the reader too. Among the voices we hear, Maggie’s voice stands out because of the form it takes in the novel. While the other focalizers appear to be following the rules of classic narration, she speaks in a monologue that randomly – or so it seems – interrupts the narrative, so that her voice is heard directly, and not through a narrator. We do not know in what circumstances or to whom she speaks, so that she appears to be talking directly to the reader. The erratic display of her monologue consolidates the sense of loss and imprecision at the heart of the novel. She even openly shares Brad’s concerns about her own identity and that of her fellow Southerners: “you don’t know any center of *you* anymore, you don’t feel *you* anymore, and you are sick because everything is sliding out of focus,

out of equilibrium.” (*Flood* 324-5) She draws our attention to the physical consequences of this state, resembling a state of dizziness, and concludes, “how can you live if there is no *you* to do the living?”. In this way, she highlights the difficulty of living without a clear sense of one’s identity.

Contrary to *A Cry of Absence*, the depersonalization that is pervasive in *Flood* is not explicitly presented as a result of change and novelty. However, I believe it is possible to read it this way; implicitly at least, what is new or coming from the North is often presented in a negative light. Let us go back to Digby, the engineer, and see how his presence redirects the gaze of the other characters to threatening-looking structures linked to the construction of the dam that is about to erase Fiddlersburg. We also note the presence of a monument commemorating the Civil War, which Brad deems “the spiritual center of Fiddlersburg,” adding that its maker “is all that makes Fiddlersburg Southern. He is all that gives us the dignity of our defects. He is all that makes paranoid violence into philosophic virtue.” (*Flood* 256) Here, he underlines the transcending power of the construction and what it stands for, enabling Southerners to cope with defeat and still to uphold their identity. Brad even turns the Civil War monuments in the North into negative doubles of the memorial in Fiddlersburg, saying that “all over Yankeeland you’ll find those wasp-waisted statues. [...] But those monuments up there in Yankeeland – they don’t stand for anything. Up there, a monument is merely an expensive roost for pigeons and a latrine for tired sparrows. Down here, the monument stands for something.” (*Flood* 256) Far from being transcending, those monuments are reduced to prosaic functions and openly compared to “latrines.” Here the negative connotations in relation to the North are conspicuous. In fact, a contrast between what is Northern and what is Southern is built all throughout the novel, and especially thanks to the depiction of two symbolic places: namely Fiddlersburg and the Happy Dell motel. The motel is a recent construction that is representative of novelty and of the changes transforming Southern society. It is made “in the style of fairy-tale illustration, plaster and cranky timbers”, surrounded by “non-indigenous and non-thriving conifers.” (*Flood* 5) The mention of the conifers indicates that what is not from the South cannot thrive in the South, while the adjective “cranky” used in the description of the building has an obvious negative connotation. Some advertising boards present characters that are reminiscent of fairy tales, a Prince Charming in pajamas and a young woman waiting to be kissed by him, while another one states that “[f]irst in the South” are “electric massage mattress[es].” (*Flood* 5)

It all puts the emphasis on technological progress, but also on a growing sense of falseness. Indeed, such a place seems to belong to a degraded version of a fairy tale rather than to reality. As a matter of fact, not only is the motel enclosed in an unreal and false atmosphere, but falseness colonizes nature, so that we encounter a “cement frog,” water lilies in a real stream but made of

cement, a cement “gnome, dwarf, brownie or some such improbability” (*Flood* 4) fishing with a real line. Natural elements and human-made ones are intertwined, so that the onlooker cannot be sure of anything. Indeed, the line and the stream only “looked real” (*Flood* 4) but no certainty is expressed. What is certain is that nature loses ground and is surrounded by human constructions. For example, we read: “The creek was there, but it flowed decorously between two banks where stones were mortised into the earth.” (*Flood* 4) The description operates a reversal; nature is now a decoration and not the other way around. In clear contrast to this conception of nature, we find Fiddlersburg. Yasha describes it as “[a]rchetypally human, archetypally simple, and therefore precious,” (*Flood* 261-2) contrasting the town’s simplicity with the motel’s intricacies. Paradoxically, simplicity seems here to be very valuable in Yasha’s eyes, and more valuable than complexity. Earlier on the accent is put on Fiddlersburg’s “wealth of Southern tradition, unassuming charm, homely virtue” (*Flood* 38) while the motel is “glimmering like a dream” a few lines later. Lettice also asserts the simplicity linked to the town when she awakens to “the simplicity of sunlight.” (*Flood* 208) A few pages later, Maggie stands naked under the sun: “I lay there shivering in my nakedness while the sun burned down on me all over and seemed to outline my body down to the smallest detail.” (*Flood* 216) If we read Maggie as a symbol for the South, standing naked and letting the sun reveal all of her body can imply that the South has no secret to hide and nothing to be ashamed of. Brad also imagines himself at the mercy of nature as though he, as a Southerner himself, had nothing to hide either: “He had, fleetingly, the image of himself, far off, yonder on the flat earth, crouched naked and alone, under the unending grayness of rain.” (*Flood* 323) Nakedness, of course can denote simplicity, and being naked enables the subject to be in direct contact with nature, be it rain or sun. So the motel and Fiddlersburg seem to be diametrically opposed; while Fiddlersburg is depicted as a place upholding Southern values and putting an emphasis on untouched nature, the motel seems to be proof for the wish to change nature in order to adapt it to human needs, wishes, or visions. The motel uses the natural world to its own ends, it invades it, while Fiddlersburg seems to encourage direct contact with it. It is probably not accidental if the novel opens with a trip to Happy Dell and ends with a religious congregation gathered in Fiddlersburg: it could be a way of giving precedence to an agrarian vision of society in the text.

Part Two: A Pessimistic Vision of Progress

Part one focused on the specific vision of the Southern region in each novel, accentuating the value of nature and of tradition. It is now time to analyze more specifically how a negative vision of technological and industrial progress seems to be presented in the novels, through various narrative and literary choices. While part one already introduced the topic by analyzing how nature was opposed to industrialization and how traditional values and novelty were in contrast to each other, part two will differ inasmuch as it will focus on technological progress and the negative vision of it. I will first be interested in the negative vision of progress in *Flood* and in *A Cry of Absence*, and then focus on a possible result of change, that is to say the death of the Old South as idealized and mythified by some. Let us cite the agrarian movement whose supporters, in the 1930s, upheld a society based on the cultivation of the land as opposed to a world that was becoming more and more industrialized and modern. As Leo Marx writes in *The Machine in the Garden*, in his study of characters in a pastoral conception of the country, characters seem to have a “yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence ‘closer to nature.’” (Marx 6) It is the case of Brad in *Flood* and Hester in *A Cry of Absence*. One is in quest for his own identity in his hometown, the other desperately tries to preserve her ideal world which is slowly waning away as modernity takes its place. As a result, there is evidence of a vision of “progress” that is rather pessimistic. In order to clarify my point, I will separate the analysis of *Flood* and that of *A Cry of Absence*. I will first focus on this vision in *Flood*, before switching to *A Cry of Absence* in the second sub-section; the third and last sub-section will address a possible result of progress, which is the death of the Old Southern society.

1) Northern Industrial Power Versus Southern “fortunate fall” (Lovejoy 162) in *Flood*

The most striking and obvious aspect of a pessimistic description of progress in *Flood* has to be the dam. The aim of the construction is ultimately to flood Fiddlersburg or, in other words, to erase it. My argument here is that Fiddlersburg is turned into a metonymy and an allegory for the whole Southern region. It is meaningful that Brad, speaking of Nashville that is presumably situated

not far from the fictional city of Fiddlersburg, compares it to Athens and thus potentially gives it the influence of a capital city: “They [...] built an exact replica, only in much better repair, of the Parthenon, of Athens, Greece, this community being, as of that moment thenceforward, the Athens of the South.” (*Flood* 23) The quote is especially interesting if we consider the architecture on the Southern plantations. In his article “Plantation Architecture of the Lower South on the Eve of the Civil War”, published in the *Journal of Southern History*, James C. Bonner explains,

Southern plantation architecture, in the popular mind, carries the connotation of a massive structure, adorned with a portico of stately columns of classic design, and flanked with giant magnolia trees, crepe myrtles, and mimosa. (Bonner 370)

The classic columns are reminiscent of the famous Greek and Roman classical architectures while *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 8* characterizes the magnolia tree as “one of the prime symbols of the romanticized South of the plantation,” (Melosi & Wilson 236) stressing the composite nature of the description of this theoretical, typical Southern architecture, as present in the popular mind. It enables me to stress the presence of the Greek-Roman classical influence within Southern culture, and it gives particular resonance to the comparison between Fiddlersburg and Athens, as it confirms the importance of Greek and Roman influence in the South. And, ultimately, if Fiddlersburg equals Athens, its disappearance is very significant.

In fact, beyond the comparison with Athens giving prominence to Fiddlersburg, Warren stages a contrast between the South and the rest of the nation through the description of two specific places: in this vision, Fiddlersburg would stand for the South and the new motel, Happy Dell, would serve as a symbol for modernity and progress. After having met Yasha Jones, Brad drives past the motel and describes it to his passenger this way: “I know it may not strike you as much, you being fresh from the space-age vulgarities and Disneyland fantasia of L. A., but this is the best a backward state can do [...]. And you will admit that this is a step in the right direction. America, I love you.” (*Flood* 36) His words are somehow mismatched, when he speaks of the “vulgarities” that he later considers “the best backward state can do”. The discrepancy creates a difficulty in determining whether he is sincere or not, but we can reasonably think his discourse is laden with irony. His “love” for America as a modern country based on industrialization is probably ironic, too, as there is a probable discrepancy between his words and his convictions. This is reflected in Yasha’s thoughts

about Brad; he “wished that the man could be a little more natural,” (*Flood* 36) emphasizing and somewhat confirming the falseness of his speech about America. Conversely, it is then not clear at all that he considers Tennessee as a “backward state.” The gap between what he says and what he may think is also apparent earlier, when Brad endorses the role of a tour guide for Yasha: “‘Centennial Park coming up,’ Brad announced, with a parody of the tone of the bus-tour guide.” (*Flood* 23) The parodic tone and irony dominating his words reminds us of the description he makes of the motel the first time he sees it, and perhaps makes us sense mockery or a certain amount of irony in it. The “young woman [...] waking to the kiss of Prince Charming,” the same Prince in a “pajama top,” (*Flood* 4) presents us with a typical scene from the fairy-tale genre, but it is a scene that is subverted with the seemingly incongruous presence of the pajama to fit the needs of the motel ad. One page later, we see Prince Charming “leaning from one side to smile in ecstasy at a bed.” (*Flood* 4-5) The gap between the object, a bed, and the Prince’s reaction is obvious and partakes of the irony of the situation. Therefore, Brad seems to have contempt for the place and what it stands for. We can go further and say that it frightens or upsets him: “He would be damned if he was scared of stopping there for a little gas;” (*Flood* 5) later, confronting the black employee at the gas station, he “remembered reading how a jellyfish devours an oyster; it smothers it with softness, the oyster gets tired in the softness, the shell relaxes. Bradwell Tolliver felt like an oyster,” (*Flood* 9) making the other man the predator.

This leads to another remark about the impression of helplessness resulting in danger and fear. Happy Dell is not the only Northern, or modern, element to cause Brad to feel helpless, not in control. Undeniably, Yasha’s presence triggers similar feelings in him. Brad feels compelled to talk while they both sit in his car, precisely because he also feels threatened by Yasha’s silence: “the kind of silence this guy created sucked you in. [...] It was a kind of treachery, that silence. That guy had started out smiling and putting out his hand. He had even made a joke. Then he pulled this silence on you.” (*Flood* 24) It is a silence that is unexpected and almost forces Brad to lay himself bare under Yasha’s gaze and judgment. During the trip to Fiddlersburg, communication between the two men is not easy, almost impossible, as communication between North and South on the whole is probably as problematic. There also seems to exist an untold relationship of power between the two characters; to be sure, Brad seems to be at Yasha’s mercy: “It was as though Yasha Jones had opened a flap in the side of his head and, like reaching into the glove compartment, had taken out the words. He felt defenseless” (*Flood* 25) in front of a man whom we could say stands for the North, hinting at an unwanted power relationship between the two regions. The same notion is present in Maggie’s monologue; speaking of Brad’s girlfriend, Lettice, she admits that “I was awful

timid in the beginning, she was so New York and grand and tall [...], she overpowered me, in a way.” (*Flood* 211) New York is significantly associated with meliorative adjectives such as “grand” and “tall,” and thanks to the comparison between Lettice and the famous city, such adjectives also come to characterize Lettice. Maggie also reveals Lettice has taken to teach the local Girl Scouts how to do their make-up and be refined; she would “t[each] them how to put on lipstick and hold their stomachs in,” (*Flood* 215) which puts Lettice in a position of power regarding Southern girls and women. Northern precedence and power over the South is also hinted at when Brad speaks about Billtown, a place not far from Fiddlersburg; he explains to Yasha that it is “[a]ll fancied up now. But in my day, it was not fancy.” (*Flood* 223) If the adjective “fancy” denotes embellishment and elegance, it can also mean those qualities to the point of extravagance and carry a negative connotation. Lettice’s habits, as well as the transformation of places such as Billtown, are implicitly linked to this aspect of progress or, at least, to the “fancy” aspect which Brad – and to a lesser extent Maggie – associate with the idea of progress. The idea that Southern presence and influence has grown weak is also introduced when Brad goes to see his father after he died. Maggie is with him and insists their father is “so little now [.] Oh, look how shrunk he is!” (*Flood* 76) Lank Tolliver’s importance has then considerably reduced, from the time he “owned Fiddlersburg” (*Flood* 53) to his death. The shrinking of his body can be interpreted in an allegorical sense, suggesting that Fiddlersburg as he knew it disappeared with him.

Other examples touch on the unwilling, forced submission of Southern identity and culture, as a result of progress and industrialization that it does not wish to endorse. In fact, after the town of Fiddlersburg, we can find other elements which help generate an allegorical narrative about the South. Leontine Purtle’s character is one of them. Leontine is a secondary character and never acts as a focalizer. But what is interesting is the way focalizers – mainly Brad – see her and what they make her stand for. Leontine is a paradox. Despite her blindness from birth, it is said she knows Fiddlersburg by heart: Brad says that “[s]he can walk all over Fiddlersburg” (*Flood* 87) as though she could see clearly. In fact, he asserts that “[i]t is just as though she were not blind but staring right into you. [...] It is as though she is the only one that ever looked straight into you.” (*Flood* 86-7) So, despite being blind, she seems to possess some kind of clairvoyance others do not have. Other elements in the way Brad describes her also help single her out. He explains, “Got a face on her, too [...]. Pale, pure, and noble. Slightly touched by the refinement of suffering.” (*Flood* 87) Immediately after he compares her to the Lady of Shalott, which triggers in the reader's mind a train of intertextual associations. The Lady of Shalott is the main character in poet Alfred Tennyson’s eponymous ballad, based on a medieval legend. In the ballad, the Lady is condemned to see reality

through a mirror and, at the end, the curse leads her to a death by suicide. Because she is bound to see everything through a mirror, the Lady of Shalott cannot fully see the real, hence the comparison I make with Leontine's character, who is blind and therefore unable to see reality herself. Leontine's incapacity to grasp the truth can be linked to the romanticization at work in the creation of a Lost Cause memory; we can consider it to be a manufactured vision of reality, as though reality is only accessed through the mirror of mythification. Despite Brad's remarks about Leontine's clairvoyance and her ability to see "right into you" (*Flood* 86-7), Leontine's blindness, thanks to the comparison with the Lady of Shalott, can be seen as metaphorical as well as literal: in fact, she cannot fully know reality, since she has only access to a representation of it.

About Leontine, I will add that her figurative death can be seen as symbolizing and recalling the disappearance of the Old South after the civil war. One should ponder the religious, redemptive quality of loss in that case, as a particular understanding of theology that was created in order to explain and legitimate the Lost Cause. When Southerners strove to understand how God could have let them loose the war, some concluded that "Confederate loss would lead Southerners to stronger religious faith" as supported in *Baptized in Blood* (Wilson 60). In the same religious vein, losing the war could be connected to the idea of the "fortunate fall" as depicted in 1937 by Arthur O. Lovejoy, in his article entitled "Milton and The Paradox of the Fortunate Fall." Lovejoy writes,

[The paradox of the fortunate fall] is a paradox which has at least the look of a formal antinomy. [...] The Fall could never be sufficiently condemned and lamented; and likewise, when all its consequences were considered, it could never be sufficiently rejoiced over. Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit, many theologians had observed, contained in itself all other sins [...]; and by it the entire race became corrupted and estranged from God. Yet if it had never occurred, the Incarnation and Redemption could never have occurred. These sublime mysteries could have had no occasion and no meaning [...].
(Lovejoy 162)

If we make an analogy between the Biblical episode of the eating of the fruit and the Confederate loss in 1865, we can appreciate how losing the war could paradoxically be interpreted as a "fortunate fall" for Southerners, leading to religious redemption and grace. Southern bishop Stephen Elliott even "professed that Christians should not fear the darkness; rather, they should

enter into it, ‘knowing that God often dwelleth in the thick darkness.’” (Wilson 62) Portraying a deity that is supportive not of the victors, but of the ones who suffer loss and death, was a way to strengthen the religious meaning of the loss of the war and of their culture, which some Southerners thought was superior to the rest of the nation and more in accordance with God’s will. Suffering, then, was made a holy and dignified experience; and Leontine seems to embody the qualities of the perfect Southern lady, “pale, pure, and noble,” (*Flood* 87) mourning the loss of the Old South.

Actually, defenders of the Confederacy went even further and believed losing the war was like a purification and, to use their expression, a “path to victory [...] through a baptism of blood.” (Elliott qtd in Wilson 5) This could be a reason for the purity Brad sees in Leontine and in her suffering as a woman from the South, and according to the upholders of the Confederacy who reflected on such matters and created the Lost Cause myth. As I mentioned before, it is interesting that Leontine should be both blind and described as being able to see better than the others. It can be a sign that her experience as a Southerner sets her apart and enables her to have a different understanding of the world. However, it is also her Southern identity that puts her in jeopardy, as the only bearings she knows are located in Fiddlersburg. Thus she is physically and figuratively indissociable from the South. Indeed, Brad remarks: “there is no way to relocate Leontine Purtle. Unless for her relocation you totally reconstruct Fiddlersburg – every hump in the road, every sagged gatepost, every cocklebur and pig wallow, every flake of rust on the iron posts.” (*Flood* 87) She is so used to roaming Fiddlersburg that she would be unable to get used to any other environment. In the end, being Southern is a drawback for her and compels her to disappear – be it metaphorically – with her region. Another character is similarly endangered by his “southernness.” Brad and Yasha first thought of featuring a man with a birthmark in their film: “The guy is a perfectly decent-looking guy. But for one thing. He has [...] [a] birthmark [...]. It comes up under the eye, too high for a beard to help [...]. And you know, he has always felt ugly. He feels nobody can love him.” (*Flood* 125-6) Brad and Yasha’s plan being to shoot a film about Fiddlersburg, we can imagine the character they strive to create here is a Southerner or, at least, symbolizes a certain “southernness.” In this short description, his most salient characteristic seems to be his birthmark, disrupting his otherwise “perfectly decent” look. If we interpret said birthmark as being a symbol for his Southern origin, then it is clear that being a Southerner is turned into a serious drawback, at least in the context of a fast-changing country in the 1950s and 1960s. Both Leontine Purtle and the anonymous character imagined by Yasha and Brad will not be able to fit in a different society than their own.

However, there is no clear assumption on the part of the characters that technical progress and industrialization are the right choice to make. As an example of the overall ambiguity regarding this subject, we can think of a passage where Brad tries to imagine what Digby, the Northern engineer, thinks of Leontine and her blindness. He says Digby “[w]onders what it is like to be blind. Light is dark, dark is light. To be in velvety darkness which is your light, to be free of something.” (*Flood* 125) We almost have an oxymoron here, equating “dark” with “light.” If we consider that “dark” connotes traditional values and society, compared to “light” which could stand for progress, modernity, industrialization, then it is not clear here whether progress and industrialization are the best choice to make. The characterization of the specific darkness which Leontine experiences is interesting; it is a “velvety darkness,” and the adjective, introducing an evocation to velvet, calls to the reader’s senses; not only sight, but touch also. It establishes an impression of increased perceptiveness, which in itself is a paradox, as Leontine’s blindness precisely deprives her of one of her senses. Described in this way, blindness seems to increase her perception rather than prevent it. Actually, being blind, or living in darkness, appears to be a state that really enables Leontine to live in light, since “darkness [...] is your light.” As a matter of fact Brad admits that blind people, if they don’t have the same experiences as others, “exist a hell of a lot more completely in another way.” (*Flood* 127) Existing in another way could mean holding to a traditional Southern society instead of accepting, or submitting to, modernity. Interestingly, Brad comments that Digby “had no purple birthmark” (*Flood* 173) or, in other words, that he is not a Southerner. As a result, he cannot be “the man to enter that mystic dark of Leontine,” unable to reach her specific state of consciousness.

2) Anamorphosis of the Southern Landscape and Generational Estrangement in *A Cry of Absence*

In *Flood*, Robert Penn Warren conveys Brad’s pessimistic vision of progress through the use of focalization and the character system, and also through the use of settings acting as cultural mirrors. In Brad’s eyes, Happy Dell appears to epitomize novelty and the ridicule, or the unreality attached to it – again, in Brad’s view. Through the system of characters, a kind of hierarchy is created; Brad and Maggie both seem overpowered, defeated by Yahsa and Lettice who are from the North. Finally, Leontine Purtle seems to embody a paradox that is specific to the Southern culture, and especially to the defense of the Lost Cause. Interestingly, she is also presented as impervious to Northern influence. In *A Cry of Absence*, Madison Jones uses roughly the same techniques; that is to say he presents a pessimistic vision of progress through an opposition between some of his

characters - mainly between the two focalizers, Hester and Ames. As to the visible facet of progress, the landscape is slowly transformed, destroying Hester's utopian view of her town and region.

Here again, focalization is crucial in the representation of progress and of a Southern society gradually transformed, and destroyed, precisely because of progress. Hester is one of the two focalizers and "in charge of" vision in approximately half of the narrative. Contrary to her son Ames, the other focalizer, she holds on to tradition; traditional race relations, traditional buildings and memorials, are sacred to her. Just like Brad and Maggie feel – to some extent – threatened by Northern influence in Warren's *Flood*, Jones' Hester is confronted to the gradual anamorphosis of her environment and feels she, and especially what she stands for, is imperiled in the process. Anamorphosis consists in the blurring or deforming of preexisting categories and shapes. It is sometimes used as a technique by visual artists such as painters or graphic designers, but could also be applied to other artistic means, like writing. Through anamorphosis, elements are deformed and, as a result, the process "has the capability of making the familiar seem 'strange.'" (Collins in "Anamorphosis and the Eccentric Observer: History, Technique and Current Practice" 179) It applies to *A Cry of Absence* inasmuch as Hester, and the reader with her, is confronted to several characters or places that appear as distorted versions of their former selves. We could argue this same process of anamorphosis is at stake when Hester offers to leave her family's country house to Ames when he is married; indeed her proposal is met by a harsh reminder that "[t]his is not 1857," (*A Cry of Absence* 221) so that Ames puts an emphasis on the fact that the South has undeniably changed. Hester herself acknowledges that "[o]ur family were always farmers and planters, until my father's generation;" (*A Cry of Absence* 204) so there is already a gap between past and present, and it implies Hester does not live according to agrarian principles anymore; her environment has already been affected by progress, since she does not live on the farm as her ancestors used to, but in a house built in town. Her direct surroundings are neither the countryside nor fields of cotton and cabins, such as were analyzed in the first part in terms of the romanticization at stake in the novel. When Hester tries to further defend an agrarian, pastoral way of living, Ames is clearly not receptive. The character of the son is repeatedly used to expose the discrepancy between Hester's idealization of the past and the present, actual situation in the 1950s. To her "I know it's a human way of living," (*A Cry of Absence* 221) putting an accent on the "genuine humanism" that the Twelve Agrarians wanted to preserve, Ames quickly replies, "Instead of a real living, you mean. Why do you think they're all leaving the farms?" (*A Cry of Absence* 221) Of course, we notice a play on words here, as "real living" not only describes a way of living according to some standards or values, but also refers to the act of earning sufficient money. Ames equates living on a farm in the

1950s with an unreal life somehow, or a life that is not proper or well suited to the times; he also points out the potential financial difficulties associated with this kind of life. Still, Hester does not want to endorse his point of view and argues that “they’ll come back, don’t you see? They will have to. People can’t go on living like this,” (*A Cry of Absence* 221) emphasizing her belief that a life cut off from nature and the cultivation of the land is not sensible and cannot last. However, Ames’s view on this differs greatly; because it is more modern and adjusted to the times, it directly challenges her convictions. He says, “Like what? With enough money so they can live like people?” (*A Cry of Absence* 221) If we endorse Hester’s point of view, we see how Ames is primarily interested in economic stability and development, not on tradition or spiritual welfare. The generational gap here shows how the South was affected by change in the 1950s, and how it progressively led to this kind of disagreement on what was supposed to be a decent way to live. Hester, valuing tradition as she does, cannot but have a pessimistic vision of these new ways of living. She explicitly says so: living like this is living “[w]ithout real ties. Without a sense of things... of the past. That’s what keeps us human. The way we live is not human anymore.” (*A Cry of Absence* 221-2) To her, industrial development leads to a dehumanized society, based on economy rather than the conservation of tradition and the cultivation of the land. After Ames maintains that she has taught Cam nothing but “drivel” and “nigger-hating,” (*A Cry of Absence* 222) the estrangement between them is made almost complete:

That he should think such things, should speak them to her – things which, for their ugliness, she would not allow even her own mind to repeat. On the lips of a son whom she had conceived in her own body and borne in pain and loved and raised to manhood. And this, now, was what he thought, what he saw when he looked at her: not his mother but a cruel and monstrous parody of herself – an evil woman. Did he really believe this of her? No, he could not, not in his heart, for his own eyes had never seen it. [...] Ames would come back. With bowed head, in shame, he would stand before her and try to unsay it all. / But he had not come. (*A Cry of Absence* 223)

Ames not coming back to his mother to apologize to her illustrates a gap between them that is not bridged, and remains so until the end of the novel. This is supported by Hester’s feeling that he thinks of her as a “cruel and monstrous parody of herself” and not as a human being with valid

traditions and values. So, along with having uprooted Hester's family from the farm they were running, industrial progress is also destroying the family unity by causing her eldest son to be estranged from her. As I briefly mentioned earlier, progress not only seems to destroy the family unit, it also physically destroys the characters' environment. From the beginning of the book on, Hester is aware of the transformations at work in Cameron Springs and notices them with a critical eye, for instance describing "all these new houses that had sprung up, magically, in old Jake Tarver's pasture." (*A Cry of Absence* 7) The antinomy between nature and urbanization is of course at the center of her observations, and nature is losing ground. As a result, she turns to fantasy to reestablish an order that she thinks is more desirable. She closes her eyes "and she could see his big herd of whiteface still grazing," (*A Cry of Absence* 7) but her attention goes back to the houses, admitting, "to her there was something strange about the way they stood here." (*A Cry of Absence* 7) The reshaping of her space creates a sense of uncertainty and strangeness, for her and the reader alike, in accordance with the possible effects of the anamorphosis of her surroundings evoked earlier. Later, we see "Hardy's old cotton gin" being erased with a "big, yellow machine that would root out the last of its foundations in the next day or two." (*A Cry of Absence* 109) What is emphasized here, in addition to the fact that progress is necessarily destructive, is also the very fast pace at which it is happening. This is mirrored by:

her father's distress at what was beginning to happen in the town. It was something, he said, that had come in with the motorcar, and the noise and the dust they raised on the unpaved streets. [...] [S]he imagined that she could perceive something of the new spirit that he was always describing in words like "aggressive" and "licentious" and sometimes even "wicked." (*A Cry of Absence* 92)

Hester has been trained from childhood to think of progress in unflattering terms. Not only this, she has also been used to think of it as something dangerous and menacing, as her father already thought in the beginning of the twentieth century. It symbolizes that an antagonism to progress is far from new by the 1950s. The use of free indirect speech puts a visual emphasis on the father's words, and underlines the presence of his speech within his daughter's point of view. In fact, a sense of danger probably reaches its peak for Hester when the Confederate statue is destroyed and not replaced. Immediately after the accident, the statue is described as "a spirit

reluctant to pass on into darkness.” (*A Cry of Absence* 112) Although it is Ames that is in charge of the narration at this point, it perfectly fits the overall idea that progress is, in a figurative way, killing the Old South and turning it into a ghost.

That the landscape is transforming tells us much about Hester’s sense of loss, as her typical environment and culture are disappearing. As has already been said, the agrarian traditions were very prominent, not only in the Old South society with the plantation system, but also in the mythologization and romanticization of a society that, after the end of the Civil War, aimed at depicting the region as an ideal and utopian one, with nature and agrarianism at its core. Ken Taylor’s article, “Landscape and Memory: Cultural Landscapes, Intangible Values and Some Thoughts on Asia,” reiterates the importance of landscape as the vessel of ideology and identity. He writes, “We see and make landscapes as a result of our shared system of beliefs and ideologies. In this way landscape is a cultural construct, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meanings which can be read and interpreted.” (Taylor 3) Landscape, much like ideology and identity, is then considered not simply as a natural given but as a cultural construct, that is shaped by its inhabitants’ beliefs and myths and thus becomes the mirror of them. This is evident in Hester’s romantic visions of cotton fields and the beautiful countryside; landscape is the way in which she expresses her own identity and values. Taylor goes on,

A common theme underpinning the concept of the ideology of landscape itself as the setting for everything we do is that of the landscape as the repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence. This is why landscape and memory are inseparable, because landscape is the nerve centre of our personal and collective memories. (Taylor 4)

Not only are landscapes shaped by human beliefs and traditions, they are also the guardians of memory and of the past. Interestingly, Taylor is not the only one emphasizing the cultural aspect of landscape and its link to memory; in his book entitled *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama expresses the almost exact same idea when he notes that “[b]efore it can ever be the repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.” (Schama 6-7) To him, memories and the immaterial things we attach to landscape even precede, or take over, the sensory experience. When Hester thinks of her childhood,

she primarily thinks of her grandparents' house in the countryside, and she finds in these memories a society that very closely resembles the agrarianism and plantation system of the Old South, where senses themselves participate in a description of an ideal scenery. Landscape becomes the depositary of details that Hester associates with a society that she feels has come to be endangered and destroyed by progress - especially technological progress. It is precisely in the landscape that change is physically inscribed and thus made visible. Because it is visible, or audible – we can think of the sound of motorcars that Hester's father feared in contrast to the “thuds and clink of harness, Negro voices wordless and mellow” (*A Cry of Absence* 89) and the “cries of colored children playing” (*A Cry of Absence* 90) associated with Fountain Inn. The iterative use of the liquid consonant [l] in “wordless and mellow” and “colored children” creates a potential unifying effect; the sounds glide and blend into each other, so that words and elements appear closely connected to each other. The description of blacks' voices as “wordless and mellow” also conveys a reassuring effect from a Southern white perspective, as it underlines a clichéd vision of black people. To Hester, progress is seen as particularly threatening compared to the soothing, familiar dimension she attributes to tradition and to the past. Actually, more than the place where memories and ideology are stored, landscapes are also used to create sheer utopias. In an article entitled “Des espaces autres,” Michel Foucault argues that

[l]es utopies, ce sont les emplacements sans lieu réel. Ce sont les emplacements qui entretiennent avec l'espace réel de la société un rapport général d'analogie directe ou inversée. C'est la société elle-même perfectionnée ou c'est l'envers de la société, mais, de toute façon, ces utopies sont des espaces qui sont fondamentalement essentiellement irréels.
(Foucault 14-15)

By imagination and ideology combined, these spaces are turned into unreal ones, just as Hester's depiction of beautiful scenery and of the utopian society at Fountain Inn. It corroborates the idea that there is indeed a process of mythologization at the heart of Hester's representation of the Old South. And the more it is represented as ideal and unblemished, the more it will be likely for change to be described in negative terms, and generally seen in a negative light.

I will go further and say that there could be an elegiac tone in Hester's depiction of the South. Originally, elegy was a specific genre of poetry, as Gregory Nagy explains a book edited by

Karen Weisman and entitled *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*; on the origins and the evolution of the elegiac genre, he writes,

Although there is currently no consensus in the scholarly world of classical studies about the origins of elegy, an argument can be made that *elegy evolved from traditions of singing songs of lament*. / For the term *lament*, I offer this working definition: *lament is an act of singing in response to the loss of someone or something near and dear, whether that loss is real or figurative*. [...] Such a sense of the ancient Greek noun *elegos* [is] still active in some uses of the derivative noun “elegy” and “elegiac” in English. (Nagy 13-14)

We can then borrow the adjective “elegiac” and try to apply it to a *Cry of Absence*, and the way Hester all at once celebrates and mourns the Old South, as something that is dying. This particularly resonates with the Lost Cause myth, which consisted of the mourning of a perfect society that was disappearing. In fact, several poets participated in the celebration of the myth and dedicated works to the lost Confederacy. The tone of their poems could definitely be said to be elegiac. Father Abram Ryan (1839-1886) for instance was known as the “Poet Priest of the Lost Cause.” (Charles Reagan Wilson 58) Let us quote two extracts from one of his poems entitled “A Land Without Ruins,” found in a collection of Ryan’s works entitled *Father Ryan’s Poems*:

[...]

Yes, give me a land that is blest by the dust
And bright with the deeds of the down-trodden just.

[...]

There is grandeur in graves – there is glory in gloom;
For out of the gloom future brightness is born
As after the night comes the sunrise of morn;
And the graves of the dead with the grass overgrown
May yet form the footstool of liberty’s throne,
And each single wreck in the war-path of might,
Shall yet be a rock in the temple of right. (Ryan 45-6)

We see how Ryan mingles praise of and mourning for the Confederacy, with passages such as “There is grandeur in graves – there is glory in gloom,” trying to picture defeat as a transcending experience despite its final dimension. The effect is greatly emphasized by the play on sounds, as the alliteration in “g” gives rhythm, and thus prominence, to the passage. The poem is constantly playing on two distinct registers - indeed, the South is a “land blest by the dust” - in a mix that easily fits the definition of the elegy as a “lament for the dead” that also asserts their perceived qualities.

3) The Death of the Old South

The mention of a possible elegiac tone in Hester’s praise of her region quite logically brings the subject of death – especially the death of the Old South. Both *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* take place at times where the Southern society was undergoing deep changes, and it can be argued that both novels stage the death of an old society that can no longer exist or, at least, not the way it used to in the minds of some characters.

a) Visions of Death in *A Cry of Absence*

As we have seen in the second sub-section, Hester constantly tries to preserve her utopia. A quote from *Tragedy: Contradiction and Repression* enables me to highlight the possible tragic implications lying in the attempt itself. Reflecting on tragedy in general, he explains there is a “search implicit in all tragedy” which is linked to the following question: “In what structure of family and communal life may human beings find a stable political life?” (Kuhns 26) What Kuhns appears to imply is that in all tragedy there is a quest for an ideal society; Hester’s quest is for the utopian Old South, but she cannot preserve it and thus the novel has a necessarily tragic tone. And one of the obvious ways in which the death of Hester’s world is staged is through her garden. I have mentioned Michel Foucault’s article before, as a way to illustrate how characters use landscape in order to create utopias. But utopias are not the only kind of places that Foucault speaks of. To him, utopias are unreal places, with no location, except perhaps in one’s mind. He also alludes to “hétérotopies,” a neologism that could be translated simply into “heterotopias.” Here is his characterization of heterotopias:

Il y a également [...] des lieux réels, des lieux effectifs, des lieux qui sont dessinés dans l’institution même de la société, et qui sont des sortes de

contre-emplacements, sortes d'utopies effectivement réalisées dans lesquelles tous les autres emplacements réels que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés et inversés, des sortes de lieux qui sont hors de tous les lieux, bien que pourtant ils soient effectivement localisables. Ces lieux, parce qu'ils sont absolument autres que tous les emplacements qu'ils reflètent et dont ils parlent, je les appellerai par opposition aux utopies, les hétérotopies. [...] [Ce sont des] espaces différents, ces autres lieux, une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l'espace où nous vivons. (Foucault 16)

We gather that heterotopias seem to be specific spaces at the margins of society, consciously set apart in order to fit a distinct role. These spaces are described as other, different from the rest, but they are still connected to the rest, thus giving birth to a dialogue between heterotopias and the world. In this way, heterotopias contain in themselves a commentary of all the other places that are *not* heterotopias and central in society. Whereas utopias can be defined as unreal places conceived to fit idealized versions of society, heterotopias are real spaces that comment on society and on the social order, sometimes even contesting it, or acting as deformed, critical doubles of it. Foucault gives several examples of heterotopias: libraries, jails, theaters, cinemas, cemeteries; they are all at once part of society and set apart, because of their nature and role. He speaks of them as “emplacements contradictoires” (Foucault 17) and adds that each heterotopia has a specific role to play and, accordingly, differs from other heterotopias. It accounts for the great diversity of them. For example, jails are designed to keep some people separate from others, while cemeteries are homes to dead individuals who, therefore, are not really part of the living society anymore, but are likely still remembered. What is of notable interest here is Foucault's mention of what he considers one of the oldest heterotopias:

peut-être que l'exemple le plus ancien de ces hétérotopies, en forme d'emplacements contradictoires, est le jardin. [...] Le jardin, c'est la plus petite parcelle du monde et puis c'est la totalité du monde. Le jardin c'est, depuis le fond de l'antiquité, une sorte d'hétérotopie heureuse et universalisante. (Foucault 17)

It seems we find such a heterotopia, “heureuse et universalisante,” in *A Cry of Absence*. Hester’s garden is the receptacle of her agrarian thinking and of her affection for the Old South. I already mentioned her love for her garden, but Foucault’s article gives us the opportunity to read the garden as a heterotopia, that is, a commentary of Hester’s time and also a form of protest. |

If the garden is a heterotopia protesting against the transformation of society, its death is laden with meaning. As the story unfolds, the seasons move from late summer to winter, and the symbolic death it represents is visible in the garden. First, we witness the arrival of fall: “The elms and the oak behind the house had begun to turn;” (*A Cry of Absence* 119) and the season quickly leads to winter: “[i]t had frosted a little the night before, and early sunshine had not yet melted the rime on certain shrubs.” (*A Cry of Absence* 203) Later, even while “the fields were in her mind,” symbolizing her memories and fantasies about the Old South, “the vision drifted back into her eyes, how frost in the early sunlight had tipped the leaves with silver,” (*A Cry of Absence* 217) so that the same idea and image are repeated. The effects of winter propagate to Hester herself: “she was cold. Her body trembled,” (*A Cry of Absence* 223) lead her to envision “the tree [...] bare, its naked limbs accenting the gray of a leaden winter sky” while Lucius remarks, “Old winter going to be coming early this year.” (*A Cry of Absence* 236) Evidently nature is no longer fruitful, like the “lush camelia” (*A Cry of Absence* 8) alluded to at the very beginning. It is no longer the representation of a lost utopia, but it is now affected and even corrupted by reality. Ames himself witnesses nature bending to the laws of winter when he remembers “the sough of wind, the branches pitching, the shrubbery out across the yard like billow lashed in a gale.” (*A Cry of Absence* 276)

Hints at the disappearance of the Old South are not limited to the garden. Hester’s character is also a good example of this. The first mention of a possible loss of balance is made when Ames describes his mother’s hair and face: “She had a rather prominent nose, and the large bun was doubtless contrived as a sort of counterweight to give her profile the illusion of balance. [...] Her present posture dispelled this illusion of balance, and this was why, just now, it vaguely distressed him to observe her so.” (*A Cry of Absence* 20) There already is a sense of distress, as though Ames was able to predict the ending. Simple details such as the “two dead bulbs in the chandelier” (*A Cry of Absence* 26) or the fact that Hester “made herself obey” (*A Cry of Absence* 51) a stop sign in the road participate to the impression that we are witnessing some kind of death. Later, Ames walks in “streets as empty as streets in a dream.” (*A Cry of Absence* 36) Surprisingly, Hester also shows doubt early on as to her role in society: “The point was... But suddenly she felt as if she no longer really knew what the point was. ‘To preserve our heritage.’ This was the assumption with which she had joined [...] when the society was organized two years ago.” (*A Cry of Absence* 42). Even when

she is in charge of the preservation of Southern heritage, a task that seems to be central to her throughout the novel, she does not always feel certain. Her face itself bears a significant mark: Ames comments that “[t]he crease between her eyes was like a bloodless open wound,” (*A Cry of Absence* 59) foreshadowing her suicide at the end and the blood actually leaving her body and “swirling down the drain” of the bathtub (*A Cry of Absence* 277). Ames tries to imagine what she must have thought before dying:

Maybe she closed here eyes. Then, maybe, she had looked upon the scenes that she so often had tried to describe to them, to Cam and him: the procession of ordered trees and shrubs and the great house at the end, cabins, fields in summer haze and sounds of morning that must always have remained as clear as living voices in her ears. Perhaps it had all come very near as the life streamed out of her body. Yet – for his mind kept circling back to the same conclusion – he did not think that it was true. What he believed was that she had sat there, if less and less rigorously, with open eyes intent upon the sight of her blood swirling down the drain. (*A Cry of Absence* 277)

Idealized and romanticized visions of the Old South such as Hester nurtured are symbolically crushed, first because Hester dies by suicide and takes them with her, and also because of Ames’s remark. To him, upon her death, his mother did not even think of the images that so clearly resemble the passages where she marvels at the Southern countryside. This introduces the idea that Hester and her Southern utopia have become estranged with one another. There are other details scattered through the novel indicating that Hester’s relation to the mythologized Old South is not the same at the beginning and at the end of the novel. For example, she seems more receptive to the sounds of modernity: sitting in her garden, she hears “with clarity sounds not audible in the past. Dim motors hummed from unexpected directions, and there were voices that could not have come from only the residential blocks surrounding her own. Even the sound of a B&N train clear out at Rainbush was once audible to her for a minute or so.” (*A Cry of Absence* 80) Even if she resents the presence of these sounds, an emphasis is put on the fact that she used to not hearing them before. The destruction of the Confederate monument already represented an “impairment to her clarity of thought.” (*A Cry of Absence* 113) Hester also confesses that her “feeling of isolation [...] dogged

like her like a persistent but unobtrusive shadow,” (*A Cry of Absence* 127) underlining her loneliness, and for the first time in her life Hester knows “fear of a natural thing” (*A Cry of Absence* 179) when abnormal heavy rains on the town for several days in a row. It even seems to her a “disjointing of nature’s rightful procession,” as if nature itself was out of phase. One of the most striking example of the estrangement between Hester and nature is perhaps her loss of faith, since nature, to her mind, was a representation of a divine order set in place by God. “There was no compassionate ear above. As she knelt it came upon her, a remote surprise, that her faith was gone – and not just for the time. How long since it had been really with her, as it always had used to be?” (*A Cry of Absence* 193). The presence of a divine will at work in the evolution of Southern society is then completely denied and the myth is destroyed.

Participating in the same idea of a myth that is deconstructed is the character of Hester’s husband. Early descriptions of her future husband remind us of a charismatic cavalier, a typical figure in the myth of the Lost Cause. Her first encounter with Thomas Glenn precisely happened “on Confederate Memorial Day” (*A Cry of Absence* 92) and “he, he and his sorrel mare, stood literally heads and shoulders above the rest. [...] In her memory of it they never had come down. [...] Her beloved, too, was in uniform, full regalia that looked as if it had been made for him, and a shining saber was at his side.” (*A Cry of Absence* 93) He is truly described as a Confederate soldier, and the sight brings the past to life again. Hester adds that “he seemed to her as blinding bright as the sun in a morning sky,” accentuating the romanticization of such typical scenes and characters that, after the Civil War, came to be symbols for the Old South. However, the symbol is degraded some lines later when Hester remarks, “He was not as tall as he had looked then. In fact, as she discovered in later years, he was barely an inch taller than herself.” (*A Cry of Absence* 93) The novel chronicles how the myth is slowly deconstructed and Thomas is brought back to the realm of reality. More than that, after the first years of their marriage, Hester “watched his manners and even his sense of responsibility decay” (*A Cry of Absence* 95) and reflects that “the seeds were there from the start. She had been warned and, in her romantic passion, had not listened? What, then, could she have done? Nothing but what she did do. Endure the grossness she saw bud and slowly flower in him, watch it waste and tarnish things, suffer the indignities – and try to pardon.” (*A Cry of Absence* 96) The fact that she mentions her “romantic passion” for Thomas brings to mind the romantic descriptions of the Old South at large, emphasizing and exaggerating its beauty and perfection just like Hester exaggerated those qualities in her husband. The interplay of prolepses and analepses in the text enables the reader to appreciate to the discrepancy between the myth created around

Thomas Glenn's character, and reality. Indeed, different time periods find themselves juxtaposed during Thomas's description. Let us quote the end of a paragraph and the beginning of the next one:

[Thomas] was all she could have asked for. She was as proud as if he had been shaped in the very pattern of what a man ought to be.

What had happened to him? It was as though, after six years of marriage, one day the wind had changed. Or rather, more likely, she had all of a sudden waked one day to a change long since in the making. (*A Cry of Absence* 95)

The contrast strikes the reader as a visual one; the idyllic description ends, and a new one can only begin on the following line. The contrast is visibly very stark, and it underlines Hester's sudden realization about the disparity between two antithetical visions she retains of her husband.

Another character, Cam, whom Hester envisioned as the epitome of what a Southern gentleman should be, goes through the same process of demythologization when Hester learns for a fact that he murdered Otis Stephens. From this moment, he seems to be slowly erased from reality; to his mother he is reduced to a "disembodied voice," a "bodiless creature barely staining the gray daylight behind her," a "shape barely visible." (*A Cry of Absence* 191) Ames also outlines Cam's "spectral look" (*A Cry of Absence* 205) the night before his death. Later, when Cam's coffin is opened, Ames imagines that "this was what had released again, as if from out of the coffin, the drowning scent of flowers." (*A Cry of Absence* 208) If we think of the agrarian tradition in the South, the "scent of flowers" could very well be a metonymy for the Old South, an Old South that is now imprisoned in a coffin with Cam's body. Cam himself was considered a symbol for the old Southern society by his mother. Added to Hester's suicide, the downfall of these two characters, Thomas and Cam, who used to be presented in such a good light, are major hints at the disappearance of the old society. Confronted with the loss of her utopian vision of the South, Hester cannot bear to live in "a New World full of contradiction and repression," as Richard Kuhns puts it in *Tragedy: Contradiction and Repression* (Kuhns 9). The contradiction between her values and the reality she faces is perhaps what ultimately drove her to suicide.

b) Artistic Sterility and Symbolic Death of the South in *Flood*

In *A Cry of Absence*, the death of the Old South is quite clearly represented by the death of two characters, Cam and Hester, that in their own ways could be considered symbols for the old-fashioned society. Other elements tend to support the idea of the disappearance of the old ways. In *Flood*, hints at such a disappearance are more subtle, but my point will be to show that they can be spotted nonetheless.

The first question I would like to raise is the film that Brad and Yasha first intended to make. Indeed, the reason both Brad and Yasha leave the North to go to Fiddlersburg is because they want to make a film in the town before it is flooded. When the two men discuss the potential content of the film, we already find a sense of doom and death. Yasha declares, "I thought of a man who would rise in the night, just before the flood began, and go look at Fiddlersburg once more, in moonlight. [...] We would never show his face. He would not be recognizable. We would not know what man of all Fiddlersburg had risen. We should see, simply, the figure." (*Flood* 255) Many elements in the passage participate to a general somber atmosphere. The scene is supposed to take place at night, probably the last night before the flood, and the man is supposed to remain anonymous, a mere "figure". Everything is reunited here to suggest that Fiddlersburg is about to disappear, along with the identity of its inhabitants. A few pages later, Brad admits, "For my crimes, I, who am of Fiddlersburg, am sent back to Fiddlersburg to do a beautiful motion picture about Fiddlersburg. [...] God damn it, [...] maybe I can't do your God-damned picture!" (*Flood* 260) He links the process of creating a film with a sense of guilt and a need to atone for past mistakes, which is interesting, because it does not seem to be a choice on his part and appears as an unwanted necessity. He even revokes the necessity by confessing that maybe he is not capable of creating the film, despite the trust Yasha places in him. Brad gives another, more ambiguous commentary when he says, "We aren't, in one sense, putting anything in our movie." (*Flood* 344) Even if he clarifies it, saying what he wants to capture is "a sense of things" for which he needs to "whiff the peculiar effluvium of Fiddlersburg," he nonetheless clearly admits that his aim is not to put anything in his movie. Later, Yasha's inability to make a movie about Fiddlersburg is also revealed in a letter that Maggie writes to Brad after she and Yasha have gone to Greece; the letter says "Maggie was well, and Yasha too, and the picture he was working on was really the kind he ought to make, he said he would never have made Fiddlersburg right." (*Flood* 420) So Yasha admits, although through Maggie's words, that a film about Fiddlersburg was not the kind of film he ought to work on, and in the end he turns his back on the project. Brad and Yasha both seem powerless to even start writing a scenario for the film. In the end, the idea is altogether dropped and Brad and Yasha part ways. Their separation, and

more broadly fact that an artistic attempt at capturing the image and essence of Fiddlersburg should fail, reinforces the impression that the place will be utterly destroyed by the flood and that nothing, not even an image of it, will survive.

The failure of the project might have been foreshadowed by some hints given beforehand, and they also play a role in the demise of the Old South. From the beginning, Yasha admits that “reality was the uncapturable. That was why we need illusion. *Truth through lie*, he thought. *Only in the mirror, over your shoulder*, he thought, *does the ghost appear.*” (*Flood* 50) The inclusion of direct speech and the use of italics highlight the character’s vision of reality as too complex or abstract to be properly portrayed. Words like “lie” or “ghost,” putting an emphasis on untruthfulness and evanescence, also support the idea. In this quote, Yasha implicitly gives up hope of recapturing the real Fiddlersburg. More than that, he also implies that all art is part of the realm of lies rather expresses the truth. If we consider that art is an attempt at capturing and re-interpreting the real world, just like Brad and Yasha’s film aimed at doing, then it is bound to fail if “reality [is] uncapturable.” It conveys the idea that all that artists can do is forge their own reality and, to some degree, lie about the fact that they are recreating the world. As for Brad, he already questions his ability to create a piece of art when he asserts that “maybe I can’t do your God-damned picture!” (*Flood* 206) Having previously been a successful writer, Brad seems to be in quest of his abilities as an artist. But the quest remains inconclusive and “terror struck him, for, suddenly, he was thinking, too, that if he was not a writer then he was nothing, he was not real, he did not exist. He stood there in the cold terror of nonexistence.” (*Flood* 134) Not being able to create equates death, at least an artistic death. About his life in Fiddlersburg Brad even claims, “I don’t want to remember a God-damned thing!” (*Flood* 31) Moreover, Brad and Yasha are not the only artists who struggle to create; Brother Potts, one of the inhabitants, tries to write a poem about Fiddlersburg but concedes, “I’m stuck [...]. I know how I feel, but the words, they won’t come.” (*Flood* 82) The two characters are confronted with artistic failure, even artistic sterility, which could be connected to the inevitable death of the South; the literary world which Brad and Yasha inhabit is then described as one of general sterility.

But there are other, more evident hints at the death of the old society. Just like in *A Cry of Absence*, some Southern characters are threatened with death, or already dead, and their death can be interpreted as an indication that the region on the whole is disappearing. From the beginning, Brad mentions Izzy Goldfarb, an old man he used to know in Fiddlersburg. Goldfarb died while Brad was up North. He was likely buried among “graves” that “were long forgotten in blackberry bushes and love vine.” (*Flood* 18) Interestingly, Brad associates Fiddlersburg with Goldfarb. “He is

Fiddlersburg. I have been ten thousand miles away and I have shut my eyes and I have said the word *Fiddlersburg*, and what I saw was old Goldfarb.” (*Flood* 164) The fact that the old man died suggests that at least a part of Fiddlersburg died with him, at least in Brad’s eyes. More than that, Goldfarb’s tomb is “long forgotten” and Brad cannot find it no matter how hard he tries, so that he cannot reestablish this specific link between himself and Fiddlersburg. Brad himself participates in the impression that the South is disappearing; indeed, while visiting the pen, he sits on an electric chair (*Flood* 162), a powerful, though symbolic, image of death. It is true that characters from Fiddlersburg seem to suffer the same fate as their town. For example “Mrs Fiddler of Fiddlersburg,” (*Flood* 43) whose name is obviously linked to the place, is nothing but a “decayed Southern gentlewoman,” (*Flood* 108) while Brother Potts has “[c]ancer of the bone. It began in a finger and they cut that off. The third time they went way up. I hear he hasn’t too much time now,” (*Flood* 105) so that he is slowly disappearing, just like the town is about to be gradually erased by the ever-rising waters. Calvin Fiddler, another character bearing a link to Fiddlersburg through the same family name, is described as a “memory” (*Flood* 277) as though he was already dead. Frog-Eye himself, who seems to follow a truly agrarian way of life and to better mingle with nature than with other humans, is a mere “shadow.” (*Flood* 372) Brad describes a feeling of “drifting [...] down a gentle current” (*Flood* 361) as well, merely anticipating the flood that is about to engulf the town, already picturing the end of his world. “[W]hen a place dies,” says Brother Potts, “it is like a lot of living goes with it.” (*Flood* 80)

The place itself is filled with elements that could be said to foreshadow its disappearance – other than the most obvious ones, being the presence of the dam and the mentions of the flooding to come. When Brad reflects about history, he comes to the conclusion that “for him – out of nowhere, toward nowhere – that was History.” (*Flood* 69) His approach seems to be a rather nihilistic one, since to him history is moving “toward nowhere;” and it implies that there is no hope for Fiddlersburg to resuscitate after the flooding. This movement toward nowhere is further implied in Maggie’s words; she points out to Yasha that “all my life things fell down in Fiddlersburg and never got picked up,” (*Flood* 47) a habit that is strengthened by the prospect of the flood. Brad remarks that, logically, “nobody bothered” to fix “the breaks and the heaves of the road;” (*Flood* 172) he also “saw the objects in the windows of stores, [...] and thought that now, when an object was removed, it would never be replaced.” (*Flood* 88) The impression of desolation is enhanced by the sight of “windows in which no objects were displayed, where dust gathered on disintegrating cards.” (*Flood* 88) The lexical field of decay generates the impression that Fiddlersburg has in fact already been abandoned. Death can also be sensed through the singing of birds. At one point, Brad

“heard a robin utter a couple of half-hearted notes from the hydrangea bush outside the windows, then give up.” (*Flood* 229) The robin, associated with spring, and therefore associated to a certain extent with rebirth and life, gives up singing and is later replaced by owls. Two owl calls can be heard, on pages 253 and 311. The last owl is an ominous presence: “[t]he owl – and enormous barred owl – stared with hauteur into the darkness beyond the beam of the flashlight.” A nocturnal bird, here associated with “darkness,” the owl has more somber connotations. It is evocative of night and possibly of death, too. Following the same idea, the fact that Fiddlersburg is going to be flooded is probably not fortuitous either, as it is reminiscent of the biblical flood. The myth is recalled in Alan Dundes’s book *The Flood Myth*. The passage is a direct quotation from the Bible:

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said [...], I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall die. (qtd in Dundes 8)

In the myth, God decides to erase all life, because life has become corrupt and does not live up to God’s expectations; the flooding is then intended as a purification through destruction. In the same manner, Fiddlersburg is about to be destroyed by a flood and, in a way, the flood is likewise going to erase a town that does not correspond to the standards of the era. The image of the flood carries powerful evocations of destruction and thus effectively portrays the disappearance of the South. It is also ambiguous: in the religious myth it implies the birth of a new society after the disappearance of the old one. But is this assumption really present in *Flood*? Is the death of the Old South evidently connected to redemption and the future emergence of an improved society? Or is the flooding rather envisioned in its more pessimistic connotations? Let us quote a description of the rain:

The rain, pervasively and ceaselessly treading and shuffling the surface of the river, made it a dark, misty gray. The rain itself seemed to be a steady falling of the very grayness of the sky, as though the grayness that filled that

space westward were an unending deliquescence of the very substance of the sky, of the nature of things. (*Flood* 322)

The presence of colors, that are “dark” and “gray,” convey rather pessimistic, sinister connotations, echoed by the noun phrase “unending deliquescence” in turn suggesting a slow, perpetual disintegration. The rain is pictured as destroying everything thoroughly, not only in surface, but also annihilating the “very substance” of things. So there seems to be little room for optimism here, as no possibility of a new world to come is clearly expressed.

Part Three: The Dynamics of Conflict

Part one was concerned with the particular focus on nature, tradition and agrarianism in the depiction of the Southern region made by Jones and Warren. Part two moved to the rather pessimistic vision of progress presented in their works, with the strong implication that the sole idea of progress is responsible for a gradual death of the Old Southern society. In the third part of my thesis, I will be interested in conflicts and more specifically the dynamics born out of them. Indeed, conflict can be a fruitful literary device, especially in novels dealing with the South of the U.S. and complex, difficult relationships between blacks and whites, at a time where segregation and white supremacy were heavily questioned. As Randy Hendricks indicates in *Lonelier Than God – Robert Penn Warren and Southern Exile*, we can consider that “only through inner conflict was America born, and the same principle applies to the individual.” (Hendricks 77) Applied to both *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood*, this theory shows the richness of conflict as a tool to create complex characters rooted in a complex social background.

One of the central preoccupations for the characters in both *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* is the definition of their own white Southern identity as opposed to other identities – black identity, of course, but also the identities of other white characters. The example of the Delmore family in *A Cry of Absence* reminds us of the conflicts between different white groups, such as Southern whites and Northern ones. But it does not end here. Conflicts exist in the Southern white community itself, as well as within a single character’s mind, as is the case with Hester or Brad for instance. Consequently, my third part will be divided into two sub-sections. The first one will be concerned with the conflicts, and the dynamics created by such conflicts, between Southern whites and other identified groups, the main ones being blacks and Northern whites. Many examples of black or non-Southern white figures in the two novels give us room for reflection; this will also be the time to evoke the trickster figure, as theorized in *The Signifying Monkey* by scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. The second and last sub-part in this third part will then concentrate on conflicts among the Southern white community itself, or, as a more extreme form of conflict, within a single character’s own mind, with the obvious examples of main characters Hester and Brad. In both sub-sections, I will be careful to include the crucial idea that conflicts are far from being stagnant processes. On the contrary, they generate important dynamics for both novels.

1) Conflicts Between White Southerners and Other Groups

Jones' *A Cry of Absence* is full of instances of conflicts between white Southerners and other groups of characters. The most obvious opposition, of course, is between white Southerners and black characters. Characters such as Otis Stevens, lawyer Wendell Pitts, or servants Lucius and Willodene, each in their own way, act as disruptive forces, thereby proving fruitful to the elaboration of a white identity and to the unwinding of the plot.

A Cry of Absence takes place in 1957. Of course, speaking of opposition between blacks and whites in the context of the Southern region in 1957 recalls to mind the Civil Rights Movement during which black activists protested in order to secure civil rights, such as voting or housing rights, for the oppressed black population. In the novel, the most obvious conflicts between blacks and whites is crystallized around two characters, Otis Stevens and Wendell Pitts, and their implications in the Civil Rights Movement. Intriguingly, the first portrait drawn of Stephens is conveyed not through Hester's, but through Ames's point of view. Ames's character, at the beginning of the story, has not yet chosen to support the black community's struggles, and it could in part explain the vision he has of Stephens at the beginning of the novel. We read:

[Otis Stevens was] [a] handsome Negro, very black and straight, always scrupulously dressed – or overdressed – in pale green or lemon shirts and trim, flashy sport coat. To Ames, the arrogance of his posture, his manner of resting an unflinching gaze on whites he met, was not so much ominous as it was something between silly and pathetic. Two years at a northern college and, the story had it, he had come home to liberate his people. His efforts, however, had not produced any spectacular results: they appeared, in fact, to have been confined to exhortations at meetings in Negro churches and to instances of rudeness towards white people on the streets. (*A Cry of Absence* 18)

Many elements in this description contribute to present Stevens as an opponent and a potential threat to whites. The use of the adverb “very” to strengthen his black skin color is eloquent here. It does, reinforce it, even turning it into a character trait or attitude more than a mere skin

color. Not only is Stevens characterized in this way, but the adjective “black” is used next to another one, “straight,” an association recalled in the mention of the “unflinching gaze” he casts on whites. Stevens’s posture is the opposite of a submissive one, not only in his manners but also in his physical posture and his appearance. Interestingly, Ames deems him “overdressed.” The prefix “over” conveys a negative connotation and helps support the idea that, to a Southern white character’s perspective, Stevens is overstepping the bounds of the identity he is supposed to assume. The passage further includes strongly contrasting connotations carried by the narrator’s choice of adjectives; we move from “ominous” to “silly and pathetic;” the portrait of this character introduces a discrepancy between the desired effect and the perceived result, reinforcing the general impression that Stevens’ attempts at evolving in areas in which he is not specifically destined to evolve, according to social standards, is viewed as a failure.

Indeed, Ames deems Stevens “silly and pathetic,” discarding him as no real threat to the social order of the time. Cam’s relationship to Stevens, however, is radically different. The active opposition between them is made visible during their first encounter when “Stevens, determinedly staring dead ahead, passed by so close that his shoulder [collided] hard with Cam’s.” (*A Cry of Absence* 19-20) The encounter is notable, as it is a collision, which foreshadows the stark conflict to come. Semantically, the expression “staring dead ahead” characterizes the character’s stare and attitude, but the ominous choice of words introducing the lexical field of death cannot be ignored. Cam’s actions confirms the potential double meaning, as he murders Stevens later on. About the murder he then comments to his mother, “If [our ancestors] were still alive, you know they’d be glad it happened,” (*A Cry of Absence* 191) turning his act into an attempt at thwarting back rebellion and upholding Southern traditions, and more specifically white supremacy.

Other black figures in the novel seem to impersonate the growing antagonism between blacks and whites. When Ames pays a visit to his black childhood friend Matthew, the latter only “step[s] over Ames’s feet and, descending to the walk, show[s] his indifferent back” (*A Cry of Absence* 31) to him. Matthew’s spatial evolution is revealing and has obvious symbolic implications. Matthew ignores Ames’ presence and literally invades his space by stepping over his feet, then ignoring his presence by turning his back on him. Bearing in mind the white supremacy and segregation in vigor in the South of the 1950s, the gesture takes on a symbolic meaning; just like Stevens, Matthew occupies a space that is outside the one society imposed on him. Matthew’s silhouette is also described as “seeming blacker than he used to,” (*A Cry of Absence* 30) which mirrors the description Ames made of Stevens. It is as though, according to a white character’s perspective, unflinching black characters trying to push back the boundaries imposed on them are

perceived as having a darker skin. This simple comparative form, again, points to a particular use of “black;” maybe it is not meant as a skin color only, but rather as a character trait prone to disobedience. Matthew’s father significantly falls back into strict race relations codes and boundaries when Ames asks him about Stevens’ murder:

“Who do you think killed that Stevens boy?”

He saw the smile fade out.

“I don’t know, sah.”

Ames set the empty glass on the stove.

“It’s bound to have been white men, isn’t it?”

“Yes sah.”

Ames had already seen the door shut between them. (*A Cry of Absence* 32)

Matthew’s father reverts to the vernacular deformation of “sir,” using a different language from Ames’ and erasing the proximity between them, also excluding Ames from their figurative space. Ames is addressed as a superior and the communication is symbolically broken, as show the very short and simple answers he gives and the metaphor of the door used by the narrator.

Matthew is not explicitly linked to the Civil Rights movement, but other characters are, like Stevens and Wendell Pitts. Pitts is a “young Negro lawyer” described by two anonymous white characters as “half [white people’s] trouble, right there. The biggest part of them just follows him.” (*A Cry of Absence* 108) Pitts seems to be in a position of authority in the Civil Rights movement and seen as a major threat, as reveals the conversation held by the two men. But Pitts is not only a threat because of his involvement in the Civil Rights. Just as Stevens is seen as overstepping his predefined role in Southern society, Pitts, as his quality of black lawyer, incarnates a potential oxymoron according to a white supremacist’s point of view. This is hinted at in a passage where Hester comments on a letter written by him:

The letter was written by Wendell Pitts, the young Negro lawyer whom she had seen around town – a quite literate letter. She was reminded at once, by certain turns of phrase, by its demanding, self-righteous tone, of the one on Wednesday from Horace Delmore’s Committee. There was the real source.

In all probability they had planted the idea, urged it on Pitts. (*A Cry of Absence* 127)

The first aspect Hester notices is the literacy of the letter. The fact that she does not expect it from a black man is made explicit by her instant disbelief; she blames Delmore, a white Northerner, and his Committee, comprising white people as well, for the demands included in the letter.

Stevens and Pitts actively take part in the Civil Rights movement and escape the boundaries set for them by a white supremacist society, which places them in a highly conflicted relationship with the white community. But they are not the only black characters embodying a kind of threat or opposition to whites. I am going to argue that it is also the case for Lucius and Willodene, Hester's servants. Although their status corresponds to racial codes and stereotypes, they can be seen as embodying another form of rebellion against whites. This is linked to the trickster trope, as explained by Henry Louis Gates Jr in *The Signifying Monkey*. He states the "trickster figure [...] appears in black cultures with such frequency that we can think of it as a repeated theme or topos," (Gates Jr 4) making it a well-known and perennial part of black identities and cultures. It originates in the African mythological figure of Esu, a "divine trickster figure" (Gates Jr 5) whose "mouth, from which the audible word proceeds, sometimes appears double; Esu's discourse, metaphorically, is double-voiced." (Gates Jr 7) Esu's discourse, then, potentially conveys several meanings. This results in uncertainty and an impossibility to decide what is true. Moreover, the discourse is plural, not only in meanings but in the shapes it takes. As Roger D. Abrahams writes in *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia*,

Signifying seems to be a Negro term; in use if not in origin. It can mean any number of things; in the case of the toast about the signifying monkey, it certainly refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. [...] Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. (Abrahams 51-52)

So the trickster trope resides not only in words but in gestures and attitudes. This has a deep impact on our vision of the relationships between blacks and whites in *A Cry of Absence*, as several

black characters seem to act according to this trope. Very early into the novel, Hester wonders whether Lucius, her gardener, wears “a black mask of loyalty and cranky affection.” (*A Cry of Absence* 8) Here again, the adjective “black” is associated not only with rebellion, but with treachery and concealment, denoting more than a mere skin color. Later, Hester is tricked – consciously or not on the part of Lucius – by his presence which she had not noticed: “[the stillness] had deceived her. She did not discover this at first, because Lucius was seated in the partial shade of a shrub.” (*A Cry of Absence* 152) Lucius is seated in a literal shade, that can also be considered metaphorically. We note that the shade is “partial,” which makes the old servant an ambiguous, mysterious figure inasmuch as his real intentions are hard to read, as they are partially hidden from Hester. To reinforce the impression, Hester feels he is secretly watching her and “this consciousness of his scrutiny, however unjustified, [does] not diminish.” (*A Cry of Absence* 152) The relationship of power is figuratively turned upside down, as the white woman finds herself under the black man’s scrutiny. This is not the first time she thinks that she is being watched by her servants; indeed she is under the same impression with her cook, Willodene, as this description of a spying Willodene shows: her “eyes, showing white, would be turned up in her head with the effort to envision Hester’s face.” (*A Cry of Absence* 12) On the following page, Hester also associates “Willodene’s evasiveness about names” as “‘their’ instinct to privacy,” (*A Cry of Absence* 13) hinting at “the propensity to talk around a subject” raised by Abrahams. In this way, Willodene and Lucius embody the characteristics of the trickster figure, and not only because of their use of words; their whole attitude their – or, to be more precised, their perceived attitude - towards Hester participate in the impression of a cultural gap between black characters and white ones.

Several black characters use words, gestures and attitudes in a complex trope potentially aiming at conveying a double discourse and fooling their white interlocutors. But this is not the only source of conflict between blacks and whites. There is also a wish for revenge on the part of Stevens, which sets him apart. Indeed, his aim is to “liberate his people.” (*A Cry of Absence* 18) This is a direct, albeit implicit, reference to the tradition of slavery and later of segregation in the South and to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s aiming at putting an end to segregation. The conflict with white characters upholding white supremacy is obvious; while Hester defends segregation, simply stating from the beginning that “that’s the way we do it here,” (*A Cry of Absence* 3) Stevens’ ambition is to suppress it. Of course, it is not accidental that he spent “[t]wo years at a Northern college.” (*A Cry of Absence* 18) Here the North is closely associated with the Civil Rights movement as well.

The mention of the North leads me to the other main social group that is pitted against white Southerners, that is to say white Northerners. A single family, the Delmores, represents this group in

the novel; and while Cam's character is primarily set in violent conflict with blacks, the Delmores are almost immediately seen as opponents to both Hester and Ames. From the first page on, Hester and Mrs Delmore are pitted against each other. Mrs Delmore refuses Hester's argument that segregation is a tradition in the South, answering, "You will just have to change the way you do, then." (*A Cry of Absence* 3) She also linguistically separates herself from white Southerners in this first page, through the use of the third person plural, thus not directly addressing Hester when she judges segregation to be "so provincial of them." (*A Cry of Absence* 3) Later, Hester gives an account of her view on the Delmores specifically: "They are such destructive people, so full of arrogance and contempt. They don't know or care what they break, as long as it's in the name of their 'equality.' To them the idea that we have anything worth maintaining is just ridiculous." (*A Cry of Absence* 11) To her, it appears that equality is a Northern ideal, to which she opposes tradition as a Southern value. The confrontation is ideological and political, and not only visible through the characters' words; it is also depicted symbolically when Mrs Delmore visits Hester's house and gradually takes control over it. Indeed, the roles are reversed when Mrs Delmore is the one to offer, "Do sit down and let's talk." (*A Cry of Absence* 72) The effect is intensified by her judgment on the chair in which she is seated: "It is like a throne. [...] Is this where the Old Massa' sat?" (*A Cry of Absence* 72) Turning it into a throne implies she herself is a new queen-like figure, in place of the now gone "Old Massa" - referring to the old Southern plantation system, with a white master of the household presiding over slaves. There are other implications in the image. Mrs Delmore can be considered a metonymy for the whole Northern society and wish for equality between the races. In this case, the North is effectively described as gaining control over the Southern region. It is strengthened by Mrs Delmores' continuous criticism of segregation: "Something will just have to be done in the South, you know. We simply can't have this kind of thing in our country." (*A Cry of Absence* 73) At the same time, she is asserting the unity of the country on the whole, refusing separatism. The refusal to consider the South as a distinct region in the U.S. ironically only fuels conflict, since Mrs Delmore is in favor of the cultural assimilation of the South whereas Hester tries to preserve its distinctiveness.

The opposition between Northerners and Southerners in Jones' novel spans several generations. Mrs Delmore's daughter, Libby, she sets herself against Ames immediately after having met him. Her voice betrays her regional origin; Ames recognizes a "midwestern edge." (*A Cry of Absence* 141) As for Libby, she calls a petition Hester launched in Cameron Springs "very Southern" (*A Cry of Absence* 143) so that the opposition is an opposition between two regions and their respective ideals. Actually, Libby accuses Ames of being a "neutral," (*A Cry of Absence* 144) only to further polarize the debate and urge him to take sides, commenting on the South being "a

trap” (*A Cry of Absence* 147) and acting as a potential mirror to Ames’s emotions by voicing his alleged opposition to his mother: “you know she’s wrong. It wouldn’t make any difference if her being wrong was harmless, but it’s not. It’s destructive. And you know it is.” (*A Cry of Absence* 146-7)

Confronted to the Civil Rights movement and to this direct confrontation brought about by Northerners’ criticism of the ways of the South, it comes as no surprise that some characters in *A Cry of Absence* are in conflict with themselves also. As the story unfolds, both Ames and Hester undergo significant personal changes. Hester’s wish to put some distance between herself and the Southern heritage is already apparent when, interrogated by Mrs Delmore, she insists it was her great-grandfather and not her grandfather who owned a hundred slaves (*A Cry of Absence* 73). She also voices the idea that “very few of [them] are that kind,” (*A Cry of Absence* 14) making a reference to Stevens’s killers. So there is linguistic evidence of a wish to put herself in a separate category of white Southerners, fairly early in the story.

Ames is accused by Libby of being a “neutral.” She explains it further: “All this family stuff. When will you ever be free so that you can be yourself? [...] You can’t even follow out your own convictions, apparently. So you have just retired into a kind of sad neutrality.” (*A Cry of Absence* 146-7) But the novel will see him leave that state of neutrality. More specifically, he undergoes a process of detachment from his Southern heritage, and again, this is first portrayed symbolically. As seen earlier, Cameron Springs comprised a statue of a Confederate soldier which was destroyed by Civil Rights activists, marking a renewal of Hester’s involvement to preserve Southern culture. However, Ames has a different reaction to the absence of the statue: to him, “it did not seem strange that the pedestal at the center of the square bore no soldier.” (*A Cry of Absence* 158) The narrator also underlines a “feeling of difference” in Ames, closely followed by “a consciousness that he was no longer the person he used to be.” (*A Cry of Absence* 158) The breach is made obvious through spatial imagery; for example, Ames pays attention to “neat, new, suburban houses” (*A Cry of Absence* 159) suggesting an interest for modernity; he also literally finds himself at a crossroads, symbolizing the different choices he could make: indeed, “the road branched several times,” but we also note that “the ways looked much alike,” (*A Cry of Absence* 159) suggesting uncertainty. It is confirmed by another spatial image - the maze “of both new and old uncertainties” (*A Cry of Absence* 159) in which Ames’s thoughts are trapped. So Ames evolves in a landscape of uncertainties and instabilities. The spatial metaphor goes on: determined to prove Can’s guilt to his mother, he is rejected by her and she finally “slam[s]” the door “shut in his face,” (*A Cry of Absence* 168) excluding him from her space. It leads him to consider that “Hampton Street, whose entrance he could see, was not *his* street anymore” (*A Cry of Absence* 169) and to wonder: “then why need

that matter still be his affair?" (A Cry of Absence 169) Booking a room in a Cameron Springs hotel, he reflects, "It seemed to him fitting that he should be here, where he had never been before." (*A Cry of Absence 169*) This new spatial situation is confirmed a few lines later: "Soon, for the last time ever, he would be on the bus heading out." (*A Cry of Absence 169*) By leaving Cameron Springs, he seems to be symbolically leaving his Southern heritage behind as well. However, if Ames emancipates himself from his family and from a white supremacist point of view, he also ultimately rejects the influence of the Delmores when Hester admits to them what Cam has done:

"I suppose you've known this all along, haven't you?" Horace [Delmore] said.

"He had to know it." This from Libby.

"Yes, I knew it."

"But he was your brother, wasn't he?"

"That's right." [...]

"And the man he murdered was a Negro. *They* are not your brothers, of course."

A hard rush of anger just for a moment distorted Ames's image of Horace's face. The words came crowding into his throat, stifling one another, and all Ames could manage to say was, "Maybe as much as they are yours. What do you know about it?"

"Oh my God!" Mrs Delmore's grimace showed the whites of her eyes.

In a drawl of scathing mockery Libby said, "We just don't *understand*. Really you all just *love* Nigras, don't you? They make such nice pets."

"Some of us love them more than you love Pitts," he said, thrusting it at her.

"Meaning what?"

"That you'd trade him for a 'right'. Or a headline. If you get him killed, you'll chalk it up as a sacrifice. To righteousness." (*A Cry of Absence 272*)

In this passage, Ames insists on the superficiality of Libby and her parents' attitude. The use of the verb "trade" indicates that, to his view at least, they view it as a bargain, or a transaction, in order to reach "righteousness." The use of italics to highlight some of Libby's words crystallizes the newly formed gap between her and Ames, as it most likely indicates mockery or a form of judgment on her part.

A Cry of Absence portrays several groups in opposition to white Southerners; among them are white Northerners and also black people, using techniques that reminds us of the signifying monkey trope. Warren's *Flood* concentrates solely on the opposition between blacks and whites; and he relies on similar effects, further using the trope of signifying monkey.

In *Flood*, black and white characters are in constant opposition. This antagonism is mentioned by Joseph R. Millichap in his article "Robert Penn Warren and Regionalism" as one of Warren's favorite themes; he writes, "Warren's most characteristic conflicts [are between] fathers and sons, males and females, whites and blacks, as well as region and nation." (Millichap 35) This is of particular interest to reflect on the relationship between blacks and whites. Once again, I will try to explore the interaction between these two groups through the lens of the trickster trope. It is particularly useful in the study of Jingle Bell's character and his interaction with the (white) hero, Brad. The man Brad nicknames Jingle Bell is an employee at a gas station. Just before their first encounter, Brad already pictures him acting in a certain way: he imagines that "the face would grin through, servile and sly, across the transparent, but real, barrier of History." (*Flood* 5-6) The separation he draws between them, the one generated by nothing less than History, is meaningful, as it implicitly refers to slavery and segregation. Although it has become "transparent," possibly suggesting it is about to come down, it is still in place and continues to have an impact on the interactions between white and black people. The adjectives chosen to describe what Brad expects to read on the black man's face are also revealing; "servile and sly" connote the general characteristics of the trickster whose aim, as described in *The Signifying Monkey*, is "to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie" (Gates Jr 59) and to be "double-voiced." (Gates Jr 55) In other words, Brad expects Jingle Bells to be deceptive. A quote from Ralph Ellison's collection of essays entitled *Shadow and Act*, published in 1964, precisely connects this deceptiveness with the history of slavery:

[T]he white American, figuratively [forces] the Negro down into the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world, where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory [...]. Obviously this position need not be absolutely disadvantageous for the Negro. It might, in a different culture, be highly strategic, enlisting in his cause the freedom-creating powers of art. (Ellison 100)

In this light, servitude and slyness can be considered a result of white oppression over black populations, forcing the latter to be "strategic" in their communication habits. So Brad and Jingle

Bells, indeed, are under the strong influence of history, in their attitude to each other and in their expectations of each other as well. Jingle Bells is not only expected to play his part, but he is dressed in a way that overtly refers to the trickster figure: indeed, he wears “trick pants.” (*Flood* 6) Thanks to the previous detail of the “mismatched legs,” (*Flood* 5) the reader pictures pants belonging to some kind of colorful costume, which probably lead Brad to use the nickname “Jingle Bells.” (*Flood* 6)

From their first encounter onwards, there is an underlying physical and cultural separation between Brad and Jingle Bells. However, it is interesting to note that Jingle Bells strengthens the opposition by not fulfilling Brad’s expectations about him. Indeed: “there had been no grin. Jingle Bells had not grinned.” (*Flood* 6) And when the black character does offer a grin, “that grin was nothing like the grin which, a little earlier, Bradwell Tolliver had expected [...]. It was a very different grin.” (*Flood* 10) Brad is beguiled by the other man, whose voice he compares to that of a “ventriloquist crouched behind the pumps” and busy “doing a trick,” (*Flood* 9) reinforcing the parallel with the trickster figure.

Brad’s sister Maggie draws our attention to a detail in the novel that can be linked to the dormant, linguistic and gesture-based deception between blacks and whites. Hearing a bird sing, she exclaims, “the first mocker! Coming just in time to help the moonlight maintain your kind illusions.” (*Flood* 46) She seems to suggest her brother retains biased visions about the South and does not wish these ideas to be challenged, preferring the “kind illusions” over reality. The bird sings again and she draws her brother’s attention to it once more: “Listen to the mockingbird.” (*Flood* 180) But the mockingbird stops singing or, as Brad says, “He has exploded silently.” (*Flood* 180) This image could foreshadow the extinction of his own expectations.

Brad and Jingle Bells meet twice in the novel: in the first pages, and then towards the end. The two scenes act as a frame for the story, which strengthens the significance given to the exploration of the changing relationships between blacks and whites. During their first encounter, Jingle Bells shows no direct aggression towards Brad. However, when their paths meet again, Jingle Bells symbolically overthrows white supremacy and control over the black population. In fact, Brad himself had foretold it: he declares that “the Black Man [...] strikes back,” (*Flood* 225) which Jingle Bells later illustrates in a quite literal manner: wearing a “non-idiotic grin” and “with a motion like a flick of a cat’s paw, [he] had knocked [Brad] down.” (*Flood* 363) If we consider Jingle Bells as a synecdoche for Afro-American people, we can suggest that the character illustrates a literal destruction of the preexisting racial order. In this scene, the white man is at the mercy of the black one and not the reverse. It is directly linked to the context of the 1950s and the 1960s, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, when white supremacy is put in question and heavily threatened. It is

fitting that Jingle Bells in *Flood* should act in an unpredictable way, first retaining attitudes and ways of acting reminiscent of the Old Southern society, and then physically overthrowing Brad's historically superior role, therefore putting a symbolic end to white supremacy in the South. Only then is his real identity revealed to the reader: "Mortimer Sparlin, twenty four years old, of winning personality and personal dignity, as all his letters of academic recommendation declared, was an extremely able student of the romance languages." (*Flood* 366) He also has a "degree with honors at the University of Chicago." As a result, the typical image of the submissive, "idiotic" (*Flood* 358) black man that Brad instinctively forged in his mind is eradicated, at least in the reader's eyes. The fact that nine paragraphs, from page 365 to 366, are told from Jingle Bell's point of view, is also revealing: black characters are no longer mere objects without a consciousness or depth.

Other black men in *Flood* challenge white supremacy, either evidently or more subtly. Brother Pinckney, the black pastor, and Blanding Cottshill, a white lawyer, compose an intriguing duo in Fiddlersburg. Like Jingle Bells, Pinckney is educated, the "[o]nly person in Fiddlersburg who has ever finished college" and also "very intelligent, tactful with white folks." (*Flood* 93) Like Jingle Bells once again, he is educated but also "tactful." This is reminiscent of the trickster figure in black culture: like Jingle Bells, Brother Pinckney probably has inherited specific ways of acting and speaking, in order to trick whites and navigate white domination. Although Pinckney and Cottshill often talk, Cottshill himself admits:

"we are both keenly aware of the irony of our having conversation at all. According to the mores and folkways of our time and place, we are not supposed to have conversation [...], the vast difference between our personal histories and the histories of the races to which, respectively, we belong, means that neither words nor things mean precisely the same thing to us." (*Flood* 294)

So Cottshill recognizes the improbability of such conversations, since he and Pinckney use communication systems that he believes are incompatible, because of their diametrically opposed situations and experiences. Pinckney is also presented as more educated as most whites in Fiddlersburg. Subsequently, the black pastor, like Jingle Bells, doubly challenges white supremacy, first by tricking white characters and then by dismantling their old vision of uneducated black people.

So a parallel can be drawn between Jingle Bells and Pinckney. However, Pinckney does not resort to violence, contrary to another black man nicknamed "Pretty-Boy." Brother Potts, the white

pastor, wants to visit Pretty-Boy in jail, where he is to be executed for a crime. The convict is also referred to as “[t]he one who won’t pray,” (*Flood* 236) already challenging the religiosity of the South. Potts attempts to bring him to pray, with the result of Pretty-Boy spitting in his face. What is striking is the way Potts talks about the incident: “I did not make a motion to wipe that spit. I let it run. [...] I was thanking God that that spit was on my face, and I was not going to wipe it off, I was going to let the sun dry it, or the wind, in God’s Holy Will.” (*Flood* 238-9) The alliterative use of the pronoun “I” in the beginning of each phrase puts an emphasis on the centrality of the character as the receptacle of the experience, which serves as an awakening of sorts. Indeed, the spit can be interpreted as a retaliation, which Brother Potts seems to welcome willingly and to equate with a divine sign.

2) Conflicts Within the Southern White Community or Within a Single Character’s Own Mind

We have seen how Southern white characters are pitted against other groups, namely Northern whites and blacks in both *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence*. This is not to say that Southern whites are a fully unified group against all others; indeed, conflicts are to be found everywhere in these novels, and we have to keep it in mind when analyzing the relationships between Southern white characters. In fact they appear to be deeply divided, mainly in *A Cry of Absence*, but also in *Flood*. This points to a lack of continuity and of unity in this group, sometimes even within a single character’s own mind, reflecting the changing perspectives of Southern white people on their own identity and on race relations during the 1950s and 1960s.

Let us start the analysis of conflict within the Southern white community by working on its least evident form. In *Flood*, the conflicts are not directly apparent. Warren rather creates conflicts and discrepancies within some of his characters’ minds. Brad, the hero and the main narrator, constantly questions his identity. Recurrent images of drowning, bleeding and dying lead me to argue that his vision of his own status as a Southerner is distorted, if not destroyed. In the first part of this thesis, dedicated to the analysis of a Southern identity that resists change, I mentioned Brad’s father, Lank Tolliver, a man closely associated with the South since “he damned near owned Fiddlersburg.” (*Flood* 53) After Lank dies, Brad

began to weep. [...] It was as though somebody else were weeping. Then he tried to appropriate the process. He tried to profit from it. [...] He waited for the reward, the sweetness, the relief that should come. Nothing came. [...] All at once, he felt that it was some stranger who stood and wept in a grief that had not been divulged to Bradwell Tolliver. He had been tricked. (*Flood* 197)

In this short passage, the strong link between Brad and the Southern region, from where his family originates, is broken. Indeed “somebody else,” a “stranger” experiences the emotions, not him. This sense of loss of one’s identity is pervasive in the novel, the “pathos of the lost man, the common man, clinging to some dignity in the midst of personal ignominy, loss of identity and general social wreckage.” (*Flood* 6) This depersonalization is further developed by specific comparisons and metaphors; Brad feels “like a man bleeding to death from some inner wound” (*Flood* 69) or fantasizes about “a drowning, an eternal drowning, a perpetual suffocation.” (*Flood* 18) If these images suggested a disappearance of the traditional South, they also support the analysis that Brad is losing touch with the Southern part of his identity. The fact that he is of Northern descent from his father’s side at the same time annihilates the equation made earlier between Lank and the South.

So Brad’s identity as a Southerner is heavily challenged. Albeit indirectly, he likewise puts into question his relationship to Fiddlersburg. The last line of chapter 8 reads: “‘Oh, Fiddlersburg,’ he breathed, ‘I love you.’” (*Flood* 111) But a comparison used later in the story challenges this affection, when Fiddlersburg is equated with a trap: “Fiddlersburg was rising and closing around him like a fog, like a trap. He could not breathe. He stood there and hated Fiddlersburg.” (*Flood* 306) Not only is Fiddlersburg a trap, but it is also a fog, therefore connoting immobility and confusion at the same time. The final feeling of hatred acts as a reversal of the initial “love,” framing Brad’s conflicted emotions towards the Southern town.

Moreover, Brad’s indecisiveness as to his attitude towards Jingle Bells is another proof of his internal struggle. After making a comment about Jingle Bell’s trick pants, he says, “I’m sorry I said what I did. About the trick pants. [...] I didn’t mean to – to be offensive.” (*Flood* 9) The narration further upholds Brad’s words: “He hadn’t meant to put it that way. Twenty-five years ago, he would have known how to put it.” (*Flood* 9) This last comment recalls the evolution of the Southern society and the evolution of race relations, thus disrupting the codes and leaving Brad

conflicted about his attitude to blacks. The lack of familiar, cultural bearings seems to have an important impact on Brad as a character; when he asks Leontine Purtle, “What’s it like [...] to be blind?” she answers, “*Being you’s like being blind.*” (*Flood* 232-3) The use of italics helps to visually set apart Leontine’s answer; it gives prominence to her words. Brad is associated with a state of blindness, and the image underlines his inner confusion.

Brad’s new cultural blindness can be linked to a notion that Frances Bixler describes as central to Warren’s work - the notion of “acedia,” put forward in her article entitled “Acedia: The Most deadly Sin in Robert Penn Warren’s Fictive World.” The article is enclosed in a collection of essays edited by James A. Grimshaw Jr. and entitled *Time’s Glory – Original Essays on Robert Penn Warren*. Acedia, from the Greek negative prefix “- a” and the noun “*kedos*”, translating as “concern,” can thus be described as a lack of concern or apathy. Bixler defends the idea that the novelist’s “fictive world [...] focuses on the characters who are not yet completely devoted to either good or evil but are struggling to define themselves in a world where the signs have become blurred or lost and the temptation to give way to acedia beckons powerfully.” (Bixler 3) She further maintains that Warren attempts at “present[ing] acedia as the most pervasive modern failing” (Bixler 4) in his writings. Characters like Brad, confronted with a changing society and the disappearance of their old culture and habits, can thus be prone to it. It is hinted at in Brad’s mention of a seemingly Southern habit he calls “high lonesome.” (*Flood* 54) He describes it to Yasha in these terms:

“Well, in the Deep South, in certain circles, upper-class circles – that is, by old-fashioned standards [...] - the locution *high lonesome* means a strictly private booze-soak, alcoholic concentration of point five percent or better, undertaken for strictly philosophical reasons. [...] It is the nearest Bradwell Tolliver comes to Zen, and he is coming there now because, in this flood of moonlight and memory, he is about to retire to the chamber where he, as a boy, lay [...].” (*Flood* 54).

This description of alcoholism and a retreat into philosophy as a response to the “flood of [...] memory” can indeed be interpreted as a form of apathy. Apathy is meant here with no psychological or moral judgment; only as a tool to analyze the characters’ construction and actions.

However, Brad is not the only element suggesting conflict. The sheer narrative structure of the novel seems to mirror a kind of internal struggle. Brad, of course, is the main focalizer, but the narrator regularly makes use of other focalizers, such as Brad's girlfriend Lettice (*Flood* 137-141, 146-148), Yasha Jones (*Flood* 266-274) and even black pastor Leon Pinckney (*Flood* 170) and black employee Jingle Bells, whose real name is Mortimer Sparlin (*Flood* 365-366). Seen in this light, the novel is a polyphonic one, and it highlights a lack of unity and continuity. Since we are dealing here with the conflicts within the white community, let us focus on two white Southerners,: Brad and his sister, Maggie. We notice a first discrepancy between the passages told from Brad's point of view and those told from Maggie's point of view. While the third-person narrator gives us access to the story through Brad's eyes, Maggie speaks directly to the reader through direct speech. Her voice is heard without a filter. The interplay between the two kinds of writing, direct speech and the use of a third-person narrator, creates a slight imbalance. Incidentally, Maggie tells Brad, "Hush [...], you interrupt." (*Flood* 182) From this moment on, resurgences of her monologue interrupt the narration - seven times in books three and four combined. These interruptions last anywhere from two to seven pages. Maggie's voice thus appears around the middle of the novel and starts challenging Brad's point of view. Figuratively, we can say that the two voices are in conflict to be heard in the second half of *Flood*, as though both wanted to tell their side of the story.

Flood's books three and four, then, differ from the first two inasmuch as Brad is not the sole voice anymore. The unity is gradually degraded and destroyed. To go further, not only the structure of the novel, but the genre called "novel" itself is put into question. Just as several voices reveal themselves in the narration, other genres, literary or not, mingle with the novel. One striking example of this is the passage where Brad recalls his conversation with Calvin Fiddler; the conversation is then shaped as an extract from a play, with the names of the characters, namely "HIMSELF" for Brad and "CALVIN," and the characters' words given through direct speech. To quote a passage:

CALVIN: *And Bradwell Tolliver – yes, you – sits in his room at night working, and pretends he does not know.*

HIMSELF: *God damn it, I didn't know. But to tell the truth, I hope to God they are up to something.*

CALVIN: *No doubt. And no doubt they are. (Flood 288)*

The presentation of the text is entirely different, from the names in capitals to the utterances in italics. It constitutes an important breach with the rest. And it is not the only one: another instance is the presence of bits taken from the script of Calvin Fiddler's trial. Calvin Fiddler, as mentioned before, was accused several years before of murdering a Northern engineer working on the dam destined to flood Fiddlersburg. The script of the questioning appears five times, exclusively in book four. These passages act as a kind of echo to Brad and Calvin's conversation given in the shape of a play. Here is an extract from the script:

Q: Where were you on the afternoon of Saturday, October 5, 1940?

A: I was in my study – the room I work in – reading.

Q: At what time did you come down?

A: Around six thirty.

Q: How come you know the time?

A: My wife called me at six. She called up from the garden and said it was six o'clock. (*Flood* 301, beginning of book four)

So, from book three on, the form of the novel undergoes an anamorphosis, featuring passages in the form of a play and monologues; the process is accelerated in book four which opens on a piece of what seems to be the script of a trial. Not only is the novel a polyphonic one, but it is also a multiform one. These two processes underline an obvious discontinuity, reinforced by the seemingly random use of italics and capitals. Here, form serves substance and puts an emphasis on the general lack of unity in the novel: a lack of unity within the Southern white community, but also within the characters' minds.

In *Flood*, the narrator depicts characters who have trouble adjusting to a changing world and are in quest of a new identity. Among other things, this depiction is enacted through the use of contrasts, polyphony and the inclusion of different genres of writings. The narrator of *A Cry of Absence* likewise stages conflicts between members of the white Southern community, but also the inner struggles of some white characters such as Hester and, to a lesser extent, her son Ames.

Hester undergoes a substantial, if not completed, evolution throughout the novel. What is of interest here is the path she follows after her son Cam dies by suicide. His death acts as a triggering event. One passage is symbolic and significant: her car is "topping the crest from where she must

see, through the misty rain, lights blooming row on row along the slopes of what had been green pasture land. At the fork there, she paused uncertainly, but then went on, choosing the right road down.” (*A Cry of Absence* 266) The opposition between the “slopes” full of “misty rain” and the former “green pasture land” hint at the change that has taken place, both outside and inside Hester. She now stands at a crossroads and has to make a choice. If we take into account the polysemy of the adjective “right,” the fact that she chooses “the right road” is meaningful. It indicates a spatial, but also a moral direction. To reuse the notion of *acedia* examined earlier, Hester, unlike Brad, actually surpasses *acedia* inasmuch as she decides to act. Towards the end of the novel, she warns black lawyer Wendell Pitts of the terrorist attack planned by white supremacist Hollis Handley. She also comes to face with Cam’s guilt in the death of Otis Stevens, hence figuratively – and literally – facing herself:

She looked into the mirror again, at herself [...]:

“[Handley’s] son was a friend of my son.” She drew a breath. “They are the ones who killed the Stevens Negro. [...] I think I had known it all along, though, really. I couldn’t face it.” (*A Cry of Absence* 268)

But inner conflict takes the upper hand as Hester dies by suicide.

Just like in *Flood*, *A Cry of Absence* features characters who experience personal struggles, but also conflicts among different members of the same group, namely white Southerners. We notice a first opposition between Hester and other Southern women part of the same society, dedicated to defending Southern culture and heritage. The antagonism is built around the destruction of the Confederate statue is destroyed in Cameron Springs; Hester wants to rebuild it at once, but the rest of the women disagree. One of them comments, “I think you’re being awfully unrealistic. Things aren’t like they used to be anymore, we have to face the facts,” (*A Cry of Absence* 137) while another declares, “After all, we lost that war” (*A Cry of Absence* 137) referring to the Civil War. The general resistance to her will results in Hester deciding to leave the committee. On the same page she reflects, “this was the moment that, in a vague compartment of her mind, she had been anticipating for at least these last few days. No, much longer.” (*A Cry of Absence* 137) It indicates that the conflict between her and the other women is a latent one; so Hester’s character contrasts with the others.

Another conflicted relationship leads us to enter not only the community circle, but the family one. During their first encounter, Hester's future husband Thomas Glenn is described by young Hester as an almost superhuman being, "as blinding bright as the morning sky." (*A Cry of Absence* 93) But Hester's perception of him changes drastically as they grow up and as the story unfolds. She "watched his manners and even his sense of responsibility decay," (*A Cry of Absence* 95) so that "his departure had been like a purging of her house." (*A Cry of Absence* 96) The meliorative connotations of the first depiction give way to a starkly negative vision, and the final separation between Hester and Thomas acts as a symbol for the underlying conflicts and oppositions in the Southern white community - sometimes within families. To reinforce this idea, Hester is also put in opposition to her other son, Ames. Contrary to her, Ames follows a rather progressive path regarding race relations. Of him, Cam comments: "Ames is not really on our side. I wouldn't trust him a foot." (*A Cry of Absence* 85) So there is already a strong suspicion regarding Ames.

Moreover, not unlike Brad in *Flood*, Ames is an in-between character as he constantly moves from his mother's house to university. The following passage strengthens his role as a progressive character: "his eyes followed the highway out of town north past the textile mill. One week more and he would be on it, headed back to school. No matter what, he would be." (*A Cry of Absence* 29) The fact that his gaze is directed northwards is significant and foreshadows the breach between him and his Southern family. When Libby Delmore, a Northerner, later asks him if he is on his mother's side, Ames finally answers, "Maybe not in a lot of things I used to think." (*A Cry of Absence* 146) He also urges Hester to do "the *right* thing. The right thing for you to do is to turn [Cam] in." (*A Cry of Absence* 167) Lines before, his insistence had led Hester to declare, "I will not have this, Ames. You are in my house," (*A Cry of Absence* 166) foreshadowing the final rejection: "she advanced straight toward him [...]. The door slammed shut in his face." (*A Cry of Absence* 168) After this spatial, as well as social, exclusion, Ames reflects, "At last he could belong to himself, be what he thought and felt, and chose to be. [...] Soon, for the last time ever, he would be on the bus heading out." (*A Cry of Absence* 169)

Even before the direct confrontation between Hester and Ames, the reader is given a glimpse into Ames's history workbook at university. It reads,

Seen thus objectively, in the unbiased light of modern statistical and other research, these facts necessarily explode virtually all of the romantic

illusions about the Old South. That such a society, based squarely upon a crushing exploitation of the Negro, with its largely rude, oppressive, and anti-democratic characteristics, should give rise to so many dearly cherished fairy tales is a classic illustration of the hollowness of most of our myths. It scarcely needs saying that the persistence of myths like these, playing havoc as they do with the rational conduct of life, gravely reduces the chances for the achievement of truly free and just societies. (*A Cry of Absence* 102)

Two lexical fields confront each other in the excerpt; the lexical field of fantasy and romanticism: “romantic illusions,” “dearly cherished fairy tales,” “myths,” counterbalanced by that of oppression: “crushing exploitation,” “rude, oppressive, and anti-democratic characteristics,” “havoc.” The clash between the two antithetical representations of the South prefigures the conflict between Ames’ changing frame of thought and his mother’s traditionalism, leading to the eventual removal of the former from Hester’s house.

Part Four: Efforts at Accepting the Reality of Change

Part one of my dissertation dealt with a certain representation of the Southern region as resisting change, especially change threatening racial codes and a society still based largely upon agrarianism and an idyllic vision of the old Southern society. Part two proceeded to analyze more precisely the pessimistic vision of progress at work in both *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood*. This vision can be seen as resulting in the death of the Old South as a myth and a seemingly ideal society. Part three focused on the dynamics of conflict in *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood*, and how they question or endanger white supremacy in the South, as well as values or ideas that are traditionally associated with the region. Conflicts between white Southerners and other groups were under study, as well as conflicts existing within the community; such oppositions create interesting dynamics and reveal a conflicted consciousness standing on the brink of a metamorphosis. As for part four, it is going to be dedicated to the elements, in both novels, pointing at an attempt at reconciliation between the different groups, especially white Southerners, Northerners and blacks, but also within the white Southern community.

Indeed, while part three already touched on the subject through the analysis of conflict, necessarily implying the notion of possible reconciliation, it is now time to delve into the phenomenon of personal evolution on the part of the main characters, physical as well as mental. In *Flood* for example, Brad follows a circular pattern, assessing the same ideas over and over. The idea of evolution and a change of mind will be linked to the tradition of racial conversion in the South, as Fred Hobson's *But Now I See – The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* will help support. It will also be associated with the hybrid quality of the characters portrayed in both novels, and such hybridity can in turn be seen through the lens of postmodernist fiction. While associating reconciliation with the postmodernist perspective could be questionable, because of the issues raised by the postmodernist movement pertaining to the use of unreliable narratives, it is my belief that the composite nature of some narratives, a feature that is also at the heart of postmodernist studies, can in itself point to an attempt, at least, at some form of acceptance or reconciliation.

The idea of personal evolution, possibly linked to hybridity and postmodernism, will be the subject of the first sub-section. The second sub-section will be concerned with the several attempts at reconciliation and at finally accepting change on the part of white Southerners.

1) Personal Evolution

In *A Cry of Absence*, Madison Jones depicts characters who are constantly confronted with change and to the nature of their own traditions and ideals. It comes as no surprise, as the story takes place in 1957, in the midst of the Civil Rights movement. Let us focus on Hester. As already mentioned and supported in this thesis, Hester embodies a deep love of the past, a traditional way of living. She is even portrayed as the last defender of the mythical Old South when she begins doubting the other members of the committee dedicated to the memory of the Old South. After the Confederate statue was destroyed by Civil Rights activists, the Delmores, a Northern family, propose “that a World War II memorial replace the old, anachronistic one.” (*A Cry of Absence* 128) Immediately after, Hester puts in question the attitudes of her friends at the committee:

they would think, as Jane had, as Edgar Lashley had, that she was making too much of the matter. Was she? But why could they not see the issue, and its importance, as plainly as she could? [...] [S]omething behind the faces she had queried, behind the friendly voices and even the pages of the newspaper, was being withheld from her. (*A Cry of Absence* 128)

If the interrogation marks connote uncertainty, pointing at the character’s emotions and uncertainties, Hester’s condemnation of her friends is later made complete; sensing a “decay in the whole order of things” (*A Cry of Absence* 132) and receiving no answer when asking “I take it that nobody will support a resolution to the city council... that the monument be put back right away?” (*A Cry of Absence* 138), she finally declares, “I think it’s time to put up a plaque for this society.” The image here is a *mise en abyme*, as the role of the society is to care for the historic heritage of the Confederate South. Here, the society is equated with a vestige of the past. Hester is the only one pushing for the refection of the Confederate statue and, therefore, is singled out as the last defender of the old ways. In this circumstance, she willingly sets herself apart from the others in order to retain her beliefs. All these elements connote immobility and stagnation rather than change.

However, she later undergoes a substantial evolution. If I already mentioned it in part three of this thesis, I would now like to put an emphasis on her evolution regarding race relations, provoked by several events, although the triggering event is her son, Cam. Her vision of him

changes drastically when she learns he is the murderer of Otis Stephens and she envisions his existence as a punishment for her, as he is “part of her fate, like something sent [...] to bring ruin upon her, upon her family, upon all that she held dearest and most worthy. To bring extinction, this was the word.” (*A Cry of Absence* 217) The iteration of the rather old-fashioned proposition “upon” endows the passage with a biblical tonality; in this way, the reader can be led to read it as a kind of punishing prophecy that has just been fulfilled. Hester is now bound to abandon her idyllic vision of her murderous son. His subsequent death by suicide further encourages Hester to change her mind on race relations.

It also brings me to mention tragedy and mourning. Although both seem to be personal, psychological phenomena more than literary ones, I believe they can have meaningful literary repercussions. In fact, in *Tragedy – Contradiction and Repression*, Richard Kuhns characterizes tragedy as “address[ing] a conflict that goes to the heart of political life: the conflict between private psychological need and public political obligation.” (Kuhns 2) Indeed, regarding Hester’s situation, it seems to be the case; the guilt, and then the loss of her son bring tragedy into her story, and the dynamics of tragedy as described by Kuhns put her in an ambiguous position. She begins questioning her family and her regional heritage, while still rejecting the ideals defended by Civil Rights activists. She becomes an in-between, indecisive figure regarding race relations. There is a strong sense of indeterminacy in her character, and it is reflected in the way the narrator describes her; for example, “There had been a stretch of time, hours, when all the functions of Hester’s body seemed to be virtually suspended. Her consciousness, like the images fixed or passing in a mirror glass, was whatever thing impinged upon sight or hearing, without before or after.” (*A Cry of Absence* 214). Not only her consciousness is reduced to what her senses perceive around her, putting into question any reflective process or emotional activity, but Hester is also described here as an entity outside time or “suspended.” Interestingly, Kuhns adds that indeterminacy in a character “can be generated in narrative fiction by a simple contradiction, even an obscurity as well as by denial.” (Kuhns 132) We can argue that, in Hester’s case, tragedy is implemented with the help of inherent contradiction, as she condemns her son’s actions while retaining her mythical vision of the Old South. Subsequently, it is also created through denial, which in turn leads her to monetarily lose all her bearings.

Contradiction and denial have other literary consequences. Another idea raised by Kuhns is that “mourning completes the temporal sequence of past-present-future.” (Kuhns 33) It is very relevant in the construction of Hester as an in-between, hybrid character. This hybrid quality is exposed after Cam’s death. Interestingly, Kuhns adds that “futuraity is realized through mourning.”

(Kuhns 32) In this way Cam's death can be considered the event that made possible any evolution and attempt, on the part of Hester, at accepting the reality of changing race relations and of the Southern region. This change is literary present through a spatial evolution and through some of Hester's actions. The mention of "a small displacement, like a change of balance" (*A Cry of Absence* 181) in her mind already foreshadowed her physical and ideological journey. After his death, Cam is quickly negated as Hester empties his bedroom. The room is described through Ames's eyes as

bare – chest of drawers and tabletop, the mattress on the bed, the walls on which triangular marks palely showed where the patterns of colored banners had hung. Already it was no one's room. [...] [H]e saw Cam's silver cups, as if simply dropped among the banners and sweat shirts and an oily baseball glove. (*A Cry of Absence* 212-213)

The contrast between the "colored banners" and the marks that "palely showed" reinforces the process of disappearance; "Cam" has been replaced by "no one," both figuratively, as the perceived receptacle of Southern values, and literally. Not only does the passage support the idea of a death of the Old South, embodied by Cam, it also tends to show Hester's progression. As mentioned before, the progression is physical as well. Planning on giving Cam's clothes to "the Negroes," (*A Cry of Absence* 220) she drives "fast away down a bumpy rutted road that seemed as if it might lead into a country out of which she never would find her way." (*A Cry of Absence* 248) The "bumpy rutted road" might be a metaphor for her journey toward change, toward a "country out of which she never would find her way," suggesting the kind of change under way can only be final. She symbolically stops the car near "Bo Camron's cabin," the cabin recalling the typical houses where black slaves lived on plantations. Giving away Cam's clothes to black people is quite an ambiguous gesture on her part. It can be argued that Hester plays the role of the traditional white Southern lady, giving away her used items to black people. However, the act of offering them her dead son's clothes can also be seen as materialistically bridging the gap between Hester and black people. Indeed, Cam was previously described as an archetypally Southern figure; giving his clothes away to black characters is then a highly symbolic gesture.

Hester's route from her house in Cameron Springs to the "cotton field" (*A Cry of Absence* 248) and the cabins is reminiscent of a Southern practice among the white community: the white

racial conversion. In a book entitled *But Now I See – The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*, Fred Hobson explains it is “a form of southern self-expression not seen [until] the 1940s” (Hobson 1) where white people, “all products of and willing participants in a harsh, segregated society, confess racial wrongdoing and are ‘converted’, in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment.” (Hobson 2) If Hobson’s study is primarily interested in nonfiction, he underlines that “any treatment of southern racial conversion could certainly include fiction” (Hobson 5) and points out Southern authors such as Faulkner or Mark Twain (Hobson 6). In *A Cry of Absence*, Hester does experience changes akin to what Hobson characterizes, but in a literary work of fiction.

Madison Jones’ main character in *A Cry of Absence* experiences a mental journey on the path to “racial conversion,” (Hobson 5) echoed by a physical journey as well, from her house in Cameron Springs to the typical cabins inhabited by some black people.

In *Flood*, Warren seems to depict a quite similar situation with his main character, Brad. His evolution is not only mental or psychological, but physical too, as he seems to follow a very erratic and diverse pattern, spending a considerable amount of time traveling between several places. The novel opens on his arrival to Fiddlersburg, but numerous analepses bring the reader back to when he was in the North, in New York City. There, Brad decides to go to Spain and take part in the civil war there, with the simple declaration “I am going to Spain.” (*Flood* 135) Two pages after that, an ellipsis brings us to “[w]hen he had gone.” (*Flood* 137) A few pages after that, at the beginning of chapter 11, Brad is suddenly “[b]ack in New York,” and still entangled in memories of when “[h]e had been in battle. He had seen death” in Spain (*Flood* 142), so that he and the reader alike are made to linger in two different places. Two pages later, he declares, “I’m going back to Spain.” (*Flood* 145) It establishes a circular pattern between Spain and New York, that is seemingly impossible to escape from. However, he breaks the circle on the same page when, after an other ellipsis, he says to his partner Lettice Poindexter, “I’m going to Fiddlersburg.” (*Flood* 145) Even though the circle is spatially broken, the symmetrical structures of all these declarations add to the impression of restlessness on Brad’s part.

Of course, the event of his going to Spain to fight in the civil war there echoes the history of the South. It evokes the American Civil War that opposed North and South from 1861 to 1865. It could suggest an attempt at appropriating the history of his country by reenacting it, even though it is in a different part of the world. It can also be interpreted as an attempt at changing himself, by changing places or changing the course of his actions. It brings to mind literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s affirmations that “in a novel the individual acquires the ideological and linguistic

initiative necessary to change the nature of his own image,” and that “[a]s a rule, the hero of a novel is always more or less an ideologue.” (Bakhtin 95) As a result, a personal evolution throughout the novel appears to be inevitable, closely linked to the – debatable - idea that the main character generally embodies, or strives to embody, a specific ideology.

The notion I am defending is that characters necessarily evolve during the course of a novel; and their evolution gives birth to a hybrid nature or status. Indeed, hybridity is inherent to both Hester’s and Brad’s constructions as heroes of their stories, starting from a specific point and then sustaining a mental and physical journey. On the subject of novel characters, Bakhtin explains,

An individual cannot be completely incarnated into the flesh of existing sociohistorical categories. There is no mere form that would be able to incarnate once and forever all of his human possibilities and needs, no form in which he could exhaust himself down to the last word [...]; no form that he could fill to the very brim, and yet at the same time not splash over the brim. There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness. (Bakhtin 94)

According to him, it does appear that a character is, intrinsically, a hybrid entity. Bakhtin strikingly points out that change is also inherent to the novel format itself. The “symptoms of change appear considerably more often in the novel than they do elsewhere, as the novel is a developing genre; they are sharper and more significant because the novel is in the vanguard of change.” (Bakhtin 89) In this way, the progression of the characters, leading to their necessary hybridization, can be interpreted as part of a larger literary reflection on the novel as a developing form, retaining some sort of plasticity, and prone to change and experimentation, in such a way that the evolution of the hero can be said to mirror the fact that the novel itself does not stop evolving as a genre. More specifically, we can think of the Bildungsroman inherited from a German literary tradition. In a Bildungsroman (“roman d’apprentissage” in French), the hero indispensably goes through a meaningful evolution. Paul Ricoeur explains in *Temps et récit 2 : La configuration dans le récit de fiction*,

[dans le] roman d’apprentissage [...] [t]out semble tourner autour de la venue à soi du personnage principal. C’est d’abord la conquête de sa maturité qui fournit la trame du récit ; puis ce sont de plus en plus ses

doutes, sa confusion, sa difficulté à se situer et à se rassembler, qui régissent la dérive du type. (Ricoeur 19)

In this passage, we recognize the elements referring to characters acquiring a hybrid nature. Interestingly, Ricoeur stresses the confusion and doubts developed by the characters on their way. The two elements seem to correspond to both Brad in *Flood* and Hester in *A Cry of Absence*. Other literary theorists include hybridity and evolution in their consideration. For instance it is presented by Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, in their article “Theorizing the Hybrid,” as a state of “in-betweenness, belonging to both and neither,” (Kapchan & Strong 245) which recalls Brad’s mixed origins, both Northern and Southern, and his ambiguous relationship to Fiddlersburg, his hometown. Indeed, confessing: “Fiddlersburg, I love you,” (*Flood* 111) he later feels that “Fiddlersburg was rising and closing around him like a fog, like a trap. He could not breathe. He stood there and hated Fiddlersburg.” (*Flood* 306) It could be argued that he belongs to both North and South, and also to neither. From here, we could say Brad was a hybrid figure from the beginning on. He himself even directly puts into question his Southern heritage, admitting, “I’m mixed. Confederate as hell on my mother’s side – the Cottshill side [...]. But I bet it was Blue-Belly all the way with the Tollivers.” (*Flood* 121) “Blue-Belly” presumably refers to the blue uniform worn by Union soldiers, that is to say Northerners, opposed to the Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. That Brad describes himself as half-Confederate, half-Unionist can almost be considered as an oxymoron; the reunion of two opposed sides illustrates Brad’s inner conflict, transforming the war into a personal struggle and an attempt at reaching closure. Of course, his personal evolution throughout the novel reinforces this hybrid quality.

Analyzing the evolution of the characters brought me to mention hybridity and to apply it to the construction of both the characters and the novel as a literary form. Daniel Grassian puts an emphasis on another aspect of hybrid traits in fiction. In his book entitled *Hybrid Fictions: American Literature and Generation X* he argues that it is part of a “larger issue [which] is the search for individuality and identity.” (Grassian 86) This process of finding a new identity is naturally linked to the Bildungsroman genre and the quest it fundamentally implies. This quest for a new identity is visible through literary and linguistic devices; namely, here, the elasticity of the forms used in *Flood*, but also Brad’s wanderings, from Spain to New York and finally Fiddlersburg. In *A Cry of Absence*, we have already alluded to the mental journey that Hester follows, mainly on the subject of race relations. Because a huge part of her identity as a white Southerner revolves around questions of the place occupied by black and white people in society, putting into question the relationships between blacks and whites naturally leads to the path of a whole new identity.

2) Attempted Reconciliations

The first sub-section was dedicated to the analysis of personal evolution on the part of Hester, one of the main characters of *A Cry of Absence*, and Brad, the hero of *Flood*. Hybrid qualities of both characters, mirrored by the hybridity and plasticity of the novel form, are part of a larger design: that of attempted reconciliations, extensively featured in the two novels. Indeed, what is left out in the first sub-part is the state that the characters reach at the conclusion of their evolution. Through numerous and diverse ways, Madison Jones and Robert Penn Warren stage an attempt at some sort of closure or reconciliation: reconciliation with oneself, with one's culture, with other characters belonging to different groups; reconciliations between tradition and evolution, past and present, blacks and whites, North and South. These attempts show that both *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* can be read as more than stories about the nostalgia of a dead past; they show more depth and complexity, sometimes remaining ambiguous, inconclusive and open to interpretations. This trait could be associated to the postmodernist movement in literature and more broadly in the artistic field.

“Postmodernism” in the arts does not seem to have any final definition. However, let us focus on the description given by Brian McHale in his book *Postmodernist Fiction*:

the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive:” “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (McHale 10)

So postmodernist fiction seems to be primarily concerned with the philosophy of being, the nature of existence and reality. If it sounds like a philosophical topic rather than a purely literary one, it is still very relevant in the construction of the characters and of the scenario. McHale gives more details about the core questions of postmodernism; he writes,

Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they

constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (McHale 10)

Based on these explanations, I will try to see how, first *A Cry of Absence*, then *Flood*, can be said to have postmodernist components, which in turn can be related to the processes of finding closure and reconciliation. While questions about closure or lack thereof are common to both the modernist and postmodernist movements, I have chosen to focus on postmodernism, as this literary movement gained momentum in the 1950s and 1960s. In his book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern Fictions*, Gerhard Hoffmann remarks that “[h]istorically, postmodernism as an important category evolves from the Sixties” (Hoffmann 34) and goes on to describe the movement in these terms:

“Postmodern fiction [...] [turns] against the three pillars of modern art, the concepts of reality, identity and totalizing artistic form, and [develops] its own ‘imagined alternatives’ (Goodman). It was the deconstruction of ‘traditional loyalties, ties and associations’ (Howe 426), the experience of a sharpened sense of new possibility and diversity, and the willingness to experiment, rethink, and redefine, that caused what has been called a ‘revolutionary explosion of the arts’ (Howard 267).” (Hoffmann 33-4)

This explanation of Postmodernism, and the period during which the movement really developed itself, makes it seem particularly fitted to the analysis of *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence*, published in 1964 and 1971 respectively, and ultimately concerned with the deconstruction of traditional literary representations as an attempt to “redefine” reality and create “new possibility and diversity.”

Let us start with Ames, the second focal character in *A Cry of Absence*. As already extensively mentioned in part three, just like Hester, he goes through a substantial internal struggle. He is cast out by his mother, as shows the passage: “she advanced straight toward him, blotting the light behind her tall, draped figure. He could not but step back across the threshold. The

door slammed shut in his face.” (*A Cry of Absence* 168) The threshold here is a symbolic one as much as a literal one and he enters a figuratively uncharted territory, as it “seemed to him fitting that he should be here, where he never had been before.” (*A Cry of Absence* 169) What is interesting is, his mental journey is also supported by his physical whereabouts. His exclusion from his mother’s space is confirmed by the statement: “Hampton Street, whose entrance he could see, was not *his* street anymore.” (*A Cry of Absence* 169) But even before being cast out, Ames’ trajectory is indicative of reconciliation with different groups, namely black people and white people from the North. Chapter 3 concerns a trip he makes in a black area in Cameron Springs. When first entering the neighborhood, “[f]our Negro girls danced around a pole in the wan streetlight. Their glances at Ames made a momentary interval in the song that took up again as he passed by.” (*A Cry of Absence* 29) The interval, the rupture in the girls’ song suggest a distance between them and Ames. However, Ames later tries to annihilate the distance, as his “presence here was a mute apology” (*A Cry of Absence* 32) for Cam’s actions and he presents his hand to a young black boy. But “the contact was a mere brushing of flesh that communicated nothing,” (*A Cry of Absence* 30) hinting at the failure of his attempt.

Black people are not the only ones Ames wants to reconcile with. Pushed by the Delmores, a Northern family, he finally declares, “[i]t made me see, in a light I never saw them in before, the ugliness and the falseness of things. [...] It completed my own emancipation. At least I know which side I am on...” (*A Cry of Absence* 170) The mention of the side gives a visual dimension to his emancipation, which once again is completed spatially. At the very end, he regains a certain amount of control on his mother’s territory, as he inherits her house: “he would keep the house. He would rent it for now, but it would still be his, still recoverable.” (*A Cry of Absence* 280) Once again, it is a question of territory and space, and reconciliation is also achieved through the capture, or recapture, of specific places. These places act as synecdoches: indeed, Hester’s house for example is not “just” a house, it is representative of a whole Southern tradition, culture and society. If we consider that the house, the black neighborhood, the “side” chosen by Ames all stand for a broader ideology, then his journey could be an illustration of the postmodern core questions enumerated by Dick Higgins, cited in Brian McHale’s *Postmodern Fiction*: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Undeniably, the process of reconciliation leads Ames to take into account different facets of the literary world in which he evolves, and this enables the character to build a new identity. In his work about hybrid fictions, Daniel Grassian makes the thought-provoking assertion that “identities are formed and cultures established in the in-between spaces of ethnic and

cultural identities.” (Grassian 2) This corroborates the fact that Ames achieves a new, intrinsically composite identity through his wanderings and his status as an in-between literary figure.

However, if Ames’ attempts at a reconciliation between several groups and several parts of himself as a character seems to be reasonably fruitful, perhaps it is not the case for his mother, Hester. Engaged on the road “from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment,” (Hobson 2) she prevents any change from becoming final by killing herself at the end of the novel. Interestingly, the fact that her evolution cannot be considered complete because of her death, could be read as being indicative of one of the characteristics of the novel as a developing form in the 20th century. As Paul Ricoeur argues, “ce qui capte l’intérêt, c’est maintenant l’inachèvement de la personnalité, la diversité des niveaux de conscience, de subconscience et d’inconscience, le grouillement des désirs informulés.” (Ricoeur 19) In this way, *A Cry of Absence* presents one successful journey on the path to reconciliation, and one that is not, because it is followed by death. Let us recall some of the core questions constitutive of the postmodernist movement as raised by McHale: “What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (McHale 10) Ames’ and Hester’s trajectories were both triggered by the confrontation of different worlds: Southern history confronted to the Civil Rights movement, Southerners confronted to Northerners, middle-aged people confronted by a younger generation, white people confronted to black people. Such oppositions precisely led to the quest for a new identity and a new space to occupy for these white characters, as part of a broader quest for combination rather than opposition.

The town of Cameron Springs itself, where the action takes place, can be considered as a symbol for the combination of two previously opposite elements. Old and new buildings stand side by side; for example, Ames observes “the well-remembered place of his childhood” while at the same time “considering the works of construction and demolition underway in the town.” (*A Cry of Absence* 109) Change does imply demolition and construction, in order to reach a final state; tradition and modernity, in the shape of buildings, seem to merge and, in this process, the South is pictured as gradually losing its cultural and environmental uniqueness in the U.S.A. Several characters underline the necessity for Cameron Springs to evolve according to new racial, cultural, technological standards. Mrs Delmore, as a Northerner, declares on the first page of the novel that Southerners “will just have to change the way [they] do,” (*A Cry of Absence* 3) but Southern characters as well uphold this idea. Editor Kirk Qualls tells Hester,

“We have to move ahead, and we *are* moving ahead. [...] We are absolutely dependent on industrial growth now, or the town will dry up. We have a most advantageous situation for industry here, if we can keep them coming. [...] I wonder if you realize how much things have changed, Mrs. Glenn. Even in the last five years, in this town. In ten more, you won’t know it. And I must admit it’s about time.” (*A Cry of Absence* 124-5)

This description of a Southern town is far from the idealistic, rural society defended by the Southern Agrarians. If progress, and especially industrial progress, can be envisioned in a pessimistic way, we could also argue that the evolution of Cameron Springs and the gradual dissolution of a distinct Southern identity tend to enable a comparison between the two formerly opposed regions that were the industrialized North and the agrarian South. Hester’s friends, dedicated to the preservation of the Southern identity, underline themselves that “[t]hings aren’t like they used to be anymore, we have to face the facts.” (*A Cry of Absence* 137)

Although not completely similar to Jones, Warren stages several attempts at reconciliation in *Flood* - mainly through his characters’ evolution. Characters endorse a newly-forged identity, groups that were previously set in opposition to each other, such as blacks and whites, are described in new ways. Let us start by an analysis of the main character, Brad. As I argued in the first subsection, he grows to be a highly hybrid figure. However, once again, the composite nature of Brad’s identity and status in the novel is precisely what triggers the process of reconciliation, and *Flood* also features his coming to terms with his hometown, Fiddlersburg; more precisely, he comes to terms with the forthcoming disappearance of Fiddlersburg.

Before delving into the subject of the flood more, another element should be cited here that is also indicative of Brad’s attempts at a reconciliation with his own background. Indeed, after having gone to Spain to take part in the civil war there, as a kind of re-enactment of the American Civil War of the nineteenth century, he goes back to Fiddlersburg “to arrange for repairs on the house, now unoccupied since the death of his father.” (*Flood* 146) Repairing the old house once occupied by his father hints at a metaphorical rebuilding of his own identity as a Southerner.

But the recurring mentions to the flooding of Fiddlersburg undoubtedly puts a stop to the process of rebuilding the house. However, what is striking in Warren’s writing is that words related to water, or even plain flooding, are combined with lexical fields of conciliation, reconciliation, or rebirth. As the novel unfolds, direct references to the upcoming flooding of Fiddlersburg are more

numerous. Interestingly, Brad is pictured suffering the flood, rather than the town; and this could hint at a process of acceptance on his part. Let us look at the first reference to flooding as a development underwent by Brad rather than Fiddlersburg alone:

If you just drifted you would drift into some calm place where you would lie side by side, out of the current, and the current would go past and carry with it everything that had ever happened, like the trash and plunder sluiced away on the crest of a freshet. (*Flood* 361)

We notice that some words would normally be opposed in terms of connotations, such as “calm” on the one hand and “trash and plunder” on the other. But they are reunited in this paragraph, as part of a greater whole. The act of “drift[ing]” is described as a purifying one, as it virtually erases “everything that had ever happened”. It strongly recalls the biblical episode of The Flood, touched upon earlier in this thesis and related to the disappearance of the Old Southern society. However, the way it is characterized here is not centered on destruction, rather on purification. The flooding would be what enables Brad to “reach a calm place” contrasting to the agitation which marks his evolution. During a conversation between Brad and Cal Fiddler, who is imprisoned, Cal describes a specific state of mind achieved in solitary. He reports it in words that fully evoke flooding:

“in solitary, you begin by thinking you can detach yourself. That there is, somehow, a *you* different from, and above, that thing that they have put in solitary. [...] [L]et the coat die and let the silence flow over, and the real *you* will ride on that flood of silence like a chip on water. [...] [A]fter the unthinkableness of things, which is what makes you want to die, suddenly you feel different. I feel different. It was like knowing that life, [...] which is a sort of medium in which the *you* exists, like a fish exists in water, is beautiful.” (*Flood* 411-2)

Not only is the character’s identity equated to a fish in water, but again, the use of verbs of movement create a harmonious effect between the subject and the water carrying it. Even if the

flood is “of silence” rather than water, we cannot but establish the link with the forthcoming flooding. The realization that “life [...] is beautiful” should have been contradictory with the idea of flooding a town, but it is depicted as the logical outcome of Calvin’s reflection. Onomastics plays a part here; Calvin’s last name being Fiddler, he could be read as synecdoche for the town itself, thus expressing, in a conversation with Brad, a reconciliation with its own disappearance. Another mention of water rising is unexpectedly mingled with an image evoking life and rebirth: Brad pictures the flooding in his mind and the reflection eventually directs his gaze outwards, to the real scene before him:

He lifted his gaze beyond the church and the crowd, over the river. No, not a river now, already a lake. [...] Westwards, farther off, the water spread out over all the flat land. The hedges marking those far fields stood in water. The trees, far off yonder, lifted their bright, cloudy burden of new leaves.
(*Flood* 416)

It appears that the flood imagined by Brad has in reality already started. The river has expanded into a lake and it has begun flooding the land. The fact that this description is situated towards the end of the novel is no accident; the event giving the title of the novel and largely foreshadowed eventually takes place. If Fiddlersburg is on the brink of disappearance, However, the mention of trees bearing new leaves could be read as a symbol of life and of renewal. Situated just at the beginning of the flood, combined with the image of the waters already rising, it seems to suggest that a new start is preparing also. The idea is defended by Brad’s final thought on the last page of the novel: “*There is no country but the heart.*” (*Flood* 440) So the “country” and the traditions or the sense of belonging it stands for is virtually displaced; it is no longer located outside the character but inside him, which enables it to survive the flood, as “tomorrow, Bradwell Tolliver would be far away. And, he told himself, he would not come back.” (*Flood* 416) Moreover, this change does tally with Bakhtin’s declaration that “[t]here always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness; there always remains a need for the future, and a place for this future must be found. All existing clothes are always too tight.” (Bakhtin 94) The quote reinforces the idea that characters in a story necessarily evolve, in an attempt at building this “place for [the] future.”

Not only do characters evolve and try to find closure, but we can argue that the structure of the novel does the same. As already brought up in the third part of this thesis, dedicated to the

dynamics of conflict, in *Flood* the characters are far from being the only conflicted constructions. As the novel progresses, it starts becoming more plastic and even mimics the form of writings belonging to other genres and forms, like a record for instance. This plasticity can be read as powerfully reinforcing the underlying dynamics of conflict. However, other interpretations can also be made. The use of such diverse forms in itself is a sign of hybridity. Looking at it through the lens of postmodernism enables us to reflect on the conciliation of different forms or genres as a literary attempt at reconciliation between elements hitherto thought of as antinomic. Actually, the emergence of hybrid figures and constructions are at the heart of the processes of reconciliation. As Vanessa Guignery, Catherine Pessa-Miquel and François Specq sum up in their book entitled *Hybridity: Forms and Figures in Literature and the Visual Arts*, “[t]he encounters and mixtures triggered off by hybrid processes open up new perspectives on the world and result in artistic forms which can combine different styles, languages, modes and genres.” (Guignery, Pessa-Miquel & Specq 3) It is precisely what happens in *Flood*, where different styles of writing merge in a single book, and a single story encompasses several others. For example, the reader has access to Calvin’s story through his discussions with Brad, but also through bits of scripts from his trial. As for Maggie, her monologue regularly punctuates the third-person narrative, so that the first and third person mingle. Hybridity, indeed, does open new artistic perspectives and possibilities. And, instead of thinking about these differences as opposed, postmodernism enables us to consider their coming together as typical of a certain literary culture that developed after 1945, according to Len Platt and Sara Upstone who describe, in *Postmodern Literature and Race*, a period “of intense literary experimentation, characterised by postmodern texts.” (Platt & Upstone 1)

Mentioning the book *Postmodern Literature and Race* leads me to the question of the attempted reconciliation between blacks and whites in *Flood*. As evoked earlier, Brother Potts, the white pastor in Fiddlersburg, is a character that already hinted at a possible reconciliation. Visiting a black man, Pretty-Boy, in prison, he is spat at but does not do anything to wipe the spit from his face. He recalls,

“I did not make a motion to wipe that spit. I let it run. And I was praying again, out loud. [...] I was praying [...] for God to make me know that what happened was right because it was His Holy Will. I was thanking God that that spit was on my face, and I was not going to wipe it off, I was going to let the sunshine dry it, or the wind, in God’s Holy Will.” (*Flood* 238-9)

The passage resolutely recalls the tradition of “racial conversions” in the South, where white people acknowledge their racist way and seek forgiveness for them, as documented in Fred Hobson’s *But Now I See*. The “conversion” is described as a highly religious one, as “the language of most of these white southerners is the language of religious conversion - ‘sin,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘blindness,’ ‘seeing the light,’ ‘repentance,’ ‘redemption,’ and so forth.” (Hobson 2) It coincides with Brother Potts’ experience, who speaks of “God’s Holy Will.” The event is later remembered by the black pastor, Brother Pinckney. He confirms that “if a white man had not gone to pray with Pretty-Boy Rountree and got spit on, then today Pretty-Boy would not have found that peace which passeth understanding.” (*Flood* 297) Brother Potts’ experience with Pretty-Boy is almost exactly mirrored by that of Brad with Jingle Bells, the black man working at the gas station. Having just been hit by him, Brad reflects that “Brother Potts was right: you had to arrange to have him spit in your face. Then you had to refrain from wiping the spit off. You had to let it dry here, in God’s sun and wind.” (*Flood* 384)

The fact that Warren addresses racial relations in a novel that shows postmodern tendencies is significant, particularly if we take into account a book such as *Postmodern Literature and Race*. The authors draw a parallel between postmodern experimentation and the representation of profoundly transforming racial relations in works of fiction. They write,

The ambivalent politics of postmodernism hint at both radical and profoundly conservative engagements with race, offering potentially problematic encounters, but also the possibility of a progressive literary politics in which formal experimentation acts in the service of the deconstruction of racial hierarchies. (Platt & Upstone 3)

If, as they later explain, “[t]here is no ‘postmodern manifesto’ which might allow the identification of a particular attitude to race as an inherent feature,” (Platt & Upstone 3) they seem to connect formal experimentation with the deconstruction of traditional race relations. For a novel such as *Flood* that is set in the South, in the 1960s, it is all the more relevant, and race relations are indeed challenged by the characters’ actions. In fact, Brother Potts eventually tries to bring the two

communities, black and white, together before the flooding of the town. Blanding Cottshill says of him,

“Brother Potts was going to go traipsing across the vacant lots followed by whoever was worked up enough on this, the last official day of Fiddlersburg, to follow him to pray with the colored for God to grant mercy and reconciliation and what-all might be necessary to undo the work of History. But [...] you observe that the colored folks are not there. Nobody is here. Brother Pinckney has out-foxed Brother Potts. [...] Leon Pinckney is a very deep fellow, and he knows more about you and me than we do. He knows that white folks are human, even if they are white folks, and he knows, therefore, that we like the cheap and easy way to feel good. Like praying with colored folks.” (*Flood* 424-5)

It appears that Brother Potts’ plan is not carried out; black people do not join white ones in prayer, and once again the two groups are described as antagonistic, each represented by their own pastor - Brother Potts for the white community and Brother Pinckney for the black one. Indeed, attempts at a reconciliation are not always successful; here, Blanding Cottshill declares the effort is a superficial one, as the endeavor “necessary to undo the work of History” is eventually devalued to become a mere “cheap and easy way to feel good” for whites. However, this failed attempt does not exclude the existence of mechanisms of reconciliation and combination at work in the novel.

Conclusion

The narratives of *A Cry of Absence* (1971) and *Flood* (1964) take place in 1957 and in the 1960s respectively, and are both located in fictional small Southern towns – Cameron Springs on the one hand, Fiddlersburg on the other. The two novels prove very fruitful if one wishes to reflect on the white Southern culture confronted to industrial, social, societal and economical change in the middle of the 20th century. The theme brings about many potential ramifications, but I chose to restrict my analysis to four main axes in order to better explore the “visions of change” built up in the two narratives. At the same time, the comparative literary analysis of *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* permitted me to ponder on the similarities and discrepancies in Jones’ and Warren’s treatment of the theme. Both authors seem to put an emphasis on a certain resistance, in the Southern identity, to industrial and social change. One of Jones’ main focalizers, Hester Glenn, gives the reader access to numerous descriptions of luxuriant nature, also asserting its centrality in the divine order and its immortal quality to offset the many evidences of death. We find that *Flood*’s narration is less straightforward in its defense of the Southern agrarian tradition. Warren’s contribution to the well-known agrarian manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand*, issued in 1930, is not enough to find unquestionable evidence, more than thirty years later, of his focalizers’ agrarian ideals in *Flood*. True, one of the characters mentions Southern author John Crowe Ransom, who co-authored the manifesto; but *Flood*’s narrative remains an ambiguous one nonetheless. However, I have argued that resistance to industrial and technological change can be found in the general sense of disorientation experienced by protagonist Bradwell Tolliver, confronted to new constructions in his hometown, such as the motel and, of course, the dam destined to erase Fiddlersburg. I have striven to show how Jones’ and Warren’s literary strategies appear different inasmuch as Jones’ narrative underlines the importance of preserved nature and the manifestations of the “regional southern religion,” (Wilson x) whose aim is to uphold the South’s tradition and distinctiveness, whereas *Flood* insists more on the “loss of identity and general social wreckage” (*Flood* 6) tied to the historical period.

My dissertation then moved to a more specific study of a pessimistic vision of technological progress. The narrator in *A Cry of Absence* once again extensively relies on descriptions of the landscape surrounding the characters in order to create a negative vision of novelty. I have focused my analysis on the preexisting landscape that is progressively erased to be replaced by new structures. This is of notable interest in the reflection I have led on the symbolism of landscape, as

the favored vessel of identity and ideology, drawing on Michel Foucault's characterization of what he calls "heterotopias" and on Ken Taylor's notion that "the landscape [is] the repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence. This is why landscape and memory are inseparable." (Taylor 3) A dichotomy between old and new is installed and epitomizes the relationship between the two focalizers, Hester and her oldest son Ames, so that in the end, progress is seen as disrupting both the Southern traditions and the family unit. Up to a certain point, the treatment of technological progress and its consequences is similar in *Flood*. Fiddlersburg is also directly endangered by novelty, embodied by Northern engineer Digby whose ambition is to build an "industrial complex" (*Flood* 113) after the flooding of the town.

My analysis of the visions of change in *A Cry of Absence* and *Flood* could not have been complete without a reflection on conflicts generated by change and, to be more precise, the dynamics born out of such conflicts. As I argued, conflicts between different groups of population, between the representations of different places, or internal and ideological struggles, actively participate in the structure and unfolding of the narratives. I was much inspired by Randy Hendricks' notion that "only through inner conflict was America born, and the same principle applies to the individual" (Hendricks 77) to defend the idea that forces of opposition inexorably lead the characters to undergo a mental and / or physical journey; and the evolution of the characters has a substantial impact on their environment as well as on the plot itself. Conflict is, in fact, a very fruitful literary concept. The most salient opposition is the one pitting white Southerners to other groups of populations, in *A Cry of Absence* as well as in *Flood*. Exploring the clashing relationships between white Southerners and blacks permitted me to introduce the trickster trope, originating from African divinity Esu whose "mouth, from which the audible word proceeds, sometimes appears double; Esu's discourse, metaphorically, is double-voiced." (Gates Jr 7) Some characters such as Lucius and Willodene in *A Cry of Absence* and Jingle Bells in *Flood* can be interpreted as incarnations of some of Esu's qualities, not only through their words but also through the eyes, hand movements or general demeanor. They constitute mysterious, almost ominous, hard-to-read figures for whites. In several other instances, being black is also associated with rebellion, concealment, and possible treachery, reinforcing the presence of this trope throughout the two narratives. Naturally, we have seen that opposition is also visible between white Southerners and white Northerners; the Delmores in *A Cry of Absence* and Digby in *Flood* epitomize this latent confrontation of two cultures, as national influence and criticism grow in the South. Confronted to these conflicting visions, it is not so surprising that some Southern characters experience an all-encompassing sense of "depersonalization." (*Flood* 180) Brad, perhaps more prominently than

others in *Flood*, is associated with recurrent images of drowning – which ominously foreshadows the flooding of his hometown -, bleeding and dying. As to Hester in *A Cry of Absence*, she is confronted to Ames' criticism as he leans more and more towards progressive ideals. Later she has to accept the reality of the murder committed by Cam, her other, idolized child; her convictions and identity are disrupted to the core, while Ames embarks on a quest for a new identity detached from his old Southern one. Finally, the dynamics of conflict and its implications, for the characters as well as the narrative, led us to explore the growing anamorphosis of *Flood's* narrative. The novel form mingles with several others, a myriad of voices also progressively arise and add themselves to Brad's, creating uncertainty and discontinuity for the reader, as a result of the many oppositions and conflicts.

Subsequently, I have seen how characters either try to salvage remaining bits of their old identity or forge themselves a wholly new one, in a broader attempt at acceptance of change and reconciliation between old and new, South and North, white and black... The characters' evolution, be it mental or physical, buttressed my analysis of their intrinsic hybridity. Although it may be associated with modernism as well, I chose to consider the concept of hybridity through the lens of postmodernism, as it is also particularly enlightening in the analysis of composite aspects - in *Flood's* narrative and structure, but also in the main characters in *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* both. We have shown how hybridity in the characters is mainly born out of the evolution they undergo. In *A Cry of Absence*, Hester, as one of the last defenders of the mythic South, is confronted to the destruction of her ideals when she learns Cam is a murderer. Consequently, I was interested in Richard Kuhn's work on tragedy; he defines it as the "conflict between private psychological need and public political obligation," (Kuhns 2) and it is precisely at the crossroads between these two aspects of life that Hester finds herself, confronted with the necessity to acknowledge Cam's deeds. At this point, I also touched upon Fred Hobson's book on the racial conversion movement, which can be applied to Hester's narrative inasmuch as she embarks on a journey "from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment." (Hobson 1-2) In *Flood*, Brad's evolution seems to be a spatial one, but his whereabouts account for a mental development as well. Analepses lead the reader from New York, to Spain and to Fiddlersburg, in a seemingly unending circle; his participating in the civil war in Spain can also be read as an attempt to reenact the Civil War of 1861-65. Brad and Hester become profoundly hybrid entities, preoccupied with the "larger issue [which] is the search for individuality and identity." (Grassian 86) It brought about the theme of reconciliation and the broader quest for closure, which I once again tied to elements of the postmodernist movement concerned by questions such as, "What happens when different kinds of

world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?” (McHale 10) As I have shown, boundaries between worlds and traditional race roles in the South are relentlessly challenged in both novels, and it is precisely what leads to attempts at reconciliation between elements, or characters, that were previously thought of as antinomic; in *Flood*, the inclusion of several genres and forms in the novel form is a proof of such process. Whether these attempts are successful or not, however, is open for debate; as an example, the congregation between black and white inhabitants of Fiddlersburg that is organized to bid the town farewell does not take place, hinting at a lack of final closure in *Flood*, while Hester in *A Cry of Absence* dies by suicide, interrupting her journey to racial conversion.

To complete my thesis on the diverse “visions of change” in the two novels, I will say that conducting a comparative analysis of *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* enabled me to explore several, interconnected facets of the theme. I have come to the conclusion that the two novels have a lot in common while still retaining their own, distinct characteristics and literary features. Jones’ narrative appears more straightforward than Warren’s, as it puts an emphasis on the descriptions of nature to possibly uphold the old Southern society or, conversely, to hint at a negative vision of technological progress disrupting the characters’ environment. On these subjects, *Flood’s* narrator is less frontal as they insists more on the characters’ disorientation as a result of technological change. In spite of these discrepancies, the two novels seem very similar in their treatment of conflicts born out of inexorable (technological, social, cultural) change; they both focus on conflicts between blacks and whites, white Southerners and white Northerners, or on internal conflicts experienced by a white Southern community steadily doubting the validity – or sheer reality - of its identity. As a result, *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence* can be considered to be hybrid narratives insofar as they seek to conciliate diverse, contrasting aspects, as an endeavor to come to terms with change.

Without a doubt, much remains to say on the “visions of change” included in these two Southern works of fiction. Other novels by white Southern authors from approximately the same period could also be considered in a further analysis; let us cite *The Rock Cried Out* by Mississippian Ellen Douglas, published in 1979 and focusing on a white young Southerner going back to Tennessee in 1971, or Carson McCullers’ *Clock Without Hands*, first issued in 1961 and set in 1953 in a small Georgian town. As for *Flood* and *A Cry of Absence*, a closer analysis of the Civil Rights movement and its literary repercussions, or an interest in black characters’ perspective could prove beneficial and shed a whole new light on the matter. Furthermore, the yet largely unexplored treatment of - chronological and historical - time appears of singular interest. From Calvin Fiddler’s assumption that “a man must be splendid when he has lived past his own death” (*Flood* 278) or his

description by another character as “a boy gone gray;” (*Flood* 405) or to Blanding Cottshill’s remark that Fiddlersburg is “a place where there isn’t any Time,” (*Flood* 48) the static quality of time in *Flood* could be analyzed in relation to the symbolic death of the South. On the contrary, what of Yasha Jones’ certainty that he “worked in evanescence” (*Flood* 57) as a filmmaker? As to *A Cry of Absence*, the narrative is not short in examples of distorted time either. A comparison could be drawn between Calvin Fiddler and Hester’s old-fashioned aunt, Minnie, symbolizing immobility in a fast-changing environment; Hester herself is depicted as a timeless, boundless entity, “something other than Hester Glenn – or without age, without affliction. And also new, as if she stood at the unchanging origin of things.” (*A Cry of Absence* 97) What to do of such ambivalence?

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