

STATIC CHAOS: THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN NOVELS OF STERILITY

by

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of English
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 2012

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

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Title: Static Chaos: The Great War and Modern Novels of Sterility

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Degree awarded June 2012

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

June 2012

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The Great War was unprecedented both in its devastation and in the significance people attached to it, which this dissertation contends led to a crisis of representation that manifested in literary tropes and discourses of sterility. Some authors used sterility to represent the war as a cultural and historical apocalypse, others as a basis for questioning how literature, Western civilization, and humanity itself could continue after such a catastrophe. “Static Chaos” theorizes how thematic renderings of sterility work alongside modernist formal experimentation to sever reproductive literary traditions. The widespread instances of sterility reveal the deep effects of the war on non-combatants as well as combatants, as demonstrated through analysis of novels by a diverse group of authors from Britain and United States—Rebecca West, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, Claude McKay, and Ford Madox Ford. The study moves chronologically yet it also follows a narrative logic of thwarted human sexual experience beginning with novels focused upon problematic virginity, then those depicting the inability or unwillingness to procreate, and then one preoccupied with pregnancy overshadowed by illegitimacy and stillbirth.

This dissertation draws upon trauma theory and grief and mourning theory, which reveal how, in addition to individual experiences of psychological trauma, the war disabled traditional means of coping, leading to a widespread inability to mourn that was traumatizing in itself. I name this state “traumatic grief” and argue that its pervasiveness led authors to break with a longstanding interconnection between making war and making babies. “Static Chaos” also expands theories that diagnose narrative’s mimetic relationship to human sexual intercourse and sexuality, particularly those of Judith Roof and Lee Edelman who assert narrative’s heterosexuality based on its traditional logic of continuation. I argue that post-war formal experimentation in modernist literature renders narrative metaphorically sterile by disrupting reproductive traditions and conventions. These formal components include generic manipulation, representations of inversion and paradox, ambiguous or inconclusive endings, and parodic or circular plot structures. Together with themes of sterility, these formal elements work to depict the post-war world as fixed in a barren wasteland, trapped in static chaos.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The gestation and completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without the support, friendship, and mentorship of many individuals. I first wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Professor Paul Peppis who has been a true mentor throughout my PhD studies. He has been involved in this dissertation project from its earliest quickenings and the value of his advice, edits, and feedback on writing, research, and argument cannot be overstated. I also wish to thank my other committee members, Professors Allison Carruth, Mark Quigley, and John McCole for their generous advice and support. Gratitude goes out to Mark Gully and Paul Stoeckl for always being on my side, and to my mother, Ann Stoeckl, who reveres education and always wanted this for me. Thanks also go out to the many collegial faculty, staff, and students at the University of Oregon and Utah State University, and the ongoing mentorship of Professors Melody Graulich and Evelyn Funda at Utah State University. Last, I want to thank my wonderful graduate student colleagues at the University of Oregon, particularly the members of DWDP, who have made me both a better scholar and better friend.

For Mr. X

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION: STERILE NARRATIVE, TRAUMATIC GRIEF, AND THE GREAT WAR.....	1
II. FALSE VIRGINITY: THE PARADIGMATIC STERILITY OF <i>THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER</i>	33
III. FORCED VIRGINITY: MISREADING, REREADING, AND THE STERILITY OF <i>ONE OF OURS</i>	59
IV. A MOST TRAUMATIC PARADOX: STERILITY, TRAUMA, AND THE GREAT WAR IN <i>THE SUN ALSO RISES</i>	102
V. BETWEEN JAKES: THE GREAT WAR, QUEER STERILITY, AND <i>HOME TO HARLEM</i>	135
VI. (RE)PRODUCTION, (PRO)CREATION: CHILDBEARING, NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, AND THE STERILITY OF <i>PARADE'S END</i>	180
REFERENCES CITED.....	225

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: STERILE NARRATIVE, TRAUMATIC GRIEF, AND THE GREAT WAR

“It is obvious that the war must brush aside this conventional treatment of death. Death is no longer to be denied; we are compelled to believe in it.”

—Sigmund Freud, “Reflections on War and Death”

“Reading [modernists and war writers] together, the distinction between ‘modernism’ and ‘war writing’ starts to dissolve—and was by no means clear at the time—and modernism after 1914 begins to look like a peculiar but significant form of war writing.”

—Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History, and the First World War*

In Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) Septimus Smith achieves masculinity and promotion as a soldier during the Great War, but finds himself unable to feel after the death of his friend, Evans. Upon returning to England with Rezia, his Italian bride, Septimus begins slipping into madness, unable to make sense of the world and seeing visions of Evans. As Rezia hints, insists, and sobs that she wants a child, Septimus thinks, “One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals, who have no lasting emotions, but only whims and vanities, eddying them now this way, now that” (135). In the end, Septimus flees from the ministrations of “human nature” out an upper story window, believing that Rezia “was with him” in his need to escape and, indeed, she “ran to the window, she saw;

she understood” (139, 226). In this, her second novel representing the Great War’s effects, Woolf sets up the distance between the couple and their expectations and experiences only to bring them together at the end. Civilian Rezia desires the maintenance of civilization and the family while soldier Septimus rejects the continuation of family, society, and self. During her struggle to care for and to understand her shell-shocked husband, Rezia comes to comprehend and to accept that the war has made procreation a horror and that supporting Septimus’s need to escape it through suicide represents a post-war portrait of matrimonial solidarity.

In Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) the Italian front is marked by paradox: during the barren and cold winter, fighting ceases, but when the warmth and vitality of spring and summer arrive, the death and violence of war return. Seeing soldiers march through the rain from a failed battle in the first chapter, Frederic Henry narrates that all their gear “bulged forward under the capes so that the men, passing on the road, marched as though they were six months gone with child” (4). As the war wanes for another season, the soldiers appear pregnant with the accoutrements of war. Henry and VAD Catherine Barkley ultimately flee the chaos of the ending war but their dream of togetherness shatters when their baby is born strangled by his own umbilical cord and then Catherine herself dies from multiple hemorrhages. The novel concludes as Henry orders the nurses out of Catherine’s room: “But after I had got them out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn’t any good. It was like saying good-by to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain” (332). The novel opens and closes with dreary weather overshadowing Henry’s connections between violence and procreation, revealing a world where viability disappears into its negation.

H. G. Wells famously dubbed the Great War “the war to end all wars,” a moniker that became increasingly unstable in the midst of the war’s horrors and in its politically and psychologically disturbing aftermath. After this examination of the way authors used sterility to represent the war’s culture-shattering effects, I propose we might better rename it “the war to end all procreation, regeneration, and productivity.”

Mrs. Dalloway and *A Farewell to Arms* are two canonical examples in a sizable cohort of post-war modernist novels that use sterile situations or characters to represent the effects of the Great War.¹ Further, the sterility in these novels features not only in characters but also in the structures of narrative itself, revealing the deep trauma done to the cultural imagination by the Great War. This unrecognized modernist sub-genre, which I call “modern novels of sterility,” combines theme and form as it attempts to understand, comprehend, and depict the aftermath of an unprecedented, quintessentially modern event. As Samuel Hynes declares, not only was the war “the great military and political event of its time; but it was also the great *imaginative* event. It altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about war but about the world, and about culture and its expressions” (*War Imagined* xi). These novels render post-war Western culture as an imaginative No Man’s Land, unable to find consolation in previous modes of understanding but uncertain how to move forward. This stasis arose in response to an indeterminate affective state I call “traumatic grief,” arising from grief that cannot be resolved. In attempting to represent and cope with this melancholic condition, modernist

¹ This cohort includes: Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918); Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* (1922) and *The Professor’s House* (1925); F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925); Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927); William Faulkner’s *Soldier’s Pay* (1926); Ford Maddox Ford’s tetralogy *Parade’s End* (1924–28); Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* (1925), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929); D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928); Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) and its sequel, *Banjo* (1929); Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* (1929); John Dos Passos’s *1919* (1932); Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932); and Nathaniel West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933).

authors from Britain and the United States used sterility to thematize and symbolize their cultures' states of static chaos.

In many ways, “sterility” is an imperfect term. It conjures up negative associations and its connection to cleanliness can disrupt its intended meaning in this dissertation. But “sterility” also gets closest to the layered and myriad manifestations found in post-war novels. Certain popular critical terms, such as “impotence,” fail to represent the diverse kinds of sterility exhibited in these novels, and others, such as “barrenness,” prove too biologically determined to represent adequately the agency in texts and characters. Sterility, however, allows for a variety of types and can encompass various reasons for the inability to reproduce including biology, choice, or force. Registering the flexibility of “sterility,” I often employ synonymous terms such as non-regeneration or barrenness, and often use terms that signal the linguistic connection between making art and making babies such as creation/procreation and production/reproduction.

This dissertation focuses on a diverse set of novels in order to uncover the varied articulations of sterility. I ordered the chapters more or less chronologically and, fortuitously, that chronology mirrors a narrative of human sexual experience from pre-sexuality, to thwarted or non-reproductive sexual intercourse, to pregnancy and birth. Chapter II analyzes Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), published during the war, and chapter III reads Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922), both novels featuring an unnatural, perpetual virginity in their soldier protagonists and in their narrative structures. Chapter IV examines Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), which emphasizes both impotence and contraception in characters and form as the result of war

trauma. In contrast, chapter V assesses how Claude McKay queers Hemingway in his *Home to Harlem* (1928) in a parody that proposes a sterile, artistic brotherhood as the answer to modernity's post-war ills. Last, chapter VI analyzes Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–28) and reads the work's thematic preoccupation with illegitimacy and stillbirth as manifest formally in its bizarre fourth volume, which serves as a modernist offspring of the preceding volumes, potentially unviable, because of the war's devastating effects. This dissertation encompasses novels by Britons and Americans, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, combatants and non-combatants, each of them expressing a distinct type of sterility. Apart from sterility broadly construed, these novels share a bewildered response to the changed world that represents the traumatic grief the Great War wrought. The diversity and sophistication of these sterilities highlights the need for an extensive analysis of how they reveal the war's effects on narrative, modernism, and the combatant populations of Britain and the US.

This analysis of modernist sterility deepens a critical conversation on this tendency in modern novels depicting the Great War. Many scholars have noted, usually in passing, the prominence of impotence in literary soldiers. For example, Peter Hays delineates a sweeping literary archetype of "limping heroes" that, he argues, are symbolically impotent. Modern novels of sterility do participate in longstanding literary and symbolic trends but, in keeping with the unprecedented nature of the Great War, they also subvert, deconstruct, or reject those trends. Taking a more political approach, feminist scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, "the gloomily bruised modernist antiheroes churned out by the war suffer specifically from *sexual* wounds, as if, having traveled literally and figuratively through no man's land, all have become not just no-

men, nobodies, but *not* men, *unmen*” (*Sexchanges* 260). Like most such acknowledgements, Gilbert and Gubar brush against this tendency to sterility but decline to push on its implications or probe its manifestations. Others examine sterility in modernism more expansively but try to connect it to concerns other than the war. For example, Walter Benn Michaels reads in American modernism an obsession with racial purity so pronounced as to become sterile. Benn Michaels’s selectivity and lack of close reading undermines his argument about “nativism” and I contend that the war provides a more persuasive reason for sterility in modernist novels (from the US *and* Britain) while registering issues of race or other identities such as gender, class, or sexuality.² James Dawes, in *The Language of War* (2002), gives the only sustained assessment of sterility in war works to date. He devotes only a handful of pages to the subject but in them he mentions a dizzying array of modernist texts, asserting, “The frequency of post-war representations of birth as death is uncanny” (84). In this brief section, Dawes reveals the horrified response to the war in American literature, but his discussion of sterility in post-war texts limits its scope to plot, characters, or themes. I expand upon Dawes’s arguments to reveal not only how sterility appears in plots and themes of post-war modernist fictions but also in their structures, forms, and experimentations.

With its focus on the war’s effects on modernist novels, and its commitment to examining both theme and form, this study aligns with two current critical trends: the return to formalism and the new modernist studies. Marjorie Levinson describes new formalism as a movement, not a methodology, that aims to revivify an attention to form in literary study. In particular, this dissertation participates in what Levinson dubs “*new*

² Benn Michaels only addresses sexuality in order to read racism into expressions of homosexuality in American modernism. For a thorough rebuttal to Benn Michael’s controversial *Our America* (1996), see the special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* (1996) devoted to refuting his argument.

historicism,” a corrective approach to traditional “new historicism” that “drives context into text—the unique way that each artwork tries to make symbolic what experience has suggested as actual—as the privileged analytic object, exposing history in tension with ideology” (565). Thus, I consider sterile novel forms an expression of the historical effects of the Great War that, in turn, influence subsequent cultural expressions.

Examining the form *and* content of literary texts works as a particularly useful source for understanding the historical war’s myriad devastations because, as Alan Kramer argues, Great War combatants emphasized destruction of the enemy’s culture as much as of its soldiers: “cultural destruction” became “both the incidental by-product of combat and the consequence of deliberate policy” (1). Antagonists in the Great War embraced a practice of total warfare that did not differentiate between soldiers, civilians, and cultural artifacts such as churches, museums, libraries, and the items contained therein. Dawes directly links war’s physical decimation with the destruction of art, contending “Violence destroys fiction: this thesis recurs continuously throughout the literatures of war. . . . Violence thus achieves bare truth negatively, by shattering the cherished fictions that structure our routines of life” (131). Modernist novelists attempted to utilize the new literary techniques to represent the war’s “shattering” of those “cherished fictions.” Their endeavors yield a genre of novel that undermines the reproductive basis of Western narrative and, thereby, calls into question the social and biological reproduction of Britain, the United States, and the world. In my participation in the return to formalism, then, I undertake the task of accounting for how an attention to form can provide insight into the historical and cultural realities of experiencing and

understanding the Great War. This study reflects a primary interest in how form works with content to depict, understand, and counter historical-cultural realities.

The new modernist studies are perhaps even more difficult to pin-down than the new formalism but their major attribute is “expansion,” as contend Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz—expansion on temporal, geographic, and textual grounds. This dissertation, too, aims to expand understandings of modernism, particularly of how the Great War influenced narrative form and combatant cultures. I interact with three prominent ways of expanding “modernism,” all of which seek to correct or complicate the origin tale of a handful of geniuses, most of them white and male (Woolf and Gertrude Stein prominent exceptions), who wrestled literature away from Victorian (aka middle-brow) decay and changed it irrevocably for the better. These three approaches often overlap and do not exclude each other but, nevertheless, they represent distinct moves in recent efforts to understand modernism. The first approach examines the distinction between artists who self-consciously considered themselves “moderns” and the middlebrow, the popular, and other artists who were not “modernist.” These critics generally extend the category of modernism to include the avant-garde of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (from Franco Marinetti to Wyndham Lewis, Dadaists to Surrealists) but leave out the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the war poets, and misfits such as Cather on the grounds that their aesthetic endeavors differ from the unique experimentalism of modernism.³ A second, popular critical trend is to perceive “modernism” as the art that responds to “modernity,” particularly modernity that rises accompanied by capitalism, industrialization, urbanism, and the perceived breakdown of stable social orders. In this logic, cultural and social change brought about by modernity

³ For examples of these kinds of critics see: Hynes, Sherry, Whalan, and Krockel.

provokes art that reflects this alteration. Consequently, we can and should trace the influence of modernity on art in Europe through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, particularly in light of colonialism, technological change, and war and violence; but we also can and should trace engagements with modernity's effects on a larger global and temporal scale.⁴ A third focus works to further understand modernism within its cultural contexts, that “*new* historicism” that Levinson mentioned, which can include the political, technological or otherwise cultural, and the historical.⁵ This third group, critics especially interested in historical and cultural changes, has brought a renewed focus on the Great War and its effects on modernism.

My goal here is not to debate the merits of these various approaches but to explain my critical place in relation to them and to clarify what I mean by the terms “modernist” and “modernism” in this dissertation. The production of art changed radically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, responding to a host of cultural changes in the way Western subjects thought about their existence. Some of these changes were political (i.e. colonialism, waning liberalism, Communism), technological (i.e. telephones, radio, film, and, with the war, military innovations), and social-scientific (i.e. psychology, sexology, evolutionary theory, shifting beliefs about gender and race). This cultural upheaval led to a sense not only that people were living in “modern” times but also that modernity had reached a climax, which might lead to triumph (a belief held particularly prior to the war) or to chaos (a belief exhibited in the pre-war that became dominant after). Serious artists of various stripes represented this perception in their work, and it is

⁴ For examples of these kinds of critics see: Stanford Friedman, “Planetarity”; Berman; and Doyle and Winkiel.

⁵ For political readings, see: Peppis and Esty. For examples of the cultural/technological focuses see: Cohen, Coyle, and Lewty; Collier; Sherry; Hynes; and Whalan.

this group that I consider “modernists.” My definition situates authors from the French symbolists to Henry James, Stephen Crane, and H. G. Wells as proto-modernists who began laying the groundwork for those who would follow them. It also excludes most novels that follow the Second World War on the grounds that these works do not reflect that same belief in apotheosis and, instead, wrestle with the concept of a lingering, unstable modernity. Literary works following the Second World War often take on a blasé attitude of futility or endless play; in contrast, modernist Great War works register the fracture and horror of the war while maintaining an attitude of optimism that art, if made new in the right way, can still positively affect the world. Thus, this definition allows for a host of “modernisms” that includes works from any and all authors self-consciously creating a new art that depicts, reflects upon, or responds to the perceived change in the nature of the world. I work from a definition of modernism that is both expansive and limiting, arguing for merit in an expansion that rejects the hierarchy of canonization common in more traditional views of modernism but finds similar merit in avoiding a definition of modernism that becomes unhelpfully vague and capacious. This merging, then, of new formalism and new modernism, reflects the perspective of the authors themselves that they were inciting a change in art for a world desperately in need of innovation.

A useful grounding for my definition can be found in Ezra Pound’s imperative: Make it new. Pound, of course, had strict ideas about what art fulfilled his dictum but, even so, his imperative allows for broad and flexible expressions of obedience. McKay “made it new” by imbuing racial politics into traditional forms, most notably the sonnet but, as this dissertation argues, also through a novelistic parody of Hemingway’s *The Sun*

Also Rises. Cather made it new by deconstructing a host of established narratives to represent the war's destruction in *One of Ours*, narratives ranging from the myth of the Frontier to the *Bildungsroman*. West, for her part, deconstructed the sentimental novel tradition in *The Return of the Soldier*, undermining and ironizing various tropes and symbols to launch her socialist, feminist critique of the Great War. And Ford redefined realism to reflect, in *Parade's End* particularly, the need for a new way of telling stories to represent the decimated social landscape resulting from the traumas of modernity. "Make it new" shores up this dissertation's definition of modernism, and appears throughout, for example, in recognizing innovative literary techniques, such as Hemingway's sparse prose style, and in defense of manipulations to preceding techniques and genres, such as West's manipulation of British pastoral.

More specifically, this dissertation works alongside recent new modernist studies examining the effects of the Great War. Several notable works have appeared in the last fifteen years and, as with new modernist studies broadly, have expanded understandings of what effects the war had and on whom. These works share a desire to expand the canon of "war writing" beyond texts by combatants alone, and to understand the consequences of the war not only for combatants but also for artists, civilians, and the cultural imagination broadly. For example, Trudi Tate's *Modernism, History, and the First World War* (1998) examines the influence of cultural artifacts—including propaganda, tanks, and psychoanalysis—on the creation of Great War narratives from soldiers and non-combatants, men and women. She also uncovers how "being exposed" to horrific war experiences, even if "indirectly, discursively, through stories, can cause war neuroses, just as some soldiers suffered from shell shock without ever going into

battle.” Tate shows how “stories which circulate in a society can damage people’s bodies, or send them mad,” and while she speaks primarily of news, rumour, and propaganda I add that the modernist fictions that arose from the war also bore the potential to dually represent and cause the disorientation arising from the war (19). Similarly, Vincent Sherry extends the war’s devastation across the population by arguing that the war exploded the ideology of humanistic liberalism by which British society had grounded its perception of itself, decimating what Sherry calls “the grand syllogism of history” (309). His uncovering of how the war destroyed liberal ideology reveals how the conflict impacted the British citizenry in a profoundly negative way, a premise that this dissertation shares and applies to citizens in the US as well. Steven Trout’s *On the Battlefield of Memory* (2010) builds on the work of Sherry, Hynes, and Paul Fussell’s seminal *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1977) through an examination of how Americans experienced, understood, and remembered the war. Trout complicates prominent critical beliefs that everyone in the US viewed the war as an absolute horror and, consequently, represents American memory of the war as inherently unstable and in perpetual flux, a formlessness that, he claims, arose because the “greatest engine of unsettled memory was the human cost of the conflict ... and the absence of a clear-cut answer to the question, *why?*” (31). Because of the impossibility of answering this “why,” modern novels of sterility use non-regeneration to signal this perpetual lack of resolution. To posit a world incapable of perpetuating itself is to play with apocalypse. Unable to understand the war’s purpose or meaning, either because it had none or because facing its implications proved horrifying in its own right, modern novelists represented the world as trapped in a non-regenerative state of traumatized stasis.

Significant historical details show that human reproduction, as a topic for thought and conversation, was “in the air” leading up to, during, and after the war. These examples suggest why sterility proved particularly fitting as a response to a war that wiped out millions of young men and seriously damaged landscapes both physical and cultural. Before and after the war, the now debunked “science” of eugenics focused on the breeding of humanity. Racists used eugenics to justify their beliefs about racial hierarchies but even prominent African American leaders, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, saw it as a legitimate science, and Du Bois used it in his own racial uplift propaganda.⁶ Birth control, too, became a topic of public debate with radical proponents Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman leading the charge in the US while, across the pond, Marie Stopes utilized the styles of sentimental fiction and propaganda to make her case for *Married Love* (1918), which promoted birth control as a necessary component in marital happiness. After the war, as Keith Gandal reports, American doughboys came home with condoms, which were readily accessible in France, and an increased awareness of oral sex, which they had learned from French prostitutes; these birth control methods encouraged the “free love” atmosphere of the “roaring ’20s,” and aided “a significant decrease in the U.S. birthrate in the 1920s ... [and] an increase in premarital sex” (Gandal 28). Discussions around birth control arose organically from the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century science of sexology, which worked to catalogue and understand human sexuality, thereby increasing and legitimizing the discourse around sex and reproduction.⁷

⁶ Daylanne K. English provides an important historicized intervention into our understanding of eugenics and its proponents in *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (2004).

⁷ Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Otto Weininger were all prominent researchers pioneering the field of sexology, while Freud and Stopes were related thinkers. For an introduction to the work of

Concerns about masculinity under threat, exhibited before and during the war, reveal the deflation of masculinity that also encouraged authors to use sterility to represent the war's effects. Leading up to the war, many commentators felt that masculinity was under fire from the forces of women's suffrage and a general state of cultural decadence. They further thought that a war would be just the thing to restore virility to Western culture (Kramer 160). Historian Kramer contends that sexual violence by combatants, including rape and forced prostitution, probably arose from their feelings of impotence and exposure in the war zone; he also reports that the increased promiscuity by both soldiers and civilians during the war made venereal disease the third most common illness of the war and further undermined the gender hierarchies that situated men comfortably above women. In short, the Great War "marked the definitive end of the Victorian era for British society and bourgeois sensibilities" (Kramer 251).⁸ Ultimately, the conditions of trench warfare—including the symptoms of shell shock, horrific and/or debilitating physical injuries, and the perception of senselessness—shattered any dreams of a robust post-war masculinity, particularly in Britain but also in the US. In the aftermath of this devastation to ideals of masculinity and established gender boundaries, so metaphorically connected to ideologies about the virility and perpetuation of Western civilization, sterility served as a resonant representation of this bewildering alteration.

As noted earlier, traumatized soldiers—impotent or otherwise debilitated—represent only one manifestation of literary sterility. The role of women in the Great War

prominent sexologists and modern interpretations of the field and its effects, see: both volumes by Bland and Doan.

⁸ Other scholars discuss the perceived collapse of masculinity due to the war. Gilbert and Gubar argue that men felt emasculated by how deftly women managed "male" work during the war (*Sexchanges* 258–323). Elaine Showalter asserts that the realization that shell shock equated to feminized hysteria further undermined patriarchy (167–247). Carol Acton contends that the cultural emphasis on grief as the province of women provided another pressure, potentially traumatizing, to soldiers needing to mourn (105–31).

era also provoked representations of sterility in modern novels, particularly when British and American cultures made symbolic use of motherhood to justify and perpetuate the war. Combatant governments found motherhood a fruitful area for propaganda leading up to and during the Great War. Mothers not only held down the home front while their sons went off to fight, but they also represented the need to replenish the nation after the deaths of so many young men. Jennifer Haytock demonstrates how propaganda posters of the time envisioned a mother who was as dutiful as she was self-sacrificing (7). Carol Acton articulates how society created a specific script for mothers when sending their sons off to the war and grieving their deaths: “Official and unofficial discourses in wartime further transform the relationship between mother and dead son, rewriting the ‘story’ of death wherein, for example, the dead soldier becomes the sacrificed Christ of the Pieta” (3). These emphases on perfect motherhood attempted to delineate a space for women in wartime but, to citizens, that space seemed as hollow and fragile as the soldier’s in the wake of so horrific a conflict. For combatant populations, particularly in Britain and Europe, motherhood also seemed bitterly, ironically deflated when the loss of so many millions of young men left so many women without husbands and, therefore, the possibility for “legitimate” procreation. Thus, for authors of modern novels of sterility, dismantling the carefully constructed gendered boundaries and manipulating the vision of motherhood proved as resonant as impotence in depicting the war’s effects. These various period concerns with human reproduction set the stage for sterility to become central to representing the war and its aftershocks.

Because the war further undermined or, in some cases, caused destabilizations to preceding beliefs about society, gender, sexuality, and procreation it also undermined

narrative traditions. As will be discussed shortly, narrative relies upon a reproductive structure that makes it symbolically procreative and heterosexual. By “narrative” I refer to the realist novels that accompanied the rise of capitalist modernity, particularly those of the nineteenth century. However, narrative encompasses more than printed fictions alone, including social and political narratives, personal stories, advertisements, film, and so forth. Narrative seemingly means everything and exists everywhere, which creates problems when trying to discuss its standards and effects. Yet with an awareness of the danger of becoming completely unmoored, I treat narrative as a broad and deep term because, as Judith Roof, contends, “Narrative’s intersection of language, psychology, and ideology makes it an appropriate and compelling construct for the negotiation and containment of the contradictions and anxieties that inevitably attend the focal and delusively stable organizations of existence” (xvi). However, in an attempt to make the term slightly more precise, I use the terms “narrative” and “traditional narrative” throughout to refer to the realist fictions of the nineteenth century that immediately precede the modernist period and that the modernists themselves regarded as their imperfect artistic progenitors. Among such realist fictions, I emphasize overtly reproductive “marriage plot” novels and the *Bildungsroman*, both of which come in for a significant amount of deconstruction in modern novels of sterility. Narrative here also refers to those aforementioned social and political narratives that work to control the behaviors of a citizenry by putting parameters around how they can and should understand the world. Due to the influence of Freud and other thinkers, modernist artists exhibit a keen interest in how societal structures moderate individual responses. Further, the rising embrace of Freud’s “talking cure” as a treatment for shell shock and other

psychological problems likewise increased an awareness of the importance of narrative, broadly conceived, to human social and personal life.

Modern novels of sterility reflect the war's lack of precedence by breaking with various narrative traditions, including a longstanding one linking war and childbirth. Nancy Huston clarifies the connection between war and childbirth in her exploration of a Gnostic paradox that states, "How long will men make war? As long as women have babies" (153). She interprets this adage as implying that men make war *because* women have babies, and traces this construction in the rituals, myths, art, and psychology of several cultures across several centuries. Huston claims patriarchy segregates women while also co-opting the generative power of childbirth into violence and the sacred: "The analogy between war and childbirth hinges on what might be called reciprocal metaphorization. . . . Although childbirth indubitably has biological precedence over war, neither phenomenon can be said to have symbolic precedence, and therefore only the *interaction* between the two can be the object of analysis" (165). Even as Huston acknowledges that we cannot know precisely *how* this connection came about, and that evolution should favor procreation over war, she asserts that humans have tied together the twinned glories and dangers of war and childbirth. Thus, the Great War's perceived disruption to the historical connection between war and childbirth in modernist novels of sterility amounts to a crack in cultural history, a disruption that highlights the sense of stasis and of non-regeneration left in the wake of the war.⁹

⁹ Feminist critics of modernism and the war have been the most prominent explorers of the connections between war and gender. Many of them engage Huston's ideas on war and childbirth but none of them have explored the recurring use of sterility in novels depicting the post-war era. See: Gilbert and Gubar (*No Man's Land*); Showalter; Cooper, Munich, and Squier; Tate; and Haytock.

This dissertation enhances understanding of the metaphorical connection between things as varied as war, artistic creation, and human reproduction by analyzing how modern novels of sterility deconstruct the structure of Western narrative itself. Traditional narrative resembles reproductive human sexuality: “The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act,” states Robert Scholes. “When we look at fiction with respect to its form alone, we see a pattern of events designed to move toward climax and resolution, balanced by a counter-pattern of events designed to delay this very climax and resolution” (26). Scholes’s argument evokes the work of Mark Johnson on the embodied basis of human metaphor; it also unconsciously establishes a heteronormative perspective whereby the (feminized, passive) text teases and toys with the (masculine, active) reader or writer until he achieves climax through successful completion of the text. Queer theorist Michael Warner unveils the political underbelly of this narrative structure, dubbing modernity the “historical epoch of what might be called repro-narrativity: the notion that our lives are somehow made more meaningful by being embedded in a narrative of generational succession” (7). Cultural enforcement of the ideology of generational succession maintains the reproduction not only of human life but also the social constructions of power; societies use traditional narrative structures to perpetuate their ideologies.

Building on both Scholes and Warner, in *Come As You Are* (1996) Judith Roof emphasizes the distinct heterosexuality of modernity’s narratives in their drive not only to climax but to reproduction—in literal marriage or birth, in death or ecstasy that posits a continuation, in other forms of production such as knowledge, mastery, or understanding. These narrative structures, what she calls “heteronarratives,” rely upon a conclusive

coming together of differences to create a satisfying whole: “The reproductive imperatives of the story produce heterosexuality as the magical, motiveless mechanism that turns everything right, while homosexuality and other perversions—also necessary elements—make all fail to cohere, exposing the story’s parts in a meaningless, short-circuited, truncated, narrative gratification that heterosexuality seals up again” (xxi–xxii). Heteronarrative’s merging of binaries and divergences aligns it with the constructed imperative of heterosexuality. Using Freud’s own narrative of “normal” sexuality, and its counter-concept “perversion,” Roof posits that perversion exists in the middle regions of traditional narrative to give tension and urgency to the heterosexual conclusion. She further shows that, since most narratives do not overtly concern their plots with sex or reproduction, this base becomes structural in the support of reproductive conjunctions of opposites rather than the non-reproductive merging of sames (xxix). Roof uses a wide swath of examples, not only overtly heterosexual narratives such as “marriage plot” novels or others ending with human reproduction, but also narratives of narrative and/or sexuality such as the work of Freud and Peter Brooks’s work on Freud that turn sex and death into binaries that they then merge in conclusions emphasizing sex, death, or both. She also discusses narratives that posit continuation through triumphant mastery such as *Bildungsromane*, those that end in a death “for the greater good” or for the education of other characters (and, of course, readers), and those that kill off “bad” (i.e. non-reproductive, perverse) elements.

Roof ties the narrative around “normal,” “successful,” “reproductive” sexuality to the narrative of capitalist production, both of them inflecting each other and inflecting the narratives that arise during the build of capitalist modernity: “Where in human

reproduction male and female come together to produce offspring, in capitalist production capital and labor come together to generate products. ... As ideology, this pattern of joinder to product also accounts for the countless analogies to child/product—knowledge, mastery, victory, another narrative, identity, and even death—that occupy the satisfying end of the story” (xvii). Narratives of sexuality and of capitalist reproduction favor continuation as not only a pleasure (orgasmic) but also an inarguable good (social reproduction). But as Roof clarifies, glossing Foucault, such connections require a threatening “other” upon which to contrast their socially acceptable logics—the perverse or queer that threatens to derail the story. Roof, too, acknowledges that some endings or interminable middles may work to undermine the “heteronarrative” although she remains cautious about the viability of such transgressions because, potentially, even narratives that rebel against the heteronarrative may unconsciously reinscribe it by drawing attention to its logic. For their part, modern novels of sterility register the war’s devastation by undermining this reproductive narrative base. All of those studied here engage the imperative of heterosexual and social reproduction but they use varied manifestations of sterility to signal that this imperative has grown unstable and untenable.

Lee Edelman also unveils the reproductive logic of nineteenth and twentieth century Western narratives. A Lacanian, Edelman argues in *No Futures* (2004) that we use narratives to hide our reliance on the Symbolic, which separates us from the Real. We thus mediate the inaccessibility of the Real through an imperative to what he calls “reproductive futurism,” a subsuming belief in an imagined future that manifests itself most often in the figure of a Child. Because of this obsession with futurism, the non-reproductive homosexual becomes marked as the dually threatening and fascinating

figure that endangers the Child and the fantasy it maintains: “whatever refuses this mandate by which our political institutions compel the collective reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of such a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends” (11). Given the ingrained nature of this reproductive narrative logic, I contend that modern novels of sterility represent a radical fissure in narrative history that registers the immense trauma wrought by the Great War. I show how Edelman’s assessment of the way in which our narratives (from political rhetoric to Hitchcock films) insist upon an imagined future based on reproduction resemble Roof’s critique of theories and fictions that rely on a structure positing social and narrative heterosexual reproduction. Both authors critique the reproductive logic of traditional narrative and I build on and extend their analyses by uncovering how post-war, modernist novelists disrupted this reproductive drive.

Modernist authors grappling with the effects of the Great War troubled, undermined, even permanently damaged the reproducibility of narrative. They used various techniques that include: characters unable or unwilling to reproduce; ironic, inverted comparisons between the natural world and human life; deconstructions of previous traditions and forms; truncated or ambiguous endings; queerings of heterosexual narrative; structures of static circularity; and presentations of text as illegitimate or threatened offspring. I read certain aspects of these texts as conscious rebellions against the world that created the Great War, gesturing to the political potential of changing narrative. However, the sterility of these modern novels originates in trauma and grief and they often reflect or reflect on these troubling emotional and psychological effects.

As evidenced by the elements of elegy and regret in these texts, they often bemoan, rather than embrace, the changed world. Thus, modern novels were not entirely successful in their attempts to render narrative non-reproductive. For evidence of their lack of success one need look no further than the retrenchment of reproductive narratives after the Second World War. But these modernist texts do disrupt, if not destroy, reproductive narrative traditions and, in so doing, telegraph the unprecedented traumatic grief that attended the Great War and forge new, non-reproductive narrative techniques.

One reason for the historical and metaphorical connection between procreation and war lies in their seeming inevitability—both have always happened and always will. Like death and taxes, war and childbirth can be counted on in human culture. So what was it about the Great War that so disrupted and disarmed this “truth,” if not literally then certainly metaphorically? To answer this question, I draw on the work of trauma theory, which helps establish how recurrent representations of sterility in modern novels witness to the shared horrific experience of the Great War. Freud tied literature to psychology by positing that cultures or epochs in cultures have psyches, just like individuals, and that cultural products (art, religion, philosophy, literature) reveal cultural psyches.¹⁰ In “Reflections on War and Death,” written and published during the war, he asserts that the war’s horror has made death evident in a way that civilized culture traditionally attempts to efface: “Death is no longer to be denied; we are compelled to believe in it” (47). Freud, writing specifically to address the suffering of civilians, acknowledges the deep psychological fissures that arise when individual experience and civilized discourse cease moving in relative tandem—fissures that, in modernist novels, manifest as sterility. Cathy Caruth, a foundational theorist of trauma in literature, argues that because trauma is

¹⁰ See Freud’s “Civilization and its Discontents”.

always related to what it does not know how to articulate, as much as what it does, it is always bogged down in narrative and symbol. The question of how to convey a traumatic experience in narrative “can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5). Caruth, like Freud, emphasizes how narration sits at the heart of human experience of trauma (thus making it “somehow *literary*”) but that because trauma resists stabilizing discourse, it becomes a unique problem in texts attempting to describe (or efface) its experience. Because of the difficulty inherent to voicing trauma, Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1991) and Kalí Tal in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996) posit that the events of the horrifically violent twentieth century force the need for *testimonies of* and *witnesses to* trauma, conjoined acts that can be found in various speaker/listener relationships, including those of author and reader. Modern novels exhibit a preoccupation with trauma, depicting characters and situations that suffer from psychological trauma and representing trauma through the fractured forms that suggest the damaged state of literature itself. They thus present narratives of trauma that testify to the endemic trauma of the post-war period.

These emphases on narrative lend credence to my examination of modernist novels for their role in depicting Great War trauma. Each of these trauma theorists emphasizes the importance of narrative—literary, personal, and cultural—to the representation of trauma and to its eventual healing and memorialization. However, it is imperative to avoid conflating the real life sufferings of people with psychological traumas and the formal chaos of texts or the constructed pain of characters in novels. For

one, I want to respect the specific and real-world ramifications of individual traumas. Second, the trauma of texts functions in a different vein than that of individuals, doing important cultural work that reveals broad, often competing articulations of the war's effects.¹¹ Carl Krockel addresses this concern with an attitude that mirrors my own thinking on the subject: "I will guard against diffusing the extremity of suffering of [the war's] immediate victims; instead I wish to commemorate them as the front-line victims of events so cataclysmic that their impact has left no aspect of our culture unmarked" (23). Unquestioningly, the Great War had devastating psychological effects on individuals—combatants and non-combatants—which shadowed their perception of Western culture as a whole. Indeed, the Great War provoked another troubling psychological state that was even more widespread than trauma—grief. Modern novels of sterility contend with the effects of both trauma and grief, and they themselves are as likely to be elegiac or grief-stricken as they are to exhibit signs of trauma.

In this analysis of sterility in modern novels, I uncover the presence of both trauma and grief within them and, indeed, show that the boundaries between trauma and grief often overlap and dissolve. Grief and mourning theorists claim that because of the unprecedented nature of the events of the twentieth century (with the Great War being particularly catastrophic), Western societies lacked mourning rituals adequate to the monumental task of dealing with the grief these events created. Instead, the trauma of war permeated past the boundaries of the battlefield into the home front, linking the public and private spheres in a shared cultural shell shock. As Jahan Ramazani states, "Slaughter

¹¹ Both Tal in *Worlds of Hurt* and Ben Shepherd in *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (2001) express concern about the way Americans conceive of, conflate, universalize, erase and/or treat various real-life experiences considered "traumatic." Their work provides a useful caution to anyone venturing into the application of trauma theory in textual studies.

and suffering on such a scale was not readily amenable to traditional mortuary codes or recuperative mourning, which were permanently altered. Even the homes of those far from the scene of battle were left feeling like haunted, crypt-like spaces” (“Afterword” 288). Grief inevitably comes with war but the Great War, with its unprecedented devastation of both bodies and culture, magnified grief, both for personal, human deaths *and* for the widespread destruction of a way of perceiving history, culture, humanity, and self in the modern world. Peter Homans, a scholar of psychology and religion, emphasizes that humans can experience grief from the loss of ways of understanding self and the world, “a symbol or rather a system of symbols and not a person.” Generally, he claims, such loss is “sociohistorical, cognitive, and collective” rather than individual, although individuals are forced to cope with it. Because this “symbolic loss” exists outside the purview of standard mourning, “the inner work of coming to terms with the loss of such symbols is by no means always followed by generative or creative repair or recovery, but as often by disillusionment, or disappointment, or despair” (20). Reproductive narrative structures and traditions, being both collective and symbolic, fit within Homans’s formulation. Modern novels of sterility highlight the need to mourn the loss of the reproductive narratives but also, more importantly, the near impossibility of doing so. With the intertwining of personal and collective grief, Great War literature served a dual function: a personal response to loss, but also a collective artifact or narrative representing the loss.

Modern novels of sterility expose unmournable grief due to the Great War. As Ramazani argues, the Great War undermined traditional mourning rituals and thereby enfeebled people’s ability to cope with their grief. Building on Ramazani, Patricia Rae

contends in *Modernism and Mourning* (2007) that many modernist authors even engaged in a “resistance to mourning,” rejecting the grieving process that would lead to closure and acceptance in favor of an “activist melancholia” that consciously refuses to “move on” from grief. She argues that this resistance to mourning is “a deliberate decision about how not to respond to loss. It might be characterized, in general, as a resistance to reconciliation, full stop: a refusal to accept the acceptance of loss” (16). In my analysis of sterility in post-war novels, depictions of the end of procreation can be read as a veiled threat from the grief-stricken public to the powers that be: continue making war and we will stop producing soldiers. Yet as with the deconstruction of reproductive narrative, resistant grief can exhibit political potential or political impotence; it can refuse to participate in maintaining the status quo or it can bog down in the stasis of suffering.

I wish to avoid the presumptiveness of stating unequivocally that modernist authors exhibited pacifism and protest through a resistance to mourning.¹² Indeed, a preoccupation with post-war suffering potentially encouraged certain artists and intellectuals to remove themselves from political debate, an absence that may have enabled their governments and fellow citizens to engage in the thinking and rhetoric that led to World War II and its horrors. However, at a minimum, modernist authors draw attention to the apocalyptic mood after the war, and thereby reveal the ambiguities of the post-war tone: a sense of bewilderment and inversion, of an experience that—for many people—fell somewhere between the life-halting pain of psychological trauma and the

¹² *Modernism and Mourning* does acknowledge the complexity of the “resistance to mourning” and “activist melancholia” ideas, and essays in the volume such as “Against Melancholia: Contemporary Mourning Theory, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, and the Politics of Unfinished Grief” and “Monumental City: Elizabeth Bowen and the Modern Unhomely” question the productivity of certain authors’ melancholia. Rae writes: “it is advisable, clearly, to assess the political significance of rejecting, or failing to do, the work on mourning on a case by case basis, with a view to the nature of the thing being stubbornly missed or lamented” (22).

painful complexities of profound grief. Grief unmournable has the potential, I contend, to become traumatizing in itself. This traumatic grief features in the novels that attempt to represent and understand the effects of the Great War yet exhibit, through the construction of sterile narratives, the irresolvability of this unprecedented state.

This dissertation proposes adding “traumatic grief” to the list of emotions Sianne Ngai dubs “ugly feelings.” Such ambivalent emotional states play an important role in the art and culture of the twentieth century as Ngai uncovers in *Ugly Feelings* (2005). She analyzes several ambiguous affects that philosophers have traditionally ignored for more self-assured emotions such as anger, love, or sadness. As Ngai articulates, these “ugly feelings” arise repeatedly in the literatures of Western, capitalist modernity. These emotions are: envy; anxiety; paranoia; a “racialized affect” she dubs “animatedness”; and “a strange amalgamation of shock and boredom” Ngai calls “stuplimity.” She reads these affects “as unusually knotted and condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments’—that is signs that not only render visible different registers of problem (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner” (3). Traumatic grief also lives in a grey area among affects, straddling two more clearly defined states and signaling the unmournability of the Great War’s losses. Traumatic grief saturates these modernist novels, and its effects result in sterile narrative responses to the Great War. Adding traumatic grief to the list not only expands Ngai’s theory of “ugly feelings,” it also enhances our understanding of how unstable affective states pervade and complicate literature in the twentieth century.

This call to recognize traumatic grief as a distinctly modernist “ugly feeling” again encourages questions about the political potential of representing this affect

through sterility: What is the ultimate purpose behind such representation? Why (and how) sterility and to what goal? *Ugly Feelings* suggests a way of understanding the politics of using sterility in response to the war, for a key component of Ngai's project lies in figuring out how these unsettled or unsettling affective states serve "as a meditation between the aesthetic and the political in a nontrivial way," yet also reveal the limited strength of individual political action in the face of modernity's magnitude (3). She claims that these affects offer "no transcendence" but they do "provide small subjects with what [Gertrude] Stein calls 'a little resistance' in their confrontations with larger systems" (294). Through her exploration of the subtle viability of political resistance inherent in "ugly feelings," Ngai provides ways to conceive of sterility in modernist literature as a minutely effectual but also legitimate political protest against the powers that created the Great War. For example, in *The Return of the Soldier* and *One of Ours* West's and Cather's respective depictions of home-front women who are better equipped to read and understand the war breaks down the gender hierarchies that, in their estimation, participated in the Western world's decay. Hemingway's traumatized "lost generation" of *The Sun Also Rises* ultimately refuses to create a stable narrative of their traumas and thereby resists the resolution of successful mourning that accepts the loss and moves on. Claude McKay attempts to revivify masculinity crushed not only by the war but also by institutional racism by proposing a sterile but vibrant homosexual brotherhood that rejects both racist and heteronormative narratives. Last, although definitely not least, *Parade's End* consciously undertakes to fulfill what Ford perceives as the ethical job of the novelist to act as the "historian of his own time" (qtd. in Saunders, *Dual Life*, v.2 126). Thus, I argue that each of these novels exhibits at least

traces of that “activist melancholia” that rejects an acceptance of the war even as each also insists upon the unprecedented, horrific, and bewildering state of shell shock perceived as the quintessential condition of the post-war world.

Summary of Chapters

Each of the chapters in this dissertation analyzes a single novel, examining the primary sterility in each and how this sterility manifests in both content and form. Chapters II and III investigate novels that represent sterility through tropes of virginity and employ their virginities to “make it new” by deconstructing generic traditions, specifically the pastoral and the *Bildungsroman*. In chapter II, I argue that West’s *The Return of the Soldier* portrays a false virginity in its soldier protagonist, Chris Baldry, whose virginity arises from his regressive amnesia due to shell shock, a forgetting that also represses the memory of his young son’s death and his wife’s subsequent barrenness. I ultimately argue that through the novel’s unreliable narrator—Chris’s cousin, Jenny—West destabilizes events so that readers will not only apprehend but also experience the traumatic bewilderment of the war environment. I further assert that the novel’s truncated, unsatisfying ending mirrors the perpetual sterility of unending virginity. Chapter III argues that Cather’s *One of Ours* also represents sterility through its soldier protagonist, Claude Wheeler; but in this case the protagonist’s virginity is forced upon him, an imposition that prevents farmboy Claude from maturing. Cather uses Claude’s inability to mature as a central component in her deconstruction of the *Bildungsroman*, highlighting his out-of-placeness through antithetical representations of Nebraska and France. In examining the virgin sterility of both novels, I demonstrate that, as Elaine

Showalter has argued, not only did the war have profound ramifications for home-front women such as West and Cather but also that women modernists depicted the war's sterile effects earlier than male peers and in intriguing, innovative ways (194).

Furthermore, in opening with discussions of virginity as sterility, these chapters immediately establish how modernist expressions of sterility encompass far more than just depictions of impotent soldiers or women dying in childbed.

From examining modern novels focused on modes of sterile virginity, this dissertation turns in chapters IV and V to examining Hemingway's traumatized elegy to stable heterosexuality in *The Sun Also Rises* (chapter IV) and then analyzes McKay's *Home to Harlem* as a parodic queering of Hemingway's novel (chapter V). In Hemingway's seminal text, sterility appears in both the physical sterility of Jake Barnes, whose war wound makes him impotent, and the emotional sterility of Brett Ashley, who, I argue, uses literal and symbolic contraception to protect herself from pregnancy and emotional intimacy. Moreover, the sparseness of Hemingway's prose, the circular and episodic structure of the novel, and its ambiguous ending become a kind of contraceptive barrier to interpretation that blocks stable understandings of the text and thereby incites an interpretive impotence in readers. Chapter IV assesses *Home to Harlem* as a queer parody of Hemingway's text that simultaneously critiques and creates modernist literature. McKay's novel first aims to contrast Great War trauma with the emasculating trauma of institutional racism which, as McKay emphasizes, precedes and also exceeds the war. But he layers this critique by claiming a homosocial and homosexual brotherhood of modernists that he accepts as physically sterile in exchange for a queer artistic productivity. McKay thus prefigures Edelman's call for a non-procreative politics

yet his homosocial, artistic utopia relies problematically on the exclusion of women. I ultimately show how Hemingway lays an eloquent foundation depicting the collapse of heterosexual narrative that McKay then builds upon by proposing a homosexual alternative. This dissertation uncovers how Hemingway's mingling of impotent and contraceptive manifestations of war trauma reveal the collapse of stable gender boundaries and how McKay's parody uses sterility to promote queerness.

Chapter VI, the concluding chapter, analyzes another aspect of human reproduction—pregnancy—and its troubling uncertainty as portrayed in Ford's monumental Great War tetralogy, *Parade's End*. This work exhibits the author's perspective as both a combatant and a transitional elder of literary modernism, both roles encouraging him to render the war and its effects in a sweeping, expansive style. In *Parade's End*, Ford entangles the worlds of the front and the home front, interweaving domestic battles and sexual warfare with the horrors, boredom, and trauma of the trenches. *Parade's End* also exhibits a deep preoccupation with procreation and legitimacy, which appears in protagonist Christopher Tietjens' suspicions about his son's paternity, a concern that comes to symbolize the war's explosion of history. Like Hemingway, Ford structures his novel as a circular manifestation of trauma; however, the circularity of *Parade's End* perversely mirrors the teleological and cyclical movement of pregnancy in order to emphasize not only illegitimacy but also post-war anxieties surrounding stillbirth and non-regeneration. I argue that Ford's behemoth attempts to represent the gestation of modernist literature that he hopes will shore up the world against the ruins wrought by the Great War; however, the lingering ambiguity in the

tetralogy's final, and most modernist, volume suggests his anxiety that this infant modernism will prove unviable, either stillborn or illegitimate.

“Static Chaos” thus analyzes multiple manifestations of sterility in post-war novels that reveal the long reach of the Great War and its attendant traumatic grief. This dissertation aligns itself with new formalism and new modernist studies, particularly those works focused on the Great War. It also utilizes several theories to understand why and how sterility proved so resonant a representation of the post-war experience, including theories of gender, trauma, grief and mourning, affect, and heterosexual, reproductive narrative. In theorizing, in turn, how these novels use modernist innovations to deconstruct preceding narrative traditions and to represent the war's damage to culture in the US and Britain, I unearth new implications for our understanding of modernism, the Great War, other literatures of war and trauma, and fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

CHAPTER II

FALSE VIRGINITY:

THE PARADIGMATIC STERILITY OF *THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER*

Rebecca West's slim first novel, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), appears deceptively simple on the surface but contains multiple layers that suggest that Britain's problems—including class inequality, gender inequality, disconnection, and the Great War—are intertwined, and that each of these contributes to an unregenerative modern world. For Jenny Baldry, the novel's narrator, attempting and failing to fix understanding reveals the impossibility of narrating the war's effects as anything but the collapse of the known world. After her life has been thrown into upheaval—by the war, by her shell-shocked cousin Chris's amnesia, by the confusing person of Chris's early love, Margaret Grey—Jenny asks: “Why had modern life brought forth these horrors that make the old tragedies seem no more than nursery shows?” (30). Jenny asserts that the unprecedented scale of the war nullified previous ways of comprehending and mourning great tragedies, and she links the evils attendant upon the Great War with children and childrearing, “these horrors” and “nursery shows.” The novel establishes the sterility of such a world, one that relegates children to a past that could allow them.

West's novel stands out from other war novels because of its wartime publication date, focus on home-front experience, and use of a woman's perspective.¹³ It is a foundational text in modern novels of sterility, one that depicts the world's barrenness

¹³ In conceiving of West, and Willa Cather also, as “war writers” we must note their insistence on the Great War's effects beyond battlefields and beyond combatants. Debra Rae Cohen, in *Remapping the Home Front*, and Elaine Showalter, in *The Female Malady*, both argue that women writing during and immediately following the war were better able to assess, challenge, question, and imagine the war's meaning (or lack thereof) because of their unequal position under patriarchy.

through the unreliability of its narrator, its soldier's amnesia that manifests as a regression to virginal adolescence, its representation of nature out of sync with regenerative cycles, and, finally, the haunting non-presence of two dead children—particularly Chris's son, Oliver, whom he also forgets yet cannot elide forever. The brevity, style, and deceptive simplicity of West's first novel also reveal its intriguing position within a literary tradition in flux. Similar to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), *The Return of the Soldier* packs what seems like a classic realist fiction into a constrained space that obfuscates as much as it unveils its core of uncertainty and trauma. Indeed, in both works the lack of certainty stemming from a breakdown of sense, ethics, and stability assumes a traumatizing aspect in itself. Moreover, Conrad's Marlow and West's Jenny manifest the discombobulating trauma of their experiences by drawing overt attention to their uncertainty over “what really happened” and, therefore, highlight their unreliability as narrators. Samuel Hynes notes of *The Return of the Soldier's* publication date, “the crucial action in the world, the war itself, doesn't yet have an ending, has not been won and lost” (Introduction xvi). I submit that this attempt to understand an overwhelming event while in the midst of it contributes to the novel's status as a virgin narrative, full of questions but without metaphorical maturity or the sense of continuation (via answers, triumph, creation, procreation, etc.) that characterize most Western narratives.

To call *The Return of the Soldier* “virgin” is not to say the novel or its author are “immature” in some pejorative sense. Rather, at the time West wrote the novel, understanding of the war and its effects were still in an “adolescent” state and she deftly mimics this uncertainty and its attendant trauma with her virginal narrative. Ultimately,

West rejects the notion that people can or should flee into fantasy and psychosis to escape modernity's horrors even as she critiques a world so traumatic that insanity appears the only sane response to it. In so doing, the novel repudiates productive, sense-making or world-stabilizing conclusions and creates, instead, a thwarted, virgin narrative.

Because the story of Chris Baldry's shell-shocked "return" comes filtered through Jenny's sympathetic but highly unreliable consciousness, overly simplistic readings of the novel have been rampant, and many critics have unequivocally accepted Jenny's depictions—Kitty as shallow and cruel, Margaret as irreproachably beatific, and Chris's amnesia as an escape from his stilted, responsible life. For example, early West scholar Harold Orel condemns the novel: "Only stock formulae that falsify human truth even as they pretty up the otherwise barren and unacceptable ugliness of the life we know would justify this kind of fictional resolution" (125). More recent scholars including Ann Norton, Bernard Schweizer, and Bonnie Kime Scott suggest their uncertainty about the novel's merits with their silence: Norton's study of West's fiction treats the novel but briefly; Schweizer's study of West and the female epic gives it a mere mention; and Kime Scott, in an article on West's feminist modernism, focuses only on West's second and third novels, *The Judge* (1922) and *Harriet Hume* (1929), while her seminal *Refiguring Modernism: Women of 1928* (1995)—where West figures prominently—never even mentions *The Return of the Soldier*.¹⁴ I assert, however, that *The Return of the Soldier* deserves serious consideration as a formally and politically modernist novel, particularly because of its paradigmatic status among works that use sterility to represent

¹⁴ Peter Wolfe also dismisses the novel even as he makes evident his respect for West's body of work. He rejects all her early novels saying, they "are enigmas: given their brilliance, they have no right to be so bad" (30). West's complicated and long career often overshadows her earliest work, even as the illusory nature of *The Return of the Soldier* puzzles scholars—early and late—who attempt to fix its position in her oeuvre.

the trauma and grief the war created. This work is indebted to the handful of recent, careful scholars who balance an awareness of Jenny's unreliability with prescient, thoughtful readings of West's dynamic first novel, including the seminal work of Margaret Stetz, feminists Debra Rae Cohen and Mischa Kavka, and Freudians Margery Sokoloff, Wyatt Bonikowski, Susan Varney, and Steven Pinkerton.

The primary manifestation of *The Return of the Soldier*'s sterility lies in its unnatural virginity, which appears not only in its soldier but also in its "spinster" narrator and her tale. As one who is damaged by war and by modernity, Jenny cannot be trusted, and gaps and problems in her narration reveal that the response of everyone to Chris's memory loss (including Chris himself) is a return to a virginal, pre-war state. Indeed, as the novel's only literal virgin, Jenny's tentative gropings toward truth and understanding seem to mimic a metaphorical virgin's uncertainty, curiosity, and trepidation. Jenny has probed at this experience so consistently that she admits to having "lived so long with the story" that she cannot remember all the details, yet she still asserts, "I think it is the truth" (33). Thus, Jenny performs a kind of narrative virginity, which includes the possibility that her virgin's perspective de-sexualizes the details surrounding her cousin Chris's various "returns." However, within the text, Chris pretends to literal virginity as a symptom of shell shock, and these intermingling virginites fix Chris, Jenny, and the novel in sterile stasis. Moreover, Chris's shell shock not only returns him to a time before his wife, Kitty, but also to a time before the death of his son, Oliver. The haunting silence surrounding Oliver's death suggests the complexity of Chris's trauma-based psychosis: His flight into the safety of Margaret's arms reveals less a desire to flee from the war and other mature responsibilities than a desire to escape to a time before he lost a beloved

child, before the end of the Baldry line.¹⁵ Chris's return to adolescence, however, proves as sterile as his mature life with barren Kitty and virginal Jenny.

Relating virginity to sterility may seem odd since, as Jason Compson reminds his son Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), virginity is, in theory, only sterile temporarily. Jason dubs it “only a state in which the others are left,” and also asserts that virginity “means less to women” and was “invented by men.” Quentin, however, seems bent on proving Jason's point, complaining, “Why couldn't it have been me and not her who is unvirgin?” thus reflecting the importance of sexual virility for men in the logic of Western culture (78). A “virgin” narrative also appears difficult to imagine as it suggests one that will never climax, let alone conclude and reproduce. Yet *The Return of the Soldier* is, I contend, a narrative that reveals the semi-obvious truth that virginity, as an ongoing state, is just as antithetical to procreation as impotence, barrenness, homosexuality, and so on. And just like Quentin Compson, this narrative dies a virgin.¹⁶

Oliver's absence frames *The Return of the Soldier*: the novel opens in his still-maintained nursery and reminding Chris of his son returns him to sanity at the novel's end. Yet the war saturates the novel and proves the catalyst that reveals the traumas that precede it—which include Oliver's death, Chris's break from Margaret, and Jenny's unrequited love for Chris—as well as those traumas that derive from it. Even as a non-combatant, Jenny is deeply entrenched in the war and its horrors haunt her dreams: “By night I saw Chris running across the brown rottenness of No Man's Land, starting back

¹⁵ While too divergent to delve into here, the novel's “end of the line” sub-motif highlights, via ironic futility, the pointlessness of all Chris became and did to keep the Baldry family afloat. His faithful class conformity brings no rewards, only suffering.

¹⁶ As we will see in the next chapter, Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) enacts a related-but-distinct form of sterile virginity.

here because he trod upon a hand, not even looking there because of the awfulness of an unburied head, and not until my dream was packed full of horror did I see him pitch forward on his knees as he reached safety—if it was that” (5). I will return to this dream later but emphasize now that Jenny’s ability, through images from newspapers and newsreels, to convincingly envision the war, combined with the ongoing terror of worry for a loved one, highlights the war trauma experienced by those on the home front.¹⁷ Likewise, the overhanging spirit of Oliver pervades the novel with another trauma, this one domestic. Through the narrative, Oliver’s death links to the Great War, linking in turn the shell shock of men and women, soldiers and non-combatants. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write, “no man’s land was real in its bizarre unreality, and to become a denizen of that Unreal Kingdom was to become, oneself, unreal” (*Sexchanges* 268). No Man’s Land, the literal place, is where Chris returns from, lost to his adult self. At the same time, the grief-shadowed Baldry Court is also a “No Man’s Land,” a space without Chris, or even Oliver, and that lack also makes Jenny, Kitty, and their life ephemeral, unreal. No Man’s Land experienced in person by Chris and in absentia by Jenny,

¹⁷ In *A War Imagined* Samuel Hynes clearly appreciates the novel, calling it “more complex” than war novels by other women, such as Rose Macaulay. However, he takes a condescending tone to West’s (and all women’s) ability to represent the war, succinctly asserting that Jenny’s “war film is obviously the faked scene in *Battle of the Somme*; but the hand and the unburied head must have another source—a letter or a war diary, or some returned soldier’s tale, perhaps” (212). Hynes’ insistence that West must have cannibalized her writing from sources deemed, he implies, more real or legitimate—at a minimum, outside her purview—gets at the very heart of West’s own assessment of the novel. In “On *The Return of the Soldier*” (1928), West ostensibly corrects the notion that she took her inspiration from the field of psychoanalysis (which she also defends against those who mis-or under-read its complexities) but she ultimately insists on her own imaginative and artistic talents, on *her* creation of a dynamic literary text. She explains that through her own experiences, the pervasiveness of the war, and absorption of amnesia stories, “the novel was there, quite without the intervention of psycho-analysis” or, she suggests, any other blueprint for understanding the war (67). *The Return of the Soldier* is the creation of an intelligent, thinking artist—one who happens to be a woman—but it is not a naive approach to events West could not possibly comprehend or, what’s more, feel the effects of. On the war’s effect on West personally, including the birth of her illegitimate son, Anthony, on the day England declared war, see: Rollyson, 32–51.

highlights an unreality in both of them, an attempt to evade the world's horrors—through amnesia or false perception—making both characters victims of Great War trauma.

“Tell Me What Seems Real to You”: The Sterile Virginity of Jenny’s Unreliable Narration

Throughout the novel, Jenny’s perspective remains in flux, her allegiance switching between Kitty and Margaret, her interpretation of events shifting. Margaret Stetz emphasizes the novel’s “sympathetic portrait of a narrator whose orientation and desires remain multidirectional and ambiguous” (“Oscar Wilde” 167).¹⁸ Throughout the story, Jenny exhibits her drive to understand even as she admits the impossibility of doing so. In an important scene, she begs Chris, “Tell me what *seems* real to you,” and thereby reveals her and Chris’s conjoined inability to fix the facts, to understand what “really” happened (32, my italics). This instability in the narrative points to the novel’s groundbreaking participation in literary sterility because it evacuates the text of verifiable certainty, thus re-creating the sense of discombobulation the war engendered. The formal and thematic use of sterility derives from the war’s lack of precedence—the way it exploded people’s perceptions of the world, the way it seemed to signal an end to history. Amidst all the uncertainty the war either creates or brings to the surface, Jenny’s unreliability constructs barriers to understanding and, therefore, to achieving the feeling of resolution and satisfaction, or their narrative counterparts, climax and conclusion.

¹⁸ In her excellent article, “Drinking ‘The Wine of Truth’: Philosophical Change in West’s *The Return of the Soldier*” (1987), Stetz provides an important intervention into West scholarship, asserting that Jenny, the novel’s central consciousness, is also the novel’s protagonist—rather than Chris—because it is Jenny who develops with the plot: “Through Jenny’s emotional and intellectual struggles, we are led to a mature understanding of what modern life demands of us. Suffering and danger must be confronted directly, rather than denied or avoided for not even the strongest parental figure can protect us from them forever” (75).

I particularly emphasize that Jenny's *interpretations* of the novel's events cannot be trusted and that this uncertainty belies a surface-level understanding of the story. Jenny, like most citizens of combatant nations, is adrift in virgin territory in terms of understanding the war—its meaning, its effects, its purpose, its aftermath. The impossibility of fixing the characters' motivations, behaviors, or experiences destabilizes the story and its meaning, showing that West, the literal author of the text, encourages reading against the grain of Jenny's narration. The novel avoids a conclusion that is either clarifying or future-inducing, in the end making an argument for the rupture in historical temporality caused by the war.

The novel often hints at Jenny's unreliability but one passage makes it particularly apparent: when Jenny reports the tale that Chris told *her* of his early love affair with Margaret on Monkey Island. This fairy tale reveals not only Jenny's unreliability but also the way that war trauma colors her perspective of this pre-war tale. For Jenny (not Chris) states, "I have lived so long with the story which he told me that I cannot now remember his shy phrases. But this is how I have visualized his meeting with love on his secret island" (33). She admits the failure of her memory in this passage while acknowledging that the story has become her own "visualization," a detail suggested as well by the excessively romantic language of "meeting with love on his secret island." This passage also shows that much time has elapsed since the events Jenny narrates, situating the present moment of the novel in a projected future distant from its wartime setting and wartime publication. The fact that West creates an unstable, narrative memory of the Great War in the midst of the Great War reveals the ongoing state of suffering the war brought to the surface of Jenny's consciousness. Grievances pile up in Jenny's biography—her

unrequited love for Chris, her life spent in the shadow of his indifference and Kitty's beauty, the death of Oliver, the horrors of the war itself, and the shattering of all her illusions that is the effect of Chris's return—and these ever-mounting sufferings erupt into trauma that cannot be narrated, explained, or escaped by Jenny, even in the future.

This instability in Jenny's understanding also reflects the pervasive mental suffering that attended the wartime environment, showing how the war seeped beyond the battle lines and inundated the perceived world. Trudi Tate explains the home-front damage that arose from the war: "Witnessing such events at a distance, or being exposed to them indirectly, discursively, through stories, can cause war neuroses, just as some soldiers suffered from shell shock without ever going into battle. ... [S]tories which circulate in a society can damage people's bodies, or send them mad" (19). Evidence that the war has infiltrated Jenny's psyche appears in her persistent nightmare of Chris in No Man's Land with its cheerfully ghoulish song: "We were all of us in a barn one night, and a shell came along. My pal sang out, '*Help me, old man, I've got no legs!*' and I had to answer, '*I can't, old man, I've got no hands!*'" (5). The infusion of the war into Jenny's psyche also reveals itself in the narration of Chris and Margaret's initial reunion, where Baldry Court takes on the aspect of the battlefield only this time Chris pitches forward into Margaret's arms: "there he was, running across the lawn as night after night I had seen him in my dreams running across No Man's Land. ... I assumed that at Margaret's feet lay safety, even before I saw her arms brace him under the armpits with a gesture that was not passionate, but rather the movement of one carrying a wounded man from under fire" (59). To Jenny, this scene is one of battle and rescue, not passionate romance.¹⁹

¹⁹ Pinkerton argues that Margaret and Chris suffer from related traumas, including the deaths of their children, and that at the point in their lives that the story takes place they function for each other not as

Jenny's powerlessness to help Chris find safety from anything that she perceives as threatening him—the war, Kitty, or Oliver's death—signifies her personal stasis as a literal and symbolic virgin. Juxtaposing the two scenes of Chris running and collapsing—the one from Jenny's nightmare and the one where Chris falls into Margaret's arms—we can deduce Jenny's inability to aid Chris as Margaret can. Jenny's virginity comes to bear here, for while she is literally one who never experienced sex and marriage—with their attendant complexities—she is also a metaphorical virgin in relation to the novel's other traumas. She does not experience the literal battlefield—as Chris does—nor does she experience the death of her offspring—as Chris, Kitty, and Margaret do. All of Jenny's traumas occur vicariously. Debra Rae Cohen articulates Jenny's tenuous position by noting that she is a “superfluous woman,” one who “is always liminal, on the margins looking in or looking out,” and argues that Jenny legitimizes her position by aligning her perspective with what she perceives to be Chris's, first in league with Kitty and then moving to align with Margaret (67, 69). However, the liminality of Jenny's life and traumas does not delegitimize them for, as Tate articulates, shell shock did not occur solely on the battlefield. Rather, Jenny's virginity bars her from so many of the events (traumatic and otherwise) that imbue the other characters' lives with meaning and this causes a symbolic virginity, registered in a tone of being thwarted or barred, to pervade her tale and to saturate it with the virgin's sterility. Jenny proves incapable of productive action, situating her and her story within the metaphorically sterile world that *The Return of the Soldier* depicts. However, the catalyst for Jenny's story is Chris's “return” home from the war believing himself an untarnished boy-man, and West constructs his false

lovers but as comrades or, as he terms it, Margaret becomes Chris's *therapon* in the spirit of ancient Greek narrative and in keeping with contemporary French trauma theory.

virginity as a nuanced yet direct condemnation of the war, modernity, and their attendant sterility.

“A Boy’s Sport”: Shell Shock and False Virginity

Late in *The Return of the Soldier* Jenny goes looking for Chris and Margaret in the forest and sees an overturned tree that symbolizes Chris himself, one that highlights the falsity of his amnesiac bliss. The tree “had been torn up by the roots in the great gale last year, but had not yet resigned itself to death and was bravely decking itself with purple elm-flowers” (63). Much like this tree, Chris’s life has been “torn up” by a “great gale” (a term resonant with “the Great War” yet evocative of other storms as well). He is also a middle-aged man putting on the trappings of his boyhood self, his amnesia allowing him to be “not yet resigned” to death and suffering and, instead, “bravely decking itself with purple elm-flowers,” symbols of spring, youth, and the promise of new life. Yet these lively flowers suggest a tragic irony given their appearance on an uprooted and dying organism (62–63). By emphasizing this scene, I aim to complicate readings of the novel that suggest the only escape for a sane and good man is into the realms of insane fantasy because reading this tree as a symbol for Chris himself highlights West’s subtle critique of anyone who, like Chris, flees reality’s harsh truths (including his own failings) for fantasy’s comforts.²⁰ Moreover, the sterile untenability of

²⁰ In one of her weathercock moments of epiphany, Jenny thinks, “I felt, indeed, a cold intellectual pride in his refusal to remember his prosperous maturity and his determined dwelling in the time of first love, for it showed him so much saner than the rest of us, who take life as it comes, loaded with the inessential and the irritating” (65). Many assume that this perspective of Jenny’s mirrors West’s yet, I contend, that while this moment has notes of revelation we must still be aware of its irony, coming during a melodramatic, comically ineffectual attempt at something like suicide and in light of the novel’s ending, which insists on facing reality over escaping into fantasy—even when reality shows the world gone mad.

Chris's regression to his boyhood virginity signals the profundity of his adulthood traumas while still gesturing to the literal and metaphorical barrenness of his mature life.

Chris's amnesia takes his mind backwards fifteen years from 1916, the heart of the war, to 1901. Queen Victoria died that same year, and his return to that date suggests Chris's desire to rediscover a stable British worldview that began to disintegrate, at least symbolically, with Victoria's death. Yet his regression places him in the sterile stasis of an unrealistic, patently inequitable past. Despite Jenny and Margaret's insistent praise of Chris's character there is little in his behavior past or current to suggest that he really is a sensitive super-man, enraptured by love beyond class, time, and age. Rather, the regressive temporality of his delusion emphasizes its nature as a coping mechanism for his traumas—one that returns him to a virginal state before the war and the death of his child and, thus, his possibility for regeneration through parenthood.

As demonstrated with the fallen tree, West often uses landscape and the natural world to depict the sterility of her characters and their world, particularly in the midst of the false virginity that pervades Baldry Court. This tactic becomes particularly dynamic in the Monkey Island interlude that explains much (but, importantly, not all) of the Chris and Margaret back-story. In Jenny's re-telling of Chris's story, this idyll "had a grace and silliness that belonged to the eighteenth century" (36). This reference to the eighteenth century invokes the pastoral mode that characterizes this romance between the son of the "big house" and the innkeeper's daughter.²¹ But Jenny highlights the beauty of this tale, its "grace," even as she immediately emphasizes its "silliness," the foolishness of attempting to escape modernity—with its real and unavoidable evils—for a fantasy.

²¹ For the importance of the country house or "big house" as a concept in the British national imagination see: Mao and MacKay.

As noted earlier, the narrative admits its own unreliability by gesturing to the limitations of Jenny's perspective, particularly during the Monkey Island interlude. However, at its core this is Chris's story and subtle details highlight that this island—a "gentle jungle" where Chris and Margaret watch "a pale moon" appear "above the green cornfield on the other side of the river"—may not really have been a romantic refuge (40). For one, the story ends days before Chris and Margaret's love affair does, which, Margaret tells Jenny, came about because of Chris's irrational jealousy and Margaret's realization that "he wasn't trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class." Admirably, she "told him so, and he went on being cruel" (52). Thus Chris's amnesia erases his own betrayal of the girl he claimed to adore, thereby undermining the assumption (which many critics share with Jenny) that Monkey Island and Margaret were taken from the noble Chris by rigid responsibilities—rather than by his own entanglements in class and gender-based assumptions. Jenny—like Chris, like Margaret—wants to make of their affair something so beautiful that class, gender, war, and modernity will be literally erased, rather than just Chris's memories of them. But such a fantasy is patently untrue and unsustainable. In this way, each of the characters in this triumvirate—Chris, Margaret, and Jenny—is frozen in a sterile dream.

Chris's memory also ends on the cusp of his and Margaret's relationship growing deeper, possibly even sexual, a detail ironized by the setting of their unseen consummation—a "small Greek temple" that the previous owner, a Duke, had built for his sexual "excesses," for which fact Chris had previously avoided visiting the spot with his spotless maiden. This temple fits the pastoral vision yet its misplacement in time (i.e. not actually ancient) and its history of erotic indiscretions suggests the falseness of

Chris's (and Jenny's) fantasy.²² In the last night Chris remembers, he places Margaret in a statue's niche above the temple's altar, and in his response to Margaret's ambiguous, ageless beauty, he assures himself that "his love was changeless." And in one sense he proves himself right for this becomes the moment when his amnesia erupts, erasing everything between this interlude and his shell shock in battle: "Lifting her down from the niche, ... her warm body melted to nothingness in his arms. ... He was lying in a hateful world where barbed-wire entanglements showed impish knots against a livid sky full of booming noise and splashes of fire and wails for water, and the stretcher bearers were hurting his back intolerably" (42). In this transition from moment of adoration between virgins to the horrors of a Great War battlefield the text gestures to a core falsity in Chris's amnesiac escape. On one hand, the horror of modernity, epitomized by trench warfare, supersedes the symbolic grace of the Monkey Island fantasy, which appears tied to an earlier, more elegant England. On the other hand, the temporal location of Chris's regression—before he lost his son, before he married an appropriate woman, before he became a man of business and class expectations, and before he lost his first love by acting the bully—reveals that he desires to escape much more than the constraints of his respectable married life at Baldry Court; he desires, indeed needs, to escape himself.

Chris himself, by virtue of his amnesia, is captured in false virginity, and the novel features ironic descriptions of the natural world that highlight the sterile

²² The subversion of pastoral tropes was a common theme in Great War poetry by combatants and is tied in with pastoral's traditional connection to elegy, as noted by Paul Fussell and Jahan Ramazani (Fussell 253, Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* 9). Fussell writes, "If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral" (231). However, many novelists made similar use of the pastoral. Christine Froula contends that the "distinction" of the novel-as-elegy "arises from its discovery of the genre's deep resources for dramatizing and mediating death; the violence of everyday life; and the violence intrinsic to mourning, the grief-driven rage that threatens to derail the mourner's progress toward acceptance and consolation" (88). Similarly, John Vickery claims that the diversity of things needing to be mourned in the modern world, "increasingly generated a need to seek less traditional forms of consolatory authority with which to invest the elegy" (2).

impossibility of his rejection of reality. In particular, the text alludes to seasons acting in discord with their usual regenerative cycles in order to contrast pre-war Chris with the reality he hides from in the wartime present. Chris and Margaret's original romance, like the main events of the novel, happened during the spring, connoting youth and new life. Monkey Island's idyllic pastoral setting belongs to a time before modernity, to the world before dead sons and great wars. Yet after his return, Chris spends his time in "a place where autumn lives half the year," a pond that rejects greenness even though the season is spring, and instead remains, "fringed with yellow bracken and tinged bramble." Seeing Chris "play with the skiff" on this pond disturbs Jenny because, "It was a boy's sport, and it was dreadful to see him turn a middle-aged face as he brought the boat inshore" (43). The text highlights that, despite Chris's happiness, his virginal amnesia breaks faith with cycles of life including seasons and maturation: "This was the saddest spring," Jenny states (64). Like the overturned tree, Chris blossoms even though age and death mark him. Under his amnesia lurk the traumas of the war and the death of his son and, more subtly, the inequalities of class and gender from which Chris also tries to hide.²³ But the text makes evident that Chris appears as unnatural avoiding these realities as autumn does when it usurps the place of spring.

The novel never confirms whether Chris and Margaret were physical lovers in their youth, but the text does affirm the chastity of their relationship once Chris "returns."²⁴ For one, Chris's own amnesia elides any sexuality in their youthful affair,

²³ At the time she wrote *The Return of the Soldier*, West was becoming well known for her articles in suffragist and socialist publications. She maintained her feminism and socialism throughout her life but became disillusioned with Communism and an outspoken critic of totalitarianism in any guise.

²⁴ The text certainly provides hints that Chris and Margaret's youthful relationship included physical sex. Margaret tells Dr. Anderson, "Yes, [Chris] was always very dependent" when the doctor suggests, "He turned, then, to sex with a peculiar need" (81). Pinkerton believes they were lovers and emphasizes the

situating him in the sterile protection of virginity's illusions. For another, Jenny's depiction of their modern coupling, even in their most intimate setting, appears maternal and protective rather than sexual and passionate. Chris lays "in the confiding relaxation a sleeping child" as Margaret, "her mournfully vigilant face pinkened by the cold river of air sent by the advancing evening ... was sitting beside him, just watching" (69). Jenny describes this behavior as religious and beatific, like "kneeling worshippers" in "Catholic country" or, again, as maternal, like "one sees a mother with her child in her arms" (69). Chris now sleeps "englobed in peace as in a crystal sphere," layering Jenny's view that he is protected and safe on top of the text's insistence upon the falsity of his return to an earlier time. The erasure of sexuality marks not only Chris's flight from the war or from Kitty but also his regression into the stasis of perpetual boyhood through constant virginity. If Chris conceives of himself as irrevocably pre-sexual he will never need to cope with his mistreatment of Margaret, the birth and death of his son, the barrenness of his wife, or the general responsibilities and expectations of adulthood. Importantly, escaping all of these tragedies also allows him to escape the world-shattering realities of the Great War.

Chris's false virginity pervades the world of Baldry Court once he returns, entangling all the central characters in an unnatural virginity. He strips sexuality out of his relationship with Margaret, transforming her into a beatific Madonna savior, while the story itself comes through the consciousness of a literal virgin, the "spinster" Jenny. Even Kitty herself, the rejected wife who appears so horrid in Jenny's version of events, performs a virgin's role. In a prescient or calculated move on the night Chris returns

change to asexuality in Chris and Margaret's relationship, noting: "their apparent lack of an erotic union signals an important shift in Chris's desires from their earlier relationships (even if Chris seems to act as though he and she are merely picking up where they left off)" (7).

home, Kitty dresses herself “in all respects like a bride. ... She looked cold as moonlight, as virginity, but precious” (26). Later on, while waiting with Dr. Anderson, she stands “showing against the dark frame of her oak chair like a white rosebud that was still too innocent to bloom” (78–79). Thus Kitty too becomes saturated with Chris’s false virginity but, in her case, such an appearance proves itself ironic as well as tragic because women of her class and appearance “are obscurely aware that it is their civilizing mission to flash the jewel of their beauty before all men, so that they shall desire it and work to get the wealth to buy it, and thus be seduced by a present appetite to a tilling of the earth that serves the future” (75). As with the interrupted sexual connotations of Chris’s mirroring of paradoxical seasons, the agrarian metaphor “tilling of the earth” symbolizes sex and procreation as much as the business of farming, yet Kitty is physically sterile, unable to bear other children after Oliver. This fact makes ironic her ability to encourage men into being fathers of the nation.²⁵ On the surface, Kitty’s body contains the goods that make men want to conform to the standards of production and procreation, yet underneath she is unable to help in this endeavor because of her inability to have further children.

The irony of Kitty’s ties to procreation seems lost to Jenny, who states in response to Kitty’s future-inducing beauty, “There is, you know, really room for all of us; we each have our peculiar uses” (75). Yet we must assume the irony is not lost to West. Despite the many proofs that we cannot trust Jenny’s assessment, many critics accept her

²⁵ Susan Varney examines *The Return of the Soldier* in order to clarify the mytho-cultural figure of the father and suggest that what the Oedipus complex really reveals is a clinging to the idea of a guarantor of protection, even when history and life prove that no such guarantee exists: “Chris’s recovery, the return of his memory, renders suspect the ties of paternity insofar as it results not in a warm reunion and return to a keen sense of domestic ties but, rather, in an alienation that is all the more palpable” (263).

depiction of Kitty's shallow selfishness.²⁶ These critical blindspots generally extend, as well, to understandings of Chris and Margaret. Yet Jenny's unreliability as a narrator, particularly when considered alongside her love for Chris and her jealousy of what Kitty has that she does not (from Chris to beauty), argues for a correction to Jenny's reading of Kitty. On one hand, Kitty very well may be "the falsest thing on earth," as Jenny paints her (87). On the other hand, she too has suffered the loss of a child, the loss of her ability to procreate, the loss of her husband's love—in short, the shattering of her "globe of ease" (5). Jenny takes at face value Kitty's claim that she dries her hair in Oliver's old nursery because "it's the sunniest room in the house," but then later Jenny decides she "did not care" about the "tremendous implications of the fact that [Kitty] had come to the dead child's nursery though she had not washed her hair" (4, 58).

The text is full of such notes that hint at Kitty's suffering yet are glossed over by Jenny. For just two further examples: when Jenny and Kitty watch from the window Chris and Margaret's reunion, Jenny only remarks, "Kitty wept" before asserting the truth of Chris and Margaret's love (59); later, Jenny and Margaret see Kitty holding her neglected dog, which leads Jenny to claim, "That she should at last have stooped to lift the lonely little dog was a sign of her deep unhappiness." Jenny is puzzled by Kitty's appearance outside Oliver's nursery as she and Margaret contemplate leaving Chris happy in his insanity, but she asserts that Kitty "could not have conceived that we could follow any course but that which was obviously to her advantage. It was simply that she hated to see this strange ugly woman moving about amongst her things" (87). This depiction of Kitty is riddled with inconsistencies, from the acknowledgement of Kitty's obvious suffering to Jenny's dismissal of its legitimacy on the grounds of Kitty's shallow

²⁶ Pinkerton and Sokoloff are notable exceptions to this critical tendency to dismiss Kitty's own losses.

selfishness and Jenny's obliviousness to the maternal implications of Kitty's cradling her small pet in lieu of the son that died. The "truth" of Kitty's personality remains ambiguous when highlighted by the instability of Jenny's version of events, which ultimately attempts, but fails, to elide the traumatic grief that undergirds the false virginity pervading Baldry Court.

All these details indicating false virginity as a result of suffering emphasize the infiltration of unnatural sterility into the world of Baldry Court that boils to the surface when Chris returns. They also bring to the fore the trauma shared by Chris, Kitty, and (perhaps) Jenny—Oliver's death—which predates the war even as the war seems the catalyst for insisting on Oliver's importance and the evils of erasing his life and death. Moving beyond the borders of Baldry Court's contained world, Oliver's death (as well as the death of Margaret's son, Dick) signifies a larger modern thematic of sterility brought to fruition by the horrors of the Great War: the awareness of the inherent "cruelty of the order of things" where "children are not begotten that should have had the loveliest life, the pale usurpers of their birth die young. Such a world will not suffer magic circles to endure" (78). Thus the false virginity that saturates Baldry Court gestures to the heartrending death and elision of Oliver, who ultimately reveals the catastrophic sterility of modernity in Britain.

"Half a Life": The Merging of Front and Home-Front Traumas

The Return of the Soldier opens in Oliver's former nursery as Kitty "wails" at Jenny not to "fuss" about Chris's safety (3). Jenny and Margaret's collusion at the novel's end also occurs in the nursery, as they agree that, "The truth's the truth ... and

[Chris] must know it,” and use Oliver’s things to shock Chris into remembering. Oliver’s death bookends the novel, undergirding the narrative with memories of his death and the looming possibility of Chris’s, hinting at the shattering of the home-front world that the war entails. Sokoloff suggests that the “preservation of the nursery ensures that Oliver’s death will never fade ... while the lock [on its door] represents a desire to shut that unpleasant memory forever away—or at least to control its return” (186). The nursery thus reveals the lingering, unresolved grief surrounding Oliver’s death, which, tellingly, Chris’s unconscious elides when it collapses into amnesia. Extrapolating further the intermingling of the outside world of the war and the domestic one of the home front, each of the women Chris has had a romantic relationship with loses her son and finds herself barren, symbolizing the sterilizing touch of the soldier within the novel’s logic or, more specifically, the non-regeneration at the heart of a world that created the Great War. Thus Chris’s retrenchment to an unnatural virginity, and the other characters’ subsequent participation in this virginity, functions to avoid traumas from both fronts even as ongoing virginity’s sterility emphasizes the fact of mature barrenness, the war’s horrors, and the death of the final Baldry child.

The importance of Oliver’s ghostly presence highlights the loss that all the characters share. Yet despite its inhabitants’ conjoined suffering, Baldry Court continues in a state of unconsolable grief, which transforms into traumatizing experience through the inability to mourn Oliver’s loss. Kitty wishes “Chris wouldn’t have it kept as a nursery when there’s no chance—,” her unfinished dash admitting through absence that she cannot have more children (4). Later, Jenny is appalled by Kitty’s obvious suffering and claims, “But there are ways pain should not show itself ...”—her ellipses, like Kitty’s

dash, revealing the family's silently agreed upon imperative to hide their suffering (17). Chris's shell shock causes him to elide completely the life and death of his son, adding even further weight to the household's inability to acknowledge Oliver's loss. And, finally, Margaret speaks the truth, moaning in agony, "I knew there was something," when she discovers that Chris, like herself, lost a child; she thereby acknowledges that Chris's amnesia has little to do with his love for her or even the constraints of his adult life but, rather, the traumatic grief that stems from being unable to mourn the death of his son (78).

Baldry Court and the people within it hide their grief surrounding Oliver's death, exhibiting stereotypical "stiff upper lip" behavior even as markers of the loss remain. In public, the truth of Baldry Court appears limited to its "material seeming" even as, in private, grief continues to roil (67). Carol Acton examines the distinction between public and private expressions of mourning during the Great War, and her description of the slippage between the two modes of mourning Great War losses also applies, intriguingly, to the grief expressed (or not) over Oliver's death: "While 'enacting the duty imposed by the group' could offer consolation, the discrepancy between public form and private feeling in a wartime environment demanding stoicism could equally result in enormous stress on the bereaved" (38). Acton argues that loss unmourned or unmournable transforms into trauma, psychological and emotional suffering becoming so profound yet so un-narratable the psyche cannot process it as it cannot process other traumatic events. Ultimately, it takes Margaret—perhaps because she is less constrained by the trappings of upper class respectability—to acknowledge the deep well of loss underneath the seemingly idyllic world of Baldry Court, a loss epitomized in Chris's amnesia.

Margaret realizes the great trauma of Chris's life through *her* grief over the death of her son and her own barrenness. She also understands the even greater tragedy that allowing Chris's forgetting equals. For Margaret, it is not merely that, as Jenny claims, Chris will "not be quite a man" if he remains in amnesiac bliss, but that the deeper tragedies of life cannot forever be erased, which becomes the root philosophy behind the unassailable declaration not only that, "The truth's the truth," but also that Chris "must know it" (88). Considering that it is Oliver's ball and jersey that she uses to *return* Chris to the modern world, we must acknowledge that the novel's two traumas—Oliver's death and the Great War—are inextricably linked. Nancy Huston emphasizes that war and childbirth are always already entwined: "Although childbirth indubitably has biological precedence over war, neither phenomenon can be said to have symbolic precedence, and therefore only the *interaction* between the two can be the object of analysis" (165). The horror of the war causes Chris's amnesia but the temporality his psyche chooses for his regression points to traumatic grief due to the loss of his son and the pervasive, consuming tragedies of modernity that force Chris into choosing virginal boyhood over suffering manhood.

West twists the connection between war and childbirth by subsuming any potential glory or inevitability that could be gleaned from the Great War into a world where children die even as their parents live—without them and without the possibility of further procreation.²⁷ In doing so, she troubles traditional narrative movement, which

²⁷ Margaret Higonnet builds on Huston's argument by articulating how societies mythologize the categories "masculine" and "feminine," and how these distinctions become even more paradoxical during wartime: "Underlying this myth is the belief that men are naturally fierce and warlike, while women, as mothers, have an affinity for peace. It might be argued that this opposition of masculinity to femininity, like that of battlefield to homefront, helps to guarantee social stability. For, paradoxically, war unleashes aggressiveness in defense of civilization—violence intended to contain violence" (1).

Judith Roof assesses as heterosexual because reliant on a procreative logic of continuation. Narratives often express their reproducibility through endings in literal marriage or procreation but, even more commonly, by concluding with other productions, including “countless analogies to child/product—knowledge, mastery, victory, another narrative, identity, and even death—that occupy the satisfying end of the story” (xvii). These reproductive narratives sustain a heteronormative hierarchy by perpetually linking the sense-making of Western narrative to heterosexual physical and cultural procreation. However, it is my contention that the significant trauma done to the cultural imaginations of Britain and the United States by the Great War disrupted this reproductive tradition. In *The Return of the Soldier* the sterile response to the war’s trauma and grief resolves around its thematic and formal manifestations of unnatural virginity.

Critics have noted the intriguing possibilities and problems inherent in the publication of West’s war novel while the war was still being waged. Hynes suggests that the novel’s wartime publication date denied it the sense of completion and understanding historical novels generally achieve: “the end of the novel is not a tidy termination, but a precipice over which Chris must step into the terrible ordeal of war” (Introduction xvi). Cohen posits an important flexibility to such wartime works: “It is perhaps in home front works written during the war that traditional paradigms of war narrative can more definitively be rewritten—indeed, must be rewritten, since the lack of a resolution denies the author any standard valediction” (2). Building upon this notion of lack of resolution, I submit that the refusal of historical closure or stable sense-making contributes to *The Return of the Soldier*’s status as a virginal narrative by making its climax an unsettling question mark, rather than a resolute pleasure, which, furthermore, doubles back on that

climax in its conclusion, “returning” Chris and everyone to where they were at the beginning and upending notions of futurism and procreative continuation.

In *The Return of the Soldier*, West constructed a story incapable of satisfying resolution. The novel’s conclusion affirms that virginal stasis is no alternative for contemporary reality, regardless of how attractive such escape might seem, yet the unavoidable dissatisfaction inherent in the conclusion reveals not West’s artistic failings but her talent. In the end, the novel asserts a position, favoring “reality” over “fantasy,” even as its narrative tilts inevitably toward a conclusion that cannot satisfy characters or readers. This dissatisfaction stems from the predicament West creates, a plot impossible to resolve unambiguously. The alternative to the ending we get—leaving Chris happy in his insanity—is comparably discomfoting. Stetz insists that West faced the “unpleasant duty” of the artist by making the novel “force that bitter drink to her own lips and to ours” (“Drinking the Wine of Truth” 76), while Sokoloff contends that the novel’s conclusion should be read as a “critique of a world where the proper response to death is presumed to be emotional repression” (215). Most importantly, however, the novel’s ambiguous and ironic final “return” fails to resolve the lingering psychic trouble of Baldry Court’s inhabitants just as it fails to comfort readers with an expected resolution movement towards continuation.

Chris’s return to a world of horrors, including the fact of Oliver’s death and his likely return to the war, can hardly be embraced as satisfactorily inevitable. However, the alternative of leaving Chris insane is envisioned and rejected by Jenny: “there would come a time when his delusion turned to senile idiocy; when his joy at the sight of Margaret disgusted the flesh, because his smiling mouth was slack with age; when one’s

eyes no longer followed him caressingly as he went down to look for the first primroses in the wood, but flitted here and there defensively to see that nobody was noticing the doddering old man” (88). Some have critiqued this passage’s embrace of patriarchal masculinity, the insistence that Chris can and should suffer so he can remain “a flag flying from our tower” (88).²⁸ But what really appalls Jenny is the unnaturalness of Chris’s regression, and the way his pretence of boyhood will grow ever more grotesque as he continues to age. West carefully constructs a world of dead children, battlefield horrors, and pervasive virginity yet insists that humans must deal with that world on its own terms.

By the conclusion, West’s novel uses its narrative movement to formally represent modern sterility and it does so by emphasizing the sterility of unending and false virginity and through the futility of a world haunted by dead children. The closest thing the novel suggests as insight or achievement is a greater comprehension of the world’s inevitable and unavoidable horror, which, as an insight, is lessened further by the literal and metaphorical sterility of the Baldry Court world. However, Roof seeks to complicate arguments that see ambiguous conclusions as denying the heterosexual continuation of narrative, locating the procreative promise of narrative in the arousal and tease that precedes climax, not in the climax itself, or in its conclusive aftermath (6). I counter that in *The Return of the Soldier* even the lead up to climax gets undercut by the bleak dissatisfaction forced by its ending. Not only do the characters achieve no insight or creation that posits continuation, the novel constructs an ironic recirculation in the layered uses to which it puts the word “return,” which refers to Chris’s *return* from the

²⁸ For example, Kavka aims, in part, to explain West’s complicated, heteronormative feminism, an endeavor shared by Ann V. Norton, who undertakes a book-length examination of West’s fiction and feminism.

war, his *return* to Margaret and his boyhood self, his *return* to sanity, and his inevitable *return* to the war. Moreover, the recirculation that “return” comes to represent points to the perpetual retrenchment of immaturity and non-regeneration that marks the unnatural virginity at the text’s core.

The catalyst for this narrative apostasy is, of course, the Great War, highlighting the war’s unnarratability in traditional terms. Just as the novel is published before the war’s conclusion can begin its cementation in history, Margaret’s whispered assertion that Oliver and Dick “each had only half a life ...” locates the narrative as one truncated by perpetual ellipses, one that fails to mature (85). The structure of the plot itself shows the bleak, apocalyptic state of the Great War world, creating the feeling of rupture, of halt, and of non-regeneration. A paradoxical narrative, such as *The Return of the Soldier*’s, thwarts our ability to make sense of the novel’s world or find absolution for the war’s effects. Ultimately, the dissatisfaction inherent in the novel’s conclusion, combined with the impossibility of embracing the alternative, points to West’s critique of and rejection of a world that constructs such enigmas, a world that creates Great Wars.

CHAPTER III

FORCED VIRGINITY:

MISREADING, REREADING, AND THE STERILITY OF *ONE OF OURS*

Similarly to Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) emphasizes the home-front experience of the Great War, as well as the battlefield, and does so by manipulating the traditions of the pastoral.²⁹ However, *One of Ours* filters pastoral through the mythology of the western Frontier, thereby becoming a consciously American, modernist deconstruction of Great War mythologies and preceding literary forms. The sterility in *One of Ours*, like that in *The Return of the Soldier*, centers upon the central soldier's virginity, yet the forced virginity of Cather's Nebraska farmboy diverges from the false virginity of West's upper class British officer. In *The Return of the Soldier*, the soldier seeks refuge from the war in his madness-induced virginity symbolized by the novel's depiction of an unnatural pastoral setting; in *One of Ours*, the paradoxically fecund Nebraska landscape highlights Claude Wheeler's enforced and perpetual boyhood. Claude's inability to mature enacts only to subvert and parody the *Bildungsroman*, deconstructing the development that sits at the heart of this traditional form in order to show the destruction of traditional modes and perceptions in the modern, war-torn world. With Claude as the perpetually-thwarted heart of the novel,

²⁹ There is reason to believe that Cather drew inspiration from West's earlier novel, as Steven Trout points out in *Memorial Fictions*, noting that Cather's "lost American" who Claude meets in Paris seems like an archetypal version of West's Chris Baldry (72). This injured soldier has complete amnesia of the women in his life, including a fiancée "who is very ambitious for him to make the most of himself" (444). He has also fallen in love with a French country girl, and Claude envies the love the lost American has found and his amnesia of the suffocating people back home (437-44). West's novel can thus be seen as a progenitor for other sterile modern novels even as both she and Cather explore the unmapped regions of the non-regenerative world.

Cather creates a protagonist who can sense modernity's negative changes yet cannot seize hold of an alternative destiny or a new way of perceiving and being in the world.

The novel's first half sets up Claude's futility in order to establish why and how he chooses to embrace a specific narrative of the war, one that the novel will relate as a tragic misreading. His experience of the war mirrors the propagandistic and romantic narrative epitomized in the early war years by the poetry of Rupert Brooke, the beautiful boy-poet who symbolized Britain and civilization's rejuvenation in the "war to end all wars." Brooke asserted a nationalistic vision of English sacrifice on foreign soil when he wrote: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England" ("The Soldier" lns. 1–3). Brooke's poetic narrative of romantic consummation in war, and the propagandistic use made of it, function within the tradition of regenerative narratives analyzed by Judith Roof, Lee Edelman, and others. Roof and Edelman assert that such narratives feature a problematically heterosexual imperative of reproductive mastery and future-based continuity (i.e. Brooke and soldiers like him may die but they die for the future maintenance and improvement of the homeland and the generations to come). Claude believes in this kind of narrative, even in the face of opposing evidence, and this sets the stage for his anti-*Bildungsroman* plot that will lead to his death as a virgin, a dupe, and a heroic fool. Ultimately his mother, Mrs. Wheeler, undermines Claude's false reading with her prescient yet regressive re-interpretation of the war and her son. Thus, Cather's non-regenerative deconstruction of American pastoral and reformulation of the *Bildungsroman* form situate *One of Ours* as a noteworthy modernist novel of sterility.

Cather took the inspiration for her story from the life and death of her cousin, Grosvenor P. Cather, who died in France and with whom Cather had a complicated relationship. It was a hard novel for her to write, requiring more research, time, and communion with her protagonist, Claude, than any other work. Cather began the novel wanting to honor “G.P.” and doughboys like him but, as she wrote, the world’s understanding of the Great War, and her own, changed dramatically. As biographer James Woodress claims, when she began writing, G.P. was “God’s soldier, who had gone from the cornfields of Nebraska to fight in France for an ideal. This intense feeling of elation could not be sustained for long, and Cather, like other writers of her generation, suffered sharp disillusionment when it soon became apparent that the war had neither ended all wars nor saved the world for democracy” (303).³⁰ With all the emotion Cather poured into the novel, she took very hard its dismissal by respected and admired critics such as Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken.³¹ She even settled on 1922, the year the novel came out, as the year in which “the world broke in two” (preface).³²

³⁰ Janis P. Stout also claims that Cather felt the effects of the war keenly, and that she focused on more than the soldier’s experience: Cather “repeatedly asserted that [the war] had unleashed a general misery infecting every aspect of life so that no one could have any true happiness as long as it went on. In part, these feelings sprang from her reading about the sufferings of civilians in the war zone” (73).

³¹ Lewis wrote that, having sent Claude “off to war” with his home life “unresolved,” Cather “might as well have pushed him down a well” (129); Mencken credits the genius of *Three Soldiers* (1919) for revealing the “lyrical nonsensicality about [*One of Ours*] that often grows half pathetic; it is precious near the war of the standard model of lady novelist” (142); Edmund Wilson asks: “Can Mr. Mencken [who praised *My Ántonia* (1918)] have been mistaken when he decided that Miss Willa Cather was a great novelist?” because “Her new novel ... seems to me a pretty flat failure” (143). Notably, nearly all of the novel’s most virulent detractors were male. The novel’s defense by friends such as Dorothy Canfield Fisher did little to soothe Cather’s feelings.

³² 1922 was a seminal year for more than just Cather, as Michael North shows in *Reading 1922* (1999): “Observers living at many different points in the twentieth century have felt the earth heaving beneath them, and historians have rarely proposed 1922 as being uniquely troubled or troubling. Virginia Woolf dated the definitive break in her century to 1910, though it is worth mentioning in this context that she first started writing about this break in 1922. And according to D. H. Lawrence, ‘It was in 1915 the old world ended’; but he also wrote this in 1922” (6). And while Cather’s world was breaking, F. Scott Fitzgerald

The importance of 1922 points not only to Cather's hurt feelings or the war itself (which ended officially in 1918) but to the rising understanding of what the war meant or, rather, *did not* mean. Steven Trout unearths this particularly unstable memory of the war within American culture: "from its beginning American memory of the war was fractured and unsettled, more a matter of competing versions of memory ... than a single, culturally pervasive construction of the past" (*Battlefield of Memory* 2). This instability stemmed from a significantly different experience of the war for Americans than their British and European counterparts. Americans, as John T. Matthews emphasizes, relied upon "institutions of representations—journalism, print propaganda, fictions, sermons—to make the war real in the place where it was not occurring." Because the experience of the war so often came filtered through narratives, "In important respects, American writing of the war *was* the war" (217). Early in the war years, the prevailing propaganda and attendant perspective in the US and Britain envisioned the war as the glorious and culminating event of civilization, but by the war's end, and in its politically and psychologically unstable aftermath, American attempts to understand the war became increasingly fractured, as if cultural memory was itself traumatized and unable to concretely narrativize that experience. The ascendant narrative of the Great War—particularly from those subjects we now call "modernist"—diverged from the early narrative established by Brooke and his ilk to become one of void, of futility, and—in its literature—sterility.

One of Ours evidences this fracture through its ambiguous narrative that seems, on one hand, to praise Claude and his idealism while, on the other, it simultaneously

declared 1922 the "definitive moment of the Jazz Age" (4). In literature, 1922 also saw the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and Woolf's *Jacob's Room*.

critiques his foolishness and condemns the horror of the Great War. Contemporary critics still grapple with *One of Ours*, participating in a long-standing debate between defenders and detractors. Hermione Lee dubs *One of Ours*, “a painful and unsatisfactory book” (179–80) while Pearl James charges Cather with blaming “New Women” for the sufferings of men such as Claude.³³ However, a significant counter trend in *One of Ours* scholarship argues that those who dismiss the novel miss its deeply ironic depiction of Claude’s Nebraska and his war. Accounts emphasizing the novel’s irony begin with David Stouck’s insistence that the novel is a satire. Merrill Maguire Skaggs provides the most famous assertion of the novel’s dark edge: “The central fact about *One of Ours* that one must see in order to read it intelligently at all is that the book is bathed and saturated in irony” (40). The debate between those who view the novel as conservative or flat and those who see it as ironic and satirical mirrors other arguments about Cather’s place within modernism. This debate takes on three aspects, with one segment praising Cather as a realist in a world of inane experimenters, the second critiquing her for an out of touch nostalgia, and the third wanting to read her as an important, under-recognized modernist stylist.³⁴

³³ The work of several critics runs counter to James’s assertion that Cather was sexist. For example, Rosowski makes one of the earliest arguments that Claude is a different vision of manhood in a world that has no space for him. Unlike Ernest Hemingway’s self-contained “code hero” she suggests that “Claude is most himself when he is most domestic,” which added an influential twist to work on the novel (*The Voyage Perilous* 111). Another Cather biographer, Sharon O’Brien, focuses on Cather’s early work in order to argue for Cather’s self-aware lesbianism and its effects on her fiction: Cather faces feminist criticism for her “use of male narrators and personas in her fiction. But these were in part strategies necessary to conceal ‘unnatural’ love that do not necessarily signify Cather’s endorsement of masculine values and assumptions, which in fact she challenges in her fiction” (140).

³⁴ Although she was accused of being out of sync with her time, Cather read, engaged with, dismissed, admired, and/or befriended many of her modernist contemporaries including A. E. Housman, Ford Madox Ford, Carl Van Vechten, Mabel Dodge Luhan, Mary Austin, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Canfield, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Lady Gregory, and H. G. Wells. A currently prominent thread in Cather criticism aims to articulate Cather’s engagements with her cultural moment. For examples, see: the essays contained in *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World* (2005) and Montgomery. West

This dissertation aligns with those critics interested in Cather's modernism. Further, I contend that the literally central position of *One of Ours* in Cather's oeuvre, its significance to the year she identifies as when "the world broke in two," and its representation of the Great War all contribute to its unstable reception history and literary inadequacies. *One of Ours* may be a failure but its very imperfections—given its ambition, complexity, unfixability, and elegiac handling of the war as modernity's definitive event—are the very attributes that mark its alliance with the many admirable failures of modernist literature.

Yet the complex, problematic, and more nuanced aspects of *One of Ours* make it difficult to declare the novel *either* foolishly idealistic *or* profoundly ironic. This tonal and ideological discord also contributes to confusion over the novel's modernism or not because, on one hand, Claude's idealism and pleasure in the war seem to align Cather more with the period's sentimental propagandists (Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Edith Wharton being among the more prominent) while, on the other hand, notes of irony, horror, nihilism, and despair suggest that Cather imbued her novel with the war's troubling qualities, thus situating her more closely with the war's detractors, such as John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway. Trout fleshes out the difficulty Cather encountered in balancing her goals for the novel, including honoring her cousin and other doughboys, representing grief over the war, expressing concern about the world's future, and signaling her allegiance to decimated France and French culture: "Cather demonstrates that the 'truth' about war is more elusive than we think, its motivations and satisfactions more deeply rooted in the American psyche than we would care to admit" (*Memorial*

was aware of Cather, too, writing a favorable review of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) (Glendinning 152).

Fictions 7). For Trout, *One of Ours* is a modernist novel but it proves unsettling because it refuses to participate in the war narratives of *either* camp: in short, *One of Ours* depicts the war as a futile evil but does not suggest that the American soldier's intentions were entirely unfounded or his experience thoroughly wretched. Such nuance reflects the period's own complex thoughts about the war, complexity often ignored or glossed over that, nevertheless, connects Cather to various modernist peers. Moreover, the novel reveals its dynamic modernism through not only its representation of sterility and the Great War but also the ways it uses generic manipulation to deconstruct old forms. It thereby reveals the failure of old narratives and modes of perceiving in the war-shattered modern world. The novel's generic manipulations invert the pastoral mythologies of the American Frontier and then integrate these inversions into its anti-*Bildungsroman* plot in order to construct its protagonist's forced, sterile virginity.

“An Attitude of Arrested Action”: Sterility and Modernism's Anti-*Bildungsroman*

As with traditional *Bildungsroman*, *One of Ours* centers upon the formative years of a male protagonist seeking to discover his place in society. Franco Moretti sees the traditional *Bildungsroman* as a form that moderates the rise of capitalist modernity and the place of the subject within that changing world. He writes that the “apprenticeship” that characterizes the novel, beginning with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), is “no longer the slow and predictable progress towards one's father's work, but rather an uncertain exploration of social space But it is also a yearned for exploration, since the selfsame process gives rise to unexpected hopes, thereby generating an *interiority* not only fuller than before, but also . . . perennially dissatisfied

and restless” (4). *One of Ours* aligns with these traditional requirements in making Claude “dissatisfied and restless” over his life’s circumstances, seeking some personal and social importance different from the stultifying success of his father’s farm. However, after establishing Claude’s dissatisfied character and his limited circumstances, the text declines to send Claude on a successful and socially regenerative journey of development and instead poses the question: What is “wrong” with Claude? (146). This question asks what makes Claude unable to either accept the world in which he finds himself, as do traditional *Bildung* heroes, or break out and away from it, as do certain modern contemporaries such as Stephen Dedalus.³⁵ Susan Rosowski argues that Claude’s wrongness stems from his situation as “a romantic caught in a nightmarish world of realism” (*The Voyage Perilous* 98). Building on Rosowski’s explanation, I contend that Claude belongs not only to some earlier age of Romanticism but, rather, he reveals an essential wrongness in the modern world itself. Cather emphasizes that Claude has no place in the modern world, he fits nowhere, by nullifying the profound interiority represented and regenerated in *Bildung* protagonists. She claimed that, unlike with her other novels, she cut out all the “picture making” in the novel because Claude does not see in pictures (qtd. in Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous* 96–97). Cather here implies that Claude lives on emotion and impulse instead. Moreover, she declines to make Claude an artist, a genius, or anything else spectacular. He possesses just enough heart and brains to recognize his strained circumstances but wants for the gumption or the drive to escape them. His inability to see beyond his immediate impressions, to see the “big picture,”

³⁵ Notably and in intriguing counterpoint, Joyce’s Stephen only appears to break out and away at the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and before the Great War. In his follow-up appearance in *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen has failed in his romantic intention to get away from Dublin and “go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (*Portrait* 244).

leads directly to his embrace of a problematic, propagandistic narrative that asserts war makes men out of boys, the Great War marks a new Frontier, and American boys will go “over there” to “make the world safe for democracy.”

Claude is ultimately less an innocent than a dupe; he is, in essence, a “clod,” the hated pronunciation of his name nevertheless evoking his limitations (180, 279). He comprehends sexuality, masculinity, and social expectations yet he perpetually misreads his circumstances or missteps against his best intentions. These personal limitations build the foundation for the novel’s sterility by setting Claude within a *Bildungsroman* plot that continually obstructs his ability to develop. The novel symbolizes his lack of maturation in his forced virginity, which leaves him a thwarted man-boy unable to achieve his requisite social role. Moretti argues that the Great War destroyed the efficacy of *Bildungsroman* to mediate the role of the subject within society: “If history can make cultural forms necessary, it can make them impossible as well, and this is what the war did to the *Bildungsroman*” (229). He sees *Bildungsromane* in the modernist period as focused ever more on regression than on development, proving their formal literary crisis in the face of vast social change. Moretti’s contention features in Claude’s forced immaturity, which mocks his attempts at development in the modern world.

In contrast to Moretti, however, Gregory Castle asserts that the *Bildungsroman* takes on new life during the modernist period and that the form’s manipulation by modernist writers represents one of the movement’s most important literary developments. He reads modern *Bildungsroman* as radically challenging the bounds of subjectivity and examining further the subject’s place in an unstable and ever more enveloping social milieu: “By challenging the pedagogical assumptions of the genre—

that is, by challenging the grounds on which young men and women become ‘viable subjects’—modernists appear to challenge the pragmatic and instrumental values the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* more or less overtly legitimizes and celebrates” (64). In Castle’s estimation, modernists recognized that the old criteria for successful subjectivity no longer applied but they used the form of development to critique preceding modes and to explore the implications, limitations, and potentials for subjectivity in the modern world. Jed Esty contends that modernist appropriations of the *Bildungsroman* signify the conjoined crises of individual subjectivity and nationhood in the face of limitless colonialism: “Modernism exposes and disrupts the inherited conventions of the *bildungsroman* in order to criticize bourgeois values and to reinvent the biographical novel, but also to explore the contradictions inherent in mainstream developmental discourses of self, nation, and empire” (3). Thus, Claude’s tale becomes an anti-*Bildungsroman* that features the “motif of failed progress” that Esty finds characteristic of many modernist texts (7). Both Castle and Esty recognize the regression that Moretti sees in modernist *Bildungsromane* but they see this alteration as evidence of modernist formal innovation and experimentation with representation rather than as proof of the death of the form itself.

These arguments surrounding regression and anti-development in modern *Bildungsromane* characterize Claude’s plot but they do not articulate the sterile nature of perpetual immaturity. Such non-regeneration within a traditional form signals a cultural crisis that questions how society can continue and perpetuate itself. Modernity features many traumas but the war in particular induced novelists to represent this period of crisis through an inability to regenerate. Moreover, modernist appropriations of the traditional

form play out this rupture in history by gesturing to the literary and social continuity that preceded them and using regression, anti-development, limited or false interiority, or narrative gaps to symbolize the genre's inability to perpetuate itself any longer. Among their techniques, then, modernists use the themes, tropes, and movements of traditional forms and genres to render narrative metaphorically sterile. With its emphasis on individual development and social apprenticeship, the *Bildungsroman* proves a particularly useful and resonant form for modernist deconstruction.

One of Ours depicts its youthful protagonist as unable to develop and, instead, trapped in stasis by familial and social obligations and by his own innate tendency to behave dutifully while failing to perceive reality or act on his own behalf. These attributes in himself foreshadow his misreading of the war, a false interpretation that, like all his others, Claude would assuredly comprehend once the consequences of his choices become fixed: "Claude was aware that his energy, instead of accomplishing something, was spent in resisting unalterable conditions, and in unavailing efforts to subdue his own nature. When he thought he had at last got himself in hand, a moment would undo the work of days; in a flash he would be transformed from a wooden post into a living boy" (146–47). Flickering back and forth from inanimate resolution to inflamed flesh, Claude reveals the ambiguous experience of living in a modern world that has no place for dreamers, romantics, and passionate personalities—particularly those smart but not brilliant, sensitive but not artistic, dutiful but not self-actualized, in short, those like Claude. Cather paints this stasis by again depicting Claude as an arrested figure out of place in the modern world. Bemoaning the lack of any frontier that he could conquer, Claude "sprang to his feet and stood frowning against the ruddy light, so deep in his own

struggling thoughts that he did not notice a man ... who stopped to look at him.” The stranger sees Claude as if he were a statue: “a young man standing bareheaded on the long flight of steps, his fists clenched in an attitude of arrested action,—his sandy hair, his tanned face, his tense figure copper-coloured in the oblique rays” (165). In both these visions of action denied, Cather renders Claude as physically transforming from organic being to static and immobile object, his living flesh turned to “copper-coloured” metal. Statues frequently serve as memorials to war and here Cather foreshadows Claude’s lack of future by situating him as a figure to memorialize and remember. As well, through these allusions to his inability to develop, the transformed Claude becomes fixed or frozen in place. Not only will Claude not procreate but the novel represents his life, much like the plot of the *Bildungsroman* itself, as predestined to be cut off from the flow of history. The Frontier is closed, the American West has ended, making the only work available to Claude the death-work of war in the anti-pastoral of No Man’s Land. But before Claude finds self-actualization in the Great War, Cather forces him to confront modern American life, depicted as the culmination of modernity’s “progress” before it plunges into the precipice of war. Cather uses Claude as a symbol for modern futility that finds its manifestation in unabated virginity. She enhances this depiction through a misalignment between sterile human life and the fecund natural world.

“The Harvest of All That Has Been Planted”: Paradoxical Pastoral

One of Ours uses contrast and inversion to formally represent Claude’s out-of-placeness, further signifying a world about to break in two. These contrasts and inversions highlight the novel’s reformulation of the *Bildungsroman* into an anti-

Bildungsroman. They play out structurally in the novel's two halves, signifying the fissure rent between two historical epochs by the Great War. And in one of the most important uses of paradox, the text frequently engages the tropes of the pastoral to contrast the lush, regenerative land against the people who live and work on it. These citizens include the wasteful or shriveled people who control Frankfort, Nebraska such as Claude's father, Nat, his brothers, Bayliss and Ralph, and his wife, Enid, as well as those who exist under their sway, including Claude's "aesthetic proxy," Gladys (160), the Wheeler's feeble-minded maid, Mahailey, and his mother, Evangeline Wheeler. The land in Nebraska also functions as a stark antithesis to wartime France, where Claude idealizes the people and culture and buries the war's horror under his excitement at finally feeling in place. Because *One of Ours* manipulates pastoral and Frontier mythologies in its representation of a topsy-turvy modern world, the importance of *place* cannot be overemphasized. On a base level, *place* primarily means physical location, signifying Claude's connection to the physical spaces wherein he finds himself. Yet the concept of *place* takes on further contours of inversion and irony when Claude escapes what is "wrong with him" by finding "his place" through a violent death in the Great War (146, 603).

Cather, like West, uses landscape to reveal her character's unnatural virginity, but the differences between *The Return of the Soldier* and *One of Ours* highlight the nuanced ways in which modern authors employed sterility. Chris Baldry's false virginity arises as a symptom of shell shock, while Claude Wheeler's forced virginity perpetually frustrates his ability to mature and buffers him from the trauma-inducing realities of the Great War. These divergences, and the ways both authors connect their soldier's virginity to the land,

reveal, as well, the distinction between British pastoral and its altered counterpart in the United States.

One of Ours exhibits the difference between British and American pastoral. In the US context pastoral frequently merges with the mythology of the Frontier, a landscape often depicted as rugged or agrarian (or both), a challenging space that forms character (and nation) rather than an idyllic retreat. Both traditions share representations of power and renewal in the natural world and, frequently, a romanticization of peoples deemed “primitive” or “other.”³⁶ Leo Marx argues that American pastoral generally depicts individual renewal in a natural space that occupies a safe middle ground between wilderness and urbanity. Yet the individual finds this rejuvenation threatened by technology, particularly through the ever-intrusive, noisy and noisome machine: “Throughout our literature the machine is to the ideal society what a hideous noise is to a delicate sonata. If the new technology does not literally smash into the symbol of utopian aspiration, as the steamboat smashes into Huck [Finn]’s raft, it invariably threatens it” (80). He posits that this tendency arose in a society that imagined itself as unendingly wild even as it quickly developed into an industrial powerhouse. As a farmboy living in Cather’s American West, Claude exhibits these competing modes in his pull to and away from Nebraska—the farm, his family, and social expectation. Physical space proves formative to Claude’s psyche but Cather inverts agrarian or natural rejuvenation by aligning them with the stifling world of Frankfort. She then makes ironic Claude’s escape by situating his period of greatest satisfaction in the Old World only to have this period

³⁶ Greg Garrard emphasizes these different critical focuses on the pastoral that appear in the US and Britain: “It is not the ratification of an oppressive social order, identified with a landed aristocracy, that provides a pejorative edge to ‘pastoral’ for Americans, but its identification with masculine colonial aggression directed against women, indigenes, and the land. Great differences of history and topography ensure differing meanings of pastoral on either side of the Atlantic” (49).

end through the technological horrors of the Great War. *One of Ours* uses pastoral tropes much as it uses the form of the *Bildungsroman*—as a modernist literary deconstruction meant to evoke preceding narratives in order to reveal their sterile inefficacy in the modern world.

Cather's contrasting focus on land, particularly within the farming community and its opposite—the battlefield—provides a key point of disparity between generation and non-regeneration, procreation and sterility. The Wheeler farm brings forth life in cycles of repetition yet Claude's concern over modern farming technology aligns with Marx's assertions about the disruptive machine. Moreover, Claude and his mother's dislike of excessive mechanization on the farm highlights their fear that humans are being severed from regenerative natural cycles. The battlefields of France bring forth death; they are, indeed, destroyed farmland, yet it is here that Claude finds "his place." If the war is a "harvest" (as Joseph Urgo emphasizes) then, Trout adds, "Claude's final battle ... both completes and renews a perverse growing cycle" (Urgo 160; *Memorial Fictions* 146). The paradox that makes life death and death life for Claude brings cohesion to Cather's vision of the breaking world. Culture has become topsy-turvy and Cather's narrative paints this reality in the terms of inversion.

One of Ours further mirrors the world's breaking in two with its binary structure: the first half taking place in Nebraska and the second in the war. By spending as much time on the home front as at the war, Cather connects the war to civilian life, which has changed negatively since the end of the Frontier and the onslaught of modernity.³⁷ She also acknowledges perhaps more than any other American author how long the war

³⁷ Stouck connects the tone, themes, and structure of *One of Ours* to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, noting, "Although there is no direct relationship between the poem and novel, the 'waste land' nonetheless is a suggestive metaphor for the novel's mood and direction" (89).

waged before US troops joined in, and thereby emphasizes how profound the conflict seemed to Americans, even in excess of its seeming value in terms of combatant experience. Lawrence Buell contends that such antitheses lie at the heart of American pastoral, which always contains radical anti-sociability in a culture prone to embracing and absorbing radical anti-sociability into its national psyche: “This duality was built into American pastoral thinking from the start, for it was conceived as a dream both hostile to the standing order of civilization (decadent Europe, later hypercivilizing America) yet at the same time a model for the civilization in process of being built. So American pastoral was always both counterinstitutional and institutionally sponsored” (20). In terms of the war, Buell’s argument regarding American pastoral’s innate flexibility reveals the imaginative basis for many American myths and ideologies that enabled Americans to feel an intense emotional and psychological connection to the Great War without suffering comparable physical, personal, social, and geographic losses to their British and European counterparts. *One of Ours* exhibits just such a duality in its binary structure and Claude’s antithetical impulses. Cather uses ironically and critically the tropes and themes of American pastoral to represent the decaying modern world on the brink of breaking in two. Yet she also manipulates readers’ emotional responses by making Claude likable, if foolhardy, in order to engage the elegiac and critical components of pastoral. She thus creates a Nebraska filled with paradox, one where the natural world continues cyclically while the people filling it waste, abuse, and cheapen their blessings with the trappings of technology and the small mindedness of rural, American life.³⁸

³⁸ If *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) were odes to frontier accomplishment, *One of Ours* is their antithesis; in light of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, the novel also seems unusually canny about the dangers of agricultural hubris.

Claude finds himself trapped in forced virginity whilst surrounded by an extraordinarily fecund landscape—sometimes monstrously so. Called home from college to run the farm, he roils with frustrated aspirations, the calls of filial duty, and the belief that he simply does not fit with sophisticated people anyway. His only solace is hard work on the homestead and Cather uses the language of sexuality, even rape, to show Claude's emotional state: "The new field he ploughed and drilled himself. He put a great deal of young energy into it, and buried a great deal of discontent in its dark furrows. Day after day he flung himself upon the land and planted it with what was fermenting in him, glad to be so tired at night that he could not think" (113). His violent treatment of the land leads to positive results for he has "the satisfaction of seeing a blush of green come up over his brown wheat fields, visible first in the dimples and little hollows, then flickering over the knobs and levels like a fugitive smile" (114). With reference to "blushes," "dimples," "little hollows," things "flickering" over "knobs," and "fugitive smiles," Cather paints Claude's victim as a flirt who returns his rapacious appetite with her own desire. The harvest comes in strong, suggesting that Claude may find success if not satisfaction on the farm, but the winter brings two defeats: further distance from his college friends, the Erlichs, and the wasteful death of thirty-seven hogs when their enclosure collapses during a blizzard. The separation from the intellectuals he admires but feels uncomfortable around and the pointless suffocation of the hogs both highlight Claude's sensation of being out of place yet trapped there. Their occurrence in the winter symbolizes further the metaphorical uses to which the natural world is put, with winter signifying death and the cycle's end point. From Claude's perspective, nature and

civilization both turn on him, emphasizing his inability to succeed at what he desires *or* what he feels bound to do.

The paradoxical power of the land plays out further the following year, amidst rumors of war in Europe, affirming again the separation of people from the regenerative natural and narrative cycles that used to order human life.³⁹ In opposition to the impending, manmade violence, the land puts forth a monstrously large bounty under a sun that “Every morning ... came up a red ball, quickly drank the dew, and started a quivering excitement in all living things” (213). This ravenous sun “was like a great visiting presence that stimulated and took its due from all animal energy. When it flung wide its cloak and stepped down over the edge of the fields at evening, it left behind it a spent and exhausted world” (214). In contrast to the year before, nature now has its way with Claude and the community, bringing them together just so they can help “each other to cope with the burdensome abundance of man-nourishing grain” (213). This capacious harvest creates a stark contrast between humans and the natural world, manifested in Claude’s antithetical impulses and his thwarted sense of self. The excessive fecundity of the landscape also ironizes the sterilizing doom the Western world is embarking upon. When the war breaks out during this abundance, Claude’s friend Ernest explicitly makes the connection between politics and the land, claiming that the war is the “harvest of all that has been planted” (223).

Amidst this harvest, with its layered meanings, Cather maintains the importance of land to how her Americans understand the world in order to carry this emphasis on place over into France and the trenches. When war actually begins in Europe, Mrs.

³⁹ The first half’s frequent references to barbed wire, shells, maps, and news lead Andy Jones to claim, “The unacknowledged persistence of the war-like images of the Nebraska section thus contributes to the horrific irony of Claude’s pastoral misreading of the front” (5).

Wheeler goes digging through the attic “for a map of Europe,—a thing for which Nebraska farmers had never had much need. But that night, on many prairie homesteads, the women, American and foreign-born, were hunting for a map” (219). Claude himself has gone to bed, ordered thus by his father who wants him to leave early to sell off the grain for the higher prices brought on by the threat of war. The effect here is layered: First, Cather plays up the ethical problem of making money because of war, ironizing even further the unusually lush harvest that has just occurred.⁴⁰ Second, the fact that the prairie’s women go in search of maps in order to better understand the crisis shows Cather’s insistence on home-front experience of the Great War—American women’s deep emotional involvement with the events in Europe and the griefs that characterize their wartime suffering. But third and most importantly, the drive to search for a map in order to understand the war’s events emphasizes the primacy of land, of place, to Cather’s Nebraskans, particularly Claude who sits fixed in an arrested state between the productive landscape and troubling modernity.

The battle between modern waste and natural renewal plays out in Claude’s psyche, revealing that the duality exhibited between the natural world and human life struggles within Claude as well: “Listening to the deep singing of the frogs, and to the distant barking of the dogs up at the house, he grew calmer. Nevertheless, he wondered why it was that one had sometimes to feel responsible for the behaviour of people whose natures were wholly antipathetic to one’s own” (30). Claude finds balm for his anxiety in the sounds of the land yet cannot shake the clinging attachments of his family, friends, and town, or their expectations of him. His in-between emotional state suggests the

⁴⁰ Cather makes this criticism even more overt in the pacifism of Bayliss Wheeler, founded on his desire for the personal and national gain to be gleaned from Europe’s ruins (311).

uncomfortable or “ugly” affects that Sianne Ngai claims characterize modernity, particularly in this case, a “general situation of obstructed agency” that produces an “inherently ambiguous affect of affective disorientation in general ... a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling.” Ngai adds: “Despite its marginality in the philosophical canon of emotions, isn’t this feeling of confusion *about* what one is feeling an affective state in its own right?” (13–14). Claude epitomizes this affect and, with his emotional and social liminality, reveals the non-regenerative stasis that characterizes his world. In this sense, Cather’s pastoral turns ironic, no longer a palliative for grief, an escape from urban modernity, or an imaginative space for masculine self-fashioning but, instead, a reminder of how alien humanity and nature have become to each other. The contrast between people and the land—the one sterile and willing to impose that sterility, the other aggressively regenerative—suggests the anti-consolatory effects of this anti-pastoral elegy.

Returning, then, to Cather’s similar manipulation of the *Bildungsroman*, Claude’s thwarted boyhood, exhibited in people’s disjunctive relationship with the natural world, becomes even more problematic when he attempts to assume his proper social role through marriage. As a key trope of traditional *Bildungsroman*, marriage generally signals the subject’s embrace of his place in society—and the conclusion of the male subject’s development. However, Claude chooses a literally and symbolically sterile marriage, thus furthering his distance from regenerative natural cycles. Claude’s marriage, which takes place near the novel’s center, rather than its end, is never consummated either physically or emotionally. His awakening to how false illusions led him into a miserable marriage mirrors, instead, one of the two versions of female

Bildungsromane—what Rosowski calls “novels of awakening” (rather than ones of “development” or “apprenticeship”).⁴¹ Yet Claude’s forced virginity and his death in the masculine theater of war mark Cather’s manipulation of multiple *Bildungsroman* plots, rather than a one-to-one mapping of a male character onto a female form. In this modernist deconstruction of genre, Claude’s false marriage mocks his attempts at development in his limited world and heightens the significance of his forced virginity. This alteration of one of *Bildungsroman*’s key plot movements ultimately emphasizes the sterility that arises as a consequence of modern traumas.

“The Transformative Power of Marriage”: Forced Virginity and Untenable Narratives

This chapter has already shown how Cather depicts Claude as arrested in action; she thus creates a forceful spirit trapped in stasis to symbolize a world barred from regeneration as it nears the brink of known history. Claude, however, remains ignorant of this impending doom and his decisions all evoke his belief in the regenerative narratives that Roof describes, narratives that posit continuation through conclusions based on learning, mastery, creation, procreation, etc.: “As ideology, this pattern of joinder to product also accounts for the countless analogies to child/product—knowledge, mastery,

⁴¹ Scholars recognize two female versions of *Bildungsroman*: The first, epitomized by *Jane Eyre* (1847), mirrors the male plot in that it focuses on the protagonist’s youth and education, culminating in marriage. However, in the male texts marriage signals the subject’s assumption of his place in society while in the female this features more as resignation and acceptance of her place and often includes troubling counterplots that reveal women’s limitations (i.e. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* or Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* [1813]). The second type of female *Bildungsroman* is Rosowski’s “novel of awakening,” epitomized by *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *The Awakening* (1899). In these plots, the woman awakens to her limitations and the falseness of romantic illusions, usually *after* she is married, and her attempts to discover happiness and agency inevitably fail and culminate in her death. Even within their rebellions and acknowledgements of limitations, female *Bildungsromane* generally accept the limitations in their primary plots or kill off their protagonists for their inability to conform. See: Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*; Rosowski, “The Novel of Awakening”; Abel, Hirsch, and Langland; and Castle.

victory, another narrative, identity, and even death—that occupy the satisfying end of the story” (Roof xvii). Claude finds his ability to fulfill these narratives thwarted at every turn, beginning with scholastic achievement and intellectual sophistication. In college he writes a promising paper on Joan of Arc and gains acclaim for his football prowess. The sign of his rising prominence in the urban setting of Lincoln, Nebraska lies in his friendship with the worldly Erlich family. But as much as he enjoys their company, the Erlichs emphasize to Claude that he also has no place in their world when he realizes that the “thing that hurt was the feeling of being out of it, of being lost in another kind of life in which ideas played but little part” (120). Claude cannot shake off the shackles of Frankfort and, thus, cannot escape or find renewal in rural *or* urban life.⁴² He then tries out other regenerative narratives, including marriage and soldiership, to similar effect. All of these attempts reveal the inefficacy of these traditional narratives in the modern world and result in Claude’s entrapment in the unending stasis of forced virginity.

Cather emphasizes that this static virginity represents perpetual infancy and death in life. While Claude works, Mahailey watches “him as if he were a baby playing,” signifying how his social world refuses or neglects to view him as an adult or capable of adulthood (36). Claude himself feels that his limited life represents a suffocating safety, and he renders this belief in terms that link death and stillbirth, thinking, “To be assured, at his age, of three meals a day and plenty of sleep, was like being assured of a decent burial. Safety, security; if you followed that reasoning out, then the unborn, those who would never be born, were the safest of all; nothing could happen to them” (36, 146).

Burial and babies, death and non-birth converge in the person of Claude. These two types

⁴² This is a divergence in Cather novels, where the western landscape has previously been a revitalizing offset to modernity and the source for a rejuvenation of American art. See: *O, Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Song of the Lark* (1915).

of non-regeneration—death and the never-born—find their shared expression in Claude’s virginal, immature state and foreshadow the inevitability of his destruction.

Claude’s forced virginity takes on a literal aspect with his marriage, which casts a shadow of permanency over his immaturity when he joins himself to a woman who cannot or will not physically consummate their union. Enid shuts him out of their train berth on their wedding night because she feels ill and symbolically shuts him out of her body, establishing immediately the terms of their marriage. In the morning, bright eyed and solicitous, Enid responds to Claude’s question of whether she’s forgotten anything with, “I never lose things on the train,—do you?” Followed by Claude’s glowering reply: “Sometimes” (265). With this double entendre, Enid assures that Claude will never lose his virginity to her. Later, Cather explains that Enid finds “everything about a man’s embrace distasteful,” a state likened to “something inflicted upon women, like the pain of childbirth” (281). Presuming the ongoing frigidity of their marriage, Enid and Claude appear far more likely to remain children than to produce them. Set against the backdrop of the thriving landscape, Claude and Enid are a sterile Adam and Eve in Nebraska’s voracious-yet-stifling anti-Eden. Sinclair Lewis believed that Enid was *the* central antagonism of Claude’s life and it was Cather’s failing to “evade” the “Enid problem” by sending Claude off to war rather than playing out their relationship (128). Enid’s role in the novel—her sudden appearance, prominence, and then abrupt disappearance—proves one of the text’s many enigmas and Lewis expresses the discomfiture incited by her unresolved status. Viewed with an eye to the novel’s sterility, however, Enid heightens our awareness of Claude’s forced virginity while further revealing those limitations in himself that prevent him from seeing reality under the veneer of traditional narratives.

These two recurring attributes—virginal sterility commingled with Claude’s metaphorical blindness—ground the novel’s depiction of the modern world racing tragically and horrifically toward a chasm in history.

The courtship and marriage of Enid and Claude occurs at the same time as the capacious harvest and the beginning of the war, and Cather uses Enid, alongside the harvest, as a point of contrast for Claude’s sterility and, indeed, the sterility of modern life. For example, as Claude sits on his porch after a cold dinner left for him by Enid who has gone to a prohibitionist meeting, he examines the squash vine that grows over his porch, “feeling grateful to a thing that did so lustily what it was put there to do. He had the same feeling for his little Jersey cow, which came home every night with full udders and gave down her milk willingly, keeping her tail out of his face, as only a well-disposed cow will do” (276). Enid, on the other hand, acts in unnatural contradistinction to the “lustily” squash and “well-disposed” Jersey cow, and forces Claude to do the same. Enid’s distasteful coldness represents sterile modernity, which acts in discord with the vital natural world. Her frigidity comes to represent, as well, another component of Claude’s life that freezes him into static futility.

Enid functions as an antithesis to Claude, but this mispairing effectively reveals his singular limitation. In a novel originally titled *Claude* the “Enid problem” is part and parcel of what is “wrong” with Claude himself: i.e. his astounding aptitude for self blindness, an attribute that often goes unremarked in examinations of Enid and the other small, unlikable aspects of Frankfort. It is Claude who rejects his true mate, Gladys Farmer (whose name evokes the natural, agrarian world where Claude feels most at home), because she allows his brother Bayliss to court her. It is Claude who fancies

himself in love with Enid even as his fantasies about her reveal her own arrested sterility through language that evokes the descriptions of his stasis: “Even in his dreams he never wakened her, but loved her while she was still and unconscious like a statue. He would shed love upon her until she warmed and changed without knowing why” (199). It is Claude who goes ahead with his proposal even after Enid’s father tries to warn him away, telling Claude, “You’ll find out that pretty nearly everything you believe about life—about marriage, especially—is lies” (205). It is Claude who pushes for their engagement although Enid herself tells him, “My mind is full of other plans. Marriage is for most girls, but not for all” and, once she finally agrees, responds to his kisses “like a shivering little ghost come up from the rushes where the old milldam used to be” whilst a “terrible melancholy clutched his heart. He hadn’t thought it would be like this” (209, 210). And it is Claude who feels something lacking in Enid’s response to him and the house he’s building yet convinces himself, “Everything would be all right when they were married He believed in the transformative power of marriage, as his mother believed in the miraculous effects of conversion. Marriage . . . changed a cool, self-satisfied girl [like Enid] into a loving and generous one” (238). In sum, Claude receives multiple opportunities to see Enid for what she really is—and this includes a girl who never misrepresents herself or her level of emotional attachment—yet blinds himself to the truth because he believes in the narrative of marriage, based in the logic of development found in the *Bildungsroman* with its attendant tropes of masculinity, family, community, and maturity. Thus, his faith in “the transformative power of marriage” not only contributes to the continuation of his arrested life, it also lends a shadow of irony to Claude’s dissatisfaction and romanticism. Enid proves Claude’s inability to accurately

read modernity's new realities, and the consequences of his blindness include immaturity, non-regeneration, and death. It is Claude, not Enid, who is to blame for his unhappiness and it is Claude, not Cather, who will be so delighted by his escape from Nebraska that he behaves as can only be expected, (mis)reading the war as a source of rejuvenating good rather than pointless, horrific destruction.

Cather creates in Claude a metaphorical representation of dreamers in a world with no space for them but she refuses to make him a tragically romantic figure. Instead, she extends her manipulation of the *Bildungsroman* to depict the male subject still undeveloped and unstable after his marriage in order to represent the sterile, self-destructive modern world that will swallow such limited dreamers in the maw of the Great War. Gladys, the "one person in the world who felt sorry for Claude," sums up his fate: "Claude would become one of those dead people that moved about the streets of Frankfort; everything that was Claude would perish, and the shell of him would come and go and eat and sleep for fifty years. Gladys had taught the children of many such dead men" (211). Her projection here superimposes what *would* happen to Claude in Nebraska over what *will* happen to Claude in France. The future tense of Gladys's thoughts intends to show Claude's fate, living in a static state of pre-death as Enid's husband, Nat Wheeler's son, and Bayliss Wheeler's brother in Frankfort, Nebraska. Yet the future tense also foreshadows, in the language of metaphor and allusion, what actually happens to Claude. This boy-man ("one of ours") will haunt his hometown as "one of those dead people that moved about the streets of Frankfort." Moreover, rather than existing as a half man, Cather uses the resonant term "shell" to signal his death in the Great War. Lastly, the phrasing "everything that *was Claude* would perish" foreshadows his literal death,

described as “the look that *was Claude* had faded” (598, my italics). In this passage, Cather suggests that the only fate for a thwarted virgin in a sterile world is dissolution in the last, great, horrific event before the world breaks in two. Only the dead achieve life in war; only a virgin finds regeneration in futility.

“Bound For the Big Show”: Claude’s Inverted Fate

Claude’s inability to mature arises amidst the novel’s inversions (including its manipulations of the pastoral and the *Bildungsroman*) and signifies his ironic and inescapable sterility. Cather uses his perpetual virginity as the primary manifestation of this sterility, and his thwarted development seems a kind of fate, one sensed by the person who loves him most, his mother. Mrs. Wheeler’s interior responses to her son acknowledge his infantilization while alluding to death or miscarriage. In considering how much she feels for Claude, how nothing in life touches her inner emotions except for him, Mrs. Wheeler “became *quick* again for him,” implying that even in young manhood Claude is more or less a fetus, connected to his mother’s womb by an empathic umbilical cord (101–2, my italics). Yet just as she makes this allusion to impregnation, Mrs. Wheeler links her beloved son with barrenness, adding that Claude’s “chagrins shriveled her” (102). Here we have again a connection between pregnancy and death, the never-born and the doomed-to-oblivion that signals Claude’s doom. As the first half of the book comes to a close, Mrs. Wheeler increasingly connects Claude and the war: “When the war news was bad *or when she felt troubled about Claude*, [Mrs. Wheeler] set to cleaning house or overhauling the closets” (235, my italics). And on the night before Claude and Enid’s ill-conceived wedding, Mrs. Wheeler finds herself restless and in constant prayer

for her boy, with the text claiming, “She has not prayed so long and fervently since the battle of the Marne” (249). Mrs. Wheeler’s mind remains overshadowed by Claude and the war, two primary and seemingly interchangeable concerns. They inflect each other, connoting an ironic connection between this boy-man and the Great War, the paradoxical marriage of Claude and death. Her ability to sense these connections foreshadows Mrs. Wheeler’s understanding of Claude’s limitations and the war’s futility in the novel’s conclusion. She cannot fully see yet, but she will. The inversions of death and birth, of virginity and manhood, gesture to the inevitability of Claude’s personal consummation in death on the battlefield. As argued in the previous chapter, Chris Baldry’s amnesia also connects his dead son and the war. By linking dead babies and the Great War, Cather and West manifest the lack of future the war seemed to incite, a cultural apocalypse that they register through sterility.

Cather furthers her use of inversion and paradox to represent Claude’s misfit status when he finds satisfaction and comfort in the war. From Claude’s flu-ridden Atlantic crossing to his arrival in France, Cather heightens the paradox of life in death that makes up his experience in the war. When Claude himself heads to the battlefield, the destroyed landscape of “long lines of gaunt, dead trees . . . big holes gashed out in fields and hillsides . . . and straggling lines of rusty barbed-wire” are viewed paradoxically by Claude as “reassuring signs” that they were “bound for the big show” (471). Claude’s delight in scenes of destruction casts a shadow over his belief in a regenerative war narrative and highlights the problematic root of his pleasure in the war. For Claude begins to feel “in place” once he escapes the social-cultural world of home that bars him from maturation. His wartime satisfaction continues Cather’s modernist deconstruction of

the *Bildungsroman* by making her protagonist's maturity arise in a space of horror and futility that will lead ultimately to his death rather than the assumption of his proper social role.

Cather extends this inversion to doughboys in general, highlighting Claude's status as a metaphor for all the illusioned boys who rushed off to war, pre-doomed by modernity to die in futility. Mary Ryder argues that "Claude is not the only romantic boy who goes to war," parsing Cather's application of the terms "boy" and "man" in order to show the darkness underlying Cather's vision of the Great War: boys go off to fight whilst men die or return broken, their maturation a perversion of the youths they were when they left (146). For example, when Claude sees wounded soldiers for the first time, he thinks, "Everything that belonged to health had left them, every attribute of youth was gone" (440). These soldiers are young in years but elderly in experience and physicality, another point of paradoxical inversion that Cather uses to shape her vision of the war world. Furthermore, that Claude recognizes the horrifying and unnatural state of these soldiers yet still embraces the war environment puts a troubling cast on his personality. On one hand, his inability to register the horror reveals the strength of Claude's belief in the story of the war's value for himself and for society. On the other hand, the failure of the war's truth to penetrate Claude's psyche emphasizes his home-front misery and the ironic root of his fate. Even scenes of destruction and decay signify life to Claude, inverting the anti-pastoral of home into the annihilating fecundity of the war.

Concurrently, certain plot details explain Claude's satisfaction with the war even as Cather insists upon the war's futility. Claude idealizes France itself, as well as the experience of being part of what he deems a great conflict. He enjoys cathedrals, French

food, and the cultivated hospitality of French people. Claude also finds a true friend in violinist David Gerhardt and sees himself and his fellow soldiers as noble liberators of a great nation.⁴³ Yet while Claude may believe the war a great good—personally if not also ideologically—Cather employs various tactics to represent its darker truth, thereby distinguishing the post-war understanding of the war from Claude’s naive blindness to its truth. The novel features many examples of the war’s horror and many of them emphasize the paradoxical connections between children and the Great War that represent one aspect of its sterility. In one example, Claude encounters a sick mother, “far gone in consumption,” and her three children including the plucky ’Toinette who struggles to get her mother home to her own village so she can die (473). As ’Toinette explains their situation to Claude, the baby her mother holds begins to wail: “The woman turned it around with difficulty—it seemed a big, heavy baby, but white and sickly—and gave it the other breast. It began sucking her noisily, rooting and sputtering as if it were famished. It was too painful, it was almost indecent, to see this exhausted woman trying to feed her baby” (475). The oddness of the baby becomes clear as Claude realizes that the infant is younger than the Battle of the Marne in which the children’s father died. ’Toinette bluntly states, “Oh, the baby is not my brother, he is a Boche.” Claude for “a moment . . . did not understand. She repeated her explanation impatiently, something disdainful and sinister in her metallic little voice. A slow blush mounted to his forehead” (476). The implication that the mother was raped discomfits Claude but it also provides him with further desire to conquer the evil Germans, not only because of the horror of rape but also because the repulsive infant seems to embody the reprehensible, uncivilized

⁴³ Griffiths argues, “To a large extent, the two parts of the novel exist in a mode of paradox: To fulfill his Americanness—that is, to have purpose and usefulness—Claude must discover and die for France. The culturally exhausted New World somehow finds renewal in the Old” (269).

attributes of his forebears. On a symbolic level, representing the Germans in the form of a disgusting, fat baby literally sucking the life out of his French mother returns us to the paradoxical connection between war and children. Rather than sterility, however, this instance posits that if the Germans win, a grotesque and vampiric generation will destroy everything that came before. In a mirrored inversion, then, the death of a counter child, represented in the infantilized Claude, seems a preferable alternative. But this alternative amounts to a sterility that reveals the enigmatic nature of the war and of trying to understand its meaning. One scenario features a terrifying vision of newness, the other necessitates the end of the known world; in either case, the world breaks in two.

Much as the novel emphasizes Enid's true self in order to highlight Claude's misapplication of the narrative of marriage, the novel also shows the war's horror while allowing Claude to continue tromping towards his perceived rejuvenation and triumph.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Gerhardt puts voice to the war's horrific realities in a way that mingles again the collapse of modernity, the war, and sterility. He describes the smashing of his Stradivarius in a car crash, and concludes: "I didn't know what it meant then; but since, I've seen so many beautiful old things smashed ... I've become a fatalist" (538). The destruction of Gerhardt's violin makes a tidy metaphor for the world's drive to violence and futility that culminates in the Great War. Continuing on, Gerhardt claims he enlisted (even though his talent would have kept him out of battle) because the "war was put up to our generation. I don't know what for; the sins of our fathers, probably" (539). The theme

⁴⁴ Other scenes that show Cather's willingness to depict the horrific or the grotesque include: the sick doughboys; the deaths of a little girl, an old woman, and comrades during the liberation of Beaufort (565-70); and the unburied hand that reaches out from the trench sandbags of Claude's company (590). I also draw particular attention to the shell hole Claude's company bathe in, only to uncover a pile of corpses, for how it ironically evokes the line "swimmers into cleanness leaping" from Brooke's celebratory war poem "Peace," another poem Cather almost certainly knew (*One of Ours* 482-3; Brooke ln. 4).

of children dying so their parents can live or because of their parents runs underneath West's and Cather's novels. Notably, Gerhardt assesses this truth coolly and then connects this culminating conflict to "the old mythology tales" where "the sons of gods were born, [and] the mothers always died in agony." He then admits, "I've sometimes wondered whether the young men of our time had to die to bring a new idea into the world...something Olympian" (539). In this assessment, the Great War and death in procreation are again linked, and the death-in-life that characterized Claude's life at home inverts to become his life-in-death. Moreover, Gerhardt's figuration contains a slippage noted by neither he nor Claude. His story focuses on the deaths of mothers in childbirth, evoking the historical connection between war and childbirth as well as the destructive German infant they encountered earlier. But in the Great War, children die while their parents continue. Thus, the "new idea" these soldiers bring into the world, this "something Olympian," proves a misshapen, regressive stillbirth that mocks procreative continuity through the destruction of offspring for the maintenance of their progenitors.

Cather portrays Claude at home as a thwarted boy-man, incapable of thriving in the modern world, thereby heightening the irony of his perceived attainment of adulthood in a situation filled with destruction and inversion. His maturation remains perceived rather than actual through his intractable belief in the war's value, and his misreading emphasizes the continuation of his virginity.⁴⁵ His death, then, in an ill-advised burst of heroism, appears merely inevitable. For Claude dies mocked. Having prayed out a deal with God—Claude's life in exchange for the safety of Gerhardt's—he dies unconscious

⁴⁵ The homosociality of the typical military situation, combined with the possible homosexuality of Claude's relationship with Gerhardt, provides another possible layer to Claude's emotional sterility. Jenny Baldry's hinted at lesbianism contributes here as well. The sterility of homosexuality and its relation to the Great War will be examined further in chapter four on Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928).

of Gerhardt's being "blown to pieces ... when [he] dashed back through the enemy barrage" (598). The men lie to Claude, telling him David is on his way, and when they finish assessing his wounds they see that his "smile had gone ... the look that was Claude had faded" (598, ellipses in Cather). Claude perpetually misreads his world and the text makes clear the modern world's inconceivability to a young idealist such as he. Because of these competing aspects in Claude, and the novel itself, Trout argues that Cather "modulat[es] back and forth between two antithetical discourses of military experience, thereby creating a tension that prevents us from interpreting Claude *exclusively* as a dupe whose idealism blindly denies the horrors that surround him or *exclusively* as a hero whose grand exit truly represents an admirable sacrifice" (*Memorial Fictions* 118). For Trout, Cather's willingness to represent the satisfactions of war for combatants makes her novel one of the bravest and most accurate of modern Great War novels. I add that the perpetual tensions of paradox and inversion that play out in the novel manifest its sterility: infants are never born; children die so their parents can live; nature overwhelms as humans remain impotently chaste; life becomes death, death life. *One of Ours* represents modern sterility as a condition arising from modernity itself, a period in human history that can only produce horrific violence in a war that annihilates children, ideals, and regenerative narratives with equal precision. In this novel the idealistic soldier dies believing himself and his cause glorious while his mother becomes the one character who can accurately read the new world and, thus, in a final, bleak inversion, celebrates the death of her offspring.

“Beautiful Beliefs to Die With”: Mrs. Wheeler’s Maternal Nihilism

Narrative sterility depends upon the notion that the narratives we tell mirror the act (or the telling of the act) of human sexual intercourse, and that modern authors deconstruct this mimetic relation thematically and formally to depict the Great War’s unprecedented effects. Robert Scholes’s characterization of narrative’s mimetic association with sexual intercourse aligns with Roof’s later critique of narrative’s procreative heterosexuality. He asserts that fiction, like sex, “takes two,” author and reader, and that masturbatory fiction, which has been “purged of its possible procreative content and its necessary emotional content,” runs the danger of becoming “a pleasure pursued so narrowly for its own sake that it ceases, finally, even to be a pleasure” (26–27). But I counter that mutual pleasure is not the point of *One of Ours* (or other modern novels of sterility), nor is some kind of autoerotic play designed solely to tickle the author’s intellect at the cost of alienating the readers. Rather, with her novel Cather seeks to reveal the traumatic grief wrought by the war and by modernity that manifests in a sterile disruption of regenerative narratives. Thus, a better sexual metaphor for *One of Ours* is its representation of the virgin-hero’s sexual frustration, his inability to reach climax and conclusion, the impossibility of becoming procreative or regenerative. Furthermore, it reveals a bleak, nihilistic understanding of the death of regenerative narratives as seen in Mrs. Wheeler’s mature ability to comprehend the new world in a way unachievable by infantilized Claude. Mrs. Wheeler’s articulation of the death of social-cultural narratives in the post-war world sounds the final note to the novel’s sterility by cementing Claude in his infantilized state and seeing his tragedy not as his death but in the impossibility that he could ever live and thrive in the modern world.

Throughout the first half of *One of Ours*, Mrs. Evangeline Wheeler represents an ideal of motherhood as well as the limited options available to prairie women once there is no more frontier for them to thrive on.⁴⁶ She lives under the jocular thumb of Nat Wheeler and in thrall to Christianity and the preachers who represent it, all but confined to her house. Indeed, Mrs. Wheeler only leaves her homestead twice in the novel: once for Claude's wedding and once to pick him up from the train station after army training, where she remains demurely contained in her husband's wagon.⁴⁷ Her deepest pleasure (and source of anxiety) is Claude—her middle son, her favorite child. Mrs. Wheeler also adheres to the narrative of perfect motherhood when Claude leaves for the war, fulfilling the expectations constructed by wartime culture and propaganda, saving her tears until he exits and sending him away with love and prayers.⁴⁸ When Claude comes to say goodbye, “She passed her hands over his shoulders, down his strong back and the close-fitting sides of his coat, as if she were taking the mould and measure of his mortal frame” (350–51). As stated earlier, she feels the war keenly and connects it to Claude himself. In their affecting goodbye, Mrs. Wheeler feels her son's body in his uniform, suggesting how the essence of Claude has merged with his status as soldier. Similar to the earlier descriptions of Claude transformed into statuesque metal or a post of wood that symbolized Claude's arrested fate, this conversion of Claude into a soldier symbolizes his assumption of yet

⁴⁶ In Cather's earlier work she depicts the Frontier as a space where women can achieve their own brand of self-actualization, refuting the masculinist discourse of Western progress while, as Louise Westling argues, participating in narratives of Colonialist expansion. Consider, for example, the very different experiences of Alexandra Bergson of *O Pioneers!* and Antonia Shimerda of *My Antonia* as compared to Evangeline Wheeler.

⁴⁷ The Wheeler's maid, Mahailey, also reveals this gender-based limitation. Having lived through the Civil War, she is pleased to be the only member of the household to have experienced war first hand yet she is perpetually puzzled by gas masks, bombings, the rape of Belgium, and all the trappings of modern warfare.

⁴⁸ On the figure of the mother in wartime culture and propaganda, see: Acton and Haytock.

another traditional narrative role. Knowing his fate in the war, such instances of symbolic objectification narratively fix Claude in the no longer tenable plots he plays out. Mrs. Wheeler physically caresses this manifestation of her son, thereby participating in the story they believe he will enact.

However, Cather overturns this portrait of stereotypical motherhood in the novel's final scenes, turning Mrs. Wheeler's grief into a melancholic nihilism. If Claude stands for all the illusioned children who rushed off to battle, Mrs. Wheeler represents the people who survive to understand the extent of the world's disintegration. Her sterility manifests in her celebration of the death of her offspring because, in her estimation, to have died a fool believing in a glorious cause is preferable to returning home to life in a shattered world. Significantly, Enid plays no role in the novel's conclusion, nor do Claude's brothers, belying any sense that he will be borne into future either genetically or as a glorious symbol. Instead, the focus on Claude's middle-aged mother fixes Claude in his role of infantilized dupe and suggests that only those who have lost their primary contribution to the world's productivity (i.e. their offspring) will now be able to see and articulate the subsuming sterility of the post-war.

Mrs. Wheeler's thoughts in the "dark months" that follow Claude's death reveal her transition from stereotypical prairie mother to reader of post-war modernity. She too perceives the break in history, which she renders in the terms of a building torrent unleashed just after the duped youth joined the futile cause, a flood that overwhelms everything that preceded its release. She thinks that it seemed "as if the flood of meanness and greed had been held back just long enough for the boys to go over, and then swept down and engulfed everything that was left at home." With this closing,

Cather uses Mrs. Wheeler to summarize her structural design, which represents the drive of modernity toward destruction; the war is the culmination of a rising tide that breaks its last barriers and sweeps over everything during and after the war. Notably, Mrs. Wheeler sees this flood inundating the “home” rather than battlefields or European capitals, emphasizing the importance of civilian experiences of the war’s ramifications to Cather’s structure. At this juncture, the response of an archetypal grieving mother switches to a darker hue: “she reads Claude’s letters over again and reassures herself; ... how fully he must have found his life before he could let himself go so far—he, who was so afraid of being fooled! He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with” (604). In the end, Cather makes Mrs. Wheeler the most prescient reader of the war and its effects, representing a generational difference that Cather herself felt. By situating this awareness in a middle-aged woman, Cather asserts the potential for women, elders, and other non-combatants to read and understand the war, thereby justifying her own foray into the manly field of war literature. In the aftermath of unprecedented events, survivors must try to make sense of the occurrence. Both Elaine Showalter and Debra Rae Cohen have argued that during and after the Great War, women’s social status made them uniquely situated to question the prevailing narratives and to construct new ones (Showalter 194; Cohen 2). The prescience of women such as Mrs. Wheeler (as well as Cather and West) draws a distinction, as well, between the psychological chaos of war, where one cannot see the forest for the trees, and the post-war clarity of the home front.

Mrs. Wheeler comes to symbolize the sterility of the post-war: first by articulating the war’s futility as a middle aged and no longer procreative woman; second by fixing

her favorite son and others like him in death and infancy. By following Claude through an anti-*Bildungsroman* plot Cather formally represents the inefficacy of preceding narratives to mediate modern times. By concluding with Mrs. Wheeler, though, Cather reveals the insidious lingering of a non-regenerative cultural epoch that drove “civilization” into the Great War and broke the world in two. Mrs. Wheeler notices how, “One by one the heroes of that war, the men of dazzling soldiership, leave prematurely the world they have come back to. . . . one by one they quietly die by their own hand.” Whether they kill themselves in “obscure lodging houses” or “in their office, where they seemed to be carrying on their business like other men,” or by “[slipping] over a vessel’s side and [disappearing] into the sea,” the most admirable soldiers—the true believers, the dupes—are the ones who suffer trauma in the war’s aftermath. Subtly, certain soldiers are honored here as “heroes” and “men of dazzling soldiership,” but this does not extend to all who fought and served, only to those who, presumably, shared Claude’s mixture of romantic sensitivity and remarkable foolishness:

When Claude’s mother hears of these things, she shudders and presses her hands tight over her breast, as if she had him there. . . . [S]he thinks those slayers of themselves were all so like him; they were the ones who had hoped extravagantly,—who in order to do what they did had to hope extravagantly, and to believe passionately. And they found they had hoped and believed too much. But one she knew, who could ill bear disillusion . . . safe, safe. (605, final ellipses in Cather)

Mrs. Wheeler’s inverts her grief, transforming it from regret into consecration, thereby embracing a nihilistic melancholia. She gathers comfort in Claude’s reprieve from understanding the futility of the cause he so joyfully embarked upon, an understanding he no doubt would have come to. Just as Mrs. Wheeler used to feel “quick” or “shriveled”

with Claude and his anxieties, she feels his death in her body too, as if she has gathered him back into her physical self. This leads her to conclude that her dead son, killed on a battlefield in France, “found his place” in war, an ironic alteration to traditional plots that rejects their imperative of reproductive continuation (603). Cather ends her novel with an allusion to Mrs. Wheeler as eternal “Mother.” The text’s final word goes to Mahailey, who takes to calling Mrs. Wheeler “Mudder” and, when she does so, “Mrs. Wheeler knows that then she is thinking of Claude, is speaking for Claude” (605). Thus Claude haunts not the battlefield where he died but the homeplace and the women who keep him infantilized and virginized in their hearts. Mrs. Wheeler imagines that Claude lies locked in her body—and rather than foundering in the trauma of the broken, post-war world, she believes that there Claude is “safe, safe.”

The infantilization of Claude during his life, and the fetusization, if we can coin such a word, of Claude after his death undermine the imperative of reproductive futurism that marks Western narratives. In Edelman’s polemic he argues that enforced futurism finds its ultimate manifestation in the figure of Child: “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figuration of the Child” (11). In Edelman’s estimation, the Child demands that citizens sacrifice their happiness and actualization for its benefit in a projected future that never comes. Thus the death of young men in war appears tragic because they represent the loss of children, yet regenerative political narratives circumvent this tragedy by turning it into triumphant sacrifice for the cultural future. However, in *One of Ours*, Claude finds himself fixed into the role of Child, unable to mature and continue on in support of the symbolic Child himself. Thus the novel’s destruction of that Child, the

point that the Child must be sacrificed himself for the good of nobody, rather than be sacrificed for by parents and society, shows the narrative and perceptive rupture the war incited. Here we see the significant force of this and other modern novels of sterility.

Cather further emphasizes this transition in the contrasting understandings of Claude and Mrs. Wheeler. She constructs Claude as a traditional reader during the collapse of the traditional world; he attempts to fulfill regenerative narratives and finds himself thwarted at every turn, forced to remain in virginal immaturity. Mrs. Wheeler, however, watches Claude's inability to fulfill his goals with concern, even feeling his failures physically. After his death and after the war, Mrs. Wheeler can articulate the altered world and embraces Claude's destruction as preferable to his understanding. The novel's philosophical conclusion posits the end of the Child and, therefore, the end of the future—or at least, given the continuation of Mrs. Wheeler's less-beloved sons, the end of a world of value, beauty, and potential.

Critics have noted the unique twist Mrs. Wheeler presents to what might otherwise seem a celebratory picture of self-actualization in war; indeed, she is often the cornerstone of that particular argument. For example, Jennifer Haytock asserts that “Mrs. Wheeler's disillusionment with American idealism at the end of the novel necessarily implies a corresponding disillusionment with the structure of the American family; the intertwining of domestic ideology with war ideology demands that a questioning of one evoke a questioning of the other” (42). Frederick Griffiths argues that Cather's most impressive contribution to war literature lies in her insistence upon civilian experience, in France as much as Nebraska: “By the range of men, women, and children that she now presents . . . she emphasizes that total war no longer belongs just to the warriors” (274).

Adding to these arguments, this chapter argues that *One of Ours* needs Mrs. Wheeler's post-war prescience to confirm Claude's commitment to untenable cultural narratives and his inability to break free from those old plots and read/join modernity. Mrs. Wheeler indicates, as well, the novel's modernism by highlighting Claude's limitations and making a final statement on the futility of the war. Yet for Cather the problem extends beyond "making it new" because the horrors of modernity, culminating in the Great War, defy cultural stability and regeneration. Hence, sterility, which arises throughout Cather's novel as the symbolic manifestation of modernity's lack of coherence and which she uses in her two-part structure, the forced virginity of her non-developing protagonist, and the novel's many paradoxical inversions to signify a perceived chasm that the war opened in history.

Yet perhaps more important than scholars' accounts of Mrs. Wheeler and Claude is the assessment provided by a grieving mother who wrote to the childless Cather: "The last ten pages of your book were written especially for the mothers, and as one of them I thank you. We know:—but I cannot understand how you do" (qtd. in *Memorial Fictions* 110). This woman points out the obvious but important detail that those who wrote modern novels of sterility were as diverse in their procreative statuses as in their gender, nationality, sexuality, and wartime experiences. West wrote her novel as a new mother, while Cather never had children. Yet Cather's representation resonated with those who lost literal children in the war, suggesting how efficacious Great War survivors—from home-front readers to soldiers themselves—found sterility as a symbolic representation of the war's effects and the unstable affective state of post-war melancholia.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *One of Ours* was Cather's first big financial success, revealing the novel's resonance with post-war readers if not with critics. Woodress writes: "despite the bruises her ego suffered at the hands of the critics,

Trench

With *One of Ours*, Cather's writing diverged from her usual approach, not only in terms of research, subject, and character but also in a style and form that deviate significantly from her earlier works. However, the novel still features and builds upon her stripped down, straightforward prose, saying as much with what it leaves out as what it puts in. In "The Novel D meubl " (which also appeared in 1922), Cather gives her most famous and articulate explanation of her style: "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named . . . that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself" (50).⁵⁰ In this effect, Cather joins other literary modernists, including West and Ernest Hemingway, in a challenge to nineteenth-century realism that is stripped bare and deceptively simple rather than, say, the other key modernist styles that are deeply chaotic and fractured. For this discussion, it is worth noting the barren aspect of such a style, with its dessicated prose that consciously attempts to break with its novelistic progenitors in style and tone as well as narrative construction.

This study opened with West and Cather to show that noncombatant women writers not only participated in a larger modernist use of sterility to represent the Great War but were also among the first to do so. Their novels share an insistence upon representing the war's effects on civilians and women, and feature regressively immature

she could take comfort in the size of her deposit slips. The book became a best seller . . . and for the rest of her life [she] had no money problems" (334).

⁵⁰ Skaggs argues, "Such a process of intensification through reduction inevitably confounds or irritates the frivolous passerby. Underemphasis that would escape the notice of a careless reader, however, was an effect Willa Cather was prepared to pay for in order to create her kind of clarity" (12).

central male characters and a preoccupation with infant mortality and metaphorical sacrifice of children. Yet even as I am claiming (as others also have) that West's *The Return of the Soldier* and Cather's *One of Ours* are important modernist texts, certain of their peers were less sure. For example, a snarky, young Hemingway remarked that in *One of Ours* the war had been "Catherized" and took its battle descriptions from the D. W. Griffith film *Birth of a Nation* (1915).⁵¹ However, *One of Ours* and *The Return of the Soldier* both preceded Hemingway's first published novels in their stripped down, straightforward prose style that veiled layers of possibility and meaning. Hemingway's iceberg theory of writing is not dissimilar to Cather's insistence on the "thing not named." Arguably, West and Cather carried to fruition a literary tendency that linked them to junior authors such as Hemingway. That such literary productivity arose out of a violence that found its representation in sterility reveals a paradox at the heart of modern novels of sterility. As we will see in the next chapter, Hemingway took up the thematic and formal idea of sterility to represent the war, focusing its effects on post-war expats and the novel itself. His preoccupations were taken up in turn by a literary sibling, of sorts—Claude McKay, whose *Home to Harlem* (1928) engages *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) in a conversation between modernists equal in talent yet unequal in status because of institutional racism. Thus, as we will see in chapter five, McKay's text takes up post-war sterility in a self-consciously divergent way from West, Cather, or Hemingway.

⁵¹ In a letter to Edmund Wilson, dated November 23, 1923, Hemingway wrote: "Look at *One of Ours*. Prize, big sale, people taking it seriously. You were in the war weren't you? Wasn't that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode. Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere" (qtd. in *Memorial Fictions* 106). Bear in mind that when he wrote this letter, Hemingway had not yet published his first collection of short fiction, *In Our Time* (1924), or his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Noteworthy, as well, is the fact that Hemingway's time as a volunteer ambulance driver on the Italian Front did not give him much in the way of superiority regarding the trench experience in France.

CHAPTER IV

A MOST TRAUMATIC PARADOX:

STERILITY, TRAUMA, AND THE GREAT WAR IN *THE SUN ALSO RISES*

Ernest Hemingway's 1929 novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, is a classic American representation of the Great War. It directly depicts combatant experiences, expresses disillusionment, shows injury, and celebrates the love of two individuals surrounded by the howling of nations only to culminate in the death of Catherine Barkley in childbirth and the stillbirth of her and Frederic Henry's son. Aimee Pozorski argues that *A Farewell to Arms* shows modernism "itself as a kind of stillborn infant at the crisis point of its own self-realization. At this point of crisis, where the new modernism is still in its infancy, it seems impossible to abandon or kill it" (75). In a project examining sterility as a quintessential metaphor for the Great War's effects, *A Farewell to Arms* seems an ideal text. So why does this chapter analyze Hemingway's earlier novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), which focuses on a group of expatriates carousing in post-war Europe? In this novel, the war appears only in the past tense, there are no dead children or mothers, and the characters lack Frederick Henry's scathing certainties about the meaninglessness of wars and nations.⁵² This chapter focuses on *The Sun Also Rises* because, while *A Farewell to Arms* is a narrative of the Great War, I contend that *The Sun Also Rises* is a novel of the *trauma* of the Great War. Pozorski states, "modernism grew up, despite itself," and in opening this chapter with a juxtaposition of these two novels we can see how Hemingway's ability to narrate the war matured between *The Sun Also Rises* and *A*

⁵² Henry thinks: "I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity" (185).

Farewell to Arms, moving from a struggle to articulate the war's meaning and effects to an unequivocal proclamation of the war's resonance in history (75).

Yet I submit that the uncertain representation of the war and its traumatic aftershocks in *The Sun Also Rises* also makes it a far more complicated narrative of the Great War—and its sterility subtler. Cathy Caruth argues for the difficulty of voicing trauma because it “simultaneously defies and demands our witness,” while Kalí Tal claims, “Traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention” (Caruth 5; Tal 6). I argue that *The Sun Also Rises* depicts the netherworld before a narrative of a traumatic event has become codified, preventing the war's victims from incorporating the traumas into their psyches and moving forward productively. It is a story about being unstoried. Similarly to West and Cather—whose *The Return of the Soldier* and *One of Ours*, respectively, precede any of Hemingway's published novels—Hemingway also forefronts the emasculating sterility of his male protagonist and the consternating sterility of his female protagonist while expanding the possibilities for formal sterility in his use of static circularity and ambiguous conclusion. In this way, Hemingway, too, undermines the reproductive sexuality of narrative articulated by scholars, including Robert Scholes, who claims that the act of sex is the basis for all narrative; Judith Roof, who argues that narrative is heterosexual because of its imperative of (re)production; and Lee Edelman, who critiques the drive to futurism that inundates Western political and cultural narratives and that, he claims, manifests in the unassailable figure of the Child. *The Sun Also Rises* exhibits two distinct takes on sterility: *impotence*, exhibited literally and metaphorically

by Jake Barnes, and *contraception*, employed as a literal and symbolic protective barrier by Lady Brett Ashley.

Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley form a dyad within *The Sun Also Rises*, dual protagonists who reveal the two key types of sterility that result from trauma. Jake's sterility is physical—due to a genital wound incurred during the war—and Brett's sterility is emotional—from war-related psychological traumas, including the abuses of her shell-shocked husband. Jake's physical sterility manifests as a literal and metaphorical impotence while Brett's emotional sterility leads her to a contraceptive approach to life, using literal and symbolic prophylactics to avoid both pregnancy and emotional productivity or intimacy. Mark Spilka dubs Jake and Brett “Wounded Warriors” and posits: “If Jake's sexual wound can be read as an instance of the way in which war undermines the possibilities of ‘true love,’ then we begin to understand to some extent why Hemingway chose that curious condition as an index to the post-war malaise, the barrenness of waste-land relations among the expatriates he knew” (“Wounded Warriors” 176). Because of their distinct but conjoined sterilities, the pair move in static circles of repetitive behavior that separate “us”—the traumatized—from “them”—everyone else. Structurally, these repetitions create a stasis that reveals the characters' inability to make sense of and, therefore, articulate the Great War and their related traumas. In the world of *The Sun Also Rises*, the war has broken linear history, engendering a pervasive traumatic state wherein the war's victims circle around and repeat. The narrative itself avoids the traditional movement that mirrors human experience of temporal reality by constantly returning its characters to fruitlessness and, with the ambiguity and return of its conclusion, blocks the continuity and cohesion of

traditional narratives. Furthermore, *The Sun Also Rises* is, in many ways, a romance, but the novel travesties the traditional romantic conclusions—marriage or death—by changing the pair from thwarted not-lovers to friends and compatriots, a feature that also undercuts the reproductive conclusions of traditional heterosexual narratives.

The Sun Also Rises manifests sterility on multiple levels: First, in building a structure of repetition, the novel parodies life cycles, representing the perceived break in linear history felt in the wake of the war. Second, Jake's journalistic style of narration attempts—but fails—to mask his trauma under detached reportage, the sparsity of his prose and the ineffectuality of his relationships proclaiming his impotence. Third, with the gender-bending Brett as the conjoined half of the novel's war-wounds, the novel uses contraceptive androgyny as a symbol for the topsy-turvy, post-war world. Fourth, the novel's repetitions culminate in an opaque and ambiguous ending that works as both impotence and contraception by becoming a barrier preventing readers from gaining productive understanding and, thereby, inciting an interpretive impotence. The ambiguous ending is a prime marker of novelistic sterility because it responds to post-war grief by rejecting the narrative closure that would maintain the reproductive novelistic tradition while also inciting the feeling of being unmoored from cultural certainty.

“Just Drive Around”: Narrative Circularity and Structural Sterility

The Sun Also Rises creates a structure of repetition to depict a sterile world of static circularity. On one hand, these recurrences suggest the continuation of trauma in the character's post-war lives and repetitive non-regeneration thus stands as a testament to a shared cultural loss in the wake of the war; these repetitions signal how the

characters and history itself seem locked in a vicious circle outside of linear temporality. On the other hand, the novel's repetitions can also be read as markers of witness to post-war loss, rejecting a regenerative participation in historical linearity by remaining trapped in circles of traumatic repetition. Freud discovered that repeating is a key symptom of trauma, claiming that a "repetition-compulsion" appeared in children and the psychologically unstable, a drive to return to suffering that seemed a "daemonic character" in direct contrast to the pleasure principle (42–43).⁵³ The repetitions of *The Sun Also Rises* may thus be seen as proof of the trauma incited by the Great War. Given the conscious creation of these repetitions by Hemingway and, as will be argued in the conclusion, the embrace of them by Brett and Jake by the novel's end, these repetitions may also be seen as refusals of healing in order to commemorate the Great War's horror. Whether read as debilitating trauma or melancholic protest, the repetitive structure amounts to a literary tease, an arousal of readerly expectation that never reaches climax and dénouement. Just as Jake can feel desire but never act on it, the novel stimulates the reader's desired expectations for characters and plot, only to thwart those expectations by refusing productive development. Wolfgang Iser claims that *The Sun Also Rises* uses the modernist style of a palimpsest to create its structural whole: "i.e. there are many instances where certain words, phrases, passages, or scenes interact with and are informed by words, phrases, passages, or scenes that come later in the novel" (302).⁵⁴

⁵³ See also: Caruth; Felman and Laub; Homans; and Tal.

⁵⁴ Iser's "palimpsestic" novel form aligns with Joseph Frank's theory of "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," wherein he asserts that modern writers attempt to do the impossible—create spatial (rather than time-based or chronological) form within modern literature. This style, similar in experience to the plastic arts such as painting, is achieved through modernist fragmentation (of narrative, character, meaning, experience, etc.) that makes it impossible to comprehend the work as anything other than a whole, once it has been finished or even re-read, creating a spatial work.

This concept of return, absence, and denial appears as well in David Tomkins's argument that Hemingway's novel gestures to what it supersedes, thereby memorializing that which has gone before and entering into a perpetual cycle of memorial and mourning. He claims that what Hemingway creates "is a form of modernism that simultaneously commemorates and undermines traditional objects (be they tangible objects or intangible stories), thereby presenting such objects in ways that induce generic mutation" (758). *The Sun Also Rises* mutates the genre conventions of nineteenth-century realist fictions broadly and romance specifically.⁵⁵ Furthermore, such "generic mutation" is a common approach to modernism's "make it new" that is only just beginning to be explored fully by critics. I build on these arguments regarding the novel's structure by asserting that the repetitive and structural mourning within the novel also renders traditional narratives sterile by swirling in a vortex just outside of linear and (re)productive narrative movement. Rather than existing in a temporal spiral or gyre, the characters of *The Sun Also Rises* repetitively cycle from start to finish like a needle on a skipping record.

These claims to thinking holistically about a text have particular resonance in a novel that uses a symbol of holism—a circle—to represent a lack of continuity and stability. In *Reading for the Plot* (1984) Peter Brooks asserts the need to think holistically about texts in general: "If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it. Perhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic" (23). *The Sun Also Rises* toys with this established mode of reading through the staging of scenes

⁵⁵ Note the generic intersections between a general "realism," romance, and the *Bildungsroman* in nineteenth-century literature, revealing generic deconstruction as a link between Hemingway, West, Cather, and, as we shall see, Claude McKay and Ford Madox Ford as well.

that either evoke scenes we know have been played out before—as with Brett and Jake’s cab rides and conversations—or that undermine notions of tradition and continuity—as we will see shortly with Jake’s impotent narration and Brett’s contraceptive androgyny. These plot-based complications lead to the novel’s conclusion that, as will be discussed later on, reiterates the novel’s recycling instability. The novel thus mutates the circle’s holistic symbolism to represent, instead, the novel’s repetitive trauma.

The novel’s structural repetition—whether we call it circular, palimpsestic, or holistic—effectually undermines the reproductive continuity of traditional narratives by positing an unending cycle of nonproductivity. Brooks cautions against the illusion of inconclusive narrative: “We are frustrated by narrative interminable, even if we know that any termination is artificial, and that the imposition of ending may lead to that resistance to end which Freud found in his patients” (23). In the case of *The Sun Also Rises*, the novel “ends” in that the narrative stops and in that we can assume the inevitable deaths of Brett, Jake, and the other characters. Yet the novel also uses its interpretive instability to suggest Brooks’ “narrative interminable” that may, in some readers, incite that “resistance to end” that appears when the “end” feels forced or false, no proper conclusion at all. In a shade of contrast, both Roof and Edelman argue that traditional narratives create satisfaction in their narratives by positing reproductive continuation into an imagined future. Narratives thus succeed by suggesting the perpetuation of the narrative even beyond its literal end, making, in some sense, “narrative interminable” a prime feature of traditional narrative generally. This feature does not undermine Brooks’s point but, rather, articulates how narratives manage the constructed tradition of and desire for continuation with the physical and intellectual need

for specific narratives to end. Joseph Boone, however, argues that modernist narratives appear “deviant” in light of their predecessors, and that “these deviant modernist texts . . . work against heterosexual presumptions in their rejection of the structural dictates of the marriage plot (where the cessation of the need to narrate is equated with the perfect union of two—male and female—into one)” (220). With *The Sun Also Rises*, the two remain distinctly two, ostensibly because of their inability to consummate their romance but, in a new twist, literally because their damage prevents them from acting in any productive way. Further, the circulating non-productivity of the novel’s plot and conclusion disrupt the possibility of fixing the novel’s meaning and thus accepting its “end.” The barrier to productive or stable interpretation that *The Sun Also Rises* enacts eloquently aligns with the contraception that I argue Brett employs to avoid intimacy, leading to an interpretive impotence in readers and characters that mirrors Jake’s own inability to have a productive life. That both characters are unable to procreate highlights the structural and thematic non-regeneration engendered by the trauma of the Great War and manifested in the novel’s form as well.

The sterile circularity of Brett, Jake, and their cohort appears in their repetitive, destructive behaviors as well as instances where the characters travel in circles (walking, dancing), emphasizing the movement-in-stasis that epitomizes their lives. These plot-based repetitions are further articulated as statically circular through pointed uses of the word “around.” In the novel’s first of many taxi rides, Jake asks Brett where she wants to go and she replies, “Oh, tell him to drive *around*” (32, my italics). This circularity is mimicked in the back-and-forth of their discussion:

“I don’t want to go through that hell again.”

“We’d better keep away from each other.”

“But, darling, I have to see you. It isn’t all that you know.”

“No, but it always gets to be.” (34)

As with their circuitous journey, their dialogue represents the painful yet inescapable cycle to which their relationship has devolved. Unable to reconcile their desires with their inability to be lovers, Jake and Brett engage in fruitless discussion of their situation. Concurrently, without the extraneous, un-“factual” addition of adjectives or other interpretive markers, this and other dialogues in the novel create an inherent interpretive instability. Certainty is blocked by the lack of instruction for how to interpret words and events, underscoring the impossibility of fixing a single, stable meaning. This instability itself incites a kind of circularity, where possible interpretations present themselves only to be subsumed again in the vortex of uncertainty (is the tone of their dialogue: passionate? bitter? sarcastic? ironic? despairing? passionate?). The novel achieves this effect through the prose style that Hemingway made famous and that appears so frequently in modern novels of sterility—straightforward prose that works in a realist vein even as it draws attention to the falseness of mimetic realism. From the sentence to the individual episode to the novel entire, possibilities for interpretation abound, thus manifesting the nonproductive repetitions seen in the characters’ lives, their fruitless search for meaning or stability in a war-haunted world.

With Jake as narrator and Brett as focus of that narration, the use of “around” also situates Brett within the center—of the story and of Jake’s post-war angst. Later that same night, as Jake considers his predicament, he reports, “I lay awake thinking and my mind jumping *around*. ... I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping *around* and started to go in smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. Then after a while it was better ... and then I went to sleep” (39, my italics). Here Brett is the

center of Jake's preoccupation; she is the catalyst for Jake's distress and what calms it, the calm switching to the movement of "smooth waves" only to recirculate back to the impossibility of their romance, leading to his tears and exhaustion. Here "around" signals the novel's circularity as the movement of Jake's mind cycles fruitlessly in a scene that has similarly non-transformative relevance to his life and relationship with Brett. Jake's impotence thus expands beyond his physical wound to include the metaphorical non-productivity of his life and relationships as well.

"Just Trying To Give You The Facts": Impotence, Post-War Narrative, and Jake's Narration

The Sun Also Rises gestures to its sterile circularity in the epigraphs that highlight the damage inflicted on the war generation and the traditional cycles that characterize human lives. In the first of the novel's epigraphs, Gertrude Stein tells the young Hemingway, "You are all a lost generation." A passage from Ecclesiastes follows, rendered in the antiquated diction of the King James Bible: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; [...] The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose ... The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about to the north; it whirleth about continually." This second epigraph affirms the belief that the world moves in patterns and cycles where things fade away but are replaced by more of the same; such movement is the regenerative nature of human narratives and human lives. However, the generation Hemingway portrays is "lost" because all those meaningful repetitions of love, family, and society were exploded, somewhere on a

battlefield in France or, even, on “a joke front like the Italian” (*SAR* 38).⁵⁶ They are a generation that, ironically and tragically, cannot regenerate. Viewed through the lens of sterility, the “lost generation” acquires another layer of meaning—signifying not only the generation who cannot reproduce in these damaged times but also the generation of offspring that will not be born, lost through the trauma of their elders.⁵⁷

Jake acts as the voice for this generation, and his narrative style effaces the personal and cultural traumas wrought by the war under the detached reportage of places and events. As he tells Robert Cohn, “I was just trying to give you the facts,” and this insistent focus on facts attempts to cover over Jake’s unstoried state, his and others’ lack of a codified narrative of the war’s trauma (46). In a twist on Jane Austen’s “free indirect discourse,” Hemingway’s narrative approach appears more like “inhibited and direct discourse,” seemingly straightforward yet actually restrained. This style—which Hemingway used to ingenious effect with Jake, one of his only first-person narrators—takes such a controlled approach that it forces close attention combined with speculation to unearth what it contains, ultimately leading to multiple interpretations that incite an impotent inability to fix the novel’s “facts.”

⁵⁶ Robert Martin and Robert Cochran expound tonally different readings of Hemingway’s epigraphs. Martin sees death inherent between the “lost generation” quote and the cyclical nature of the Ecclesiastes passage, writing, “the sun of the title both rises and sets as a metaphorical measurement of the hours in between the days when ‘One generation passeth away and another generation cometh’” (100). However, using the same passages, Cochran asserts, “Far from indicating insularity and moral atrophy, the novel evidences circularity and moral retrenching” (297). I read these opposed interpretations as evidence of the novel’s inherent unfixability, which is key to its representation of a world still struggling to right itself in the aftershocks of the Great War.

⁵⁷ The loss of generation after the war was not only metaphorical. In Britain and European combatant nations the sheer amounts of young men lost resulted in a dearth of partners for millions of women during their procreative years. In the US the numbers of losses were lesser, but, according to Keith Gandall, American doughboys brought home from France greater knowledge about birth control and oral sex, and used both to prevent pregnancy in their girlfriends and wives (26–29). Finally, the Great Depression that swept the world in the late 1920s and 1930s significantly lowered rates of marriage, pregnancy, birth, and infant survival throughout the Western world.

The use of a first person narrator who pretends detachment even as he is quite invested in the novel's events further allows Hemingway to show the ongoing trauma experienced by the "lost generation" without merely stating this truth as such. The typescript version of *The Sun Also Rises* reveals as much, containing a chapter and a half that preceded the novel's opening with Robert Cohn. This earlier version begins with a third-person narrator, who tells Brett's back-story, but then abandons its third person pose in the original chapter two by admitting that the storyteller was Jake all along: "I did not want to tell this story in the first person but I find that I must," Jake says. "I wanted to stay well outside the story ... and handle all the people in it with that irony and pity that are essential to good writing. I even thought I might be amused by all the things that are going to happen to Lady Brett Ashley ... and Mr. Jake Barnes, But [*sic*] I made the unfortunate mistake, for a writer, of first having been Mr. Jake Barnes" (qtd. in Svodoba 133–34). Hemingway first attempted a narrator detached from the novel's events, found that approach inadequate, and ultimately abandoned it altogether for a deeply involved narrator who pretends to the kind of detachment a third-person narrator gives in order to deny his trauma. In the typescript's moment of transference, Jake admits his desire to remain detached and the impossibility of doing so. But importantly, Hemingway opted to cut even this level of self-awareness from Jake's narration, opening instead with information about Cohn that comes to symbolize Jake's method of avoidance through repression and denial. The decision to use only a first-person narrator reveals Jake's ongoing and un-narratable trauma, creating a personal impotence that aligns metaphorically with the literal impotence caused by his war wound.

Similarly to West's narrator, Jenny, fissures in Jake's report reveal his unreliability as a narrator and, consequently, draw attention to the inadequacy of "just trying to give you the facts" as a tactic for managing trauma and loss. For example, Jake reports his actions upon returning home after an evening with Brett: "Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire beside the bed. That was a typically French way to furnish a room. Practical, too, I suppose. Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny. I put on my pajamas and got into bed" (38). Jake's oblique reference to his wound amounts to a narrative slippage, a break in the seam of his story that he immediately resumes. What he attempts to evade is the physical injury that engenders the repeating relevance of trauma in his sterile, post-war life. Adrian Bond argues that as Jake's body has a physical hole due to the war so, too, the novel contains a narrative abyss that cannot be consummated or closed: "The central characters have actually become determined by the very past they attempt to escape. Past is the deflected center of their present, with the metaphor of loss ... figuring foremost a temporal dislocation—a living outside of history" (63). Jake tries to repress the past, but he is as impotent at burying his trauma as he is in consummating his relationship with Brett. Indeed, his ongoing engagement with an impossible love relationship reveals his inability to stop picking at his emotional scars even as he pretends they are sealed over.

Jake's reportage perpetually draws attention to the very trauma he tries to ignore, indicated when he claims, "what happened to me is supposed to be funny. I never think about it" (34).⁵⁸ Jake's repeated insistence on approaching his life ironically, on declaring

⁵⁸ J. F. Buckley intriguingly argues that *The Sun Also Rises* exhibits two personae for Jake Barnes: 1) "Barnes" (the private narrator) idealizes normative behavior even as 2) "Jake" (the public persona) cannot help undercutting normativity and placing himself in an antisocial position shared by homosexuals, prostitutes, and gender-bending Brett. He claims, "Any break in the 'normal' is a sickness that Barnes tries

that his wound is “funny,” prevents him from codifying a narrative of his traumatic experience. In his discussion of irony as the prime feature of British war literature (a claim shared by Paul Fussell as well), Jay Winter argues that the “difference between irony and deception is that the ironist has no advantage to gain by saying one thing and meaning another. The gain . . . is that she avoids seeing the world as a site of action where justice reigns, or could operate. Irony is an antidote to zealotry, to chauvinism, or even to moral certainty” (121). Jake’s irony, then, aligns with and also creates the code of “the chaps,” where they veil their traumas under a thick cloud of ironic misdirection; he refuses to participate in rhetorics of “zealotry,” “chauvinism,” or “moral certainty” but he also stifles giving direct voice to his traumatic experience. William Adair details references throughout the novel that allude to the war in order to show its constant presence in the post-war world: “the novel is more a book of memory than has been recognized” (74). I would complicate Adair’s claim by countering that the novel is also a book of not-memory, where tactics such as veiled references to the war reveal the difficulty of articulating the war and its aftermath, the challenge of making memory narratable. Memories of the war and its trauma crop up throughout the novel but not without much impotent effort to repress them on the part of Jake.

Attempts to contain trauma pervade the novel and this refusal to voice or exhibit suffering delineates who is and is not one of “the chaps.” The traumatized characters share ongoing suffering *and* the refusal to express it, and this results in a code interpretable only by those in the group. This linguistic bandaging appears when Brett

to avoid with his selective narrative of events, and that Jake tries to dismiss with his indirect dialogue” (76). Extending this idea beyond the heteronormative masculinity that Buckley sees undermined in the novel, I suggest that trauma, as well, creates a “break in the ‘normal’” that Jake tries to avoid, cover over, or dismiss.

declares that Count Mippipopulous is “quite one of us” and fully expects Jake to understand her meaning—which he does (40). It shows up, as well, in Bill Gorton’s exclamation that the “secret” to his success is that he’s “Never been daunted. Never been daunted in public” (79). Similarly, when the Count tells Brett that she, like himself, “remembers everything that’s happened,” she replies, “Fancy ... Who’d want to? I say, Jake, *do* we get a drink?” (61). Brett does not disagree with the Count only muses on the distastefulness of remembering before asking for a drink, the most prominent way that this circle of compatriots efface their pain. Yet the text allows or forces its narrator to acknowledge the suffering that remains tamped down but is never relinquished. As Jake reminds, “It is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing” (42). Generally, Jake’s clipped, declarative style glosses over the lingering horror of the Great War but when he admits the impossibility of remaining “hard-boiled” all the time his style shows the profundity of his pain, a pain that runs deep in the rest of “the chaps” as well. Jake and the others treat their traumas like a festering wound that can be bandaged over but never actually healed.

The sparsity of Jake’s narration metaphorically suggests the sterility of the novel itself—pinched, solitary, and detached rather than effusive, capacious, and engaged. Jake’s style and the novel’s structure also deviate from the verbal lavishness of the nineteenth-century novel. Yet the text’s modernism parodies rather than destroys its predecessors, with its chronological narrative movement that mimics traditional narratives only to accomplish very little in terms of character growth or clear message. Discussing the nineteenth-century novel, Edward Said claims: “a central purpose ... is to enable the writer to represent characters and societies more or less freely in development.

Characters and societies so represented grow and move in the novel because they mirror a process of engenderment or beginning and growth possible and permissible for the mind to imagine” (41). The war disrupted this tendency in Western narratives and so Hemingway’s representation of the war’s traumatic aftereffects depicts society in a state of non-development, a period without growth or regeneration. If narratives, like people, perpetuate themselves through performing shared and understood cycles then *The Sun Also Rises* breaks this pattern by travesty narrative cycles. This manipulation of traditional narrative reveals how inefficacious such narratives were after the war, and acknowledges the need for new ones even as *The Sun Also Rises* resists becoming a stable and productive narrative itself.

Writing contemporaneously with Hemingway, Walter Benjamin provides a counter expression of the damage the war did to storytelling and how it impoverished human ability to communicate experience: “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth.” Benjamin stresses that experience happened but he asserts that attempts to articulate this experience—from soldiers or in fiction—remain inadequate. Yet he states, “there was nothing remarkable about that” inability to communicate because:

never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged

but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. (77)

Benjamin eloquently articulates the overwhelming and unprecedented magnitude of the war, the cultural sea change it created, and the profound unspeakability of the experience. *The Sun Also Rises* enacts this struggle through its narrator who can only “give you the facts” rather than speak his war trauma, situating Jake as the spokesperson for a war damaged generation. The novel, like other modern novels of sterility, becomes a distinctly modernist form of realism—mimetic of its times’ perception and experience of living in the world yet self-consciously undermining the notion of literary realism that characterizes its novelistic predecessor of the nineteenth century.

Benjamin claims that, traditionally, “the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers,” then adds, “But if today ‘having counsel’ is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing” (79). And Jake, as the “storyteller” within the construction of *The Sun Also Rises*, repeatedly undermines the older style of fiction where “having counsel” abides and thus exposes his own failure as a narrator with a didactic, reaffirming, or productive message for his readers. For example, Jake mocks Robert Cohn for being influenced by a novel called “The Purple Land,” which “recounts the splendid imaginary amorous adventures of a perfect English gentleman in an intensely romantic land, the scenery of which is very well described” (17). Jake implies that amorous adventures experienced by English gentlemen in romantic lands, while fine in their place, hold no relevance in the modern world. As he states, “For a man to take it at thirty-four as a guide-book to what life holds is about as safe as it would be for a man of the same age to enter Wall Street direct from a French convent, equipped with a complete set of the more practical Alger books” (17).

Horatio Alger specialized in writing moralistic “boys books” and Jake implicitly links these didactic adventure tales and amorous novels of the pre-war. Moreover, his pairing connects traditional prose narratives with modern love and modern business, proving further the deflation of such narratives in the post-war world.

Given that *The Sun Also Rises* itself travesties romances, “The Purple Land” is not the only traditional love story that the novel undercuts. When fishing in Spain with Bill, Jake reads a story that involves a sentimental love triangle about a “bride who was going to wait twenty-four years exactly” for her husband’s body to reappear out of a glacier, “while her true love waited too” (125). Furthermore, he reads this story with his back against the romantic tableau of two “trees that grew together” (125). This plot parodies Jake’s own romantic situation because Jake, not unlike the “true love,” waits for a lady who’s attached to someone else. Yet Brett, the novel’s “bride,” waits for no man, encapsulated in a glacier or otherwise. The romantic triangulation in *The Sun Also Rises* involves Jake, Brett, and a perpetually shifting third, underscoring that Jake is not an unwanted lover but that instead, given Brett’s promiscuity, the traditional romance has been obliterated. Jake’s description of this story ultimately reveals the profundity of the world’s change—and narrative with it. This symbolic explosion of traditional romance, marriage, and heterosexual gender relations further reveals the thematic sterility that characterizes many post-war novels. In *The Sun Also Rises*, specifically, the novel’s narrator is subsequently impotent, made physically and personally unable to exist productively by the Great War. But Jake is only one half of the novel’s sterility; the woman he loves but cannot make love to proves equally sterile in ways even more

complicated than Jake, which, in the end, makes Brett's conscious, contraceptive sterility particularly powerful as a manifestation of the war's trauma and loss.

“One of Us”: Contraception, Androgyny, and Lady Brett Ashley

In another use of “around,” one that occurs during the fiesta, Jake reports: the dancing locals “took Bill and me by the arms and put us in the circle. . . . Brett wanted to dance but they did not want her to. They wanted her as an image to dance *around*” (159, my italics). This moment pinpoints the circular stasis that characterizes Brett's experience—the experience of a woman equally traumatized by the war but perpetually threatened with ejection from the traumatized brotherhood because of her gender and her beauty. Here, Jake and Bill move physically in a circle while Brett is in the center. The centrality of Brett's position also symbolizes her place within the novel—she is its heart, its obsession, the focus of Jake's narration and the ongoing reminder of the Great War in his life. Yet Brett's desire to mark herself as a full-fledged member of “the chaps”—the group of traumatized, male expats that Brett herself names as a group—appears not only in her desire to dance with them but also in her androgynous self-fashioning—short hair, masculine clothes, hard drinking, sexual promiscuity. It is my contention that Brett's status as one of “the chaps” reveals her as one of those traumatized by the Great War and that this fact effectually makes her as sterile as Jake.⁵⁹ Yet the experience of Brett's trauma is different than that of the soldiers; hers came about not through experience of

⁵⁹ The prostitute Georgette who tells Jake, “Everybody's sick. I'm sick, too” and Cohn's lover, Frances, who sees her chance to be married and have children slipping away with Cohn are also barren, traumatized female characters (16, 46–51). And while they make an interesting counterpoint to the male characters such as Bill and Mike, they are kept out of the club that includes “the chaps.” Brett, however, insists upon admittance, and the possibility remains that female trauma, as represented by West and Cather, functions in a different experiential zone than does male, a space that Hemingway does not venture into.

the battlefield but through the abuses of her husband, the shell-shocked Lord Ashley, as well as grief over the death of her “own true love” who “kicked off with dysentery” during the war and the generational experience of living through the Great War (46). Thus Brett’s sterility manifests as contraceptive, suggested in the literal sense by the absence of children or pregnancy in a woman with myriad lovers. But, as with Jake’s impotence, her contraceptive sterility works metaphorically, as well, as a descriptor for how Brett uses her androgyny to avoid emotional intimacy, which amounts to an inability or refusal to narrate her traumas and rejoin the “productive” society that engaged in the Great War.

Brett Ashley, undeniably complicated, has been one of the most derided female characters in literary history. Taking their interpretive cues directly from the novel’s host of unreliable characters, critics often read Brett as, at best, a cipher, an uninterpretable “image to dance around,” or, at worst, a nymphomaniac, a drunk, a “bitch,” a “Circe” who “turns men into swine” (*SAR* 159, 188, 148). Sam Baskett reads Brett merely as a jumping off point for understanding Jake, claiming that she “is principally a contained figure to whom her suitors react, rather than a human being whose motives are susceptible to psychological analysis” (48). Spilka suggests that Brett’s masculinity is key evidence of his titular “death of love in *The Sun Also Rises*.” Yet careful readers should be wary of trusting that the characters actually know Hemingway’s Brett for she has the power to fascinate not only the novel’s men but readers as well. As Delbert Wylder asserts in one of her earliest defenses, though Brett is “tremendously attractive and sexually stimulating, she is also a threat, and no one, least of all the critics, has been able to forgive her for that” (32). Georges Bataille also notes that Brett is too intriguing

and Jake too limited to accept an easy dismissal of *The Sun Also Rises*' central female character. With the rise of women in the academy, and the expansion of feminist readings, critics began to re-evaluate Lady Brett Ashley. Laurie Watkins Fulton reiterates Jake's unreliability as a narrator and then reads what we can deduce about Brett. She concludes that the "bond" between Jake and Brett is actually "symbiotic" (72). Wendy Martin argues that as Brett represents a quintessential "new woman" so Jake is a "new man" struggling to come to grips with a changed gender reality. Ira Elliot seeks to "uncover the reasons behind Jake's own inability to openly accept, if not fully endorse, the potentialities of gender/sexual mutability" (64). Perhaps answering critics of his "The Death of Love," Spilka argues that gender confusion and fascination accounts for Jake (and Hemingway's) unstable depiction of Brett. He ultimately suggests that Brett's ability to survive impresses Jake: "But what if the secret agenda is to admire and emulate Brett? What if Brett is the woman Jake would in some sense like to be?" ("Wounded Warriors" 178). Such a host of readings suggest the dynamism of Brett as character, yet they also reveal the circular, interpretive impotence that the novel incites. Put another way, in a critical use of the contraceptive manifestation of Brett's trauma, Hemingway constructs barriers to full contact with his leading lady and the novel itself. Whether we call this impossibility of fixing the novel and its characters "impotent" or "contraceptive" or both, it is, nevertheless, sterile in the perpetual circularity it creates. Thus, this chapter reads Brett and her sterility as built around the concepts of barrier, protection, and defense.

From her first appearance in his story, Brett is described in ways that proclaim her androgyny. Jake reports that she was "damned good looking," wearing "a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that.

She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht, and you missed none of it with that wool jersey” (29–30). His description focuses on Brett’s beauty while revealing her ambiguously gendered persona. Dressed androgynously and described in sportsman’s terms, Brett still comes across as attractive and feminine, while the “she started all that” suggests her individuality. On one hand, Brett uses her masculine attributes to align herself with “the chaps.” On the other, her unorthodox playfulness discloses her attempts to hide her trauma under booze and sex and other adventures. Indeed, her embrace of androgyny is heightened in this scene by her getting “tight” and also by her appearance with a group of homosexual men. Yet in his opening description Jake also emphasizes Brett’s uniqueness—a fact evidenced by her myriad interpretations as well—and this specificity suggests Brett’s break with generations and procreativity. For Brett to stand outside expectation and tradition is to mark her deliberate sterility—her refusal to bow to predecessors and, potentially, propagate herself. She denies expectations in favor of a non-regenerative, modern individuality and in so doing becomes a non-reproducible production, an emotional hermaphrodite, a perpetual paradox.

Brett’s sterile androgyny, particularly when coupled with Jake’s impotence, serves to undermine rigid gender categories. Roof asserts that the binary gender system contributes to traditional narrative’s heterosexuality: “The reduction of a larger field of sexuality to two categories is partly an effect of narrative’s binary operation within a reproductive logic; in this sense there are really only two sexualities: reproductive sexuality, which is associated with difference and becomes metaphorically heterosexual, and nonreproductive sexuality associated with sameness, which becomes metaphorically homosexual” (xxix). I want to suggest that within modern novels there’s a third narrative

at play—sterility—and that it exists primarily as a manifestation of the Great War’s culture-changing horrors. Thus Brett’s androgyny, combined with her sterility and the text’s lack of stable, productive movement, reveal a narrative sexuality that is non-reproductive but walks the line between being singularly “heterosexual” or “homosexual.” Specifically, the central characters all identify as heterosexual and the novel to some extent elegizes the breakdown of traditional, stable gender relations, thus linking it to reproductive, heterosexual narrative. However, the novel’s sterility connects it to homosexuality, particularly as the opposite of heterosexuality in the binary thinking of Western culture. Yet the decay of heterosexual relations, gender demarcations, and procreation seen in the novel brings it closer to the concept of a “queer” sexuality that destabilizes discrete categories of gender and sexuality.

Brett’s status as one of the traumatized situates her within the group but as the only woman who insists upon access to that club her position there is far less stable because, as a woman, her trauma is less overtly identifiable than the men’s. Brett’s difference-in-sameness appears not only in her gender but also in how long the novel takes to unfold her story of Great War trauma. We learn relatively early that Jake, Bill Gorton, and Mike Campbell are all Great War veterans but it is not until deep into the fiesta that the text reveals that Brett’s shell-shocked husband, Lord Ashley, terrorized her with his own traumatized behavior. Mike, her fiancé, reports: “When he [Brett’s husband] came home [from the war] he wouldn’t sleep in a bed. Always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally, when he got really bad, he used to tell her he’d kill her. Always slept with a loaded service revolver. Brett used to take the shells out when he’d gone to sleep” (207). The late revelation of Brett’s traumatic experience divulges the complex

and less overt ways that women were shell-shocked by the Great War. Notably, this revelation comes not from Brett herself but from Mike, who is explaining to Jake and Bill the reasoning behind Brett's retort, "Yes. I've had such a hell of a happy life with the British aristocracy!" after he has been giving her a hard time for sleeping with Jews (Cohn) and bullfighters (Pedro Romero). Using the traditional understatement employed by "the chaps," Mike concludes, "She hasn't had an absolutely happy life, Brett. Damned shame, to. She enjoys things so" (207). Through Mike, Hemingway reveals Brett's traumatic war experience without having her break the code of silence and repression herself. We cannot know whether Bill or, particularly, Jake already knows this information but we can deduce how Brett protects herself from further productive intimacy with the drunkard Mike (who *does* know) through her affairs with the distasteful Cohn and the too-young Romero.

The text further highlights Brett's rebellious originality by rejecting the traditional assumption that, as a woman, she's destined for procreation. For despite being "in the stud-book and everything" of the British nobility, Brett shows no intention of producing sons to carry on the line of Ashley (or anybody) (82). She either cannot physically procreate or, as I argue here, takes precautions not to become pregnant. Wendy Martin claims that Brett embraces urbanity and rejects the country life that satisfies Jake because she "knows that it is the urban centers that provide mobility and choices for the new woman, not the country, with its traditionally limited vision of woman as reproductive being" (59). Yet the basis for Brett's rebellion lies less in a nascent feminism than in her traumatic experience, a horror that may signal her emancipation from many gender constraints but that also marks her deliberate sterility. Her trauma shows how profoundly

the war could and did damage women and, with her androgyny and position as one of “the chaps,” Brett reveals as facile the gendering of war experience. Instead, she lays claim to a generational experience of trauma.

To further understand how essential sterility is to Hemingway’s final text, we turn again to the excised introduction, which references a child Brett had with Ashley and abandoned when she fled his abuse. The original opening situates Brett as the novel’s central character, beginning, “This is a novel about a lady,” and gives portions of her biography before the main events of the novel (qtd. in Svodoba 131). Still in the third person, the text reports that Brett and her husband “had a son and Ashley would not divorce, and would not give grounds for divorce, but there was a separation and Brett went off with Mike Campbell” (qtd. in Svodoba 131). Depending on how one wants to read Brett’s character, her abandonment of this child may appear selfishly cold-hearted or a believable response to the horror of her marriage. I argue, however, that it is not Brett who abandoned her child, but Hemingway. He always asserted the cuts were made entirely of his own volition and in keeping with his artistic goals⁶⁰ and one could conclude that, as with so much that simmers below the surface of the text, Brett’s child remains a silenced fact at the heart of her story. I propose, however, that it is more compelling to view this rejected opening as a true abortion on the part of Hemingway because his depiction of the post-war world requires a sterile, shell-shocked lost generation. Moreover, the removal of most personal history from the narrative enhances the feeling of ever-cycling stasis that characterizes the plot and the characters, and that so effectively deflects stable interpretations.

⁶⁰ F. Scott Fitzgerald, who orchestrated Hemingway’s move to Scribner’s, claimed he worked with the publisher in encouraging Hemingway to cut much of his original beginning. See: Donaldson.

The final version of the novel shows that Brett and Jake, in particular, are bonded by war-related traumatic sterility—rather than their desire for affection or alcohol or even romantic love—and that this bond is stronger than any in their lives. It is Jake that Brett calls to help her when she refuses Romero’s offer of traditional marriage and heterosexual relations, making Romero leave her in Madrid instead. Brett tells Jake, “I’m thirty-four, you know,” and in mentioning her age she acknowledges that she is nearing the end of her procreative years and rejecting the possibility of having children—with Romero or anyone. She follows up her comment about her age with the assertion, “I’m not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children,” further supporting the childlessness that undergirds Hemingway’s structure of Great War trauma and loss (247). Yet along with her nonexistent offspring, Romero is a different kind of child that Brett refuses to ruin. His youth, beauty, and innocence separate him from the lost generation. Brett’s refusal to stay with him reiterates her contraceptive sterility while admitting the possibility for regeneration in those who are undamaged.⁶¹ In the end, Brett reasserts her individual place among the walking wounded through her hair: “[Romero] wanted me to grow my hair out. . . . I’d look so like hell. . . . He said it would make me more womanly. I’d look a fright” (246). In reiterating her androgyny, Brett declares her decision—whether deliberate or inescapable—to remain encircled in traumatic sterility. And Jake acknowledges their mutual wounds, responding to Brett’s dialogue about Romero and her hair with the same language he uses to describe his own wound: “It’s funny” (246). As an emotional hermaphrodite, Brett is as incapable of procreation as Jake, and the pair form

⁶¹ Romero’s lack of Great War trauma may not be solely generational. Spain was not a combatant nation during the war and the temporal setting for *The Sun Also Rises* is prior to the Spanish Civil War. No doubt Spain sensed the cultural effects of the war, as did all of Europe, but it is very possible that one reason Romero remains untarnished by the war is because Spain did not participate in its horrors.

two halves of a non-regenerative whole. The conversation ends with a further retrenchment of their lost generation who choose or cannot escape ongoing trauma, and who resist constructing stable narratives for their suffering. Brett concludes: “I won’t be one of those bitches. . . . But, oh, Jake, please let’s never talk about” (247).

“I’ll Just Talk Around It”: Sterility and the Refusal of Narrative

Trauma marks its presence in repetition and cannot be healed until the victim constructs a story to replace it. As mentioned earlier, trauma victims acquire recurrent narratives of their traumatic experience and this story, through repetition, comes to replace the actual event. Tal also insists that telling one’s story, “bearing witness” to trauma, is inherently political, “born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience . . . Its goal is change” (7). But ultimately, Jake and Brett refuse the creation of a story to tell about their traumas. Given that their sterilities result from their traumas, their choice to remain unstoried also signals their acceptance of their non-regenerative state. In contrast to Tal, grief and mourning theorist Patricia Rae argues for an “activist melancholia” that protests by refusing to create a conclusive narrative and move on from a great loss: “Common to all the narrative strategies tied to resistant mourning is a refusal of closure, of plot developments that return matters to the *status quo* or restore satisfaction to the bereaved. . . . [M]odernist writers ensure that the resolution they deny to their mourners is also denied to their readers” (37). I contend that *The Sun Also Rises* exhibits this resistant mourning by refusing to construct a stable narrative of the war and we can see this resistance exemplified in Jake and Brett’s own silence about their suffering.

By the end of the novel, Brett and Jake grapple with their ongoing decision to not discuss their traumas and griefs. Sitting in a Madrid bar, Brett returns to the subject of Romero and Jake says, “I thought you weren’t going to ever talk about it.” Brett asks, “How can I help it?” but Jake warns her, “You’ll lose it if you talk about it.” Brett gives an important response that features another “around.” She replies: “I just talk *around* it. You know I feel rather damned good, Jake” (249, my italics). Jake and Brett’s conclusion affirms how they consciously refuse to construct a story about their traumas from the war and its continuance in their post-war lives. If they talk about their experiences they will “lose” them and, therefore, not talking becomes a new method for “bearing witness” to the war’s destruction (Tal 7). Remaining unstoried is more important for the lost generation than rejoining linear history. Indeed, it feels “rather damned good.” Jake and Brett “talk around” their traumas instead, placing those experiences in the center, thus turning the novel’s vicious circles of static repetition into memorials for the damage wrought by the war.

Moreover, the advice to avoid talking about a thing because you’ll lose it if you do, that instead one should talk “around” things, is Hemingwayesque advice. It gestures to the author’s technique of constructing stories through omission and suggestion. Taking Brett and Jake as models for how we one ought to read the text encourages reading beneath the surface for the suffering that lies underneath. It also recognizes the inherent unknowability of much of the text, the acknowledgement that Hemingway consciously gives some, but not all, of the information. This modernist technique incites writerly-readers, ones who must engage themselves in the construction of narrative meaning. It also puts up a barrier to stable, inarguable interpretations, engendering an impotent

inability to fix the novel into a position that would allow for regenerative or productive narrative creation.

The impotent or contraceptive circularity of *The Sun Also Rises* continues through the novel's conclusion. The final scene marks the physical end, even as the novel uses ambiguity and the retrenchment of its static circularity to undermine conclusive satisfaction and ongoing continuity. This scene features another "around" and again places Brett and Jake into the setting of their first dialogue of the novel, riding in a taxi. During their final ride, Jake put his "arm *around* her and she rested against [him] comfortably" (251, my italics). Rather than engaging in a frustrated attempt to make love, as they have done previously, they act as two people who accept and understand each other. A handful of critics have argued that Jake and Brett become friends by the novel's end: "By transcending the physical, their connection represents the possibility for a true, lasting camaraderie, a stable connection offering each of them something much more substantial than the sexual union they think they desire" (Fulton 77). Sibbie O'Sullivan makes a similar, eloquent case for Brett and the novel: "The genius of Brett Ashley lies not in Hemingway's ability to create the Great American Bitch but in his ability to create woman as Friend" (65).⁶² But critics have not enunciated how radical a travesty friendship is to a traditional love plot. As a symbol, friendship is biologically sterile (indeed, procreation seems beside the point) but it also provides a way for Jake and Brett to support each other within their traumatized suspension. In its traditional contexts, friendship is also homosocial, shared by members of the same sex. The "separate spheres" for men and women idealized in nineteenth-century culture only enhanced this limitation to friendship. However, Brett's androgyny and Jake's wound allow them to

⁶² See, as well: Elliott, Wendy Martin, Willingham, and Wylder.

rethink the delineations of friendship, furthering the novel's radical travesty of traditional romance narrative.

Each of the novel's repetitions itself mimics a cycle of traditional narrative arousal only to end without climax or satisfaction. Whether bar hopping in Paris or gazing at the spectacle of the bullfights, each interlude of *The Sun Also Rises* returns Jake and Brett to a place of frustration—unable to make love to each other, unable to be other than who they are, and unable to escape their Great War traumas. Jake comments early on, “I had that feeling of going through something that has all happened before,” a significant remark that indicates the novel's structure of sterile repetition (70). Instead of incorporating their traumas into a linear narrative, Jake and Brett repeat continually and without the possibility of regeneration. Indeed, Spilka maintains that Jake and Brett's problems remain subterranean and unresolved because the war's greatest casualty is (heterosexual) love itself, which is “dead for their generation. Even without his wound, [Jake] would still be unmanly, and Brett unable to let her hair grow long” (“Death of Love” 44). Their only development is acceptance of their sterility, which forces them to admit the impossibility of their love relationship and acknowledge each other as mutual victims of the Great War. This deconstruction of heterosexual romance transforms the lost generation that Brett and Jake epitomize by turning those who suffer from Great War trauma into people more akin to siblings, joined by their unnarratable trauma, as opposed to children, spouses, and parents joining in a linear continuation of the world. These individuals create or find a new kind of family in each other, another way that they survive their traumas whilst rejecting the closure of narrating trauma.

Ultimately, the novel's static repetitions are retrenched with the novel's final repetition, which marks Jake and Brett's decision to remain in their traumatized, unstoried state after leaving the bar in Madrid. Thus at the end, when Brett claims, "we could have had such a damned good time together," there exists an unacknowledged ambiguity about who that "we" refers to. If, as most assume, the "we" equals Jake and Brett, she admits the end to their fantasy of a productive romance while he further undermines the possibility that such a relationship would ever have been productive, fruitful, happy; this interpretation shows Jake and Brett embracing their mutual sterility. However, Brett could also be ruminating on her just-ended relationship with Romero. Read in this way, Jake's response, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" accentuates the impossibility of regeneration for these damaged individuals (251). In contrast to Romero and the generation he represents, Jake and Brett remain in sterile circularity outside of linear history, thereby revealing how shell shock is not confined to the battlefield but rather echoes continually in their post-war lives.

Most importantly, however, is the fact that no one can conclude debate about the novel's meaning as a whole or in its conclusion. For evidence one must look no further than the scores of competing articles written on *The Sun Also Rises*. And as *The Sun Also Rises* epitomizes modernist irony in literature, I turn to Winter's contention that first and foremost "irony destabilizes. It rules out certain kinds of certainty. It is a mirror in which the gaze confronts something which is not quite what it seems to be. Confronting it means admitting that all interpretations, including this one, must remain up in the air" (134). Thus, the novel itself incites recirculating, inconclusive readings, ones that, however compelling, can never cement interpretations of the novel. There is much

playful, enjoyable, even—ironically—productive about such a text but it also ultimately undermines the reproductive continuity of traditional narratives—those that posit some form of mastery or reproduction that carries forth into the future. Thus, with its consciously unstable narrative of the unstoried state that haunted the post-war generation, *The Sun Also Rises* functions as a sterile modern narrative.

Trench

As a volunteer ambulance driver in Italy, the young Hemingway lived through a shell attack that left him with significant shrapnel wounds in his legs. Returning home he exaggerated and lied about his war experience, and exhibited signs of shell shock. In examining Hemingway's apprentice period and his early oeuvre we can see how he struggled to articulate the war, to make sense of its meaning or not meaning, and to find a story that adequately represented the war and its effects on his world. *In Our Time* (1925) can only deal with the war in fragments and eruptions, suggesting the disorienting aftershocks that follow close behind a traumatic event. *A Farewell to Arms* presents a self-assured narrative of the war and confidently explains how it should be understood. Between them sits *The Sun Also Rises*, which presents the lingering effects of war trauma as a frenetic and inarticulable stasis.⁶³ All of them use sterility to depict the war's effects but *The Sun Also Rises*, in particular, captured a war ravaged generation, a lost generation, and—for good or ill—it continues to represent them today. It thus stands as one of the great works of modernist and Great War literature. Claude McKay admitted

⁶³ I deliberately omit Hemingway's satirical send up of mentors Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, *The Torrents of Spring* (also published in 1926), because while it represents Hemingway striving to assert his independent artistic genius it ultimately deviates from the larger themes and styles that recur in his work, all of which find their origins in *In Our Time*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *A Farewell to Arms*.

his “vast admiration for Ernest Hemingway” and takes up many of the same themes of generation, sexuality, gender, and trauma in his *Home to Harlem* (1928) (*A Long Way From Home* 195). Indeed, the following chapter argues that *Home to Harlem* parodies *The Sun Also Rises* and its war shattered “lost generation” to dual effects. First, McKay’s parody mocks in order to articulate the pervasive and emasculating traumas of institutional racism. Second, his parody also exists in a dialogue with Hemingway’s novel that expands the sterile, traumatized elegy to heterosexuality in *The Sun Also Rises* into the queer, homosexual brotherhood of *Home to Harlem*. The intertextual relationship between *The Sun Also Rises* and *Home to Harlem* shows how authors took up the thematics of sterility based in the Great War and transformed them to represent alternative traumas and to examine the potentialities within novelistic sterility.

CHAPTER V

BETWEEN JAKES:

THE GREAT WAR, QUEER STERILITY, AND *HOME TO HARLEM*

“All you younger generation in Harlem don’t know no God.” —the landlady

In his autobiography *A Long Way From Home* (1937), Claude McKay situates himself as a modern artist and intellectual yet, concurrently, refuses to align with any single group whether based on race, politics, or nationality. At one point he admits his “vast admiration” for Ernest Hemingway, and also praises *The Sun Also Rises* (1926): “When Hemingway wrote, *The Sun Also Rises*, he shot a fist in the face of the false romantic-realists and said: ‘You can’t fake about life like that’” (251). In his own writing, McKay undertook a similar aesthetic goal of not faking about life’s realities and, in the process, irritated most of the black intelligentsia in the US⁶⁴ and inspired the younger generation of African American writers, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, and the nascent French and Francophone Nègritude writers such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sedar.⁶⁵ Consequently, McKay’s position within literature remains unsettled not only because of his undeniable importance to black writing—both in the

⁶⁴ In his review of *Home to Harlem*, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that he felt “distinctly like taking a bath” after reading it (qtd. in Stoff 131). McKay biographer Wayne F. Cooper claims that James Weldon Johnson was the only member of the older generation who remained “warmly supportive” of McKay, likely because, as a “literary artist himself, he did not shock easily” (243).

⁶⁵ See: Cooper, 215, 243, 259.

United States and throughout the “black Atlantic”⁶⁶—but also because of his self-claimed placement within a brotherhood of contemporaneous writers, intellectuals, and activists.

McKay scorned rigid categories throughout his life and work. In discussing modernism in 1920s Europe, McKay expresses his appreciation for several white authors, including James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, his ambivalence about Gertrude Stein, and his disdain for the “irritating pseudo-romantic style of writing about contemporary life—often employed by modernists and futurists, with their punctuation-and-phraseology tricks” (251). He also refuses to apologize for his friendships with various white people, including Max Eastman, Frank Harris, and Louise Bryant, claiming that he cared not for the color of his friends skin, money, or class but, rather, “It was more the color of their minds, the warmth and depth of their sensibility and affection that influenced me” (38). He thus situates himself as an artist and intellectual engaging with and critiquing his counterparts, regardless of color or nationality. Yet McKay maintains distinctions between white expatriates and his own experiences: “I was a kind of sympathetic fellow-traveler in the expatriate caravan. The majority of them were sympathetic toward me. But their problems were not exactly my problems. They were all-white problems in white which were rather different from problems in black” (243). This distinction between problems that were “not exactly” the same for post-war whites and post-war blacks, that were “rather different,” appears in McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), which depicts the

⁶⁶ In *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy argues to resituate black discourses away from national bases and into “the black Atlantic,” the diasporic reaches of blackness that are the irrefutable result of slavery and colonialism: “A concern with the Atlantic as a cultural and political system has been forced on black historiography and intellectual history by the economic and historical matrix in which plantation slavery—‘capitalism with its clothes off’—was one special moment. The fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation that we try and specify through manifestly inadequate theoretical terms like creolisation and syncretism indicate how both ethnicities and political cultures have been made anew in ways that are significant” (15). McKay was born in Jamaica and lived in the US, London, Russia, France, and Tangiers thus making him a particularly fitting representative of the “black Atlantic.”

shell-shocked aftermath of the Great War and also develops the literary and cultural possibilities of narrative sterility.

Home to Harlem depicts the experience of being a black modern in a war-shattered world. It also parodies Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, with the two-fold effect of emphasizing the trauma of institutional racism, which brackets the war's horror for African Americans, while also enabling McKay to assume his place within modern literature writ large. In his unique addition to modern novels of sterility, McKay creates a world that sacrifices women, marriage, and family to the altar of male homosociality and homosexuality. McKay queers Hemingway's text, expanding Hemingway's questioning of post-war gender roles into a sexual and racial drag performance that travesties *The Sun Also Rises*.

McKay's parody uses intertextual layering to achieve his goals of satire, homage, critique, and dialogue. Thus the epigraph from *Home to Harlem* that opens this chapter, "All you younger generation in Harlem don't know no God," plays upon Gertrude Stein's declaration, "You are all a lost generation," that appears as an epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises* (220). In this echo of both Stein and Hemingway, McKay reveals his deep textual interplay by giving a nod to the novel he travesties while his coded gesture to Stein whispers the text's queerness. The landlady of Jake Brown, the novel's protagonist, continues, "All you know is cabarets and movies and the young gals them exposing them legs a theirs in them jumper frocks." She says this to the text's only "out" character, Billy Biasse, who responds, "I wouldn't know 'bout that," with a doubled meaning that mirrors the parodic layering of McKay and Hemingway's texts. On one level, Billy's claim that he "wouldn't know" about her opinion of Harlem's "younger generation" suggests his

general disagreement with her assessment. On another level, however, Billy reveals his homosexuality by responding solely to her final sentence, saying that he “wouldn’t know ’bout” those “young gals” always “exposing them legs” in “jumper frocks” because he is gay. In this brief exchange, we can see McKay’s method of layering meaning in his depiction of post-war Harlem, which—like many gay-coded texts—winks at the reader who is “in the know” yet remains unrecognizable to those unable to read between the lines. The use of such a prominent gay literary strategy also appears in his structural play on Hemingway’s own post-war masterpiece making *Home to Harlem* an intertextual, transvestite performance. He thus creates an important addition to the modern novels of sterility examined so far by bringing to the fore a non-reproductive queer sexuality that manifests in response to the shock of the Great War.

Viewing *Home to Harlem* as an important modern novel and a parody of *The Sun Also Rises* complicates lingering tendencies to segregate authors based on their gender, race, nation, or ethnicity. The novel portrays the adventures of Jake Brown, who deserts from the war because the military’s institutional racism kept him working as a laborer instead of fighting as a soldier. His overarching goal is to rediscover the “sweet brown” girl he met on his first night home, but in the meantime he cavorts throughout Harlem and spends time working as a cook on a train. On the train he befriends Ray, an exiled intellectual displaced by the US occupation of Haiti during the war. Jake is ostensibly the text’s protagonist but Ray provides an intellectual counterpart to Jake’s physicality and, despite Jake’s search for the occasional-prostitute we will learn is named Felice, the friendship of Jake and Ray is the novel’s central relationship, built on the homosocial world of the railroad and complicated by Ray’s closeted (and never “outed”)

homosexuality. Among its parodic plays on *The Sun Also Rises* are its urban, post-war setting, in this case Harlem instead of Paris; its central soldier protagonist, Jake *Brown* instead of Jake *Barnes*, as well as a close friend named Billy/Bill; its portrayal of unstable gender roles as a consequence of the war; its representation of primitivism as a rejuvenating force in war-shattered modernity⁶⁷; and its structure, generally described as “picaresque” in McKay and “episodic” in Hemingway. These interconnections between McKay and Hemingway, as well as other aspects of McKay’s life and work, trouble the scholarly tendency to situate McKay solely within the bounds of the Harlem Renaissance and highlight the difficulty of segregating the literary and artistic output of non-whites apart from the movement generally known as “modernism.”

Such multiple layers of signification apply as well to McKay’s life and work and he remains an under-studied author because, much like Rebecca West, he fails to fit neatly into prevailing interpretive categories. He wrote in several genres, including poetry, novels, memoir, and essays, and critics tend to focus on only one of these aspects of his writing life, most often his poetry. His life and work also took on many guises, leading to criticism that tends to emphasize select attributes to the detriment of others. Such foci include McKay as a primitivist, communist or socialist, homosexual or queer,

⁶⁷ Holcomb unearths this shared primitivism in “The Sun Also Rises in Queer Black Harlem,” the first article to analyze the interconnections between the two texts. Turgay Bayindir’s “War-Broken Masculinities and the Search for Healing in *The Sun Also Rises* and *Home to Harlem*” is another comparative reading, although less dynamic than Holcomb’s. In a tangential relation, John Trombold argues for an intertextual relationship between *Home to Harlem* and John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*. Since its publication, *Home to Harlem* has also been linked to Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), a connection that McKay always denied and that Cooper successfully debunks in his biography of McKay by showing that McKay began *Home to Harlem* far from Harlem and before Van Vechten’s novel came out (Cooper 222–35).

Anglo-Caribbean or “black Atlantic,” Harlem Renaissance, and/or modernist writer.⁶⁸ In her study of black modernism, Anna Snaith argues for the relevance of such racial and cultural interconnections to the history of modern art, claiming that for authors such as McKay “those moments of contact, literal or metaphorical, are moments of double consciousness, of conflict and collaboration, but they speak nevertheless to the impossibility of talking about Western modernity or Anglo-American modernism as discrete from the history of black writing” (221). I read McKay’s multiple categorizations as evidence of his status as a black modernist writing to and against other modernists, including Hemingway. In her use of the term “double consciousness” Snaith draws upon W. E. B. Du Bois’s influential argument that black Americans always see through two perspectives: their own and that of white America. McKay’s novel, however, unravels the oversimplification of Du Bois’s double consciousness by exhibiting a triple or even quadruple consciousness. The text exuberantly negotiates between white and black perspectives but also between queer and straight, colonizer and colonized, and primitivist and modernist. He uses these myriad perspectives to undermine such binary constructions, engendering his queer artistic construction and enabling him to claim his multifaceted position in modern literature.

The novel exhibits multiple concerns or types of consciousness. For example, McKay’s socialism and early sympathy for communism appear in his portrayal of Harlem’s working class while the positive primitivism of *Home to Harlem* celebrates

⁶⁸ For primitivism in *Home to Harlem*, see: Barksdale, Han, Lueth, McCabe, and Nabholz. For McKay as communist/socialist, see: Holcomb and Maxwell. For McKay as queer writer, see: Holcomb, Maiwald, and Spencer. For McKay as transnational black writer, see: Edwards, Lowney, Saito, and Snaith. For McKay as modernist, see: Heglar, Holcomb, Hutchinson, and North, *Dialect of Modernism*. The quality of this body of scholarship varies. However, I emphasize that Holcomb’s work, in particular, deftly balances diverse aspects of McKay’s life and art.

black life and culture across the “black Atlantic.” Many saw Harlem as the locus of black life during the 1920s and McKay situates its culture in opposition to the declining white cultures of the United States, France, and Britain. Yet, as Gary Holcomb asserts, these oft-commented aspects of McKay’s work only reveal pieces of the whole picture:

“McKay must be understood as a writer who not only struggled against class, labor, race, and colonial domination. He must be understood, as well, as a subject who, laterally, with varying displays of directness and obliqueness, exposed more acceptable forms of resistance—class and race struggles—to a sexual dissidence” (“Diaspora Cruises” 719).

Sexual dissidence features in *The Sun Also Rises*, as well, and McKay plays on Hemingway’s elegy to heterosexual romance by queering the homosocial relationships on display in both novels and then positing homosexual community as key to modern art.

The history of mask and revelation, of gender performance and questioning—of, in a word, drag—adds weight to McKay’s re-appropriation of *The Sun Also Rises*.⁶⁹ Judith Butler asserts that all gendered behavior is always already a “performance,” based on repetition, and so manipulation of the pre-ordained gender constructs allows for a modicum of rebellion: “‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. ... [I]t is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (145). Drag performances embody this process of conscious, deconstructive “repetitive signifying.” Quintessentially denying gender stability, drag performance carries within it both deconstructions of prescribed boundaries and homage for an admired “other”—generally the feminine although

⁶⁹ For excellent articles that uncover the thinly-veiled homosexuality of *Home to Harlem* see: Maiwald, Spencer, and Holcomb, “Diaspora Cruises: Queer Black Proletarianism in Claude McKay’s *A Long Way From Home*.” Various scholars have established that urban centers such as New York and Paris saw a flourishing of gay and lesbian life during the 1920s even if many people still remained officially closeted. See: Boone, Cobb, Herrmann, Kelley, Lewis, and James Wilson.

occasionally specific women, usually celebrities. But whereas drag traditionally involves cross-gender performance (male to female, female to male), McKay's version first transgresses racial boundaries, turning a "white" novel into a "black" one, and then crosses sexual boundaries by normalizing male-male relationships and undermining female-male ones. He thus "queers" modern literature in the basic sense of the word, transforming the normal into the abnormal and destabilizing binaries.⁷⁰

Both sexual and racial drag (i.e. "passing") put the lie to socially constructed and individual constraining categories by revealing their ongoing maintenance to be a fantasy. Analyzing the figure of the transvestite in Western culture, Marjorie Garber refutes notions that the transvestite is a putative man or woman and argues that, instead, the transvestite takes on the role of an alternative third gender that by its very nature undermines established binaries by inciting a "category crisis." She also contends that other instances of category transgressions, including racial "passing," serve a similar function and are often accompanied by gestures to or full on performances of gender switching: "*transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself*" (17). Adding nuance to Garber's formulation of transvestism's deconstructive drive, Joanne Tompkins asserts the redistribution of power seen in cultural cross-dressing in colonial and post-colonial drama: "Cultural cross-dressing and 'dressing up' enact the dressing down of sartorial and cultural authorities by fabricating selfconscious [*sic*] strategies for resisting the power associated with the dress codes of the

⁷⁰ Anne Herrmann argues that queer, "means not changing identities to justify desire, but desiring in ways that make strange the relations between identities. ... The verb to queer can go either way. But the detour it takes on the way to cross-identification will always point in the direction of an imaginary ideal" (7).

colonizer” (193).⁷¹ Both Garber and Tompkins read gender, racial, and cultural acts of transvestism as rebellions against unequal power structures based in the “putting on” of clothes, make-up, and other signifying markers. Such costuming makes alien what has been perceived as “natural” and thereby draws attention to the constructed nature of inequality.

In *Home to Harlem*, parodic commentary on Hemingway’s novel deconstructs the racism and heterosexism that characterize one layer of *The Sun Also Rises* and that pervade American society. At the same time, McKay’s novelistic performance also unearths the transgressive layers within Hemingway’s novel, thereby revealing the collapse of stable racial and sexual hierarchies at the time and rebelliously proposing a queer alternative. *Home to Harlem*’s textual drag performance of *The Sun Also Rises* “queers” Hemingway’s novel not only by making it odd or alien but also by refiguring its world of emasculation, androgyny, and gender confusion as one of a wasteland decayed by racism and heterosexuality that can only be counteracted with male friendship and escape. And while McKay proposes this vision as artistically rejuvenating for decaying modernity, his conception requires a homosexual sterility in the post-war world.

“Harlem for Mine!”: Modernism and the Rise of Parody

The vexed relationship—within history and scholarship—between “modernism” and “the Harlem Renaissance” has prompted several studies in the last thirty years. In

⁷¹ Prior to leaving Jamaica, McKay worked for a short time as a constable in Kingston and felt firsthand the discomfort of putting on the colonizer’s uniform. He expresses this irony and complication in his first books of poetry *Songs from Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads* (1912), both of which are radical and innovative due to their use Jamaican dialect and focus on local concerns and scenes. Thus we can see how early on McKay used his writing as the forum for “trying on” different perspectives in order to critique, manipulate, and expand. See: Cooper, 35–62.

Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (1987) Houston Baker, Jr. takes as a point of departure the formerly prevailing understanding of the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance as a “failure.” He instead reads the period as African America’s version of modernism, marked by “mastery of form and deformation of mastery.” He defines the style thus: “The mastery of form conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee. The deformation of mastery, by contrast, ... is a go(ue)rilla action in the face of acknowledged adversaries” (50). Baker claims that this art mingles high and low cultural forms to achieve its distinctive style and political goals, an approach we can see in McKay’s political sonnets and the street dialogue and picaresque realism of *Home to Harlem*. The novel, with its narrative similarities to Hemingway’s and thematic representations of modernist concerns, undoubtedly fits within Baker’s reading of a black American modernism that *masters* form while also *deforming* mastery.

Baker describes a kind of parody, a form which Linda Hutcheon claims rises to new prominence in the twentieth century, and which I contend characterizes much of what we call modernism. Hutcheon argues that in the twentieth century parody works through the interlayering of sameness and difference and functions in near constant irony: “parody is repetition, but repetition that includes difference; it is imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of ‘trans-contextualization’ and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage” (37). Even T. S. Eliot asserted that “mature poets steal” and Hutcheon concurs, seeing parody as both a deconstructing and revitalizing mode (Eliot 72, Hutcheon 110). Her claim that parody finds rejuvenation in the twentieth century points to a world in transition after the end of

the Victorian period and a culture shattered into fragments after the devastation of the Great War; in self-conscious ways, parody works to “make” the old things “new.” *Home to Harlem* participates in this literary trend but rather than parodying earlier texts and techniques, it parodies a contemporary, *The Sun Also Rises*, which, as argued in the previous chapter, itself parodies romantic fictions of the nineteenth century.

Beyond simple comparisons such as the two veteran-protagonists named Jake and the urban settings, *Home to Harlem* parodies *The Sun Also Rises* structurally, transforming the episodic repetitions of Hemingway’s expats into the loosely connected, picaresque adventures of McKay’s Jake. As with much twentieth-century parody, modernist picaresque manipulates traditional forms to construct ironic commentary, according to Martin Halliwell: “modernist picaresque combines the quick-wittedness of the traditional *pícaro* with an exploration of the psychic chaos caused by the perceived erosion of customs or the corruption of justice” (159). In my reading of Hemingway’s novel, the episodic structure reveals the fruitless circularity of the characters’ post-war lives. McKay’s use of a picaresque narrative form allows him to parody Hemingway’s structure while also drawing on the trickster qualities of the picaresque to transform Hemingway’s “lost generation” of white expatriates into the urban, black working class. Halliwell argues that tricksters are inherent to modern picaresque: “Perhaps it is better to confront social rules with one’s own repertoire of trickery ... if the moral consequences transpire to be qualitatively little different from when obeying moral law as absolute good” (161). Yet while the novel features a playful tone in keeping with the *picaresque*’s trickster theme, neither Jake nor Ray fulfills the role of trickster; indeed, both are profoundly committed to personal ethical codes as they contend with stifling institutional

racism while also responding to social and individual possibility. I submit that McKay himself performs the trickster role in *Home to Harlem* by parodying Hemingway's novel. In transforming Hemingway's episodic structure into a picaresque narrative, McKay's novel works within a genre with a history of play, satire, and critique. Ultimately, as we will see, McKay's queering of Hemingway's novel rejects the bourgeois construct of heterosexual relationships, leading to a homosexual aesthetic that proves itself sterile—yet a sterility filled both with problems and potential.

“A White Folks’ War”: McKay Rewrites Hemingway’s Great War

In uncovering McKay's parody of Hemingway's text, I unearth implications that complicate our understanding of modernism, troubling national, racial, and generic borders and revealing the importance of the war to diverse artists and thinkers. Snaith argues that distinctions between “white modernism” and “black modernism” tend to focus on form versus content but that such categories fail to hold up under scrutiny. She notes that McKay's novels, in particular, “might be considered social realism” but that his “combination of a modernist concern with newness and a desire to represent cultural traditions thus creates a fusion of realism and experimental form” (210). Likewise, McKay's literary connection to other modern authors, most notably Hemingway, blurs the somewhat dubious boundaries segregating writers of different races, ethnicities, and nationalities, speaking instead to a dynamic and multivalent interplay between artists and their concerns. And Holcomb contends that McKay achieves much, artistically, with his appropriation of Hemingway: “McKay's ransacking of *The Sun Also Rises* effectively enables the New Negro author to bring into being his queer black creation” (“The Sun

Also Rises” 61). Holcomb asserts that McKay makes use of Hemingway’s novel to create his own parodic vision. Thus I would add to the terms “queer” and “black” the term “modernist,” indicating McKay’s participation in the social-political concerns and formal innovations that mark the experimentation that altered art and literature in the early twentieth century.

The war was, of course, key to this period of transition and upheaval, not the only source of disillusionment and change but certainly the most imaginatively significant.⁷² The war opens and undergirds *Home to Harlem*, providing an ever-present backdrop to the novel’s Harlem. From the opening chapter we learn that Jake Brown “had his own daydreams of going over the top,” he had “enlisted to fight,” but the racist policies of the US military during the Great War kept him toting lumber in Brest rather than experiencing horror and glory in the trenches (4). So he deserts, spending time in Havre and London before disgust over racial violence leads him to abandon his white, British girlfriend and return “home to Harlem” in early 1919. McKay takes the war as the starting point for his re-appropriation of Hemingway’s text: his first parodic layer satirizes Hemingway’s novel in order to critique white responses to the war, while his second then proposes a sterile, homosocial brotherhood of modern artists as the antidote to post-war ills. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues for the messy but important connections between sex and politics: “The two sides, the political and the erotic, necessarily obscure and misrepresent each other—but in ways that offer important and shifting affordances to all parties in historical gender and class struggles” (15). She asserts how the foggy

⁷² In *A War Imagined* (1991), Samuel Hynes declares, not only was “The First World War ... the great military and political event of its time; but it was also the great *imaginative* event. It altered the ways in which men and women thought not only about war but about the world, and about culture and its expressions” (xi).

interplay between “the political and the erotic” leads to misunderstanding but also contends that this instability allows for manipulation and performance within political-erotic goals and acts. She thus articulates the problems and potentials McKay faces, both culturally and artistically, in his queer and critical modern novel. In structuring *Home to Harlem* as a layered representation of the post-war world, McKay engenders his first goal of registering both the emasculating trauma of institutional racism and the cultural shell shock of the war before shifting that political message to an argument in favor of homosocial modern art.

A tone of Bakhtinian carnivalesque imbues McKay’s Harlem, with its raucous underworld of dance clubs, brothels, and cabarets, particularly those focused on an exclusively black and working class clientele, with nods to those that catered to the more “dicty” residents of Harlem, as well as the white “tourists” who poured into 1920s Harlem seeking rejuvenation in black culture.⁷³ The narrator describes: “When you were fed up with the veneer of Seventh Avenue, and Goldgraben’s Afro-Oriental garishness, you would go to the Congo and turn rioting loose in all the tenacious odors of service and warm indigenous smells of Harlem, fooping or jig-jagging the night away. You would if you were a black kid hunting for joy in New York” (30). Bakhtin claims that carnival was a “consecration of inequality. . . . Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste,

⁷³ Bakhtin also asserts parody as a key feature of the carnival he excavates in *Rabelais and His World*: “A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of extracarnival life, a ‘world inside out’.” But Bakhtin draws distinctions between this topsy-turvy medieval world and the negative attributes he sees displayed in modernity, stressing that “the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture” (200). Despite Bakhtin’s rejection of modern literature, many critics have found his concepts fruitful for understanding modern literature, including McKay’s novel. For more on Bakhtin’s theories and *Home to Harlem*, see: Russ.

property, profession, and age,” and this intermingling was evident at certain cabarets and parties during the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance (199). During this period, many embraced primitivism as a purer expression of humanity lost in the modern world and looked to ancient and contemporary “primitive” cultures in order to (re)discover how to live. Many black moderns, including McKay, also endorsed this perspective, seeing in primitivism the potential to celebrate and elevate their unique culture. This stance conflicted with the racial uplift goals of the Talented Tenth proponents, inciting a contentious debate that continues today. In McKay’s portrayal of the “indigenous” culture found in Harlem’s nightlife he first emphasizes the stark contrast between decaying white and Western society—made manifest by the Great War—and the authentic rejuvenation of Jake’s black, American “home.”

Jake comes to reject any obligation that black Americans have to the Great War and this rejection features in the contrasting characterizations of McKay’s and Hemingway’s Jakes. Jake Brown declares, “Why did I want to mix mahself up in a white folks’ war? It ain’t never was any of black folks’ affair” (7–8). In ironic contrast to Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, racist policies have left Jake Brown *untraumatized* by the Great War. Where Jake Barnes lives an episodic life characterized by retrenchment and return, Jake Brown moves exuberantly from encounter to encounter. Through parody, McKay mercilessly distinguishes between Jake Barnes’s traumatized emasculation and Jake Brown’s robust sexuality. The narrator describes Jake as “tall, brawny, and black,” possessing a physical presence that turns heads wherever he goes and highlights the vibrant primitivism that McKay endorses (3). Early in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake Barnes’ picks up a prostitute and ultimately abandons her to a group of homosexuals in order to

be with Brett, yet the time spent with both women only highlights Jake's inability to make love to anyone. Jake Brown also picks up a prostitute early in *Home to Harlem* and his desire to re-find this "sweet brown" girl after their night together drives much of the novel. In juxtaposing McKay and Hemingway's texts, we understand that Jake Brown remains physically and psychologically functional *because* he could not participate in the war. McKay thus works along with Hemingway to overturn claims that the war would transform the soft boys of modernity into the men of the future, highlighting instead how the war emasculated rather than rejuvenated its combatants. But he then uses Jake Brown's sexual prowess to mock Jake Barnes's impotence, thereby reclaiming black power and masculinity through rebellion against a racist and imperialistic military. He demarcates distinctions between white and black experiences of the Great War and its aftermath by drawing attention to and then inverting the disempowering realities of institutional racism.

Yet despite the novel's celebration of Jake's sensuality, the text returns again and again to representing violence that breaks out around women and (heterosexual) sex, highlighting the "battle of the sexes" that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim characterizes the period (*The War of the Words* xii). This violence disgusts Jake and engenders the text's sterile logic of homosociality and homosexuality. He says, "Sometimes they turn my stomach, the womens. The same in France, the same in England, the same in Harlem. ... Ain't no peace on earth with the womens and there ain't no life anywhere without them" (34). Here Jake articulates a post-war paradox that weaves throughout the text: women equal death, violence, and degradation for men, particularly black men, yet without them there is no procreation, no "life." The text uses

this undoubtedly sexist formulation to represent the toxicity of post-war heterosexuality that appears as well in the impossible love affair between Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley. Hemingway's complicated reaction to the "death of love" includes elegy to the loss of stable gender roles and, at the same time, celebration of masculinity in diverse guises, including the bullfighter Pedro Romero and the androgynous Brett.⁷⁴ McKay declines to elegize the loss of heteronormativity and thereby vitalizes a homosocial and homoerotic world of masculinist moderns instead.

In *Home to Harlem*, McKay emphasizes the fluidity of desire, creating space for alternative possibilities to heterosexuality and extending Hemingway's own deconstruction of stable gender roles after the war. For example, when Congo Rose sings and dances in front of Jake's table, her performance causes emotional turmoil in all who watch, particularly the "pansies [who] stared and tightened their grip on their dandies. The dandies tightened their hold on themselves" (32). The term "pansy" came into use as a descriptor for effeminate or homosexual men in 1926, while "queer" also began to be associated with homosexuals during the 1920s (OED). "Dandy," however, precedes the period. Elisa Glick argues that while it ostensibly referenced appearance conscious men, whether gay or straight, the dandy also represented a queer rebellion against but also complicity with capitalist modernity; like its cousin the transvestite, the dandy destabilizes binaries. Glick contends, as well, that the black dandy of the Harlem Renaissance challenged the bourgeois, racial uplift ideology of the black intelligentsia, a political rebellion in which McKay also engaged.⁷⁵ In *Home to Harlem*, the gay-

⁷⁴ Mark Spilka, "The Death of Love in *The Sun Also Rises*."

⁷⁵ Glick argues, "If the dandy was and still often is seen as a threat to the integrity of black selfhood, I would argue that this is because he subverts the cult of authenticity that not only surrounded the

identified “pansies ... tightened their grip on *their* dandies,” emphasizing male-male couplings while the dandies tightening “their hold on themselves” obliquely suggests self-love, a common way of conceiving homosexuality, particularly in the early twentieth century. With his depiction of layers of sexuality, gender, and desire, McKay elaborates Hemingway’s novel. On the first layer, he pokes fun at Jake Barnes’s war-derived impotence by contrasting it against Jake Brown’s passionate physicality. On a second layer, he takes up Hemingway’s manipulation of gender and sexuality but deepens the possibilities for inversion and masquerade. Thus I argue that McKay’s creation of Jake Brown enacts a “putting on” of Jake Barnes, a Janus-face performance of satirical mockery and brotherly homage with elements of both passing and drag. The catalyst for this change and fluidity in both novels is the Great War.

During the war and in its immediate aftermath, many discussed the conflict’s effects on African American culture and literature. African Americans enlisted and were drafted in significant numbers and the dialogue surrounding the conflict in the black press emphasized their expectations of greater equality following noble service.⁷⁶ However, racism and racist policies pervaded the US military and most black soldiers, like Jake Brown, were kept in service positions far from the fighting. The complex interplay between the Talented Tenth’s discourse of racial uplift, the economic boom that followed the war in the US, and the racism that prevented most African Americans from experiencing the horror of the trenches led to art often characterized by tones of hope,

construction of African American identity during the Renaissance, but also persists today as a central motif for black identity and culture” (84).

⁷⁶ For example, see: Du Bois’s article in the March 1919 edition of *The Crisis*, “The Black Man in the Revolution of 1914-1918,” and the 1919 historical study, *The American Negro in the World War* by Emmett J. Scott.

play, and enfranchisement—relatively rare among post-war literatures. When African American artists use the affects of trauma, grief, and despair, they generally represent the effects of racism in modernity rather than those of the war. In turn, this focus in black post-war literature led to the general assumption that the war had little resonance in African American culture and only recently have scholars begun to explore African American literature in relation to the Great War.⁷⁷ Mark Whalan, who has written the only book-length study of the Great War and African American literature and culture, asserts that even though African American art of the post-war was “not typified by the extremes of shock and rupture” that abound in the work of white modernists, “African American writers continued to see the Great War as a vital event in the unfolding narrative of black modernity” (xii).⁷⁸ Whalan asserts a difference-in-sameness, one that speaks to African Americans’ unique contributions to modernism and the discourses of modernity. Competing perspectives and ideological goals led to a split in African American literary output at the time that contributed to the erasure of the war from studies of African American modernism. African Americans wrote about the war but these works tend to be of the sentimental and overtly propagandist variety while the best known and most modernist works of African American literature tend not to address the war or do so only in passing.

⁷⁷ For contemporary scholars who acknowledge the Great War’s importance to African Americans, see: Wall, Bremer, Douglas, Greene, Schenck, James, and Whalan.

⁷⁸ Ann Douglas emphasizes this variance as well, in her significant study *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995). However, Whalan rebuts her assertion that the war had little effect on African Americans: “Douglas is right to note a tonal difference in the finest work by black and white authors in the 1920s and to observe that responses to the war were often sharply affected by race. But to rely on these broad strokes misrepresents the consistent interest in the Great War by African American cultural producers in the 1920s, even if the war rarely occupies a central role in the most admired works of the New Negro Renaissance” (42).

Home to Harlem is a notable exception in this trend, as Whalan and Jennifer James acknowledge. James contends that McKay's "more radical" depiction of the war in *Home to Harlem* was "meant to complicate the myopic nationalist perspective that, in McKay's mind, prevented African Americans from viewing the war in a more expansive political context" (216). McKay thus balances representing the realities of black life in New York with the global impact of the war and its personal and political aftershocks, a goal that speaks to his participation in modernism broadly and modern novels of sterility specifically. Ultimately, *Home to Harlem* augments portrayals of the Great War's effects by depicting the post-war world from varied perspectives—black and modernist and, as we shall see, also masculinist and queer.

Even though *Home to Harlem*'s Jake remains untraumatized by the war, McKay's novel insists on the war's significance to modern life and history even as it complicates perceptions of that significance. McKay contends in *A Long Way From Home* that the Great War "was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white" (31). This tension appears in *Home to Harlem* with Zeddy's description of racial violence that occurred after Jake deserted. Telling the story of how his "second-best buddy" died in France through nothing more than "raw cracker cussedness," Zeddy concludes that black soldiers serving in the American Expeditionary Forces in France, "was always on the defensive as if the boches, as the froggies called them, was right down on us" (21–22). For the black soldier, the text declares, there was little difference between the tense threat of violence from German "enemies" or from their white American "comrades"; African American soldiers experienced a particular kind of war trauma, one dually

troubling for being familiar but also unexpected and out of context. This reality destabilizes the privileging of war trauma by asserting other modern horrors. McKay also alludes to the complexity of post-war class conflicts when Jake refuses to “scab” during a white strike yet also refuses to join the union, claiming, “Nope, I won’t scab, but I ain’t a joiner kind of a fellah No, pardner, keep you’ card. . . . things ain’t none at all lovely between white and black in this heah Gawd’s own country” (46–47). In these sections, the text represents the tensions arising from racism, highlighting how violence precedes and exceeds the war for African Americans and, therefore, troubles perceptions that the war was the singular trauma of modernity. McKay thus enhances his satirical spoof on Hemingway beyond simple contrasts between one Jake’s impotence and one Jake’s vitality to a critique of myopic white agony over the war’s horror. Again and again, post-war African American literature reveals not only hope and possibility but also the racial and gender violence that characterizes American life. McKay’s novel shares this tendency with other Renaissance works and draws attention to multiple traumas.

Yet the war remains central to McKay’s text, which acknowledges its unprecedented horror and attendant violence to social, cultural, and emotional stability. McKay establishes the interplay between racism and war and, in so doing, augments the modernist perspective arising out of the conflict. While Jake focuses more on race, class, and gender violence, his counter-protagonist, Ray, understands intimately the relationship between racism, imperialism, and the Great War. As he eloquently contemplates “the great mass carnage in Europe and the great mass revolution in Russia,” Ray thinks he “was not prophetic-minded enough to define the total evil that the one had wrought nor the ultimate splendor of the other. But . . . he had perception enough to realize that he had

lived over the end of an era” (225–226). Here Ray figures a common modernist trope that perceives the war as a dividing line or chasm between two historical epochs. Ray himself also represents the specificity of black experience by being forced to expatriate because of the US’s imperialist actions. As he tells Jake, “Uncle Sam put me here” by invading Haiti during the war, then imprisoning his father and killing his brother for protesting, all of which force Ray to leave school and migrate to the US for work. This grave and racist injustice provides Ray the opportunity to educate Jake on the transatlantic connections between people of African descent, de-emphasizing nationhood as a point of identification in the wake of a conflict that decimated the notion of discrete and protective borders for much of the Western world. Both Jake and Ray find that the war has forced them to construct new versions of their selves but unlike such despair-ridden, white counterparts as Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, their post-war selves find possibility in connection to other black, male modernists.

We can see, then, how one layer of McKay’s parody of Hemingway rests upon satire and critique: first, by playfully representing black, working class culture as imbued with a vibrant sensuality in contrast to the impotent, trauma-infused world of *The Sun Also Rises*; second, by depicting violent racism to expose the violence and trauma that characterizes black experience and to implicate white culture and its degradation in the horror of the Great War. Holcomb emphasizes this multiplicity: “As desertion from the racist American military is, also ironically, an act of agency in *Home to Harlem*, one may note a dramatic contrast with Barnes’s emasculating war wound. The signs of history and ideology are scored on the bodies of the two protagonists in radically different typographies” (“The Sun Also Rises” 71). In a bitter irony, black soldiers were doubly

emasculated by racist military policy by being denied the right to prove their masculinity in the war. As Holcomb argues, McKay overturns this disempowerment and makes rejection of the military an act of rebellious agency. In comparison with Hemingway, he also implies that obedience to the racist military machine forged the emasculating impotence exhibited in Jake Barnes, thus enabling McKay's critique as well as his suggestion that the answer to modernity's ills lies in rejuvenating black culture. However, McKay's parodic re-appropriation of Hemingway works not only as critique but also as an intertextual dialogue between masculine moderns. McKay's novel thus emphasizes his and Hemingway's shared goals for a new and resonant literature in the midst of the trauma of post-war modernity.

Trauma marks its presence not only through return, in flashbacks and nightmares, but also in the codified narrative that Freud and others believed must be constructed and told and retold in order for healing to occur. In *The Sun Also Rises* we see the return of trauma in the novel's narrative circularity, which mirrors the characters' repeating stasis and their ultimate refusal of a codified narrative that would provide healing and closure. Reading *Home to Harlem* as a parody of *The Sun Also Rises* manifests another traumatic return: the return of the trauma in post-war US culture that arises first in Hemingway's work and then in McKay's appropriation of that trauma. Yet in his restaging of Hemingway's text, McKay also evokes other traumas, specifically the emasculating trauma of institutional racism and the soul-crushing trauma of bourgeois heterosexuality; as will be discussed below, this latter becomes the locus of the novel's post-war sterility.

All the novels of sterility I consider exist in a mode of paradox: attempting to narrate the traumatic grief of the Great War even as they resist giving voice to something so shattering. In *Reading for the Plot* (1984) Peter Brooks claims that repetition and return are key to the success of narratives, that it is only in repetition of what came before that readers can make sense of plot and posit the end. He suggests that this fact applies within single narratives but also within each text's participation in general narrative trends that teach and enable us to read: Narrative "must ever present itself as a repetition of events that have already happened, and within this postulate of a generalized repetition it must make use of specific, perceptible repetitions in order to create plot, that is, to show us a significant interconnection of events." In his model of narrative, Brooks draws upon Freud, although not to discuss trauma or grief specifically. He asserts, however, that an event becomes meaningful through repetition, "which is both the recall of an earlier moment and a variation of it," a narrative move that also aligns with Hutcheon's definition of twentieth-century parody that foregrounds the ironic interlaying of sameness and difference.

McKay's text participates in a larger cultural drive to narrate the war and its effects by parodying and manipulating Hemingway's earlier text. This re-creation suggests the paradox of modern novels of sterility—the act of creation to construct non-reproductive narratives. Brooks provides one way of thinking about this ambivalence: "the concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement" (99–100). In his formulation, narrative always exists in a tension between reproduction and retrenchment, between moving forward and (re)turning back. McKay's parody of Hemingway shows the drive to move

forward by constructing narratives of the war and its lingering trauma yet his significant alteration to Hemingway's text, including the layering in of other modern traumas, telegraphs the lack of a codified narrative and reveals a modernist striving to represent a cultural trauma that thwarts codification and forward progress. The following section demonstrates that McKay's critical re-appropriation of Hemingway's text functions simultaneously as a fraternal dialogue, providing the demonstrative basis for McKay's vision of a queer, masculinist art as the solution to post-war traumas and ills.

“It's Jest Connexidence”: McKay's Modern, Post-war Brotherhood

McKay's parody of Hemingway critiques white responses to the war but also connects itself to a fellow modern artist, engendering the novel's preference for a world built on male-male relations. When Jake finds Felice again near the novel's end, they immediately reconnect despite the fact that Felice has been seeing someone else. After a week together, Jake discovers that that someone else is Zeddy, who first incites Jake to fight for Felice, engaging in the kind of violence over women that Jake loathes, and then “outs” him as an army deserter. Jake and Zeddy make up and Felice tries to explain that she was never interested in Zeddy, only felt sorry for him. Jake replies, “Oh, you don't have to explain me nothing. I know it's jest connexidence” (330). He of course means “coincidence,” stating that fate or dumb luck led both Jake and Zeddy to Felice. Yet the resonant mingling of “coincidence” with “connection” suggests the inescapable interweaving of these characters' lives.

“Connexidence” also points to the intersections and divergences between McKay's novel and Hemingway's, giving a playful wink at those looking for resonance

between the two texts. Earlier we noted how both Jakes pick up a prostitute early in their respective novels, but with different conclusions. Consider then how Jake and Zeddy's competition for Felice, particularly given her ultimate preference for Jake, mirrors the love triangle between Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley, and Robert Cohn—a triangle that ends with Cohn's beating of Jake, followed by apologies between Jake and Cohn and the "coupling" of Jake and Brett. Cohn repeatedly begs Jake Barnes to forgive him; Jake finally responds, "Sure. . . . It's alright" (198). In the end, Jake Barnes goes to Madrid to rescue Brett and bitterly sums up: "That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right" (243). Are these similarities coincidence or points of connection? Or are they perhaps both, "connexidence," a neologism connoting unavoidable connections and conscious digressions? Here McKay adds a layer of ironic commentary onto Hemingway's text by reformulating Hemingway's dysfunctional relationships into seemingly positive ones. However, this ironic layering reflects back on McKay's text and reveals the queer troubling that overshadows Jake and Felice's conclusion. Furthermore, McKay uses dialect throughout the novel's dialogue but the use of its "*jest* connexidence" in place of "just" also reveals his appropriation of Hemingway's text, a joke or play that pays homage to Hemingway's work even as it insists upon its right to critique, enhance, and converse. This complexity is in keeping with Hutcheon's assessment of twentieth-century parody as a "form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (6). McKay's text likewise plays with and against Hemingway's text without intending to tear it down.

Structurally, *Home to Harlem* aligns closely with *The Sun Also Rises*. Not only are both novels episodic but there is an inherent circularity to them: each finally returns the male protagonist to an emotional and physical place very similar to where he started. Each also has a three-part structure, to which McKay draws attention by dividing his novel into three discrete sections. The first shows Jake returning exuberantly home to Harlem and concludes with him leaving its violence and chaos for a job on the railroad; this portion mirrors the first portion in *The Sun Also Rises* with Jake and friends in Paris. The second section of *Home to Harlem* focuses on Jake working on the train and emphasizes his friendship with Ray; we find its counterpart in the Spain sections of *The Sun Also Rises*. In these middle sections, each Jake must leave the toxicity of his daily life—with his escape epitomized by homosocial/homoerotic relations—only to find that toxicity following him wherever he goes. Lastly, *Home to Harlem*'s shortest section portrays Ray having fled Harlem for Europe and Jake finding Felice and leaving with her for Chicago; in *The Sun Also Rises* this retrenchment occurs with Jake's return to France and then reconnection with Brett in Madrid. This structural relation confirms McKay's conscious appropriation of Hemingway's text and the cultural "return" that marks post-war trauma much as both Jakes return, leave, and return again.

Like Hemingway, McKay also connects alcohol to post-war life, which appears as both a joyous aspect of the cabaret scene and a contributor to intraracial violence between black men. Elaborating McKay's gesture to Hemingway, *Home to Harlem*'s third-person narrator emphasizes the bar as a space for modern and exclusively masculine interconnections: "Negroes, like all good Americans, love a bar. I should have said, Negroes under Anglo-Saxon civilization. A bar has a charm all of its own that makes

drinking there pleasanter. We like to lean up against it, with a foot on the rail. We will leave our women companions and choice wines at the table to snatch a moment of sex solidarity over a thimble of gin at the bar” (324). In contrast to the dialect-heavy dialogue, the narrator’s prose sounds similar to that in *The Sun Also Rises* with its simple sentences and straightforward declarative statements. And while still pointing out that African Americans are part of Anglo-American culture because they were forced to be, the narrator downplays racial difference in favor of male solidarity. In this balance between connections linking men and distinctions between races, McKay tightropes to his self-positioning as a masculinist modern who refuses to tiptoe around life’s inequalities. In the end, “sex solidarity” stands as the abiding civilizer, equalizer, and simple pleasure between modern men.⁷⁹ Even as he carves out a space for black modernism he also issues a broader invitation to other (male) modernists, engaging them in an ongoing conversation. “Come over here, guys,” McKay seems to say. “And have a drink at the bar.”

Ultimately, sex solidarity trumps racial solidarity within the logic of *Home to Harlem*, which favors connections between like-minded men over bonds forged by skin color or race. This attribute of the text revises Hemingway’s portrayal of Brett’s androgyny and her membership in “the chaps” by nixing women from the equation entirely. Even as race takes a close second place, homosociality, infused with hints of homoeroticism and misogyny, becomes the novel’s overarching preference. Ray, as a Haitian exile in the US, sees and critiques the assumption that race lords over all other

⁷⁹ Maiwald argues for the influence of Edward Carpenter on McKay. Carpenter was an amateur sexologist who argued that a hermaphroditic “third-sex” (essentially, homosexual men) had the potential to save civilization. Maiwald’s reading of how McKay used Carpenter’s ideas in the politics of *Home to Harlem* highlights the importance of homosociality and homosexuality to McKay’s text.

forms of kinship. Notably, Ray bears similar attributes to McKay himself, including being an intellectual, artist, and Afro-Caribbean expat, thereby making Ray, rather than Jake, the mouthpiece for *Home to Harlem*'s author. Trying to sleep in a room full of fellow train employees, Ray thinks, "These men claimed kinship with him. They were black like him. Man and nature had put them in the same race. He ought to love them and feel them (if they felt anything). . . . They were all chain-ganged together and he was counted as one link. Yet he loathed every soul in that great barrack-room, except Jake. Race. . . . Why should he have and love a race?" (153, final ellipses in McKay). In this moment of sleeplessness and race consciousness, Ray tellingly connects feelings of racial powerlessness to sterility, saying "he was conscious of being black and impotent," suggesting a discord between Ray's experience and Jake's heterosexual sensuality. Here we begin to recognize Ray as Jake Barnes's other literary doppelganger—*Home to Harlem*'s writer, *Home to Harlem*'s sterile, gender disordered male protagonist.

Concurrently, *Home to Harlem*, like *The Sun Also Rises*, features counter-protagonists in the characters of Ray and Brett Ashley, respectively, and we can also hear echoes of androgynous, out-of-place Brett in Ray. This layered gender-bending makes Ray's follow-up thought ironic: "Ray felt that as he was conscious of being black and impotent, so, correspondingly, each marine down in Hayti [*sic*] must be conscious of being white and powerful" (154). Knowing and admiring Hemingway as he did, as well as other modern authors, McKay emphasizes the distinction between powerless blacks and powerful whites, yes, but also between mindless soldiers of imperialism and sensitive, self-conscious intellectuals—between the masses and the Rays and Barneses and Bretts. The multiple ways that *Home to Harlem* "puts on" Hemingway's novel

provide further support for the homosocial, masculinist modernism that the novel posits as the answer to modernity's decay. In an important and heretofore unrecognized piece of "connexidence," this parodic queering of one modern novel by another becomes the central component of McKay's representation of post-war, modern sterility.

"I Likes You": Homosexual Sterility in *Home to Harlem*

For all Jake's exuberant sexual prowess, *Home to Harlem* repeatedly returns to the degradation inherent in heterosexual love, drawing attention to the alternatives posed within the text. Not only does Jake bemoan the violence that breaks out between men—of different and same races—because of women (34, 70, 285), he also condemns the economic power that black women have over men, exhibited particularly in his refusal to "live sweet," which translates as allowing a woman to support one financially, often (but not necessarily) through her earnings as a prostitute. Jake thinks about women, "*They* were the real controlling force in life," with a mixture of dismay and disgust (70). As I will show shortly, violence in heterosexuality and in race relations undermines the novel's seeming "happy ending" reliant upon heterosexual coupling.

McKay further uses his counter-protagonist, the educated and gay-coded Ray, to enhance his critique of heteronormativity by making Ray deem bourgeois marriage the ultimate form of modern degradation. As he thinks of his fiancée, Agatha, Ray imagines, "Soon he would become one of the contented hogs in the pigpen of Harlem, getting ready to litter little black piggies" (263). To Ray, marriage and its attendant drive to reproduction transform intelligent men such as himself into animals, hogs playing out a pre-ordained narrative without thought or passion. Ray "saw destiny working in

[Agatha's] large, dream-sad eyes, filling them with the passive softness of resignation to life, and seeking to encompass and yoke him down as just one of the thousand niggers of Harlem" (264). With formulations such as "hogs," "piggies," being "yoke[d]," and stuck in "nice cages," Ray renders bourgeois life in tropes shaded with racism that thereby links emasculation and dehumanization to heterosexuality and racism (265). He then rejects notions of animality and primitivism in himself by articulating his connection to modern technology, thinking that if "the railroad had not been cacophonous and riotous enough to balance the dynamo roaring within him, he would have jumped it long ago" (265). In tandem, the railroad and the "dynamo" inside him take him physically away from Agatha and to a space where he ponders his seeming, heterosexual destiny. And in this physical and emotional place away from the bourgeois imperatives of the black middle class, Ray "hated Agatha" and the life she represents, "and, for escape, wrapped himself darkly in self-love" (264). This "self-love" evokes the text's ultimate homosocial and homosexual preferences. The phrase suggests masturbation but also, as stated earlier, homosexuality or love of that which is like the self. Both interpretations function for Ray as a rejection of marriage, procreation, and soul-crushing middle class life.

McKay's particular contribution to modern novels of sterility is to idealize a world built on homosocial relations between men, often coded in the text as homosexual. Hazel Carby critiques this anti-feminine, masculinist theme in McKay, which represents another version of the patriarchal masculinity that characterized much of the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance: "Jake's journey is not just a journey to find the right woman; it is, primarily, a journey of black masculinity in formation, a sort of *Pilgrim's Progress* in which a number of threatening embodiments of the female and the feminine have to be

negotiated” (749).⁸⁰ Undoubtedly, sexism saturates McKay’s text and one could even argue that Ray represents another threatening form of femininity that the novel proposes and then erases. More likely, given the clear evidence of homosexuality in McKay’s novel, one could claim instead that he can only endorse homosexuality by degrading that which society insists he must feel desire for: woman. What interests me about this move, and what I uncover here, is how the text’s misogyny creates its sterile homosexuality as a response to the horrors and traumas of post-war modernity. The sterile homosexuality of *Home to Harlem* relies upon a rejection of women to enable its queer, homosocial modernism. For even as the novel features Jake’s “indefatigable penchant” for “reckless heterosexual philandering,” as Suzette Spencer states, it also shows Ray’s loathing of bourgeois heterosexuality and signs of his repressed but increasingly evident homosexuality.⁸¹ Spencer even suggests that the depiction of “reckless heterosexual philandering . . . might just be McKay’s own protective cover—at least the most ‘traditional’ protective cover—for a homoerotic subtext” (166). McKay negotiates this subtext by giving his novel two protagonists—Jake and Ray—and using their powerful friendship to trouble heterosexual monogamy. Here he again reflects back on *The Sun Also Rises*, with its dual protagonists of Jake and Brett who also represent the importance of friendship after the death of heterosexual love. Ultimately, Ray and Jake’s divergent conclusions work to delegitimize traditional reproductive narrative.

⁸⁰ For examples of others who assess McKay’s problematic depiction of women, see: Han and Roberts. Whalan asserts, “The New Negro movement in its immediate post-war incarnation often was described as a manhood movement” (147).

⁸¹ As noted earlier, see: Spencer, Maiwald, and Holcomb for excellent unearthings of the coded homosexuality of *Home to Harlem*.

The text frequently emphasizes the importance of Jake and Ray's friendship and codes their male, homosocial friendship with homoeroticism. Jake retains his job in the train kitchen because a "big friendship had sprung up between" him and Ray (163). Later, he tells Ray he wishes he were educated like Ray because, as he says, "I likes you." The narrator adds: "Like a black Pan out of the woods Jake looked into Ray's eyes with frank savage affection and Billy Biasse exclaimed: 'Lawdy in heaben! A l'il' foreign booze gwine turn you all soft?'" (272). The trope of Pan coming "out of the woods" evokes unrestrained sexual freedom while Jake's frankly savage and affectionate gaze "into Ray's eyes" suggests a deep connection, exceeding simple friendship. Coming from the text's only openly homosexual character, Billy's interjection also alludes to the homoeroticism inherent to their homosocial world. Billy appears at the Congo with a "straw-colored boy ... made up with high-brown powder" and "carefully-straightened hair" laying "plastered and glossy under Madame Walker's absinthe-colored salve 'for milady of fashion and color'," and bears the nickname the "Wolf" because "he eats his own kind" (91, 92). Billy himself is not effeminate so his query as to whether or not Jake and Ray are turning "soft" may legitimately express dismay at this overt expression of affection. However, given Billy's evident homosexuality, his "Biasse" for his "own kind," we may also read his exclamation as a tease from an out gay man to two ostensibly straight men that points out the homoerotic undertone of their relationship.

Other places in the text reveal the homoeroticism of male friendships and the problems such relationships pose to heterosexuality. In response to Ray's distaste for a prostitute in a brothel, Jake states, "Youse awful queer, chappie," "queer" being another word that took on double signification during the early twentieth century, coming to

mean “homosexual” even as it retained its resonance with “odd” or “out of place” (200). Earlier, the woman whom Zeddy is “living sweet” on, Gin-Head Susy, forbids him from meeting up with Jake or his other friends in Harlem, saying, “I ain’t agwine to have no Harlem boys seducin’ mah man away fwom me” (80). Susy’s overt concern is that “the boys” serve as a front for heterosexual philandering but her choice of the verb “seducin’” exposes discomfort with the desire of men for the company of their own. Susy suggests that time with the “boys” may be purely social but, then again, maybe it is not. Such places in the text figure the relations between men as sites of solidarity and freedom from constraints—whether racial, social, or feminine.

Home to Harlem’s masculinity is characterized by the trope of unrestrained movement. Flight from racist oppression provides Jake and other black men (even as racism abides wherever they go) with agency and movement—whether through work on trains and ships or by traversing cities and continents; ultimately, agency and movement figure as escape from women and their constraints and violence. Paul Gilroy claims that within the history of the black Atlantic the theme of travel takes on particular importance, not only because of forced migration and displacement, but also because of “the association of self-exploration with the exploration of new territories and the cultural differences that exist both between and within the groups that get called races” (133). These dual connotations of travel feature in *Home to Harlem*’s focus on movement at which times the male protagonists build their relationship to each other and construct their modern selves. The text traces Jake’s return “home” to Harlem, his abandonment of Harlem to “break the hold” it had on him (125), his job on the train where he befriends Ray, their travels back and forth for their job, Jake’s return to Harlem, Ray’s flight from

Harlem to Europe, and Jake and Felice's final move from Harlem to Chicago to avoid Jake's arrest for desertion. Within the novel, movement epitomizes the masculine prerogative: Jake and Ray's friendship blossoms amidst the moving of the train and Ray asserts his masculine independence and agency through his abandonment and rejection of Agatha, escaping to Europe aboard a steam ship. If the bar provides a space for male sex solidarity in *Home to Harlem*, movement signifies specifically male agency and individual freedom.

Despite gestures to homoeroticism in male friendships, however, the relationship between Jake and Ray remains non-sexual. Yet the text refuses to deny the alternative sexuality it posits and so splits its protagonists between two distinct conclusions: the escape of the queer artist, Ray, and the heterosexual coupling of the modern primitive, Jake. Ray's homosexuality remains buried in the text, literally contained within the novel's middle section, which begins with he and Jake becoming friends while working on the railroad and ends with his move to Europe.⁸² Judith Roof notes the frequency with which characters or situations coded as queer occupy the middle of texts: "Perversion, then, acquires its meaning as perversion precisely from its threat to truncate the story; ... And yet the aberrations are the foreplay necessary to ever getting to the end at all" (xxi). In her estimation, narratives need figurations of perversion or queer sexuality to enable their heterosexual imperative; without a component that threatens to derail the story, traditional narratives cannot play out their logic of heterosexual reproducibility. In *Home to Harlem* this formal containment situates Ray in the literal center of the text, bracketing

⁸² Ray appears as a counter-protagonist again in McKay's second novel, *Banjo* (1929), living in Marseille and trying to be a writer.

his “perversion” in the middle and sending him away so he proves no hindrance to Jake and Felice.

Roof’s articulation of perversion that threatens to “truncate the story” means elements that will make the narrative non-reproducible if allowed to abide, components that are sterile. I contend that McKay manipulates the structure of traditional plots (as does Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*) to enervate that central perversion and render narrative sterile. First, this physical containment of Ray also reveals his metaphorical centrality to the novel and, by extension, to Jake. Second, *Home to Harlem* emphasizes the primacy of Ray, and his anti-heterosexuality, by making him the only character who narrates in the first-person. In the chapter “He Also Loved,” Ray recounts the tragic love affair of a prostitute and a pimp, a story that further highlights the destructiveness of heterosexual love relations. His voicing of this tale also affirms Ray’s prominence within the novel, and to its depiction of vicious, cannibalistic heterosexual monogamy. Lastly, Ray’s alternative sexuality is never reincorporated into the heterosexual world and thus his disappearance from the novel serves to undermine, rather than legitimize, the final coupling of Jake and Felice.

We must address this heterosexual coupling because it complicates and challenges this chapter’s claim that the text stands as a queer example of a modern novel of sterility through its “drag” parody of *The Sun Also Rises*, its argument in favor of homosocial art, and its concluding subversion of heterosexual viability. Felice tells Jake that she’s heard Chicago is “a mahvelous place foh niggers” and dissuades him from taking to the sea like Ray because she “kain’t go ’board a ship with you and I needs you” (333, 332). Phrased similarly to Jake’s, “I likes you,” Felice’s “I needs you” takes the affectionate declaration

even further, insisting that she does not merely enjoy Jake's company, but requires it. The novel ends with her assertion that she and Jake will always have "good luck." At first glance, such a conclusion suggests the retrenchment of heterosexual monogamy and the need to "closet" homosexuality by keeping it contained to the middle and even sending it, in the figure of Ray, away from the US and off to decadent Europe where it belongs. However, several aspects of the text trouble the stability of this final heterosexual coupling thereby giving McKay's novel one of the ambiguous and unstable endings that, as this dissertation shows, are quintessential to modern novels of sterility.

First, the choice of Chicago for the site of Jake and Felice's domesticity provides an ironic note of discordance to their ending. As noted earlier, *Home to Harlem* begins early in 1919. Charles Heglar argues that the time span of the novel has the pair leaving for Chicago in the spring of 1919, right before the Red Summer that drenched the city in interracial violence. Heglar reads this temporality as imbuing the conclusion with a deep, modernist irony, "in which the alienated individuals Jake and Ray search for a home or community but are unable to find one" (25). The novel never specifies the amount of time that passes although it appears longer than the handful of months that would support Heglar's thesis unequivocally. Regardless, sending Jake and Felice to Chicago, whether just before or a year or two after the Red Summer of 1919, *does* suggest they are not truly escaping racism, social constraints, or the menace of homosexuality. Thus it becomes difficult to embrace Felice's closing assertion, and the novel's final line, that she and Jake will "always" have "good luck" (340). Such irony consequently undermines the stability of heterosexual retrenchment that the text, at first glance, seems to perform.

Second, the concluding dialogue of *Home to Harlem* evokes that of *The Sun Also Rises*, performing another ironic wink directed at those who perceive the connections between the two texts. In *Home to Harlem* Jake and Felice plan to go to Chicago but when Felice fails to show up for their scheduled meeting, Jake decides he's "bound foh Chicago" anyway. Felice then comes running up, explaining that she needed to retrieve her "good-luck necklace" from Zeddy's place (339). She declares the importance of this item, even claiming "ef I'd a had mah luck with me, we nevah woulda gotten into a fight at that cabaret," recalling their earlier confrontation with Zeddy. The book concludes with the couple making their way to the subway as Felice declares, "I'll nevah fohgit it again and it'll always give us good luck" (340). This facile basis for believing in luck, coupled with Jake's quick willingness to move on without her, gestures to the possibility that Jake and Felice's relationship is more convenient than fated. The structure of this conclusion also mirrors that of *The Sun Also Rises* where Jake and Brett drive through Madrid in a taxi and Brett sighs, "Oh, Jake, ... we could have had such a damned good time together," to which Jake famously replies, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (251). In evoking Hemingway's deeply ironic and ambiguous ending, McKay turns that irony back onto his own novel's ending, further undermining the stability of Felice's belief in the couple's future luck. Echoing between each other we can hear in the two works, "it'll always give us good luck," followed by the negating rejoinder, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" Just as Jake Barnes's final words highlight Hemingway's alteration of traditional narrative endings, so too McKay writes what appears to be a traditional conclusion only to give it enough holes and hints at irony to bring it into question.

Which leads back to Ray, the queer center of the text whose disappearance remains an unanswered question at the novel's heart. Because *Home to Harlem* spends significant space and time establishing the intimacy between Jake and Ray (far more than it devotes to Jake and Felice), it thwarts readers' abilities to dismiss Ray from memory once he leaves Harlem. Like an itch that cannot be scratched, Ray's abrupt disappearance from Jake's life, and the irresolution of their relationship, remains an irritation that the novel's ostensibly heterosexual conclusion cannot soothe. Rather than destroying Ray and the queerness he represents, or subsuming him into the world of Harlem and Jake and Felice's life together, McKay removes Ray from his text, transforming him into an unresolved narrative enigma that the conclusion cannot solve. The text also leaves signposts that remind readers of Ray and thus destabilize heterosexual monogamy. Jake's own initial desire to return to the sea suggests his longing to follow Ray and return to the masculine world of movement. Furthermore, his desire to escape stems directly from his agony over being drawn into fighting a friend for a woman, Felice, who he imagined was so different from other women. Jake thinks, "These miserable cock-fights, beastly, tigerish, bloody. They had always sickened, saddened, unmanned him. The wild shrieking mad woman that is sex seemed jeering at him. ... Oh, he was infinitely disgusted with himself" (328). Throughout this passage, Jake returns to the novel's trope of women turning men into animals, vicious and emasculated, and asserts his horror that a woman incited in him the "same savage emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men" from Brest and London who, "like hyenas and rattlers, had fought, murdered, and clawed the entrails out of black men over the common, commercial flesh of women ..." (328; ellipses in McKay).⁸³ That Jake feels this way right before allowing Felice to

⁸³ This trope also resonates with Robert Cohn's characterization of Brett Ashley as Circe because she "turns

convince him to move with her to Chicago also encourages uncertainty over the viability of their relationship and of heterosexual relations generally. These unanswered questions within the text, much like the ellipses that pepper this passage and that McKay uses throughout to suggest things that cannot be named or answered, block readers from accepting the viability of Jake and Felice and, therefore, lends a further note of irony to their seemingly happy ending.⁸⁴ In this way, McKay's text obtains its queer sterility that rejects heterosexual reproducibility.

Homosexuality and Modern Novels of Sterility: *Home to Harlem*

Home to Harlem stands alongside various modernist novels that depict the aftermath of the Great War but it appears unique because McKay refigures the trauma of the Great War to emphasize the traumas of institutional racism. His depiction takes on two guises with distinct but complementary aims: first, to portray the rejuvenating primitivism of black proletarian life that will not be daunted by inequality; second, to complicate that portrayal with characters whose ethical code—Jake—or whose intellectual artistry—Ray—exceed Harlem's limiting constraints, generally symbolized by women, heterosexual sex, and bourgeois monogamy. The text thus figures Jake and Ray as masculinist moderns. Because of this duality, McKay's work belies easy categorization, situating him *of* and *not of* the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance and *of* and *not of* modernism traditionally conceived. This complexity makes the case for a broader understanding of modernism because it refuses easy temporal, geographic, and

men into swine" (*SAR* 148).

⁸⁴ In *Banjo*, Jake reappears near the novel's end and describes to Ray his inability to remain satisfied with bourgeois monogamy. He and Felice have a child and are based in New York but Jake works as a sailor in order to satisfy his needs for movement and masculine relationships.

racial boundaries and instead highlights the tangled web of influence, exchange, appropriation, and rebellion that characterizes modern art, culture, and history. McKay's *Home to Harlem* makes a unique contribution to modern novels generally through its depiction of black moderns in the aftermath of the Great War. Moreover, as a modern novel of sterility, *Home to Harlem* is likewise unique, centering upon McKay's parodic re-appropriation of Hemingway's text, which suggests artistic recirculation between masculinist moderns, and his dual protagonists who pose a queer alternative that undermines the stability of heterosexual reproductivity.

Some scholars critique McKay's masculinist vision because it fails to imagine a regenerative future. Heglar asserts the text's perpetual homelessness and Whalan argues, "The problem resides in Jake's final inability to theorize a home or a model of gender relations that is less phallogentric than that proposed by supporters of the uplift, nationalist, patriarchal 'romance of family.'" The tensions between the political opportunities of mobility and an itinerant approach to labor, and how this can create an environment for stable childrearing, are ultimately irresolvable" (146). For Marxist critic Raymond Williams, such instances of degraded heterosexual relations in modern literature evidence capitalism's decline: "there is a position within the apparent critique of the bourgeois family which is actually a critique and rejection of *all social forms of human reproduction*" (57). He views this stance as nihilistic capitalism justified through cruel misogyny that favors the stifled male artist in opposition to the forces of social progression (including family). Whalan also extends the childbearing metaphor into the political realm, asking how McKay's "politics of resistance" can possibly be "reproduced" in the "exclusively male sphere" of "Jake's transnational itinerancy." He

claims that such politics “rely on the childrearing environment of stable, nationally centered, and feminized communities as the backdrop for its drama of masculine formation” and that the focus on “masculine formation” undermines the possibilities for procreation and political education of offspring (146). Unwittingly, these and other critics further the imperative of heterosexual reproduction likewise exhibited in traditional narratives by finding fault with McKay’s novel because it fails to perpetuate its politics, its vision of the world, or its narrative self. In such formulations, to be non-reproductive is to be bad, situating homosexuality as the threatening “other” to heterosexuality and condemning non-reproductive sexualities to the margins of society. In contrast, I emphasize that sterility characterized many narratives of the post-war period and manifested the traumas of modernity, most specifically the Great War, which then incited revelations of other traumas such as racism, sexism, classism, and colonialism. Furthermore, because the sterility of McKay’s novel rests upon its favoring of homosexuality and queering of heterosexual narrative, *Home to Harlem* politicizes sterility more than the other texts in this study, incorporating McKay’s queer, black, proletarian experience into a modernist vision that diagnoses and critiques even as it posits change and possibility.

Among the writers studied in this dissertation, McKay and West are the most overtly political. West’s socialist and feminist politics are evident in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) just as McKay weaves his socialist, black, and queer politics into the fabric of *Home to Harlem*. In these two texts at least, if not also in the others, sterility serves not only as a marker of the Great War’s trauma but also as a potential means of protest and resistance against the societies that allowed such a horror to occur. The drive

in these works to deny “narrative reproduction,” as Roof characterizes it, or “reproductive futurism,” as does Lee Edelman, reveals a fantasy of ending society as it exists currently, positing the possibility of an alternative even if it refuses to articulate that alternative fully. Edelman argues for a distinctly queer politics that rejects the imperative of futurity, turning an opposition to reproduction into an act of truth illuminating the fantasy maintained by heteronormativity. He claims that the queer’s imposed role of social negation provides a counter narrative of why binaristic, heterosexual narratives fail: queer theory “marks the ‘other’ side of politics: the ‘side’ where narrative realization and derealization overlap, where the energies of vitalization ceaselessly turn against themselves; the ‘side’ outside all political sides, committed as they are, on every side, to futurism’s unquestioned good” (7). Reading McKay’s queer, political, and sterile narrative through Edelman’s polemical lens emphasizes the negativity of gay sterility (in the binaristic logic of reproductive heterosexuality) but also resuscitates that negativity, imbuing it with potency that may have profound effects on human engagements with the world. Notably, it took a large-scale traumatic event—the Great War—to incite such dismantling of narrative reproductivity.

This dissertation has shown how modern novels of sterility take on many guises. In West’s *The Return of the Soldier* and Cather’s *One of Ours*, sterility manifests as an unnatural virginity that undermines masculinity and the patriarchal family as well as the generic traditions of the pastoral and the *Bildungsroman*. In Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, androgyny and the decay of heterosexual romance represents the trauma-shattered world of the “lost generation.” These works reveal—in their characters and their narratives—reproductive heterosexuality in decline. They contrast, then, with McKay’s

non-reproductive queering of the modern novel. Joseph Allan Boone argues that such sexual alternatives characterize modernist narratives, claiming that the intersecting currents of modernity—including the theories of Freud, increased urbanity, and general chaos—contributed to the shaping of new narratives shot through with “libidinal currents” that belie traditional novel plots. He asserts that modernist writing is “nothing if not a self-conscious performance of style, of textual inscriptions that—like the coded gay body—simultaneously flaunt and conceal ‘meaning’ in a masquerade of allusion and self-referentiality” (210). Such textual transvestism as McKay’s parody of *The Sun Also Rises* makes overt the modernist tendency to “flaunt and conceal ‘meaning,’” to draw attention to its textuality and construct meaning out of that performance.

Such deconstructive re-mappings that “make it new” align with Hutcheon’s assessment of parody in twentieth-century literature, although she cautions that such re-appropriations may be politically problematic. Hutcheon argues that twentieth-century parody’s “appropriating of the past, of history ... is a way of establishing continuity that may, in itself, have ideological implications” (110). She allows for the possibility of radical change within this formal interplay but also emphasizes the potential for retrenchment of traditional ideologies by resuscitating older ideas for a new age. McKay appropriates not a text from the past, however, but one written by a contemporary. Thus, his parodic reinterpretation functions less as a rejuvenation of a literary and ideological lineage, and more as a circular incorporation and amplification of the traumas that saturate Hemingway’s novel and modern novels of sterility more generally. McKay takes the sterility manifested in *The Sun Also Rises* and relocates it into a homosocial, homoerotic world, intermingling the political and the erotic in a perverse politics that

rejects the powers that engender heteronormativity, construct racial inequality, and provoke global wars. The next chapter analyzes how the circularity of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* also shows the return of Great War trauma. However, its sterility manifests not through thwarted or non-reproductive sexual intercourse but through formal and thematic anxieties over pregnancy, illegitimacy, and stillbirth.

CHAPTER VI
(RE)PRODUCTION, (PRO)CREATION:
CHILDBEARING, NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, AND THE STERILITY OF
PARADE'S END

“The war is both the break that divided modern people from their usable past, and the experience which most constituted their modernity.” —Max Saunders

Ford Madox Ford was a person who knew people. As renowned editor, collaborator, novelist, essayist, patron, and modernist man-about-town, he bridged the gap between the first wave (proto or early modernists), including Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells, and the second wave that followed the war. For our purposes, Ford and his sweeping novel of the war, the tetralogy *Parade's End*, have intriguing connections and disconnections from the other authors and texts in this study and their varied manifestations of literary sterility. He and his then-partner, the novelist Violet Hunt, mentored the young Rebecca West and some critics see *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) as having influenced Ford's own treatment of a traumatized soldier in traumatized Britain in *Parade's End*.⁸⁵ He irked Willa Cather when he misreported the story of her youthful meeting with A. E. Housman.⁸⁶ Yet in *Parade's End*, Ford nods to her Pulitzer prize winning *One of Ours* (1922) when his protagonist, Christopher Tietjens, experiences a similar burial in mud during a shelling as does Cather's Claude Wheeler. Tietjens also obliquely compares himself to Claude by deciding that he is not a “Hamlet of the

⁸⁵ See: O'Malley and, also, Hynes, *War Imagined*, 433

⁸⁶ Cather called Ford the “prince of prevaricators” in her frustration with Ford's version of her fraught meeting with the great poet (Woodress 159).

Trenches,” echoing Sinclair Lewis’s famous review dubbing Claude “A Hamlet of the Plains” (*Parade’s End* 630; O’Connor 127). Ford mentored the young Ernest Hemingway in Paris in the 1920s while Hemingway worked under Ford at the *transatlantic review*; Ford also joined the vaunted club of elder authors who Hemingway came to scorn including Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Sherwood Anderson.⁸⁷ Lastly, I know of no meeting between Ford and Claude McKay (despite their shared history of editorial and essay work they moved in different circles). But if McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) exhibits the compulsion to repeat that marks trauma through its re-appropriation of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), we can perceive the same compulsion in *Parade’s End*, Ford’s four-volume treatment of the war that, like Hemingway’s and McKay’s novels, uses structural repetitions and circularity of plot to represent the war’s sterilizing effects.⁸⁸

Like all of the novels analyzed in this dissertation, Ford’s tetralogy represents the war as a divisive chasm in history, the culmination of a disintegrating modernity, and focuses on a traumatized protagonist and the social, gender, national, and technological changes that drive the Western world’s historical (and Tietjens’s personal) dissolution. The preceding chapters build on the premise that narrative shares a mimetic relationship to human sexual intercourse, particularly reproductive and heterosexual intercourse. In

⁸⁷ Ford biographer Max Saunders writes, perceptively, “It was his [Ford’s] role-playing that Hemingway couldn’t understand (or couldn’t stand, because it threw into relief his own posturing)” (*A Dual Life* 151). Such fear of having his own posturing brought too sharply into focus might also explain Hemingway’s disdain for the performative Stein and the war writing of Cather. At any rate, it seems compelling and likely that Hemingway consciously contrasted his war against Cather’s and Ford’s when writing *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and, particularly, *A Farewell to Arms* (1928).

⁸⁸ *Parade’s End* was published first in four volumes: *Some Do Not ...* (1924); *No More Parades* (1925); *A Man Could Stand Up—* (1926); and *The Last Post* (1928). It was not until 1950 that the novel was published in its entirety as *Parade’s End*, Ford’s chosen title for the whole. Ford envisioned *Parade’s End* as a single work but he still brought it out in four volumes, and each of the volumes works as a stand-alone novel in its own right, which presents a challenge when analyzing it/them. In this chapter, I refer to *Parade’s End* as a novel and a tetralogy, while also discussing the individual volumes as discrete-but-connected components of the whole.

contrast, I argue here that *Parade's End* mirrors other embodied activities of human reproduction—pregnancy and childbirth—and that the influence of pregnancy and birth on narrative has only begun to be understood by scholars. Unlike the other works discussed so far, then, the sterility of *Parade's End* emphasizes not an inability to have reproductive sex (whether through perpetual virginity, impotence, contraception, or homosexuality) but, rather, the ongoing dangers that attend reproduction after the act of sex has been completed. This chapter argues that *Parade's End* reveals its concerns over illegitimacy and stillbirth thematically while also using a metaphor of gestation and birth to represent itself as new modernist literature, both theme and form highlighting its anxiety over the effects of the Great War, a conflict that seemed to decimate language, art, and cultural stability.

On the thematic level, the specific sterility of *Parade's End* appears throughout all four volumes. From the opening pages, Christopher Tietjens fears that his son is not actually his, is illegitimate, and that he and his siblings are unable to parent offspring. As the first volume, *Some Do Not...*, develops, Tietjens extends his potential sterility out to the world of pre-war English society, raging against the “barren harlots mated to faithless eunuchs! ...” before recalling that “he didn’t know for certain that he was the father of his child, and he groaned” (78, ellipses in Ford). The infidelities, lies, and sundry cruelties of his wife, Sylvia, torment the ever-upright Tietjens throughout the novel, much as the question of his son’s paternity haunts him. In spite of his suffering at Sylvia’s hands, Tietjens and Valentine Wannop—the suffragist whom Tietjens loves—decide at the end of the first volume not to become lovers because they are the sort who

“do not!” thus rendering deliberate chastity as another form of sterility (283).⁸⁹ Anxieties over human reproduction and family legitimacy overshadow the tetralogy, and map dually onto the love triangle of Tietjens, Valentine, and Sylvia and onto modern England itself. Later, Valentine connects the chaos of the ending war to anxieties about pregnancy and childbearing. On Armistice Day (rendered in the third volume, *A Man Could Stand Up*—), Valentine, working as a schoolmistress at a girl’s school, urges her pupils to avoid expressing their joy at the war’s end. She realizes that she’s been told to squelch her pupils because those in power feel a “quite definite fear. If, at this parting of the ways, at this crack across the table of History, the School,—the World, the future mothers of Europe—got out of hand, would they ever come back?” (510). These musings from a suffragette suggest revolutionary potential but also the fears that come from such enormous social change, and the novel expresses this change through allusions to mothers, as bastions of civilization, getting “out of hand.” Lastly, the final volume, *The Last Post*, returns us to questions of Tietjens’s son and his paternity, and undermines the future of the Tietjens family further through his extra-legal “marriage” to Valentine and fears that she will miscarry her (illegitimate) pregnancy. The tetralogy mingles plot and thematic concerns of frozen desire, pregnancy, illegitimacy, and miscarriage to present its perspective on the world before, during, and after the Great War.

Because these thematic elements are so evident, I will not belabor them. Rather, after a brief discussion of Ford’s motivations for writing about the Great War, we will focus on why and how childbirth serves as a metaphor for narrative and the ways in which this metaphor manifests in the four-volume form of the tetralogy. From there the

⁸⁹ On this chastity, Gordon Ambrose argues: “Though Ford can scarcely be credited with having made chastity fashionable again, his making it seem attractive, even if briefly, is a sufficient display of legerdemain and sets him apart from most of the other novelists of the period” (95).

focus turns to the novel's representation of trauma and the way that Tietjens's trauma reflects the text's anxiety about the (pro)creation and (re)production of literary art after the Great War. Last, we analyze the final volume, *The Last Post*, and uncover how Ford belied reproductive narrative traditions by extending his tetralogy beyond the confines of traditional, satisfying conclusion and thereby revealed the altered, but unstable, ethics of the post-war world.⁹⁰

Ford had good personal, social, and artistic reasons for his sweeping approach to representing the war and modern England. His aesthetic theory of Impressionism in prose constituted a new literary technique that aimed, much like stream of consciousness writing, to more realistically represent human cognitive experience.⁹¹ He also believed that the proper role of a novelist was as historian, and that after the death of Marcel Proust no one was writing with the proper scope.⁹² Both impressionism and history provided aesthetic reasons for undertaking *Parade's End*. On a personal level, Ford served in the war, volunteering even though his age (42) exempted him. During the war, he suffered a concussion from shelling and a gas attack, both of which gave him shell shock.⁹³ The war years also saw the drawn out dissolution of his long relationship with the novelist Violet Hunt while, in the post-war years, Ford began a new relationship with the painter Stella Bowen. The rancor between he and Hunt no doubt contributed to Ford's

⁹⁰ In the original, British edition the title of the final volume was *Last Post* and it became *The Last Post* in the American edition. I use "*The Last Post*" in this dissertation because that is how the title is rendered in the book comprising all four volumes under the single heading, *Parade's End*.

⁹¹ For more on Ford's impressionist technique see: Armstrong, Attridge, Haslam, and Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life* (1996) and "Ford and Impressionism" (2008).

⁹² Ford wrote in *It Was the Nightingale*, "I wanted the Novelist in fact to appear in his really proud position as historian of his own time. Proust being dead I could see no one who was doing that" (qtd. in Saunders, *A Dual Life*, v.2 126).

⁹³ See: Saunders, *A Dual Life*, v.2 2-4, 23.

mingling of the gendered spheres of front and home front in *Parade's End*. Furthermore, Ford's legitimate interest in women's lives, combined with Bowen's pregnancy and the birth of their daughter, likely fueled his narrative constructed around pregnancy and childbirth.⁹⁴

Ford, like many combatants, was profoundly affected by the war, and scholars have written at length on the effect of the war on its soldiers. Paul Fussell insists on the irony that came to overshadow memories of the war, and his description of the experience mirrors Ford's impressionist technique that requires disorganized absorption of data followed by order through memory: "By applying to the past a paradigm of ironic action, a rememberer is enabled to locate, draw forth, and finally shape into significance an event or a moment which otherwise would merge without meaning into the general undifferentiated stream" (30). Eric Leed asserts that most soldiers experienced a "profound sense of personal discontinuity," stemming from the seemingly ritualistic experience of the Great War combined with a lack of resolution or meaning-making that left them feeling perpetually liminal, personally and socially (2). Perhaps no more poignant example of this divisiveness appears in Ford's decision to reconstruct the destroyed Edwardian "Ford Madox Hueffer" into the modernist "Ford Madox Ford."⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Like many modernist men, Ford was difficult to be in a relationship with; needy and consuming, he was also seemingly incapable of fidelity (see: Wiesenfarth, *Ford Madox Ford and the Regiment of Women*). However, he also genuinely liked women and respected their intelligence, likely one reason the physically unattractive Ford entranced so many interesting women. He agreed with the cause of women's suffrage and wrote *The Monstrous Regiment of Women* for the suffragette publication the Women's Freedom League. He said of himself, "I am an ardent, I am an enraged suffragette." (See Wiesenfarth, *Regiment of Women* 24–29).

⁹⁵ Biographer Saunders underscores Ford's tendency to depression and thoughts of suicide, which might have laid groundwork for psychological complications on top of physical ones during the war (2). He argues that Ford's tendency to speak of himself as a ghost signaled his depression but also his belief, one held by many combatants, that he would not survive the war (44). Ford's survival forced him to reckon his predetermination of death with the fact of his life. As Saunders argues, "he needed to imagine his own literary death, in order to stage his rebirth as Ford Madox Ford" (59).

Yet the war's troubling effects extended beyond those who fought in its trenches. Samuel Hynes articulates the cultural construction of a myth or narrative of the war that abides to this day. He claims that all who entertained this myth shared a feeling of grief that "something of great value, something vaster even than the peace of Europe, had come to an end on August 4, 1914" (*War Imagined* 3).⁹⁶ Because of the significance of the war's effects, "art and history are not to be separated" (*War Imagined* xiv). Similarly, Astrid Erll argues that literature serves a profound function in the creation and dissemination of cultural memory, and reads the oft-noted "gap in history" that peppers modernist war novels as, in fact, a "'gap in Cultural Memory'—the lack of constructions which could attach meaning to the Great War and situate it in the process of human development" (53). Ford felt this need to discover and create a cultural memory of the war, in part because of his tendency to historicize fiction (and fictionalize history)⁹⁷ but also because he perceived the war as both personally significant and culturally transformative.⁹⁸ Like that of his protagonist Tietjens, the prime symptom of Ford's shell shock was memory loss, and his trauma derived as much from home-front worries as battlefield anxieties. Ford eloquently reported his desire to capture this experience in his

⁹⁶ Consciously building on Fussell's and Hynes's influential analyses of British responses to the war, Steven Trout examines the war's effect on American memory. He concludes that the Great War in the American imagination is not forgotten, as many critics have bemoaned, but, rather, "holds an odd and unsettled position in American culture—and for many reasons, some of which go back to the ambiguities of the event itself" (*Battlefield of Memory* 250).

⁹⁷ Ford was a notoriously unreliable storyteller, which even led some to question his having been gassed in the war (*Dual Life* 23). Saunders, however, defends Ford's self-fabulation as the impulse of the consummate novelist: "His medium was fiction, and everything he said or wrote partakes of fictionality, even when it was true, which it usually was" (*Dual Life* 185).

⁹⁸ Alan Munton details the combatant experiences of both Ford and Wyndham Lewis, including the fact that both authors wrote during the war, which suggest to him that "each was attempting to continue the work of literary and visual modernism under conditions of war that constituted the violent transformation of precisely that modernity which they had, for a vertiginous moment in the years 1913 to 1915, seemed to have understood and controlled" (112).

tetralogy, *Parade's End*: "it seemed to me that, if I could present, not merely fear, not merely horror, not merely death, not merely even self-sacrifice ... but just worry; that might strike a note of which the world would not so readily tire" (qtd. in Saunders, *Dual Life* 126; ellipses in Saunders). In the tetralogy, Ford emphasizes worry and other irksome preoccupations that irritate perpetually even when overshadowed at the top of one's mind by other concerns. This feeling of waiting characterized by an underlying anxiety mimics, in certain respects, the experience of pregnancy and thereby links Tietjens's and Valentine's experiences of the war to the potential for stillbirth or illegitimacy that saturates the novel thematically and, as we will see, ground it formally.

“Never Know the Joy of Childbearing, If It Was a Joy!”: The Childbirth Metaphor, Modernism, and Reproductive Narrative Theory

Embodied experience has a profound effect on human life, even if the Enlightenment notion of a split between “mind” and “body” causes us to forget the importance of the body to expressions of humanness. Mark Johnson unearths how embodied truth shapes human understanding and, in so doing, launches a defense of metaphor and humanistic thinking in an increasingly science-and-business-minded world: “meaning is a matter of relations and connections grounded in bodily organism-environment coupling, or interactions” (265). Thus, it is no surprise that narratives would bear a mimetic relationship to human sexual intercourse, as Robert Scholes argues, or that the dominant version of that narrative would thematically and formally favor heterosexuality and reproduction, as contend Judith Roof and Lee Edelman. Yet childbearing is another profound, embodied experience related to sex and reproduction

that has similar, arguably more complicated connections to the ways in which we make narratives. As Mairéad Claire Byrne argues in her study of the metaphorical effect of childbirth on culture, “Male and female bodies, in their similarity and difference, are foundational to culture; just as the childbearing body, in its lambency, merging of two-ness and one-ness, models our principles of invention, and change” (17). Sexual intercourse, whether heteronormative or not, is something that the vast majority of humans are capable of and will probably experience, but childbearing and birth can only be experienced physically by the female portion of the population. This biological distinction does not mean, however, that childbearing and birth cannot be experienced *metaphorically* by anyone, and authors of both sexes employ what Susan Stanford Friedman calls “the childbirth metaphor.” This section argues that Ford’s four-volume novel enacts formally this childbirth metaphor through allusions to a gestating modernism in the first three volumes that comes to birth in the final volume.

Comparisons abound between the process of creating art and the process of gestating, between the work of art and the child. Friedman argues that the viability of this “childbirth metaphor” relies on its incongruity (as with all metaphors) and also on the way this incongruity is exacerbated by the gender of the author using it. For example, a poem *is not* a child so when a male author uses the childbirth metaphor to describe his poetic creations the incongruity between his artistic creation and his biological inability to give birth threatens to overwhelm the metaphor. Concurrently, the inappropriateness of his using the metaphor emphasizes his mastery over the field of creative production: “The linguistic, religious, and historical resonance of the childbirth metaphor contradicts the fundamental comparison the metaphor makes. Although its basic analogy validates

women's participation in literary creativity, its contextual reference calls that participation into question" (53–54). In short, the childbirth metaphor establishes a restrictive paradigm—men make poems: women make babies. However, women writers also employ the childbirth metaphor and in doing so express anxieties (cultural and personal) about women's ability to create as well as procreate. At the same time, "women writers have often risked the metaphor's dangerous biologism in order to challenge fundamental binary oppositions of patriarchal ideology between word and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body" ("Childbirth Metaphor" 50). Thus women's use of the metaphor can function as a rebellious deconstruction of patriarchy's constraining gender categories. Friedman focuses primarily on the two areas where writers most overtly employ the childbirth metaphor: personal writing (letters, diaries, memoirs) and poems. Friedman's account begs the questions: Can a novel, like a poem, embody the childbirth metaphor? Can a novel, itself, enact the metaphor? What happens if a character employs it, rather than an author? Is there a mimetic relationship between the process of childbearing and the form of the novel itself (not only its creation)? And lastly, what effects did the war have on the childbirth metaphor in general, on prose in particular, and how did modernist authors reveal those effects?

Ezra Pound's dictum to "make it new" points as strongly to reproduction as to production, procreation as to creation, with its suggestion that the modern artist re-make something already existing. Responding in kind, Ford's circle gave new life to the discourse of childbirth and childbearing when conveying their artistic intentions. Writing to his wife about the gestation of *Ulysses* (1922), James Joyce calls the book, "the child which I have carried for years and years in the womb of the imagination as you carried in

your womb the children you love” (qtd. in “Childbirth Metaphor” 57). Meanwhile, Pound tries to delineate a masculine, creative fecundity that arises, fully formed, from the head of the male artist. Pound makes his case for an embodied basis of intellectual creation (with ideas that mirror, at times, Johnson’s argument) but overtly insists that the creative intellect is capable of solo, masculine reproduction: “The mind is an up-spurt of sperm, no, let me alter that; trying to watch the process: the sperm, the form-creator, the substance which compels the ovule to evolve in a given pattern, one microscopic, minuscule particle, entering the ‘castle’ of the ovule” (par. 15).⁹⁹ Pound figures the artist’s mind as biologically male and procreative, impregnating (forcefully) feminized art and, in so doing, likewise uses the childbirth metaphor to separate male, artistic creation from female, physical procreation. Yet such formulations, reliant as they are on rigid gender categorizations, were troubled by the Great War, which challenged preceding beliefs about gender.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, authors depicting the cultural damage wrought by the war emphasized sterility as the prime effect, signaling their fears, grief, anxiety, or protest that people could no longer perpetuate themselves—biologically, artistically, culturally, personally.

Notably, a connection between war and childbirth precedes the modernist movement and the Great War. In one of the theories foundational to this dissertation,

⁹⁹ Pound’s misogyny here is undeniable. In an intriguing argument, David Trotter contends that paranoia arises in the nineteenth century from an intellectual, “white collar worker” class anxious about the worth of their cultural capital. He contends that the male modernist authors were susceptible to this paranoia, and that much of their misogyny stems from their belief that masculinity held cultural capital and that they could solidify their position as artists if they could stake out that territory as the province of the masculine.

¹⁰⁰ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that stable beliefs about gender were the prime casualty of the war: “as young men became increasingly alienated from their prewar selves, increasingly immured in the muck and blood of no man’s land, increasingly abandoned by the civilization of which they had ostensibly been heirs, women seemed to become, as if by some uncanny swing of history’s pendulum, even more powerful” (*Sexchanges* 262–3). I maintain that Gilbert and Gubar fail to recognize the trauma, grief, and anxiety felt by many women during and after the war but that they articulate well the dissolution of beliefs about gender during the period.

Nancy Huston argues for the “reciprocal metaphorization” between cultural connotations of war and childbirth (165). As she assesses the cultural manifestations that prove the Gnostic adage, “How long will men make war? As long as women have babies,” Huston contends that we cannot prove if men chose childbirth as the primary marker of women’s “social prestige” or if they, rather, co-opted childbirth into war in order to “invent for themselves a suffering as dignified, as meritorious and as spectacular in its results as that of childbirth.” But she does reveal how the two gendered activities paradoxically constitute each other: “Although childbirth indubitably has biological precedence over war, neither phenomenon can be said to have symbolic precedence, and therefore only the *interaction* between the two can be the object of analysis” (165). Writers responding to the Great War thus included issues of procreation in their representations of the conflict and its effects. However, the modernist iterations of this connection between war and childbirth refuse plots and forms reliant on the inevitability of human and literary continuation, threatening their metaphorical and literary fertility. This drive to sterility marks them and the war as unique, fascinating and worthy of analysis.

Literary sterility signals the magnitude of the war and its effects but also arises from a convoluted tangle of emotional responses to the war—bewilderment, trauma, unresolvable grief, confusion, exhilaration. This nest of uncertain “negative affects” situates the tone of literary sterility amidst the “ugly feelings” that Sianne Ngai contends characterize twentieth-century art. She claims that negative affects “read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such,” which effectively makes them a “meditation between the aesthetic and the political” (3). One such affect is anxiety, which has particular relevance

to our discussion of *Parade's End* and its sterility represented through pregnancy and birth. Ngai describes anxiety as an outward, future-focused affect, one that projects itself beyond the interiority of the feeling subject and onto a perceived source of said anxiety. For Ngai, quoting Freud, pregnancy is the *ur*-experience of anxiety creation, “the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety” (211). Such early roots in pregnancy tie anxiety to female experience, particularly as the woman experiences the emotion of anxiety even as its source seems to come from elsewhere, simultaneously within and beyond her body. However, Ngai argues that in the twentieth century the affiliation switches; anxiety often appears as a masculine affect that allows men to project their discomfort with a contingent world out and away to vague, othered spaces—frequently the feminine. This projective anxiety aligns well with Ford’s desire to represent the pervasive “worry” of the wartime experience. It also represents Tietjens’s experience of being hounded from all sides by gossip, rumor, shelling, and other terrors that take their symbolic source from Sylvia and the cultural dissolution she represents. Furthermore, anxiety gets at the affective state that manifests in literary sterility, a mode of speaking or creating without certainty, confidence, or clarity over what the future holds for the characters, the modern world, and literature.

Even as we can see the anxiety of a beleaguered masculinity in Tietjens, Ford’s text also aligns anxiety with questions about pregnancy and the dissolution of gender stability. Valentine expresses the experience of the war precisely as a series of “Anxieties, yes!” that seem to overshadow that “nothing had gone so very wrong...” even as her concluding ellipses emphasizes the overwhelming discomfort of such anxiety

(506). Amidst the chaos of the Armistice announcement, she then projects her awareness of this anxiety into the future, wondering:

Might it be an omen—to the effect that things in future *would* go wrong: to the effect that she would miss other universal experiences. Never marry, say; or never know the joy of childbearing, if it was a joy! Perhaps it was; perhaps it wasn't. One said one thing, one another. At any rate might it not be an omen that she would miss some universal and necessary experience! ... Perhaps she would never see the Mediterranean. You could not be a proper man if you had never seen the Mediterranean. (506)

Valentine expresses the destabilization wrought by the war, first through her deconstruction of the pat belief in the “joy of childbearing,” second by connecting the consummate experience of womanhood, childbearing, with other cultural milestones usually reserved for men, such as seeing the Mediterranean. Through reverse reflection, a woman could not be a proper woman without experiencing childbirth just as a man “could not be a proper man if [he] had never seen the Mediterranean.” Yet Valentine aligns herself hermaphroditically to both the female experience of childbirth and the male experience of gaining cultural caché. She thus registers the possibility of positive changes stemming from this social destabilization; she may never experience the “joy of childbearing, if it was a joy!” but she may also have access to the male experience of seeing great wonders. However, hermaphrodites are traditionally said to be barren, and Valentine’s messy interweaving of the masculine and feminine spheres reveals anxiety over what such destabilization will mean for individuals. Are bearing children and seeing the Mediterranean really experiences that can be conflated? And even if they are, will Valentine experience either? The war induces, but does not answer, these questions. In Ford’s tetralogy, the war is both the cause of cultural de(con)struction and the ultimate

manifestation of social decay, and Ford extends representations of its sterilizing effects into the realm of pregnancy and birth.

In *Parade's End*, several attributes align the tetralogy more with pregnancy and birth, and their related forms of sterility, then with sexual intercourse. First, as noted above, are the overarching thematic and plot-based concerns about pregnancy and legitimacy. Second, the novel's length and structure suggest the extended period of waiting that attends pregnancy rather than the relatively brief narrative of desire, arousal, climax, and aftermath that attends sexual intercourse—and traditional narratives. Third, the final volume ends with Valentine pregnant and she and Tietjens living in a post-war, pastoral life; it is also the most formally modernist of all the novels, largely contained to the stream-of-consciousness perspective of the paralyzed Mark Tietjens, Christopher's brother. Because of the mingling of theme and form, I argue that the first three volumes emphasize the gestation of a new literature that must replace what the war destroys, while the fourth volume functions as the uncertain offspring that the first three birth. Because of the marriage of modernist form and plot, the final volume reveals the tetralogy's hope that new literary forms and techniques might revivify war-shattered literature and culture but also its fear that the war dooms literature to perpetual illegitimacy or miscarriage.

Ford's vision of post-war, literary modernism gestates and—possibly, cautiously—comes to birth across the four volumes of the tetralogy. The first volume, *Some Do Not...*, begins much like an Edwardian realist novel as the “two young men—they were of the English public official class—sat in the perfectly appointed railway carriage” (3). Later, Tietjens furthers this notion of a stable English worldview, walking with Valentine and declaring to himself, this “is England! A man and a maid walk

through Kentish grass fields” (105). However, *Some Do Not...* presents moments of disorientation that signal the shifting nature of literature and the world. For example, Tietjens and Valentine drive through a densely foggy night. Suddenly, Tietjens sees a “tea-tray, the underneath of a black-lacquered tea-tray, gliding toward them, mathematically straight, just rising from the mist” (139). The bizarre tea-tray turns out to be the car of his godfather, General Campion, barreling into them through the night. Symbolically, in a moment of physical and metaphorical fogginess, modernity comes monstrously out of the mist and crashes into their antiquated cart; the world and the novel that Tietjens and Valentine are in is about to change drastically. Likewise, the time shifts of the first volume indicate the breakdown of stability that culminates in the war when Part Two of *Some Do Not...* moves forward and presents us with a shell-shocked Tietjens, likely from a shell blast. The text gives no clear explanation but only the impression that the effects of the explosion, particularly memory loss, were as traumatizing as the blast itself. *Some Do Not...* ends just before Tietjens returns to war and he and Valentine, despite all the rumors about their supposed relationship, decide not to become lovers. Taking our metaphor, volume one shows the first signs that the tetralogy is pregnant with modernism.

The second volume, *No More Parades*, builds on the personal, literary and cultural dissolution of the first. The text focuses on Tietjens in the war; Valentine is present only in memory but Sylvia shows up, in part as the result of having fallen in love with her husband now that he loves another, and in part because she cannot control her inclination to pull “the strings of all these shower-baths” (488). Sylvia arrives like a manifestation of modern chaos and Ford’s mingling of the front and the home front

makes his case for the war as a *symptom* but not the *cause* of modern dissolution. *No More Parades* also depicts the main source of Tietjens's trauma—the death of O Nine Morgan. Serving as an officer in the war, Tietjens refuses to give leave to O Nine Morgan on the grounds that if O Nine goes to confront his unfaithful wife, her lover, a prize-fighter, might kill him. We will discuss O Nine Morgan later when the analysis turns to Tietjens's trauma and ethics. For now, I emphasize that the overarching theme of *No More Parades*, from the title on through, is dissolution: “No more Hope, no more Glory, no more parades for you and me any more. Nor for the country ... not for the world, I dare say ... None ... Gone ... Na poo, finny! No ... more ... parades!” (307, ellipses in Ford). Here, the text's characteristic ellipses emphasize the gaps left by the collapse of language, stability, culture, self, and so on. The recurrent cries of “No more parades” and the Anglicized French “Na poo, finny!”¹⁰¹ declare the disintegration of what preceded the war. In its representation of the gestation of literary modernism, *No More Parades* emphasizes what has been destroyed with gaps, bastardizations, absurdities, and uncertainties needing something to replace them.

Following the symbolism of threes that aligns mathematically with the nine months (and three trimesters) of human pregnancy, *Parade's End's* third volume, *A Man Could Stand Up*— completes the process of literary gestation begun in the preceding volumes. For one, its structure mirrors the shifting temporality and discombobulating uncertainty of the first two volumes. Second, *A Man Could Stand Up*— concludes with the coming together of Tietjens and Valentine, thereby overtly aligning itself with the heterosexual and reproductive narratives diagnosed by Roof and Edelman. Despite the structural similarities with the first volume, *A Man Could Stand Up*— asserts its changed

¹⁰¹ Derived from the French, *Il n'y en a plus, fini*.

literary stance by opening in chaos and bewilderment as Valentine answers the phone and attempts to determine who is on the other end, and the caller's purpose, while overwhelmed by the celebratory sounds attending the Armistice announcement. *A Man Could Stand Up*— begins: “Slowly, amidst intolerable noises from, on the one hand the street and, on the other, from the large and voluminously echoing playground, the depths of the telephone began, for Valentine, to assume an aspect that, years ago it used to have—of being a part of the supernatural paraphernalia of inscrutable Destiny” (503). This opening *in media res* forces Valentine, and the reader, to experience profound uncertainty, a bewilderment that at first only makes sense as the work of a supernatural force but that, like the war itself, will prove all too human. The discomfort continues when the narrative point-of-view shifts abruptly from Valentine's perspective, and back into the war with Tietjens, before all gets resolved in Part Three. Tietjens and Valentine come together on Armistice Night, celebrating with the remaining members of his company, and agreeing to be lovers/partners. The seeming completeness *A Man Could Stand Up*— provides to the story highlights the conclusion of the novel's “gestation” that makes so many critics unhappy with the fourth volume, with its continuation that seems to belie a conclusion. However, *Parade's End* constructs the feeling of completion rendered in *A Man Could Stand Up*— to symbolize the end of the gestation period for Ford's post-war literary modernism, thus making *The Last Post* the uncertain offspring of the first three volumes.

Whether one likes *The Last Post* or not, it is undeniably different from the preceding volumes. For one, Christopher Tietjens is largely absent from the text although he looms large in the consciousnesses of the other characters. *The Last Post* takes place

over a single day and Mark Tietjens, Christopher's brother, provides its primary perspective. Ambiguously, Mark either suffered a stroke or willfully refuses to speak or move, both possibilities a testament to his horror at the details of the peace agreement. Mark believes that he willed his paralysis, thinking, "Not couldn't; wouldn't from henceforth ... It annoyed him that he had not taken the trouble to ascertain what it was Iago had said, before he had taken Iago's resolution ... *From henceforth he never would speak word* ... Something to that effect" (678–9, ellipses and italics in Ford).¹⁰² He now spends his life in an open bower outside the country cottage where live Christopher Tietjens, Valentine, and Marie Léonie—Mark's wife (formerly his mistress, now Lady Tietjens). Although most chapters focus on Mark, we are also treated to chapters that give us the interiority of the previously minor Marie Léonie, a French woman who refuses to speak English now that her *pauvre homme* cannot speak; of Valentine, concerned for the health of her unborn baby and her relationship while Tietjens works, only semi-effectively, as a dealer of antique furniture; of Mark, Jr., Sylvia's son and possible bastard yet heir to the Tietjens estate, Groby; and of Sylvia herself, who cannot resist using a pretense to spy on the home life of Tietjens and Valentine.

The decentralization of Tietjens in favor of those who surround him, as well as the increasingly stream-of-consciousness style represent two of the last volume's most overtly modernist techniques. These combine with the significant shift in pace, simultaneously slower than the other volumes but also more temporally constrained, and the ambiguous depiction of the main characters's post-war lives to signal a novel that has shed the pre-modern, Edwardian and Victorian literary techniques and beliefs. The novel

¹⁰² As if to further emphasize uncertainty, Mark—the novel's primary perspective and, therefore, seeming protagonist—compares himself to unsavory figures, not only the villainous Iago but also Judas Iscariot (762).

presents us, in effect, with the literary infant that came about as a result of its gestation during the dissolution of the preceding world, a decay that culminated in the destruction of the Great War. Yet the volume's ambiguity about the future of Tietjens, Valentine, and their family highlights, on one hand, a hope that this infant literature will prove legitimate and vital but, on the other hand, a lingering anxiety that it will not. As Isabelle Brasme contends, the final volume further "sustains the notion of a text whose overall design is continually re-examined, amended, and eventually left in suspense" (250). This interpretation bears out thematically in the ongoing questions over Mark, Jr.'s paternity, seeming to favor his illegitimacy, only to swing the other way; Sylvia's barrenness caused, Mark (maybe) tells her, because of her riding; and Valentine's fear that Sylvia's presence will hurt her baby combined with Sylvia's seeming change of heart when she discovers Valentine is pregnant, declaring, "I never thought to harm your child. . . . His child. . . . But any woman's . . . Not harm a child" (827, ellipses in Ford). Thus we can see how the novel itself enacts a version of the "childbirth metaphor" linking the act of creating art to the act of carrying a child and connecting the offspring of that act, literature, with the offspring of the body, children. Notably, the ambiguity of *The Last Post* belies the completeness rendered by the conclusion of *A Man Could Stand Up*— and thereby calls into question the reproductive viability of literature. It is no wonder, then, that many critics and readers have felt discomfort, even dislike, for *The Last Post*. However, *Parade's End* serves as a litmus test for all the modern novels of sterility examined so far through its self-awareness about a significant transition, potentially non-reproductive, in literature and culture, from pre-war Edwardian and Victorian to post-war modern.

Having thus far emphasized the difference between *The Last Post* and the preceding volumes, I turn now to what binds them into a complete text—*Parade's End*. In efforts to defend the final volume and its relevance to the whole tetralogy, critics often note thematic connections between all four volumes. These comparisons range from a discussion of Ford's use of ellipses to the similar ways that he explores and plays with each volume's individual title.¹⁰³ I will now make a similar argumentative move to show the importance of *The Last Post* to the whole tetralogy *Parade's End*, but my analysis emphasizes an ethical argument at play in the tetralogy that has not been fully articulated in *Parade's End* scholarship. I contend that a major thematic connection between the volumes is *responsibility* and how perceived or legitimate failures of responsibility traumatize Tietjens and, ultimately, undermine and destroy the unwavering ethical code of "the last English Tory" (Macauley viii).

"It Was Dawn on the Battlefield": Trauma of Tietjens, Trauma of Literature

Just as Ford metaphorically links childbearing and literature in *Parade's End*, he also joins the traumas visited on characters, culture, and literature alike. This section analyzes how the related traumas of Tietjens and literature break down Tietjens's ethical

¹⁰³ Brasme argues for the editorial impulse that joins each text, focusing particularly on the frequent "suspension dots" or ellipses: "Throughout the tetralogy, it seems as though an eraser has left gaps in a text that was initially written, or at least intended, as a complete whole; but this whole is never delivered to us" (245). Eve Sorum also emphasizes the ellipses but argues that they represent, in the final volume, the lingering war trauma that cannot be expressed or resolved. O'Malley argues for connecting moments of pastoralism that, he contends, show the tetralogy's debt to *The Return of the Soldier*. Richard Cassell sees an epic structure of trial followed by redemption across the tetralogy ("Images of Collapse and Reconstruction") and Ambrose discusses how Ford plays with each title: "it is turned upside down, stared at, tapped, held up to the ear, examined, and ultimately proved by all that makes up the novel" (93). Marlene Griffith argues that the novel features both a Victorian focus on the individual in society and a modern focus on the interior individual alienated from society. Gilbert and Gubar emphasize the destruction of patrilineage that climaxes in *The Last Post* with the cutting down of Groby Great Tree (*Sexchanges*). Overall, the diversity of these interpretations lends further credence to the overarching argument that *The Last Post* belongs to a whole tetralogy not a botched trilogy.

code of Toryism, which leads to the ambiguous, potentially sterile non-conclusion of the tetralogy. Tietjens's antiquated style of Toryism represents a benevolent feudalism, already incomprehensible to pre-war modern England and wholly untenable afterward. In his attempts to render the truth of the war and the historical moment that surrounded the war, as it were, on all sides, Ford makes comparisons between the trauma experienced by Tietjens and his code, and the trauma done to written communication. Tietjens suffers loss of memory from shell shock, a significant blow to a man who previously "employed himself in tabulating from memory the errors in the [new] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*" (10). He turns to that same *Encyclopaedia* to re-educate himself and even Sylvia, the other source of his torment, bewails his changed state: "But *you!* ... without a brain! ..." (168, ellipses in Ford). Tietjens contemplates how language proves similarly damaged by the war:

Dawn on the battlefield ... Damn it all, why sneer? It *was* dawn on the battlefield. ... The trouble was that *this* battle was not over. By no means over. There would be a hundred and eleven years, nine months, and twenty-seven days of it still. ... No, you could not get the effect of that endless monotony of effort by numbers. Nor yet by saying "Endless monotony of effort." ... It was like bending down to look into darkness or corridors under dark curtains. Under clouds ... Mist (550, ellipses in Ford)

In expressing the inexpressibility of the war, Ford implies that literature has lost its memory, just as has Tietjens. Both find themselves forced to relearn the past and then to reject their former manifestations in acknowledgement of what the war has irrevocably altered. Put another way, in *Parade's End* "warfare brutally undermines the traditional relationship between language, landscape, the country gentleman and authority hitherto

seen in terms of social privilege, stoicism under extreme duress and aesthetic patterning” (Radford 324–25). Ford attempts to represent the destruction of that traditional relationship and also to create the kind of literature that must follow it.

Even beyond the confines of the battlefield, the text highlights the process of writing, both literary and personal, that draws attention to the text *as* text and to self and society as reliant on language. Sylvia overtly links men and novels, thinking, “almost always taking up with a man was like reading a book you had read when you had forgotten that you had read it. You had not been for ten minutes in any sort of intimacy with any man before you said: ‘But I’ve read all this before. ...’ You knew the opening, you were already bored by the middle, and, especially, you knew the end. ...” (394, ellipses in Ford). Here she draws attention to the repetitive tradition of Western narratives and, in comparing novels to (sexually-charged) relations between herself and men, she also reveals the interconnections between sex and traditional narrative. Sylvia’s formulation also echoes Tietjens’s own declaration from early in *Parade’s End*, “I don’t read novels, ... I know what’s in ‘em” (19). Like Sylvia’s men, novels, according to Tietjens, just recycle material, making reading them pointless. Tietjens rejects this pre-war literature wholesale but his statement also exhibits a key self-awareness. In having his novel’s protagonist declare that he does not read novels, Ford grins at readers of *this* novel, showing the novel’s recognition of itself *as* a novel. The intent moves beyond playfulness, however, to reveal the tetralogy’s anxiety over the degenerated state of literature prior to the war and its traumatized aspect afterward. Trudi Tate emphasizes the importance of stories to the plot of *Parade’s End*, arguing that the tetralogy “worries at the idea that stories—both true and false—can have a material effect in the world, and

can cause serious damage” (60). In effect, the tetralogy wonders whether stories *matter* in the real world—and also cannot decide which answer it prefers. Drawing such attention to the connections between men and literature, Tietjen’s trauma and language’s, Ford acknowledges the daunting task he faces in writing a novel of the Great War. John Attridge contends that task was particularly challenging for combatants in general and for Ford, with his Impressionistic theories of literature, in particular: “How is the impressionist to justify his narrative if it is nothing but the expression of his personality? And in the representation of the war, this literary problem acquired a crushing ethical weight: how could one narrative of the war be justified while so many thousands went untold?” (107). The weight of this problem appears in the tetralogy’s assertions that pre-war literature is no longer tenable, no longer regenerative; concurrently, the war decimated language’s ability to represent, thereby calling into question the viability of literature thereafter. The novel’s self-awareness about its own place in a traumatized tradition encourages readings that perceive the plot and characters as symbolic renderings of the state of literature as much as the state of British culture or the characters as people. Thus Ford’s ethical quandary becomes twofold: on one hand, how could his narrative be justified among so many untold yet, on the other hand, how could he justify remaining silent when the world needs to understand the war, even if or, further, *because* language lies in pieces, strewn across the battlefield?

Among the manifestations of trauma in *Parade’s End* are the tetralogy’s layers of repeating, structural circularity. Such structural circularity appears in *The Sun Also Rises*, which, I argued, represented the fruitless, traumatized repetitions of the characters’ post-war lives. Recirculation also connects *The Sun Also Rises* and *Home to Harlem*, revealing

the unavoidable return of trauma within modernist, war-torn culture. The similar circularity in *Parade's End* likewise suggests the repetition of trauma. For example, in *Some Do Not...* Part Two opens with Sylvia standing up from the lunch table, digresses for a long musing on the state of her life, before returning to the lunch as Sylvia throws her plate at Tietjens' head and wails, "I'm bored. ... Bored! Bored!" (145–56). With the instinct of one long used to living with a predator, Tietjens ducks and only a portion of Sylvia's lunch splatters the shoulder of his uniform. Sylvia, one of the most incredible villains in modern literature, also assumes an aspect of traumatic return. Her request to return to Tietjens after running off with another man is the catalyst for the entire first volume, *Some Do Not...* . Her appearance in France in *No More Parades* causes much trouble to Tietjens and dissolves the boundaries between front and home front. We discover in the final volume, *The Last Post*, that she undermined Tietjens's and Valentine's happy reunion at the end of volume three, *A Man Could Stand Up*—, by showing up at the house on Armistice night and declaring she had cancer. She appears again in *The Last Post*—uninvited, unannounced, and unwelcome—to spy on the lovers in their post war life. Sylvia does not have cancer, she *is* a cancer, perpetually receding only to come back in all her menacing, traumatizing magnificence. She symbolizes the chaos of modernity (with Valentine signifying modernity's potential) and her perpetual returns emphasize that trauma does not come from the war, *per se*, but from the destructiveness of modernity that the war itself represents.

The tetralogy's repetitions, then, signal the return of trauma and they also mimic the anxiety that attends gestation and birth. The third volume, *A Man Could Stand Up*—, relies entirely on such an anxiety-inducing circularity, beginning with Valentine

answering the telephone on Armistice Day, then circling back in time to Tietjens in the war, before returning to Valentine on the telephone and their joining on Armistice night. Such structural circles abound in *Parade's End* but Ford draws particular attention to this technique in *The Last Post* when Mark Tietjens notes how Marie Léonie always ends a conversation on the subject with which she began: "Thus, to-day having chosen to begin with *navets de Paris*, with Paris turnips she would end, and it amused him to observe how on each occasion she would bring the topic back" (683). For our purposes, we must note how such returns evoke images of circles and roundness that mirror the picture of pregnant wombs, the symbolic repetition of narratives of pregnancy and birth, and the long period of anxious waiting prior to birth.

Scholars have noted this repetition in Ford's novel and often argue that it represents a regenerative or harmonic literary force. Louise Blakeney Williams argues that circular conceptions of history arose to new prominence among several modernists, Ford included, in contrast to a progressive vision of history that seemed unsuited to the experience of modernity: "Cycles provided order, stability, and hope for the future in the face of a chaotic world grown out of the control of artists" (161). More locally, Max Saunders writes of the "ABA" time shifts in *Parade's End*, "in which a train of association takes the mind back for a moment; it then returns to the present. . . . like a musical rondo, the effect is of a satisfying reprise of the tonic; a return to home" (*Dual Life* 215). This formulation works in music but I contend that in narratives of the post-war, recirculating characters and situations often assume an alternative cast of irritation, stasis, and futility. Christopher Brightman argues that the mini-narrative "loops" in the novel become smaller and/or less enclosed as the novel continues, ending with a closing

down of the narrative loop in the conclusion of *A Man Could Stand Up*—, the reader left outside the loop of love Valentine and Christopher create for themselves: “Valentine and Christopher have each other but have excluded us; with the connivance of the text they achieved true privacy, not merely that of loops” (134). Yet Brightman ignores the final novel on the grounds of Ford’s dislike, which limits his compelling and well-conceived argument.¹⁰⁴ *The Last Post* exists, Ford wrote and published it, and it proves more slippery than either fans or detractors have suggested. It is neither satisfyingly regenerative nor naively optimistic about Christopher Tietjens’s post-war life. Rather, *The Last Post* belies the completeness rendered in the first three volumes and therefore provides an ambiguous “conclusion” to the tetralogy and an uncertain, potentially sterile ambassador for post-war literature.

At some level, all narratives rely on repetitions to move their plots forward yet the particular use that modern novels of sterility make of such repetitions often differs from their predecessors. Peter Brooks contends that narratives “make use of specific, perceptible repetitions in order to create plot, that is, to show us a significant interconnection of events” (99). He argues that repeating also creates tension in plots because the possibility of forward movement gets called into question by these returns to an earlier episode: “the concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of

¹⁰⁴ Arguing over the merits of *The Last Post* holds a prominent place in scholarship on *Parade’s End* (see: Radford; Saunders, *Dual Life*, 251, 254). Ford himself was ambiguous about it; at one point he claimed that he did not like the final volume and would rather it did not exist, although Ford’s notorious unreliability only complicates the matter (see: Ford, “Dedicatory Letter to the *Last Post*” and Saunders, *Dual Life* 254). Others contend that he always intended to write four books and connections between the volumes show the relevance of *The Last Post* to the whole (see: Radford; Skinner). Yet even among those who appreciate the final volume many fail to read its ambiguity, seeing it as unequivocally regenerative (see: Cassell, *Ford Madox Ford*; Gordon; Saunders, *Dual Life*). This study aligns with the defenders of *The Last Post*, asserting that even if Ford expressed ambivalence about the novel, it cannot be wished away and, furthermore, is a complex and fascinating conclusion to the tetralogy. Concurrently, I argue that the volume’s strength lies in its innovative and ambiguous non-closure, not in its satisfying conclusion.

reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement Repetition creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this return is a return *to* or a return *of*: for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed” (100). Like Roof’s queer-coded characters that threaten to truncate stories, Brooks’s repetitions build tension by suggesting that the plot may not resolve satisfactorily (Roof xxi). Traditional, Western narrative relies upon such endangering of resolution.

In Great War narratives, however, such repetitions destabilize the movement of plot not merely by helping the reader to make sense of the flow of events but, rather, by drawing attention to the lack of forward progress (a “return *to*” a fruitless place, as in Hemingway); or representing the ongoing and unresolvable effects of the war and modernity (a “return *of*” trauma, grief, etc., as in McKay). In *Parade’s End*, Ford uses such repetitions to represent the experiential reality of perception bewildered, truncated, or otherwise damaged by the overwhelming nature of the war and the modern world. Repetitions also evoke traditional narratives that explain the world cyclically such as summer gives way to autumn, to winter, and then the world renews again in the spring, or people die but they also rejuvenate through procreation and the recirculation of generations. Both West and Cather manipulate these expected narratives in their war novels, with West making ironic the connection between seasons, love, and aging and Cather contrasting the landscapes of Nebraska and France with the arrested development of Claude Wheeler. Ford’s war novel likewise takes up such narratives by making his text pregnant with repeating, recirculating anxieties about the procreative future of his central characters and, symbolically, of literary art.

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, several modernist authors disrupted these regenerative narratives and used formal and thematic instances of sterility to represent the trauma done to language by the war. In *The Return of the Soldier*, West favored a brief, truncated novel that obfuscates as much as it clarifies. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway chose a clipped, restrained prose that hinted at depths that could not be spoken. Ford opted for a four-volume behemoth that suggests an outpouring of words attempting to represent, to explain, to understand. Even though Hemingway participated in the war as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Italy, Ford is the only writer in this study who experienced the Western Front, and *Parade's End* the only novel, apart from *One of Ours*, to depict the battlefield at any length. The sheer size of *Parade's End* thus lays bare the overwhelming task of representing and understanding the Great War from the perspective of a combatant-writer. Among her “ugly feelings,” Ngai includes an affect she names “stuplimity,” a paradoxical state that she describes “as a concatenation of boredom and astonishment—a bringing together of what ‘dulls’ and what ‘irritates’ or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion, or fatigue. ... stuplimity is a tension that holds opposing affects together” (271). Ngai connects stuplimity to the experience of living in capitalist modernity broadly but the war as Ford describes it, particularly its magnitude overshadowed by perpetual anxiety, also appears “stuplime.” Concurrently, the size of *Parade's End* re-creates for the reader this mingling of the overwhelming and the quotidian, the enormous and minute. Even as the novel depicts stuplimity, it also creates it.

Ngai emphasizes that the most common reaction to stuplimity is speechlessness, an inability to give voice to astounding pointlessness. In *Parade's End*, Ford indicates

this response through the devolution of language and literature, and he also emphasizes the decimation of individual ethics by the war. To be more specific, Tietjens's individual ethics, built on eighteenth-century Toryism, have grown incomprehensible to the modern world and his attempts to explain only further highlight his ineffectuality. However, Tietjens is not merely a victim of a modernity that cannot hear his ethical explanations but, rather, a proponent of a code grown incapable of being ethical. Tietjens's ethics fail him most profoundly in the area of *responsibility*, a particularly troubling blow to someone who idolizes benevolent feudalism as a social order; and these failures in responsibility become individual moments of trauma and culminate, in *The Last Post*, with the focus shift from Tietjens to those to whom he bears responsibility. Sylvia herself, a true foil to Tietjens, forces him to recognize the torture his unwavering ethics caused her: "But, in the name of the Almighty, how could any woman live beside you ... and be for ever forgiven? Or no: not forgiven; ignored!" (173, ellipses in Ford). Thus the novel depicts, on one hand, an upright man in a depraved world; on the other hand, it also displays the limits of upright individuality in the face of an equally important code—communal responsibility. Tietjens's Tory ethics, by definition, eschew his shared responsibility to a community of equals, yet the tetralogy proposes communal responsibility as the only salve to the "stuplimity"-inducing traumas of modernity. I argue that the focus on responsibility gives *The Last Post* its troubling ambiguity, which will be assessed in our concluding section on the birth of a new, unstable modernism. First, however, I establish how failures of responsibility feature in the first three volumes and how the repetition of those perceived failures individually and collectively traumatize Christopher Tietjens in order to understand Tietjens's post-war life.

Tietjens first cracks in volume one, *Some Do Not...*, when General Campion's car comes out of the foggy night. The general crashes into the cart Tietjens is driving with Valentine, mortally wounding Mrs. Wannop's horse. Tietjens begins thinking of his son and his legitimacy before the whole situation overwhelms him: "But not his child! Perhaps he hadn't even the power to beget children. His married brothers hadn't ... Clumsy sobs shook him. It was the dreadful injury to the horse which had finished him. He felt as if the responsibility was his. The poor beast had trusted him and he had smashed it up" (143, ellipses in Ford). The normally restrained Tietjens finds himself unmanned not by the horror of the night or the horse's injury but by the failure of his *responsibility* to a being under his charge. In this way, the child that may not be his and that he never sees connects, as well, to the animal that will need to be put down. Critics often discuss Tietjens's and Valentine's foggy ride when analyzing *Parade's End* but they rarely note the profundity with which Tietjens feels the horse's injury. As we will see, however, Tietjens's failure to fulfill his responsibility to the horse is an originary trauma that returns in later episodes.

In *No More Parades*, the tetralogy's second volume, the perspective on the war moves from the home front to the front itself, and Ford reveals more of why Tietjens experiences shell shock. Critics view the death of O Nine Morgan as Tietjens's primary trauma, and this trauma, too, stems directly from his failure of responsibility.¹⁰⁵ A runner, O Nine bursts into Tietjens's tent, declaring "'Ere's another bloomin' casualty" before collapsing. Looking at the dead man, Tietjens thinks, "it was as if a whole pail of scarlet

¹⁰⁵ To clarify the somewhat confusing chronology, the incident with the horse happens first, followed by the shell attack that first affects Tietjens's memory, and then the death of O Nine Morgan, which happens when Tietjens returns to the war after the events of *Some Do Not*— (vol. 1). This ambiguous chronology contributes the tetralogy's representation of a shifting, recurring, unshakeable trauma.

paint had been dashed across the man's face on the left and on his chest. It glistened in the firelight—just like fresh paint, moving! . . . The red viscousness welled across the floor; you sometimes so see fresh water bubbling up in sand. It astonished Tietjens to see that a human body could be so lavish of blood” (307, my ellipses). In literary style, Tietjens's mind creates metaphors—“scarlet paint” and “fresh water”—to comprehend the gore before him but, in equally literary style, Ford uses Tietjens's violent and shifting impressions to re-create the experiential horror of the moment. And in this moment of mental uncertainty, Tietjens thinks, “He felt as he did when you patch up a horse that has been badly hurt,” thereby pinpointing the death of the horse as his ordinary trauma even as he attempts to distance himself through pronoun shifts, changing the personal “*he felt*” to the more general “*you patch up a horse.*”

As an officer, Tietjens attempts to serve as the benevolent feudal lord over his loyal serf-soldiers. But that role becomes increasingly untenable within the war environment. Instead, Tietjens's various failures of responsibility to the men under his command decimate his ethic of Toryism and, as I shall show shortly, can only be replaced by a tenuous code of community. Tietjens feels responsible for O Nine Morgan's death as his commander but, more specifically, for refusing him leave to confront his unfaithful wife out of fear that the wife's lover, a prize-fighter, would kill O Nine Morgan. Tietjens muses, “He was born to be a blooming casualty. Either by shell-fire or by the fist of the prize-fighter . . .” (310, ellipses in Ford). This decision haunts Tietjens, leading him to ask if he bears responsibility for O Nine Morgan's death in war or if he would have borne it if he had granted leave and O Nine had died from the prize-fighter (309–11). Part One of *No More Parades* ends with Tietjens seeing to the warmth

of his unit's horses before his thoughts return to O Nine Morgan, thereby revealing the building chain of traumas stemming from his perceived failures of responsibility.

In volume three, *A Man Could Stand Up*—, Tietjens experiences another traumatizing failure of responsibility. The episode references horses (“the scream was like a horse’s in a stable on fire” [640]), but it also brings us back to Valentine, who opens this volume. The volume thus highlights how she represents, on one hand, Tietjens’s salvation but, on the other, the one to whom he bears the most responsibility. The focus on Valentine, and the whole tetralogy’s intermingling of front and home front, imbues the traumatizing episode in *A Man Could Stand Up*— with a gender-bending femininity that further shows the destructiveness of the war. In *A Man Could Stand Up*—, Tietjens and two of his soldiers, Duckett and Aranjuez, are buried by a mass of mud heaving from a shell blast: “Long dollops of liquid mud surrounded them in the air. Like black pancakes being tossed. . . . The earth turned like a weary hippopotamus” (637, my ellipses). Domestic words such as “dollops” and “black pancakes” create a gendered incongruity in the war environment while Ford’s odd use of the simile “like a weary hippopotamus,” which seems both fantastic and banal, potentially conjures up childhood stories and experiences. Tietjens manages to get out of the mud and then pulls out Aranjuez. Carrying him makes Tietjens feel something similar to that weary hippopotamus, “tender, like a mother, and enormous,” thereby evoking the childbirth metaphor that the novel enacts, a complicating manifestation of responsibility in the war environment. Femininity among the soldiers imbues this passage. Not only does Tietjens feel like a mother but suddenly, while carrying Aranjuez back to camp, Aranjuez’s “screamed, tore himself loose,” running away with “his hands in front of his face. Afraid

to see” (640). Tietjens thinks of Aranjuez: “They ought not to send out schoolgirls. He was like a girl” (640–41). Heading back to the scene of the shelling, Tietjens unearths his other soldier, the beautiful Lance Corporal Duckett who reminded Tietjens previously of Valentine. Looking down at Duckett’s corpse, Tietjens notes that his face “was black, but asleep ... As if Valentine Wannop had been reposing in an ash-bin” (642, ellipses in Ford). Shortly, Tietjens discovers the reason for Aranjuez’s screaming; while being carried back by Tietjens he was sniped, and while he will live, “Of course he will lose his eye. In fact it ... it is not practically there. But he’ll get through” (644, ellipses in Ford). According to Richard Cassell, in this scene, Tietjens is “no longer assured command; he realizes that when responsibility involves the lives of others, it is ambiguous at best, at its worst more than he can emotionally bear” (“Images” 110). Further, by figuring himself as a mother Tietjens pushes his level of responsibility even higher than that of a commander for his men. And if Tietjens is a metaphorical mother, he failed to protect two of his children—leaving one dead, one maimed—thereby increasing the trauma that he experiences as a result. This intermingling of the feminine also indicates the breakdown of social sense and structures due to the war, not only the misplacement of gender but also the blurring of boundaries between responsibilities of parenthood and care to those of the romantic and spousal that should characterize Tietjens’s and Valentine’s relationship.

Altering the expected dynamics in relationships allows Valentine to care for the war-shattered Tietjens when she goes to him on Armistice night. Concurrently, *A Man Could Stand Up*—ends by emphasizing community and the responsibility to that community that Tietjens accedes to when he takes up with Valentine. It thereby brings

full circle its interest in responsibility throughout the tetralogy, including the incident with the horse, Tietjens's upright rejection of Sylvia, and the loss of his men, all of which lead to the extended musing on the potentials and pitfalls of a communally responsible life in *The Last Post*. When Valentine finally realizes who's on the other end of the phone on Armistice Day, she's hearing from Edith Ethel Macmaster about how Tietjens has gone mad. When Valentine goes to him in *A Man Could Stand Up*—, Tietjens tells her, “One has a desperate need. Of talk” (659). He tells her about Aranjuez and claims that having no one to talk to about his experiences has been as traumatizing as anything. “It's a sort of monomania,” he explains. “You see, I am talking of it now. It recurs. Continuously. And to have to bear it in solitude ...” (659, ellipses in Ford). With his emphasis on recurring trauma, Ford acknowledges how such circularity in the mind or in literature represents the trauma of the war. He also emphasizes its potential cure: community, someone to talk to, Valentine. The importance of community (as opposed to romantic love alone) bears out when the soon-to-be lovers are invaded by Tietjens's surviving comrades—including Aranjuez, who has brought his bride, and mad McKechnie—come to celebrate the Armistice with Tietjens. Valentine tears up and thinks: “She belonged to this unit! She was attached to him ... for rations and discipline. So she was attached to it. Oh, happy day! Happy, happy day! ...” (671, ellipses in Ford). Valentine, too, has suffered solitude—because of the war and her love for Tietjens—and now they come together like two soldiers joined by the same cause. As stated earlier, *A Man Could Stand Up*— ends on an uplifting note that feels complete and whole because of its alignment with traditional narratives—the heterosexual couple comes together, the war is over, the friends gather to celebrate. But as argued throughout this dissertation,

traditional narrative, narrative that is reproductive, did not escape the war unscathed. Rather, the trauma done to literature manifested as a denial or disruption of reproductive narrative traditions. In his depiction of war-derived trauma, Ford constructs a narrative that fulfills the preceding expectations and then undermines it with an additional volume that probes even further at the nuances of responsibility to a community and the potentials for a modern literature to supersede that tradition shattered by the Great War.

“Groby Great Tree is Down ...”: Sterility, Ambiguity, and the Post-War World

Tietjens’s trauma, stemming from his perceived failures of responsibility, merges in *The Last Post* with the tetralogy’s preoccupation with stillbirth and illegitimacy. On the level of plot, disruptions to the pastoral idyll carved out by Tietjens and Valentine destabilize the heteronormative narrative, indicating a wider swath of interpersonal responsibility than the nuclear family alone. Because of this destabilization, I contend that the novel does not present a rosy picture of Tietjens’s post-war life, which often serves as the locus point for arguments condemning (or praising) *The Last Past*. In a quintessential example of this critical assessment, Cassell argues that in the final volume, the “natural aristocrat as hero becomes the nonheroic simple-lifer and small producer who is the warden of the lost virtues which under his care will be regenerated and someday returned to the world” (*Ford Madox Ford* 217). In contrast, I assert that the novel shows the destruction of Tietjens’s code of aristocratic Toryism, and the instatement of communal responsibility as the real ethical code that he must follow.

Because Tietjens’s trauma stems from his failures of responsibility, the post-war existence of himself and his family—and of the literary tradition they symbolize—

remains painfully ambiguous. Formally, the novel's shifting stream-of-consciousness perspectives, displacement of Tietjens as central presence, and tightly bound temporality declare its status as modern literature while concurrently telegraphing its anxiety about the viability of this infant literature in the war-shattered world. As Radford argues, Ford does not show that Christopher and Valentine's problems have been resolved in their rural life but "suggests that it is essential to undertake this revaluation by discovering a new fictional mode that could replace what the war and its consequences had eliminated" (328). The central metaphor for this uncertainty is the cutting of Groby Great Tree, the looming tree on the Tietjens estate that also symbolizes the aristocratic code Christopher Tietjens embraces. Like a good Tory, Christopher loves the tree. But his endorsement does not shelter it from being symbolically sinister because the tree darkens the windows of the children's wing and served as the site for unjust hangings centuries before. In his final burst of speech, Mark declares, "Groby Great Tree is down . . . ," and his ellipses ambiguously suggests both continuation and dissolution (835). With the cutting of Groby Great Tree grounding the volume's ambiguous conclusion, *The Last Post* denies any certainty over the future of its characters, or of modern literature, and in so doing becomes a text under the perpetual threat of stillbirth or illegitimacy.

Mark Tietjens serves as the overarching subjectivity of *The Last Post*, even though the volume shuffles through several character perspectives. Due to Mark's paralysis, we are treated to his mental impressions as he watches but refuses or is unable to engage in the chaos that surrounds him. Confronted with the presence of his nephew, and of Sylvia, Mark muses on the legitimacy of this heir to Groby—his namesake—and the roles of men, women, parenthood, and family. Mark finds that being confronted with

the physical presence of “the lad” forces him to think about his nephew’s legitimacy, which forces him to contemplate Sylvia and, in turn the “challenge” of making “up his mind finally as to the nature of Woman” (724). He concludes that women are justified in whatever means they use to attract their men because that is “what the bitches are for in the scale of things. They have to perpetuate the breed” (731). Mark clearly lacks his brother’s delicate, ethical sensibility and his perspective colors our interpretations of Valentine’s pregnancy. Mark’s salty mental declaration reveals a conservative drive to reproductive, heteronormative futurism in the novel. It may not be pretty or romantic, but making babies is what humans, particularly women, are for. Seen this way, the former suffragette Valentine now appears safely contained within the confines of pregnancy, impending motherhood, and a modern kind of marriage.

Yet despite the potency of his interiority, Mark’s paralysis requires him to be cared for physically, financially, and socially by the community of Marie Léonie, Tietjens, and Valentine. His dependence locates him on a plane similar to that of the pregnant Valentine (and to her unborn child). Both Mark and Valentine exhibit distinct and formidable personalities despite their limited physical states. Together, their related needs conjoin with their likeability to emphasize the communal responsibility that now envelops, even overshadows, Christopher Tietjens. And Tietjens, who has cleaved heretofore to his antiquated ethical code, finds the ethic of interpersonal responsibility challenging. His knowledge and intelligence (enough, recall, to correct the mistakes in the encyclopedia from memory) gives Tietjens credence as a dealer of antiques, but he fails on the business and maintenance side, causing problems in his relationship with Valentine. Tietjens’s distraction is, in part, innate to his character, but it also stems from

his ongoing trauma, psychological suffering likely compounded by the difficulties of his post-war life. Valentine reports how Tietjens continues to have nightmares about the war—of being buried in the trenches, of failing to save Aranjuez’s eye. The incident with Aranjuez seems particularly ironic to Valentine since Mrs. Aranjuez had been rude to Valentine for being Tietjens’s mistress. She thinks, “But it’s queer. Your man saves the life of a boy at the desperate risk of his own. Without that there would not have been any Mrs. Aranjuez; then Mrs. Aranjuez is the first person that ever in your life is rude to you” (813). Subtly but tellingly, this long passage of Valentine’s thoughts shifts from discussing Tietjens’s ongoing nightmares to the discomfort, even suffering, that Valentine endures, leading to a conclusion that leaves ambiguous which of the two is the traumatized subject. Having moved from thinking of Tietjens’s nightmares to her own pain at being snubbed, Valentine concludes: “Leaving permanent memories that made you shudder in the night! Hideous eyes!” (813). Valentine’s “Hideous eyes!” seemingly references the one lost by Aranjuez but it also suggests those prying eyes that look, judge, and exert a nightmarish influence over Valentine’s and Tietjens’s post-war lives.

Compounding her anxieties about her relationship and the couple’s finances, Valentine faces rising dread over the safety of her fetus due the presence of Sylvia and her invading party of “hideous eyes.” The novel’s depiction of this ongoing anxiety undermines a regenerative portrait of the post-war world. On one hand, the very presence of Sylvia and her chaos upsets Valentine. On the other, fears and uncertainties plague Valentine before and after Sylvia arrives: “The child had moved within her. It wanted her to be called Mrs. Tietjens in its own house. . . . She could not give a father’s name to the little thing. So he protested within her. Dark it was growing” (825, my ellipses). Here the

child's illegitimacy threatens its viability as much as does Sylvia's toxicity. And the chaos of the day leads Valentine to think, "*The war is over* ... Ah, but its backwashes, when would they be over?" (824, ellipses in Ford). The novel thus insists that this final volume represents more than a domestic melodrama: it represents the aftermath of a war that put an end to everything Valentine and Tietjens believed in and forced them into the realm of uncertainty and anxiety.

The ending of *The Last Post*, and of *Parade's End* overall, mingles birth and death in an ambiguous conclusion that rejects the closed, satisfying circularity of *A Man Could Stand Up*—. Tietjens makes his only appearance in the volume at the end, after the cutting of Groby Great Tree by the Americans to whom Sylvia has let the estate. He reports the cutting to the ailing Mark in his bower and endures Valentine's anger over his business mistakes. Things seem bleak for the young family as, "Heavily, like a dejected bulldog, Christopher made for the gate," and "Valentine began to sob" (835). Mark says to himself, "Now I must speak," and rallies himself out of his paralysis to give a message to Valentine. Slipping into the Yorkshire tongue he spoke as a boy, he begins an old song learned from his nurse. The turn to the nursery song is rich with implications as it connotes a fruitful circularity in Mark's life, returning to his childhood at the moment of his death, and in the passing on of a family, childhood tradition to the mother of the next generation. Simultaneously, Mark's death overshadows the passage and casts darkness over its imagery of birth and childhood. He tells her, "Never thou let thy barnie weep for thy sharp tongue to thy goodman. ... A good man! ... Groby Great Tree is down. ..." (835, ellipses in Ford). Here Mark insists on Christopher Tietjens's goodness despite his many failings, yet the cutting of Groby Great Tree, the symbol of the Tietjens family,

also calls into question the future of the good man in the modern world. As Mark dies, the text also evokes birth, when he tells Valentine: “Hold my hand!” and she helps him push out of life as supporters help a birthing woman push out life. *Parade’s End* concludes with Valentine grateful for Mark’s words, furthering the ambiguity about the viability of Tietjens’s small circle of responsibility.

The Last Post concludes the tetralogy with ongoing instability and an open-ended non-closure. Rather than the regenerative coming together of the heterosexual couple, the unmarried lovers end overshadowed by death and uncertainty over the future of themselves and their unborn child. Anthony Monta argues, “*The Last Post* is more a requiem for pre-war approaches to domestic stability ... than the road song of any new development. As if to underscore this, the lullaby Mark sings to Valentine ... is truncated” (49). This truncation signifies a cutting off and cutting down as much as open-ended possibility. The severed lullaby also evokes the traditional narratives destroyed by the war that *The Last Post* hopes to replace. However, the legitimacy and viability of that replacement remains uncertain in the wake of the war’s destruction. Such cultural and psychological devastation cannot be easily overcome. *Parade’s End* uses the formal and thematic concerns over stillbirth and illegitimacy to reveal its anxiety over the regenerative future of literature and humanity. Ngai argues that “stuplimes” texts draw attention to the limited power of language: “stuplimity drags us downward into the realm of words rather than transporting us upward toward an unrepresentable divine” (273). As argued earlier, the size of *Parade’s End* can incite a “stuplime” reaction in readers. As well, the conclusion “drags us downward into the realm of words” through Mark’s speech, significant as much for his sharing of the nursery song as for his overthrow of

paralysis. The novel declares the importance of language by making speech the climactic act of the conclusion. Simultaneously, the truncated speech, overshadowed by death and ambiguity, telegraphs the limitations of language. Due to the war's destruction, people risk becoming hopelessly entangled in words and stories that have lost their power to move humanity up and forward.

Because of its focus on illegitimacy and stillbirth, in the realm of human lives and literary (re)production, *Parade's End* adds a new dimension to our analysis of modern novels of sterility. The tetralogy's distinction lies in its expansive approach, and in Ford's own theories of writing and his war experiences. *Parade's End's* distinction appears, as well, in its awareness of both the literary tradition that preceded it and earlier modernist responses to the war's devastation, including those from West, Cather, and Hemingway. The war novels of these authors and McKay represent non-reproductive sexual intercourse, often through truncated, ambiguous endings that undermine or halt before satisfying or reproductive conclusion. *Parade's End* does something quite different with its four-volume structure. Mark's final speech is truncated, and the ending certainly exhibits ambiguity, but the entire final volume complicates the seemingly reproductive conclusion of the third volume by forcing readers to look at the mess beyond the tidy conclusion. In doing so, *Parade's End* diverges dramatically from the other texts in this dissertation. Eve Sorum argues that, in the final offering, Ford desired a narrative that would speak to the deep mourning, what I have called "traumatic grief," that arose from the war. However, the "formal difficulties of this project signify the failure of these mourning practices. ... [The] novel becomes the aesthetic failure—a narrative that circles endlessly, even to the point of boring the reader—that so many critics have condemned"

(160). Similarly, Paul Skinner contends that Tietjens's absence in the final volume represents all those soldiers who never returned from war. He argues that because of the war, Ford encountered "two profound shocks: one of them, that fierce and inescapable confrontation with the impossibility of writing, with that radical and frightening division of the mind; the other, the horror of forgetting" (72). Sorum and Skinner both emphasize Ford's realization that to depict the war in his sweeping historical novel he must use ambiguous absence. While these analyses are, on one hand, compelling and well formulated, I maintain that, on the other, Ford also depicted the war's effects through a dramatic excess or addition. With *The Last Post*, Ford ends with perpetual ambiguity that stems not from a narrative halted *prior to* resolution but one that examines the foggy region beyond.

In keeping with this chapter's use of feminist theory to illuminate Ford's text, I contend that *Parade's End* endeavors to "write beyond the ending," a formal technique that Rachel Blau DuPlessis claims as the primary innovation of twentieth-century women writers. Which is to say, there is a method to the madness of Ford's "aesthetic failure," in its self-conscious rejection of traditional narrative patterns and in its searching beyond them, literally and figuratively, for something that might replace—or at least adequately represent the trauma done to—traditional, reproductive narratives. Such deconstructions have the potential to break down established boundaries, which is why DuPlessis sees them as a tool of resistance for women writers: "Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative" (5). Modernity destabilized gender roles and boundaries, as famously argued by Gilbert and Gubar, providing an opening for women writers to re-imagine their

role in literature and culture. Similarly, Elaine Showalter contends that women writers were more able, and therefore quicker, to represent the traumatizing aspect of the war because they were already well versed in the experiences of hysterical trauma and living under a repressive social regime (194). Ford, with his interest in women's lives and his exhibited awareness (in *Parade's End*) of the changes the war wrought on gender boundaries, took up in spades the technique of "writing beyond the ending" to represent the war's effects and, in so doing, create his unique novel of sterility.

Other modern novels of sterility often stop *before* the ending but *Parade's End* clearly writes beyond the (traditional) ending, unspooling its "stuplimely" enormous narrative to a conclusion that overturns the discrete satisfaction of carefully plotted and fully resolved novels. In this way, it structurally enacts the childbirth metaphor that links artistic and human (re)production by moving beyond its self-contained patterning in the first three volumes to present the world with a squalling, post-war infant of a novel whose future remains far from certain. As DuPlessis contends, "Writing beyond the ending ... produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised" (5). In this way, *Parade's End* carries the potential of an "activist melancholia" that, according to Patricia Rae, signified modernists' refusal to accept and move on from the war's devastation. Like the other texts in this dissertation, it also undermines the reproductive narratives that Roof argues dominate modern, Western cultures.

It is important, however, not to overstate the radical, political potential of Ford's formalist experiment. The potential exists but the text's ambiguity also limits that potential. *Parade's End* still ends with Valentine pregnant, thereby proving Tietjens's

ability to reproduce regardless of the legitimacy of Sylvia's son. It also concludes with the presentation of a post-war, infant narrative, and together these thematic and formal components align the novel with the reproductive futurism that Lee Edelman argues relies upon the unassailable specter of the Child. The Child under threat haunts all modern novels of sterility, whether in the deaths of children in West and Cather, or the impossibility of having children in Hemingway and McKay. Ford comes closest to depicting an actual, living offspring, both in Valentine's pregnancy and in the very extended ending that is *The Last Post*. That offspring, however, remains under threat, highlighting how literary sterility as a response to the war represents as much the bewilderment of traumatic grief as it does a conscious, activist refusal of mourning. I contend that this deep ambiguity in modern novels of sterility, stemming from traumatic grief, complicates their formal and thematic depictions of the war's effects. On one hand, they provide a possible model for narratives that consciously rebel against the constraints of heteronormative narratives. On the other hand, they also remain entangled in traumatic grief, trying to cope with the complexities of mourning in a war-shattered modern world. This uncertainty may account for the incorporations of modernist forms in later works and the ongoing re-establishment of reproductive cultural and novelistic narratives. Like Christopher Tietjens, modern novels of sterility, by their very production, recognize their *responsibility* to a wider circle than just their own trauma and grief. And while this responsibility may, itself, give rise to trauma it also situates modern novels of sterility within the conflicted, imperfect cultural-historical trajectory of literature.

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