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The Abyss in Allen Tate's *The Fathers*: What Can be Seen in the Darkness of American Literature?

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The Abyss in Allen Tate's *The Fathers*:
What Can be Seen in the Darkness of American Literature?

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to those who have stood at the edge of the abyss and peered into the darkness, looking for an answer to why we feel so isolated, even when surrounded by a sea of people.

Acknowledgments

The inspiration for this study came from a discussion about Allen Tate in Dr. Baum's American Literature class in 2003. The ideas we talked about took root deep in my head and gnawed at me continually until this thesis was born. I would like to thank Dr. Baum for the divine germination. I would also like to thank Dr. Metzger and Dr. Clune for their invaluable input, without which this study would never have been completed.

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ABSTRACT

There is a thread of darkness that seems to run through much of the canon of U.S. authors. There are, at the heart of us all, the questions we ask ourselves about who we are and what we mean to ourselves and others and to the places where we have lived. I believe that most of the body of writings produced in this country attempt to answer these questions in some form. Allen Tate wrote *The Fathers* in 1932, nearly seventy years after the Civil War, or the War Between the States. Perhaps one of the most critical moments in the process of how we became modern Americans, this period of history still resonates within our understanding. Tate, who was a Virginian and a Southerner, sought to understand what the South was and what it meant to modern America. The South became Tate's literary construct, a construct that included the abyss he would have to search. My belief is that Tate's South is an abyss which contains the answers to our questions of identity. *The Fathers* deals with identity through family and social structures in a changing South. Many may not be familiar with the world of the Civil War South that Tate was examining. Tate shows that depths of blackness can be found in the institutions of humans as well as in the natural world.

The Abyss in Allen Tate's *The Fathers*:
What Can be Seen in the Darkness of American Literature?

Introduction

American Literature is an expansive phrase that easily encompasses more than can be considered in this study. But there is a thread of darkness that seems to run through much of the canon of U.S. authors. There are, at the heart of us all, the questions we ask ourselves about who we are and what we mean to ourselves and others and to the places where we have lived. I believe that most of the body of writings produced in this country attempt to answer these questions in some form. This is true whether you were born in the United States, or you chose to move here from some other country. The land and water here can move in individual ways through our veins, filling us with curiosity about who we are and what it is we actually see looking into the faces around us. As John Matteson writes in his excellent article "The Little Lower Layer: Anxiety and the Courage to Be in *Moby-Dick*," "This anxiety [search for self] has become a central theme for modern artists and writers, whose works have frequently depicted humankind and society as teetering on the brink of an ontological and spiritual abyss" (97). To find these answers we must sometimes stand over a gaping chasm of doubt and peer into a darkness. The danger lies in what we may find when the images in the abyss begin to come clear.

Some international literature may attempt to provide safety from this ledge over the abyss, but I am concerned with how U.S. authors have attempted to answer the riddle of

this darkness, more particularly with a piece of literature with a character who teeters precipitously on the edge of an abyss as he explores the question of what it means to be a human being and an American.

Allen Tate wrote *The Fathers* in 1932, nearly seventy years after the Civil War, or the War Between the States. Perhaps one of the most critical moments in the process of how we became modern Americans, this period of history still resonates within our understanding. The way the South both treated and is treated by regions outside its geographical confines continues to clarify and obscure our thinking to this day. Tate, who was a Virginian and a Southerner, sought to understand what the South was and what it meant to modern America. This search caused not a little conflict for Tate, who wanted to identify himself as a Virginian, and Southerner, without attaching all the darkness of the past and the present surrounding the South. But he had to look deeply into everything the South was and had been for answers on how to accomplish this. He had to attempt to establish an identity in the intellectual and moral abyss of his land and heritage in a changing world. Early in his career, Tate lived abroad. He spent time in France, writing among the expatriates, writing about cosmopolitanism and a detachment from the tradition of locales and culture. Having been born in Kentucky, however, Tate considered himself a Southerner. And being a Southerner—in the past--meant adhering to certain codes of conduct that governed the unknown, the emotional, the irrational. The South became Tate's literary construct, a construct that included the abyss he would have to search.

Having been raised in the Midwest, surrounded by the culture of the dark corn fields of autumn, I am fascinated with the examination of the abyss of the U.S. canon of

literature. My belief is that Tate's South is an abyss which contains the answers to our questions of identity. Tate is staring in, propped up by the Southern conventions and traditions of his culture. He is looking for answers. He created a narrator--Lacy Buchan—who would undertake the search for him. The focus of this thesis, then, is on the search in Allan Tate for an American self. *The Fathers* deals with identity through family and social structures in a changing South. Many may not be familiar with the world of the Civil War South that Tate was examining. Most of us would more likely associate an abyss of unknown darkness with images of the ocean like those found in Herman Melville or Edgar Allan Poe. Tate shows that depths of blackness can be found in the institutions of humans as well as in the natural world.

Chapter One
The Concept of the Abyss and
Survey of the Criticism on Tate's *The Fathers*

What is the abyss? In order to fully understand why Allen Tate is searching this unknown blackness, the abyss must be defined. A look at the word's history and definitions, along with usage, will provide an understanding of the term and the reason why it is really the only concept that can be employed in this discussion of American Literature.

Evolving from the Greek *Abyssos*, through the Latin derivation *Abyssus*, meaning bottomless, early forms of the word in English included *Abyme* and *Abysm*. The Latin term was adopted for scholarly works around the fourteenth century. The word then went through several variations before *Abyss* became standard usage. Certain archaic versions of the word are still used in creative writing. There are several dictionary definitions for the word, focusing upon both spatial and other measurable concepts and bodies of water. This study will consider how some of the modern usages are present in Tate's novel.

Early literature contained examples of the abyss as that primordial darkness from which life sprang. Foundations for this come from Biblical sources. The Bible begins with "In the beginning when God created the heaven and earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (Gen.1.1). The creation account of the earth from this "formless void"

was present in much of early literature in which the creation myth was present. Many of the early examples of the concept of the *abyss* appear in the Bible, both as references to the formless void out of which the earth was formed and as the darkness of Hell. The word *abyss* appears directly in the text of the New Oxford Annotated Bible. Romans 10:7 reads, “Who will descend into the abyss?” *Abyss* here is used to mean the bottomless pit of Hell.” The word is used again in the book of Revelation 9:11, reading, “They had as king over them the Angel of the abyss.” And again the word appears in Luke 8:31: “They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.”

The first definition of *abyss* that appears in the OED reads, “The great deep, the primal chaos; the bowels of the earth, the supposed cavity of the lower world; the infernal pit.” The “primal chaos” was the world before meaning was present. God came to this chaos with light, bringing knowledge into creation, knowledge that was given to people, through which they could attempt to define the world around them. Webster’s online dictionary mirrors this OED definition with “A bottomless or unfathomed depth, gulf, or chasm; hence any deep, immeasurable, and, specifically, hell, or the bottomless pit.” What is striking is that most dictionaries list chaos, or bottomless pit, as their primary meanings. How does this relate to Tate? While Tate’s narrator does not necessarily struggle with the vast bottomless gulf as presented in the creation myth, he does constantly peer into an abyss of chaos. Entry number two in Webster’s Online Dictionary’s definition of *abyss* identifies the word with thought. This entry designates meaning as “infinite time; a vast intellectual or moral depth.” Tate’s novel is concerned with both the “intellectual” and “moral” abyss of the South (specifically Virginia) in an attempt to classify its place in the United States and in human history.

The word *abyss* is also associated with water, particularly when used to describe the deep aspects of the world's oceans. Chambers Reference Online provides the following as part of its definition of *abyss*: "a deep part of the ocean, generally more than 2000 meters below the surface." While this is specific about the depths involved, the word *abyss* is often associated with any deep body of water. Melville's ocean in *Moby Dick* is both a watery abyss and an unfathomable "intellectual" darkness. Ishmael's soul is not at rest; rather, he explains, it is locked into something just outside the edge of understanding, an abyss he sometimes equates with the ocean:

There is, one knows not what sweet mystery about this sea, whose gently awful stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath [. . .] for here, millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams somnambulisms, reveries; all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming, still; tossing like slumberers in their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness. (442)

That the stirrings are "gently awful" speaks to the pervasiveness and effect of the sea in Ishmael's life. Matteson explains,

He is, in Tillich's existential terms, divided from his essential being. In his yearning to recapture his essence, Ishmael compares himself with Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all

rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life, and this is the key to it all. (100-01)

The ocean does not appear in Tate's work, but *The Fathers* is a work centered on the darkness that is associated with not being able to see into the depths that surround human existence, the mystery, the "ungraspable." Studying such depths can lead to insanity. If we stand on the deck of a ship far out on the Atlantic and gaze overboard, what will we see? But what concerns us is not what is seen; what is not seen is what enraptures the viewer. What is looked upon can be comprehended, but whatever it is that lies beyond our sight is what we want to most understand—whether we are gazing into the watery depths of the ocean or a measureless chasm of the undefined and mysterious. There are surely concepts in those depths which must be known, because our lives are built around the ideas of existence. When these concepts can't be fathomed, we are confused, endangered. Definitions of being come to us through thought, both in words and actions.

Writing in *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that metaphor controls our day to day movements. We can control what is known. But the metaphors that control us aren't always easily manipulated because they aren't always in our conscious thought. According to the authors, "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (5). When trying to determine what the South means to Lacy, Tate has his narrator look into the abyss of his culture in order to try to understand the complexity surrounding him. The social structure of the South is not just a metaphor for him to live by; the social structure is what defines his existence. The *abyss* is a concept that underlies the understanding of a group of people, and the code they live by requires that they ignore this abyss. Lacy (the

narrator) and George Posey, however, cannot ignore the abyss; instead they commune with it.

Creating the form of the earth out of the void gives the world a God who is in control of all aspects of life, including the decisions we make. Catherine Keller tackles this argument in *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, a work that deals with creation in terms of what is set forth in creation myth. She discusses the idea of who we are through *tehomitic* theology, *tehom* being Hebrew for *abyss* as it is used in the creation myth of Genesis. Under this theology, God is the omnipotent creator of everything and, as such, has complete power over all things. God then holds power over all social and cultural structures. Keller seeks to provide an alternative creation out of the abyss, a creation of “bottomless potentiality” through which God is the creator, but one who provides unlimited possibilities for us to have some control over ourselves, our questions, and our answers. She bases part of her theory on the abyss in literary works by Melville, James Joyce, and Jacques Derrida.

The Bible is replete with references to the abyss, with most completing either a creation or apocalyptic vision of existence. But there are passages that seem to reach beyond these into the realm of thought and contemplation. Jonah peers into the surrounding sea much as Ishmael does when he cries out, “You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me[. . .]the waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head” (Jonah 2:3-5). But there is more to these verses than Jonah’s simply crying out to God from the belly of the whale. Part of the darkness, the sea he has been cast into, is that of ignorance of God’s commands and of his place among the people whom he is a part of. His is a question of

identity involving social and cultural structures, much the same as the question of Tate through Lacy Buchan. It is from this abyss of ignorance that I want to look upon *The Fathers*. And it is this thesis through which I wish to stand and peer into the abyss of *The Fathers*.

In pursuing this study I will draw upon the works of several literary critics. Only a couple dozen essays have been written since 1938 on Tate's *The Fathers*. Since the book enjoys little popularity outside academic settings, it is important to explore possible reasons for this. Richard O'Dea's "*The Fathers, A Reevaluation*," written in 1966, provides some insight into the novel's neglect. He points out that when *The Fathers* was published, both reviewers and critics had little taste for it, with many expecting something similar to *Gone With The Wind*. Many critics found Lacy's narration and point of view "clumsy" and difficult to follow. O'Dea believes that even those who gave "faint praise" to the novel upon publication did so only because they acknowledged Tate as a poet, not necessarily as a novelist; but he notes that the novel now enjoys "modest" popular and critical "acclaim" (87). After acknowledging the critical attention the novel's plot and symbols have received, O'Dea turns to his purpose: to discuss the two main characters, Lacy Buchan and George Posey (and thus to respond to the view that the characters are mere "abstractions). In one of the best passages of the article O'Dea writes about the way of life of the Buchan family:

Lacy prepares the reader for the ultimate destruction of that society (symbolized in the burning of Pleasant Hill) by indicating its deficiencies. Pleasant Hill is a civilized world controlled by a strict public code of honor which so subordinates

personal emotions to custom that the individual no longer acts or feels outside the ritual of society. Antebellum Virginia presents a static society that carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. (89)

O'Dea then concludes that the tragedy of the Buchans and George Posey is that they do not recognize "the existence of evil" within humans; the "universal tragedy of man" is that humans do not recognize the "abyss" of evil within humans. He thus sees *The Fathers* as a significant part of "the American tradition of Hawthorne, Melville and Twain" (94).

Seventeen years later, Richard Law approached the novel in much the same manner as O'Dea, focusing on the characters of Lacy and George Posey. He looks at the novel as the culmination of Southern thought as expressed through Agrarianism. He begins his article, titled "'Active Faith' and Ritual in *The Fathers*" with this idea, writing,

The antebellum Virginia of his [Tate's] novel represents a version of this concept, a "traditional society" which, though imperfect, is nonetheless illustrative. Such a society, Tate thought, was capable of transmuting a large part of human experience into social ritual, so that economic realities and religious life, love and rivalry, personal mortality and social continuity were all subsumed into ritualistic forms. (345)

Law views this “hypothesis” (his word) as the best example of tradition and civilization of the South. He reads Tate’s novel as providing the best insight into the reasons for living in an established, civilized society. By examining both the novel and select pieces of Tate’s poetry, Law offers the basis for his statements that although Tate had difficulties seeing the South as the purest example of traditional society, Tate still believed that tradition was necessary for all aspects of life, including the arts. In Law’s estimation, it was Tate’s intention through all of his work (Law focuses on the novel in this article) to show that “the function of a traditional society is closely analogous to the function which he claimed for poetry: both provide a means of ‘apprehending and concentrating our experience in the mysterious limitations of form’” (348).

Lewis Simpson’s article “The Ferocity of Self: History and Consciousness in Southern Literature” provides a different look into why Southern writers have examined the South. Using works from different authors as the basis of his argument, Simpson believes that Southern writers have been more concerned with how they viewed themselves as related to the Old South than how family and tradition were related. He uses three writers--Thomas Jefferson, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren--to lend support to his argument. He believes Tate’s novel, and some of his essays, point to a shift in focus from Civil War Southern literature to antebellum Southern literature. This shift was one of moving “from the rhetorical to the dialectical mode of conceiving life” (68). The reason for this shift, according to Simpson’s reading of Tate, was that Southern writers realized that the North was not to blame for the condition of the South. This is why the Southern writer began to focus more on how the self fit into Southern society.

The study of the abyss in this thesis will focus upon the darkness of the undefined, the chaotic in *The Fathers*. This is a darkness that is confronted on land, in the South. Americans who have no family history in the South may not have an understanding of the abyss into which the cultural and social structure of Lacy's family and religion leads him. This is an isolated darkness that few outside the South know. It is not a universal experience but can be visited through the work of Allen Tate.

Chapter Two

The Abyss of Darkness in Tate's *The Fathers*

What are the differences between the Old South and the New South which Tate might have been thinking about when writing *The Fathers*? He addresses the issues of the social codes of the South and the industrial base of the North in his examination of family in the novel. Robert S. Cotterill discusses these possible differences in his article "The Old South to the New." Cotterill believes that the old South was already industrial. He believes this was evidenced by the fact that the region produced millions of dollars worth of cotton every year. This size economy would, of course, have to be supported by industry. The South had this industry, but it was not as large as industry in the North. Any change would simply have been a matter of degree. He writes about the idea of the drastic change in the South after the War:

One of these [ideas of change in the South] is the glorification of the War Between the States and the emphasizing of the ruin and devastation it brought to the South. Denied the pride of victory, the southern people developed a pride of suffering. And the thought was an inevitable one that in a tragedy so terrible and a ruin so complete no previous pattern of life could possibly have survived. Therefore, the Old South must have died. (3)

He believes that the view of a changed South was mythologized by some in the North and supported by others in the South as a way of dealing with the outcome of the War. Cotterill writes of those in the South who felt this way, “There were some people then (and there have been more since) who viewed the development of manufacturing as a surrender of Southern ideals and the adoption of a low, Yankee culture” (4). Numan Bartley also considers the internal changes the South went through after defeat in the Civil War. He feels the change was somewhat natural from an agrarian to industrial economy and that the divisions discussed came from within the South. He writes of this division,

The pre-capitalist planter class promoted industrial self-sufficiency prior to the Civil War, and, following that unpleasantness, elements of North Carolina's landed upper class provided postwar leadership in textile manufacturing, banking, insurance, railroad building, and other large business enterprises. In so doing they transferred agrarian social relations and planter ideology into industry, especially in the important case of the mill village. (153)

Bartley then points out that the “lesser” landholders could neither provide the leadership, nor make the transition as easily as those who were more propertied. The difference in power caused those with less power to organize political parties and contribute to the idea that the South was indeed changing more than it actually was (153). The realities of the changes that occurred from pre to post Civil War will always be debatable. If these changes began to occur while the War was still being fought, this may be why Tate

places Lacy in the middle of the transformation. And it is through these changes that Lacy begins to look into the abyss of who he is, an abyss of the unknown and undefined that his family and community have avoided through adherence to Southern social constructs.

The Fathers centers around Lacy Buchan, part of an old aristocratic Virginian family. The story is told by Lacy as an old man, a doctor recounting the early years of his life and the eventual destruction of his family. Time progresses quickly through the three sections of the novel, beginning with the death of Lacy's mother in the opening section, "Pleasant Hill." Lacy is fifteen years old and becoming aware of the code his family lives by; he is also introduced to the manner in which George Posey lives his life. Each section of the novel presents more of the slide that Lacy's family takes as Virginia's secession from the Union approaches. In "Pleasant Hill" we are provided with a small portrait of the system within which Lacy's family lives. The section ends with George winning the tournament of the rings and challenging the value system that Lacy has known up to that point. "The Crisis" begins a year later. Lacy is now sixteen and considers himself a man. The tension between the states is growing, and the conflict looms. Lacy begins to deal with his struggle between his father's belief system and George's differing views about what opportunities the coming conflict will bring. The section ends with the beginning of the war. In the final section titled "The Abyss," Lacy begins his descent into the darkness of the conflict of his old self and new self. The value system he has lived by in his youth has been shattered with the conflict. "The Abyss" is full of the darkness that the sixteen-year-old Lacy searches in his struggle to find balance in the man he is and the man he will eventually become.

The Fathers is presented this way in order to detail the slide that Lacy's family takes as the secession from the Union approaches. Each section presents a more detailed view of the abyss into which Lacy peers for answers about these changes and how to handle and adapt to them. His views of his family structure become murky when he considers all the changes. As mentioned in the opening chapter of this thesis, entry number two in Webster's Online Dictionary defines *abyss* as "infinite time; a vast intellectual or moral depth." Lacy's forward progression in life is affected by his staring into the abyss of the "intellectual and moral depth" of the two Souths in which he struggles. There are numerous passages with images and themes of darkness and the absence of light; others describe the social structure of the Old South and how Lacy views himself as moving from his current family structure to that of the Poseys. These images and themes lend themselves to the idea that Lacy's search is into the intellectual and moral abyss of the 1860s South, not knowing where he will find himself in the struggle between his desire to identify himself with both his father and George Posey.

Tate uses the word *abyss* several times in the *The Fathers*, but there are three examples that provide substance for the definition of *abyss* as used in this chapter. In "Pleasant Hill" Lacy states, "Our lives were eternally balanced upon a pedestal below which lay an abyss that I could not name" (44). This is Lacy describing his family's existence. The "intricate game" that his family must play in order to live by the code of their South becomes a difficult game when Lacy considers the "intellectual or moral depth" (Webster's) of how his family's lives compared to the Poseys'. Lacy further describes this abyss as it relates to George Posey when he states, "Excessively refined persons have a communion with the abyss; but is not civilization the agreement, slowly

arrived at, to let the abyss alone?" (185-86). George is the "refined" person who can examine the abyss, while the Buchans are those in "civilization" who have agreed not to examine the abyss. This is where the Southern code of conduct comes from. The code allows the Buchans and those like them to exist without examining the dark mysteries that the Poseys (and later Lacy) will actually look into.

"Pleasant Hill" sets up the daily life and belief system of the Buchans. Ritual sets the family structure. Lacy muses, "The name of Buchan, obscure in origin, became assimilated to that unique order of society known latterly as the Virginian aristocracy" (4). From the beginning Tate is crafting the importance of name and where it fits in his South. Lacy's voice is removed from his childhood, but the reader is not fully aware of this yet. The idea of change begins to grow when just a page later Lacy hints at the pending changes he feels, saying, "Why cannot life change without tangling the lives of innocent persons? Why do innocent persons cease their innocence and become violent and evil in themselves that such great changes take place?" (5). Lacy had grown up in a family that upheld and lived by the agrarian rules of the South. Family, devotion to God through working the land, and adherence to the social code are what have kept his society intact. Lacy's family and the people of his community all understand this code, paying strict attention to the social rules necessary to keep their customs in order. George Posey and the Civil War brought change into this defined world. While others were fearful of this change, Lacy was ready to embrace it. Lacy mentions that his father, The Major, has to maneuver through his life by making "moves of an intricate game." The "intricate game" is adherence to all the social codes. Making a mistake in the Buchans' society would have grave consequences: members would have to face the abyss and peer into the

mysteries of life, without the structure of their codes. Lacy sees in George the boldness to engage in “communion” with the abyss. The Major is a man of letters and reason and coded behavior; George is willing to embrace his emotions and let them guide his actions. Lacy sees the delicate, societally determined living in not only his father, but also his brother Semmes. Semmes is a man of ritual like the Major. He clings to what Lacy sees as a waning social order but, like Lacy, admires George.

The mythologized South was not simply cotton fields and tobacco farms; it was a genteel world of old graces and manners, a chivalric haven against the commercialism and industrialism of the North. Richard Law explains, in “‘Active Faith’ and Ritual in *The Fathers*,” that Tate believed a “traditional society” like Antebellum Virginia could ritualize the difficult and painful passages of life: “economic realities,” “religious life, love and rivalry, personal mortality, and social continuity” (345). Thus, the traditional agrarian Southern society governed behavior through well-defined rituals. But what about the issues of a changing agrarianism, slavery, and states rights? How best can Lacy reconcile these with his need to accept the code of his chosen social structure? *The Fathers* shows the progression of Lacy from boy to man in the Civil War South. His family shares different beliefs about the state of the country, with the father clinging to hopes of continuing unionism, and the sons believing that conflict is inevitable in order to protect and preserve their way of living. Mixed in with these problems is George Posey, Lacy’s brother-in-law. George represents a new man, seeking something outside region or tradition. He represents humanity outside the social code of the Old South. He doesn’t adhere to the old code; he is self seeking, concerned only with what he can make out of his place in the world—for himself and his family. There is no established social ritual in

his new world to hold ideas and people together, to guide intellectual and moral decisions.

The Buchans, and other families of Virginia and the South, use social ritual to safeguard their way of life. Tate demonstrates disregard for social ritual through George and the manner in which he is introduced to the reader. George declares his intentions towards Susan to Major Buchan without considering the proper steps to do so in the South. He then makes his disregard known to Virginia society at the tournament of the rings. His brash competition and ultimate embarrassment of John Langton do not follow the etiquette of the code. As Law expresses it, the “burden of Tate's case for ‘tradition’ in the special sense in which he uses the word rests upon the alleged psychological advantages to be derived from living within a community of intact belief, especially where those beliefs have become formalized in social ritual” (346).

George doesn't understand the code that Lacy's family lives by. George is a man of commerce and opportunism, concepts opposed to Southern Agrarianism. George's way of life is one which Lacy finds himself wanting to emulate, telling us, “I admired George Posey even when I did not understand him for I shared his impatience with the world as it was [. . .]” (44). George does not follow ritual. And Lacy begins to deeply admire George's handling of his own life. Lacy grows into a man attempting to follow George's example. Even after George kills his brother, Lacy still continues to be drawn to George's disregard of ritual. But what is the cost of reversing beliefs? Part of this cost must involve losing some sense of where we came from, or where we're going. The life around us begins to grow dark, and we find that we are staring into the darkness of the abyss, searching for answers and direction. As Lacy himself says of George, “Looking

back through the cloud of George Posey's life and sister Susan's, I think that he [George] too saw as a world, as a strange place, the home of his wife's family, as if he had never seen it before" (7). The Buchan world is foreign to George because he cannot understand or function within it, and Lacy is conscious of changing values and behavior. He wants to love his father and hold on to the old ways, yet he admires George, and comprehends the changes that are coming. And this is what tears at him and his family. What could be more damaging to who a person is than the understanding that his world is ending and that its replacement is one that may be opposed to its value system?

Humans become comfortable through familiarity. Tate's characters had only the traditional system of the Old South to search for methods of comfort as their world changed. Major Buchan does not completely agree with slavery, but he understands how the slave system fits into the social structure of Virginia. Accepting slavery is part of the Major's adherence to Southern society. Questioning this issue too much would be looking into the abyss of "intellectual or moral depth" (Webster's) of the unknown and undefined that the Buchans avoid. This is tantamount to George's behaving boorishly at the tournament of the rings. George sees slaves as commodities which he can use to support his version of the world. And Lacy wants to follow both. He wants to live in George's world while holding on to his father's. He is "alone in a world that had been created by George Posey, out of the dead world" of his mother (13). His mother's death symbolizes the demise of Lacy's principal structure. The world created by George Posey is more alive to Lacy than the one in which he has been bred. There isn't much difficulty in seeing how this could damage Lacy's being. What Tate is trying to do in this novel is wonderfully expressed by Law when he states,

In keeping with most of his [Tate's] essays, *The Fathers* advances the claim that social rituals such as were historically present in the Old South were capable of conferring immense moral and psychological advantages, among which were wholeness of being, complexity of vision, and freedom from crippling self doubt. (348)

Some of Tate's poetry also builds on his support for the traditional systems of Southern Agrarianism. The agrarian farmer acquires virtue, moral integrity, and honor through the act of working the land. Tate believed in this philosophy, forming a group of poets who held the same belief, "The Fugitives." Agrarianism holds that the farmer is closer to God, bringing order out of chaos by creating things that grow. Writing in *Agrarianism in American Literature*, M. Thomas Inge states that the farmer "has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region, which are psychologically and culturally beneficial" (127). Framing agrarian values in verse could draw upon established pastoral and lyric traditions, but what about an attempt to frame it in a novel? The very philosophy of Agrarianism itself was antithetical to capitalism, which was a large component of the slave trade. The buying and selling of slaves produced large profits for the cultured Southern land owners. How could Lacy live within these two opposing Southern belief systems? He could take the step the Buchans were afraid of; he could emulate George and engage in "communion" with the abyss.

How could Tate construct the Buchans' world with his own knowledge as the base? Law answers these questions, writing, "The narrator's exploration of the contents of his memory, the form which his story takes in the telling of it, becomes similarly an instrument for 'knowing the world,' for understanding his own life and its larger historical context" (352). The 65-year-old Lacy explores his world in order to understand it. It is memory through which Lacy creates his order out of the chaos. Lacy says in "Pleasant Hill," "There is not an old man living who can recover the emotions of the past; he can only bring back the objects around which, secretly, the emotions have ordered themselves in memory [. . .]" (22). These objects create a sense of what our world is. If these objects remain unseen, or difficult to see in the darkness of experience and remembrance, then the world we want to know remains dark, especially if that world involves major changes. This darkness creates more than just problems of sight; it creates difficulties with perception of family, trust, belief and social structure. While the Civil War may not have been the sole reason the Southern social code began to crumble, it was the catalyst Tate used to demonstrate the changes of the Old South to the New. The Buchans avoid ideas that question their social structure, but the war brings these ideas into their world. In the section of the novel titled "The Abyss," Lacy comments,

To hear the night, and to crave its coming, one must have deep inside one's secret being a vast metaphor controlling all the rest, a belief in the innate evil of man's nature, and the need to face that evil, of which the symbol is darkness, of which again the living image is man alone. Now that men can not be alone, they cannot

bear the dark, and they see themselves as innately good but betrayed by circumstances that render them pathetic. (219)

Prior to the war, men in the Buchans' world can be alone. They have the ritual and codes of the South to live by and govern their lives. After the war when this code has been weakened and is no longer in effect, men cannot isolate themselves. This is Lacy's struggle. He is comparing his life as a young man with the life he lives now as a doctor who is 65 and living without his old social structure. When he was fifteen, Lacy could listen to the night, but as an older man he does not. When his life was full of structure, the night was a welcome place where he could isolate himself with the code, helping him to cope with chaos and potential evil. As a child he could ignore the abyss because he had had the code to protect him from its darkness. As an older man he has been in the abyss—both into darkness and weeks of coma when he was sixteen—but he no longer has a code to protect him. And he no longer welcomes the night.

Sometimes moving impatiently from one method of living to another proves disastrous. Susan's attempt to live in George's world causes the deaths of her own brother and Yellow Jim. Lacy's attempt leads Rose into a state of mental disarray. Lacy will discover later in his life that in the new world he wants, there are few "Men of honor and dignity--where are they now? I knew gentlemen in my boyhood but I know none now, and I know that I am not one" (210). Which is better for Lacy? The old South that allows human beings to own other human beings, yet holds strongly to a certain standard of conduct, or the new South that frees the slaves but forces others to forsake the grace of living under a chivalric ideal? Leaving his old world begins a long descent into memory

that causes him pain for the rest of his life. Another realization that Lacy comes to when he is older, long separated from who he once was, is that “There is not an old man living who can recover the emotions of the past; he can only bring back the objects around which, secretly, the emotions have ordered themselves in memory [. . .]” (22.). The “emotions of the past” are gone, swallowed up in the abyss.

But why the abyss? What is it in Tate’s South that represents our search? Can someone not from the region understand this abyss? We do not know what is there, but we strain to gain some glimpse of it. And when we do see some small speck in that abyss, we are usually reminded of who we were. Lacy describes this beautifully, stating, “Our lives were eternally balanced upon a pedestal below which lay an abyss that I could not name” (44). Lacy no longer has this abyss to look into in his old age. Tate’s vision of the Old South is what remains in Lacy after leaving thought, memory, and tradition behind. What, then, do humans become from this leaving? Further into his article Simpson says that “Emerging out of the lapsing culture of class and family, hierarchy and degree, the modern self tended to be portrayed by the poetic imagination as the victim, often as a prisoner [. . .]” (70). When he is 65, Lacy is a prisoner to his thoughts of wanting to live again in the old ways he knew as a child. Having moved away from the values established within us when younger, we often become prisoners to who we are, looking out of the cell of our current lives into an abyss that includes the past. Lacy knows this struggle too well, remembering, “Are we together? What was together? I did not know, and I decided that this time I would go with him [George], because it was so simple to go and leave behind all the things that I would have to think about if I stayed” (150). Eventually he realizes that leaving these things behind causes more pain than dealing

with them. And as an older man, all that Lacy has left is an abyss that now includes what he left behind.

The 65-year-old Lacy knows the South. He has emerged from its old culture, a product of its old code. But he had begun to abandon the South he knew when he decided to take on the life of George Posey, a life foreign to his earlier ways. This abandonment of social structure causes no small amount of suffering to Lacy as he grows older and toward the scenes in which he is choosing to become a new man. He cannot recognize that he has been losing hold of his old life until much later. He cannot see the change “That ought to have been ominous but was not: omens are those signals of futurity that we recognize when the future has already slid into the past” (207). Part of this suffering also comes from the fact that what Lacy has seen in the abyss has not been comforting. The problem becomes one of knowing how long to look into the darkness without the past structure of family and heritage to support him.

Sometimes the answers are worse than the questions. What good is it to leave things behind only to look for them later if nothing is learned from the experience? There is a balance that must be understood when we peer into the abyss. There must be an understanding of what may be gained and how this understanding can be used, if it should be used at all. In the key passage in the novel, Tate writes (this seems to be the narrator Lacy speaking in his most direct manner to the reader), “Excessively refined persons have a communion with the abyss; but is not civilization the agreement, slowly arrived at, to let the abyss alone?” (186). Lacy, however, cannot dwell too long in this abyss because of the chaos that may ensue. Too constant a “communion with the abyss” will cause far too much breakdown in civilization. Occasional communion with the abyss

can give us the push needed to get through our questions. Lacy does just this, telling us, “Then I was light and smothered as I sank into the suck of black water and didn’t feel anything anymore” (262). Lacy is an old man as he narrates the novel. He understands now that what he has lost by letting go of his old ways has caused him to lose his desire to peer into the darkness. His people welcomed the night because they had tradition to stand on. Lacy does not have that anymore because he has let go of his tradition. It is only a memory.

Conclusion

An abyss is a vast, formless, and dark place that is little understood. The darkness of new social constructs is part of the abyss which we search everyday for constructive meaning about who we are socially in this country and who we are individually. Lacy struggles with his identity as a Virginian (and a Southerner) by examining his family's traditional values and social systems and examining new, incongruent social constructs. The answers don't always provide him with the level of comfort about being a Virginian (and an American) that he needs, but he looks nonetheless. Looking into the inky blackness of his past, the history of his family and their beliefs, leads him to new understanding of who he has become. Growing up in the transformational period in which Tate sets the novel, Lacy feels that whoever he once was as a young Southerner can not mesh with the old man he has become. But after all his searching of the abyss that, as he enters manhood, includes both the traditional social code and pre and post Civil War changes, he is still a Southerner, and no amount of looking into the blackness of his past can change that. His solution is to accept the dangers and violence of this change.

Lacy's search may seem universal, but his desire to know who he is among the people of the South makes his a search which is isolated to that region. And this is a region unlike any other in the world. The history of the South is distinct in that it encompasses two histories: one of the region itself and one as part of a greater country,

an American country. The consciousness of the South is distinct among the numerous locations that were available to Tate, yet he chose the South because only that region could capture the search for identity he was undertaking through Lacy. This was a uniquely American search through a specific set of family and social codes and a transformational period in the South. These codes provided all the necessary parameters for Lacy to live under, and these could be found in no other place than the South.

The Fathers comments on the loneliness of humans as they search for who they are. In this quotation, Lacy is speaking of the darkness which his family did not have to commune with when they had their code to follow:

To hear the night, and to crave its coming, one must have deep inside one's secret being a vast metaphor controlling all the rest: a belief in the innate evil of man's nature, and the need to face that evil, of which the symbol is darkness [abyss], of which again the living image is man alone. Now that men cannot be alone, they cannot bear the dark, and they see themselves as innately good but betrayed by circumstances that render them pathetic. (219)

Man is the "living image" of darkness, and he is alone. Because Lacy can no longer be alone to commune with the darkness, he can not bear the dark. Throughout the novel Lacy considers looking into the abyss, finally doing so in his attempt to live his life as George Posey does. But what does it mean to look into the abyss? The Buchans live by a code that governs all aspects of their lives. This code details how each situation they are presented with must be handled. Because of this, their lives are very rigid and structured.

By following these rules they can avoid the darker aspects of living. The rules shield them from the abyss by requiring strict adherence to the social codes. They live their lives through reason, whereas George lives his by following passion and emotion. Lacy sees this type of living through George. He sees George communing with the abyss by not following a prescribed social code and living his life the way he wants. Lacy feels that following George's example of living will open his own life to new and unknown possibilities. And these are possibilities he would never have through adherence to his family's code. Stated simply, reason guides the Buchans' actions, emotion and passion guides the Poseys'. Lacy has his customs, family beliefs, the Poseys and the Civil War to examine. He looks into the mysteries of their darkness in order to understand what, for him, it means to be a Virginian and an American. Some of what he finds there leads partly to the destruction of his family and what he thought was his old way of life.

Plunging into the abyss requires Lacy to remove himself from the protection of his code and follow his emotions. The danger in this is that he doesn't know what the outcome for this will be. He doesn't know what lies in the abyss he wants to peer into. He has to follow an intricate balance in order to live by the code; to live outside the code requires none of this balance. The abyss is a place once controlled by Lacy's inherited codes and rituals. When he removes himself from these he is looking into the darkness and confusion of his life without them. By desiring and following George's example of living, Lacy does begin to live outside his known social ritual. But doing so produces consequences which cause him considerable pain as an older man. Through his examination of the abyss he begins to feel self doubt about his decisions to abandon the old code. And this doubt has a crippling effect on Lacy's life when he is an older man.

For Lacy to question his belief system means he must to look into the abyss. He must look into the darkness for ways to exist outside the world he had known in his youth. Lacy does this, and the results are disastrous. He loses family, friends, and part of his dignity. Lacy the older man laments losing the dignity men knew when they followed the code; he mourns for the fact that he no longer knows any gentlemen as they existed before he peered into the abyss and abandoned his ritualistic living. And in a most revealing display of insight into who he has become by looking into the abyss, Lacy realizes that he himself is no longer a gentleman.

In *The Fathers*, Lacy searches for, and ultimately finds, his identity through the juxtaposition of his family's social codes and a transformed South in the abyss. The idea of Lacy as an American is expressed through this examination. The code he lives under and fights to escape defines who he is. He realizes late in his life that he was a better man when he lived under the code. And this code is uniquely Southern. And as the South is a part of America, this code is uniquely American.

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