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M.A. Thesis  
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Title: Motion in Faulkner: An Analysis of Movement in *The Sound and the Fury*

Report: Prof. John Matthews, Boston University

This thesis argues that *The Sound and the Fury* exhibits principal features of the Gothic literary genre and should be considered among those fictions of Faulkner's—*Absalom, Absalom!* being the most conspicuous—in which the author engages and modifies the conventions of the Gothic to his own purposes as a modern writer (or perhaps as a writer of the modern). Ms. Hesová draws the defining attributes of the Gothic from several scholarly sources, some of them more general studies of the form, and one a specialized study of Faulkner, Elizabeth Kerr's *Faulkner's Gothic Domain* (1979). Ms. Hesová identifies the following traits and organizes her own study as a close examination of how they illuminate Faulkner's characterization in *The Sound and the Fury*: mirrorings and doubling; closed rooms; characters' movement as a function of psychological factors; sub-narratives of flight and pursuit; the quest motif; and aimless wandering. The thesis is strictly organized as a repeated analysis of this grid against all the main characters in the novel, and it concludes with a brief speculation on how the method might work in *Light in August*. Although I think there are some problems with the conceptualization of the project, I am very impressed by the systematic nature of the analyses, by the command of Faulkner's text to support points, by the nearly flawless expression, and, to a slightly lesser degree, by the extent of Ms. Hesová's familiarity with the relevant scholarship. I think she has succeeded in making the case for the Gothic in the terms she has chosen to define it, but I think those terms might not ultimately be the most useful for thinking about the Gothic in Faulkner.

The challenge facing Petra's argument is that *The Sound and the Fury* on the surface looks so little like a Gothic novel; there's a reason it's never discussed as such (as Petra points out). Normally, one would think of the defining elements of the Gothic as the weight of a moribund historical past, often figured as a curse, which produces guilt and shame; a preoccupation with blood (both literal and figurative—in the register of ancestry, familial relations, and, especially, incest); a prominent image of a decaying house (typically figuring a patronymic house); an exotic setting; a menacing villain and an endangered female (who nevertheless accrues some powers not always available to women in the day-lit world of romance); narrative formats that rely on framing; etc. A couple of these crop up in Petra's discussion, mostly as they appear in the work of other scholars attempting overviews of the genre (Fiedler, for example). I must say, however, that the set of features Petra has used here do not strike me as the most elements most precisely defining the genre. There's too much "looseness" (a judgment she's forced to herself at times: p. 34, for example) in the correlation between the categories of the Gothic used here and the effects in the novel. To take one instance, the notion of the quest doesn't get us very far into the behavior of the Compsons. Jason's quest is said to be to control his family (60), but that's using the term only in the most general figurative sense. Quentin is something of an anti-quest figure (19),

while Caddy and Miss Quentin are engaged in quests for love and freedom. Nothing in the analysis develops the particulars of the quest as a Gothic convention, and nothing in the novel supports in detail the idea that these characters are related to the quest. Nor can I say I recognize Benjy in a characterization that makes him the inversion of a romantic hero, but even if he were, it's not clear what that has to do with the Gothic. What's disappointing about this procrusteanism is that alongside the efforts to make the categories and novel fit, Petra performs a number of very fine but only semi-related analyses of other features: her discussion of the running motif of pockets in the novel is very sharp-eyed, for example, as is her identification of the chivalric imagery associated repeatedly with Quentin. There are numerous other fine local readings.

I'm afraid similar kinds of looseness weaken the discussions of psychology (in which the characters are often reduced to modern clinical terminology—schizophrenic, most commonly), or of sensitivity to movement, or to the wandering that the characters indisputably do. None of these seems necessarily to indicate the Gothic. Maybe the most succinct example of the imprecision of the model shows up in a summary of characters in *Light in August*: "The traditional Gothic types are sometimes maintained, albeit with some modifications (Joe Christmas as the perpetual wanderer, Lucas Burch as the villain seducer), sometimes parodied (Byron Bunch as the romantic hero), and sometimes refuted (Lena Grove as the persecuted maiden)" (79). It's not that these characters don't loosely correspond to type (and perhaps ironically, as Petra argues), but that the looseness makes you wonder whether these types really represent defining characteristics of the Gothic. (I do want to note that Petra's discussion of mirroring and doubling I did find persuasive in substantiating her claim that the Gothic contributes to *S&F*; taken further, the idea could provide a generic context for the ferocious intimacy between Caddy and Quentin, its resonance with the motif of incest [another dimension of *Wuthering Heights*, or Poe's "Usher") and narcissism, the secrecy of sin, and so on.)

My inference is that the conceptualization of the thesis still reflects an initial difficulty that I recall talking over with Petra when she first described this project to me: she began with two major ideas, the question of motion in Faulkner and the genre of the Gothic. I don't think the thesis finally figured out how these are related, and my guess is that they're not in any productive way. As a result, the discussion of movement is restricted to a place within the Gothic, where it fails to correlate strongly to genre, and the Gothic is defined by less obvious attributes involving movement in an effort to accommodate that idea. Eve Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* might be one more source to consult, since it proposes a revisionist taxonomy of traits.

A more organic approach might have been to start conceptually with what makes the *most* obviously Gothic of Faulkner's novels Gothic. *Absalom*, for example, but also *Sanctuary*, some of the short stories (like "A Rose for Emily"), and perhaps *Light in August* (though approached from other more customary standpoints, such as the function of the desolate Burden mansion; the gothicization of miscegenation instead of incest; the curse/burden of a generational past; etc.) all have more obvious Gothic features. Identify them, situate them with respect to the relevant dimensions of the tradition of the Gothic novel (Faulkner is in dialogue much more specifically with Hawthorne, for instance: there's an excellent article by Robert Martin on the Gothic in *Seven Gables* and *Absalom*, that would be instructive about the way parallel historical circumstances draw these writers to the Gothic),

then step back to see how *The Sound and the Fury* might be anticipating such reworking of the Gothic. The originality of Petra's conviction is that *S&F* might be read according to conventions that only come clear later, and I think that's a brilliant insight. What elements of the Gothic are, as it were, hidden or fragmented in WF's modernist novel? Why? Once a thesis crystallized along more definite lines, then some of the overly-general review of the multiple traditions of the Gothic that begin the thesis could be eliminated or sharpened, and the coda on *Light in August* could be incorporated into the early body of the thesis. I would also predict that the excessive reliance on Kerr (a pretty elementary study, after all) might fade and more of Petra's own ideas come through. What might be hoped for is a deeper consideration of what the Gothic is doing in Faulkner, or what he is doing by evoking and modifying it. Why does Faulkner need to subvert the Gothic? Beyond describing the presence of features of the Gothic, what does the genre give to Faulkner in his efforts to depict the modern transformation of the South (something Petra mentions briefly near the beginning, when she is talking about Benjy's extra sensitivity to change, motion). And why does the Gothic's development of depth psychology seem especially important to writers about the South, from Brown and Poe forward? Is the South associated with the nation's unconscious? In what respects?

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that Petra consider such revisions for this document, which I am happy to join in recommending as satisfying the standard for her M.A. thesis. I've tried instead to explore the directions I think the essay might have taken a little more productively, and to propose what a further rethinking of the topic might lead to. I want to underscore what a pleasure it was to read such sure prose, and to follow a highly determined, disciplined argument. I also admire the effort to draw in a range of authorities—including some like Irwin, who is densely theoretical, and Fowler, whose terminology is relentlessly Lacanian. This is work at a very high level, and whatever challenges I've posed here—debatable as they ought to be, moreover—reflect my opinion that Petra is operating successfully as an advanced student in a world of professional criticism.