

## Smelling the South: Olfaction in Southern Gothic Literature

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Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres

# **Smelling the South:**

## **Olfaction in Southern Gothic Literature**

Travail de fin d'étude présenté par Eva Agelakis en vue de l'obtention du diplôme de Master en langues et littératures modernes, orientation générale, à finalité approfondie.

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## Table of contents

1. Introduction .....	3
1.1. British, American, and Southern Gothics .....	5
1.2. Corpus .....	13
1.3. Olfaction .....	15
2. The Act of Smelling .....	20
3. The Eros/Thanatos Paradigm .....	26
3.1. The Artificial Smells of Vanity.....	27
3.2. Memory: The Romantic Tripwire of Smell .....	31
3.3. Thanatos: Odor Mortis and Decay .....	37
3.4. Eros, Thanatos, and Sin .....	47
4. Race: Smelling Blackness.....	50
5. Writing About Smells .....	66
6. Conclusion .....	75
Acknowledgement .....	81
Bibliography .....	82

## 1. Introduction

To a student of the University of Virginia asking about his singular literary treatment of scents, William Faulkner answered that there was no deliberate intent on his part, but granted that smell might be “one of [his] sharper senses.” Even further, he went on saying that it is “a part of the environment which the writer is trying to describe” (Aiken 226). At first glance, this might be construed as merely stating the obvious. As smell is one of five human senses, it follows that it is one of our only five ways of experiencing the world. Therefore, it would make sense for it to make up a fifth of all sensorial instances analysed in fiction, yet this is far from being the case. More often than not, in literary criticism, smell is scarce, an afterthought, or downright absent. At the very least, it has had a particularly timid presence inside the critical canon. When smells do generate discourse, it is often around works that are explicitly about them (e.g. Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume*), and it is therefore done on a thematical basis rather than an olfactory one. Apart from such works, either for linguistical reasons or historical ones, the olfactory has struggled to make its way into the critical discourse even though, one library shelf over, historians have been steadily more numerous in choosing it as a medium through which to analyse their preferred time period.

This does not mean that fiction is without scent, quite the contrary. It is the very nature of smells to permeate everything, to be constantly occupying the background of our sensory perception, to be hard to dislodge unless with *stronger* smells, and to be unnoticeable once one has got used to them. If “good fiction” is good fiction because it offers a convincing reflection of the complexity of human experience, then smells necessarily have to be an integral part of it, crouching in the corner of the narrative just as they are continually lodged in our noses and in the background of our brains. In addition, they should be present even (and especially) when they are not a thematical crux. Beyond that, they have to operate on the same axis of disgust-habit-pleasure. Setting out on this research, not only do I posit that smells indeed exist in all corners of the fictional world and that one only has to take a deep breath to unearth them, but also that they are more than incidental, but in the right hands, can be used (however subtly) as repositories of meaning.

In order to make sense, such a vast question obviously requires parameters. Faulkner’s very particular use of olfaction makes him an ideal subject of study to address the sense’s literary presence. To offer more variety (and therefore a greater possibility for contrast) to the study, a handful of texts were selected over the entirety of the genre he spearheaded, the

Southern Gothic. This regional variant of the Gothic in the American South was born in the 1930s, with notable predecessors in the nineteenth century, such as Edgar Allan Poe. The genre came into its own in the mid-twentieth century and has had a continuous presence in the American cultural landscape ever since,<sup>1</sup> waxing and waning throughout the decades without ever disappearing. None of these works are about smell, but by reason of their belonging to the same genre, they all (to various extents) share an interest in the visceral, the macabre, race, and the Southern landscape, that is to say potentially solid ground for a compelling use of scent. This genre will also permit the study to tread in relatively uncharted waters, considering that literary olfaction has been more extensively tackled in European literature.

The state of the question will have to be approached on both fronts: olfaction on one hand, and Southern Gothic on the other. In order to tackle the subject over a solid foundation, this work will first quickly sum up how the Southern Gothic has come to be, standing since its birth with one foot on a tradition of American Gothic and the other on a strong sense of regional identity. This section will also survey the main theories surrounding the genre, as well as the shapes it has taken on in this day and age. It will then move on to a quick presentation of the six authors and ten works which make up the corpus. The ten texts occupy a vast enough room, spatially and temporally, to offer diversity and a proper look into the South, yet in reason of their belonging to the same genre, they are similar enough to be comparable. It will then move on to olfaction, sketch its importance throughout history as well as the most pervasive theories relating to it, then explore its place in the recent academic discourse, in both the history and the literary fields. This discourse will serve as a framework all throughout the dissertation to analyse and compare the occurrences of smells present in the chosen stories.

This dissertation will explore the subject at hand through the medium of three prisms. Because smells always have a recipient and a source, the first two will be the act of smelling and the nature of the smells. The first section will stop to take a look at “smell” as a verb and as an active deed. It will study the precise functions of smelling in the literature at hand, concepts that will keep on being important for the rest of the work and will therefore emerge again inside the other sections. The second prism will occupy the bulk of the text: it dives deep into the precise smells that exist inside the narratives, in order to unearth what they say about the story they are a part in, about its author, and about the South at large. Because this study is first and foremost a literary one, the third prism is a closer reading at the way these smells are

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, “America” and its resulting adjective will be used out of convenience to refer to the United States of America, rather than the continent.

written. Once the nature of the smells and their importance has been asserted, the dissertation will gather the olfactory occurrences that have already been examined previously, as well as some new ones, to analyse them on a syntactical level, taking a closer look at the way these Southern Gothic authors write smells and apply olfaction to their individual and distinctive voices.

For obvious reasons, these prisms will seep into one another. With a subject such as this, clear-cut borders and complete subject changes are impossible. All of the smells present across all of these stories have a witness, a nature, and are first and foremost linguistic realizations. For that very reason, each olfactory occurrence could in theory be placed in all three sections. I have selected the most relevant ones for each theme, allowing for the different works to be compared and contrasted while at the same time making connections between them to reveal broader patterns which go through the genre. Just as the sense itself, the theory that will be used to make sense of it is plural: it touches upon the fields of medicine, physics, history and, naturally, literature.

### 1.1. British, American, and Southern Gothics

The word “gothic” has taken on a myriad of significations throughout time, amassing them to the point of sometimes forming an extremely heterogeneous lump. Outside of literature, the term refers to a large range of aesthetics spread across many fields. For that reason, there only seems to exist a shallow cohesion between the different iterations of the word, depending on whether it is used in relation to history, architecture, music or even fashion. Inside of literature, the gothic umbrella has now become tentacular, but it comes from a relatively solid and agreed-upon background. Horace Walpole is consensually held up as the father of the genre, thanks to his 1764 tale *The Castle of Otranto*. Walpole originally presented it as the recovered manuscript of an actual medieval romance and posed as the translator. That pretence was short-lived. In its second edition the following year, it displayed the subtitle “a gothic story” (Clery in Hogle 21). This second edition also re-established the truth, i.e. that it was a modern creation simply reviving medieval tropes and aesthetics (Hogle 1), having “more to do with new theories about the social origins of medieval literature than with actual imitation of them” (Clery in Hogle 25). According to John Mullan, the word “gothic” was used in the subtitle to mean “barbarous” or “deriving from the Middle Ages” (n.pag.). For E. J. Clery it is a “flippant paradox,” meant to irritate the critics of the time by posing the contradiction of a “gothic story” having a modern author (in Hogle 21). The word gothic in relation to literature therefore has an interesting

genesis: it was self-attributed, rather than ascribed by a later generation of critics (although Walpole certainly meant it in an entirely different meaning than the one it has earned since).

Moreover, the subtitle indicates an aspect that would later prove foundational to the genre: the explicit reference to the Middle Ages means that from the beginning, even before its first complete sentence, the gothic genre has been heavily concerned with the past. *The Castle of Otranto* was a strong response to its birthplace, the rational, progress-obsessed England of the late eighteenth century. In the very heart of the Industrial Revolution, *Otranto* is a challenge to the dogma of Enlightenment because it revisits supernatural plots that were viewed as obsolete: “romances had been called improbable; now Walpole accused modern fiction of being too probable” (Clery in Hogle 23). The gothic genre took some time before gathering up speed, Walpole himself moving on to other literary endeavours. He wrote a play titled *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), set “at the dawn of the Reformation,” and in this sense is considered by Clery as “anti-Gothic” (31). It took several years before the foundations he laid with *Otranto* were utilized by others (31). Fourteen years after *Otranto*’s first publication, Clara Reeve published *The Champion of Virtue*, a story set in medieval England, balancing supernatural elements with contemporary realism. It was reissued the following year under the new title *The Old English Baron* (Hogle xviii). The preface of the book explicitly lists *Otranto* as an inspiration, and defines itself as its “literary offspring” (Reeve 5). If Reeve’s novel is arguably not among the most famous works of the genre, the early gothic canon is well-known, still popular, and largely unanimous. Among which, Ann Radcliffe’s oeuvre throughout the 1790s. She cultivated a brand of gothic that was faithful to Walpole’s romance, and added rational explanations to supernatural events, smoothing over some of her predecessor’s starker contradictions by “[reconciling] Protestant incredulity and the taste for ghostly terror” (Clery in Hogle 26-27). With best-sellers such as *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), *The Italian* (1797), or *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), she helped popularize the genre and secure its tropes: a striking and eerie scenery, an aristocratic villain, a virginal heroine, and supernatural events that clashed with (or soothed) the Industrial Revolution zeitgeist. These were all, or most, used in later gothic works published in the century that followed, the most popular of whom are Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth The Wanderer* (1820), or Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).

At the same moment, another continent saw the rise of a parallel branch of gothic fiction. Because of its absence of a feudal past, which had been used in Europe as the backdrop of gothic fiction, the New World “seemed inherently resistant to Gothic stories and settings”

(Lloyd-Smith 26). Nevertheless, North America witnessed the arrival and “stubborn [flourishing]” of the genre, which imitated existing forms while putting a distinctly American spin on it (Savoy in Hogle 167-168). Eric Savoy describes the cultural function of the American Gothic as “entirely paradoxical”:

an optimistic country founded upon the Enlightenment principles of liberty and “the pursuit of happiness,” a country that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims, has produced a strain a literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow (in Hogle 167).

In other words, the genre served to show the dark other side of the American Dream’s coin. To a certain extent, a similar point can be made about European gothic romances. They were a reaction to the era, a “counterfeit” representation of the past that revealed a modern exhaustion from logic, and a longing for escapism into a romanticized and paranormal vision of history. However, whereas the European Gothic drew into references to a past that were widely shared in the popular consciousness, it seemed that no such references were available to white American authors, who were geographically far from the European medieval past, and culturally far from indigenous history. Furthermore, in Leslie Fielder’s words, “[America] was united in a disavowal of the ‘morbid’ and the ‘nasty’” (144), a claim that simply could not be made in Europe because of the old continent’s historical roots. Jason Haslam and Joel Faflak dismiss this divergence in *American Gothic Culture*, in which they state that the idea of America without Eurocentric history is fundamentally wrong, as the new continent was, at its core, more “palimpsest” than “blank slate” (3).

In the absence of romantic European ruins to be used as a setting, the American Gothic focused more closely on metaphors and themes (Savoy 167). Savoy goes to explain that the local flavour of American Gothic does not come from “formulaic plots and situations of an aristocratic genre being adapted to the democratic situation of the new world”, but from a profound ability of adaptation and innovation (in Hogle 168). Early American Gothic combined the ghostly atmosphere of European Gothic (with an emphasis on the uncanny) with a “turn inwards” (Milbank in Hogle 151), that is to say a deeper look into psychological perversity, an element that, according to Clery, also has to give credit to Walpole, who laid the groundwork not solely with *Otranto*, but with his “anti-Gothic” play:

As an example of natural horror and an investigation of the extremes of human nature, [*The Mysterious Mother*] was unquestionably influential on a developing strand of psychological Gothic, distinct from supernatural fiction, found in the work of William Godwin, Joanna Baillie, Mary Shelley, Lord Byron, and the Americans Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe (Clery in Hogle 31).



If it is tempting to point to Walpole as the sole origin of several strands of literary gothic, one has to be careful to not put too much emphasis on what has stayed a lesser-known play. It would mean disregarding the universality of some themes, as well as the literary disposition of the time and place. The “unquestionable influence” that *The Mysterious Mother* had on authors (Lord Byron admired it greatly)<sup>2</sup> at least serves to illustrate the tight-knit relation between fantastic and psychological gothics.

Along with Nathaniel Hawthorne, the American authors cited in the quotation above are indeed the most notorious early American Gothicists, but if Charles Brockden Brown was the first one with the publication of *Wieland* in 1798, Edgar Allan Poe unequivocally gave long-lasting success and reach to the genre, going down in history as the prolific father of the American Gothic. He cemented many of its most notable characteristics. These were defined not by a substitution of setting, e.g. replacing Italian ruins by wilderness, but by a focus on the specific anxieties that defined the American experience (Lloyd-Smith 4). Such anxieties include:

The frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment, the relative absence of developed “society”; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans. That these circumstances invited and even required a Gothic style is shown by the inclusion of “Gothic” elements within such clearly non-Gothic texts as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Spy* (1821), or *The Prairie* (1827). Such texts are not so much working to *adapt* the Gothic mode; instead the Gothic emerges from the conditions they seek to describe (4).

These circumstances diverge sharply from those experienced in Europe at the time. Justin D. Edwards defines American Gothic in opposition with its British predecessor. Whereas British Gothic is delineated “by its fantastic, metaphysical, externalized and class-based characteristics,” the American version is “historical, psychological, internalized” and focused on “predominantly racial concerns” (xvii). Because of those anxieties, some critics have seen almost all of the literary output of America as gothic (Lloyd-Smith 4). However true this might be about the United States in general, it is possibly even more so for the South.

Although having been born in Boston, Poe has been claimed by the South in reason of his having spent the majority of his life in Virginia, a place which undeniably permeated his writing (Anderson 24-25). In *Edgar Allan Poe and the Southern Gothic*, Tom F. Wright

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<sup>2</sup> Lord Byron described it as a “a tragedy of the highest order, and not a puling love-play” in the preface to *Marino Faliero* (1821).

questions the place of Poe inside the American canon, including on geographical terms. Contrary to other gothics, which question society and the nation, Poe's is turned inwards, it "is the gothic of agonized introspection," heavily concerned with elements of "morbid introversion" and "the motif of enclosure" (10-11). His addressing universal themes, such as the limitations and betrayals of the individual mind and its capacity for evil, makes him universal rather than placeless: he transcends any given time or place (11). As Wright argues, Poe's existence in the American canon suggests "that the Gothic is a state of mind, not a state of the Union" (11). Many critics would, if not outright contradict that, at least amend it: some states, for historical, social or aesthetic reasons, simply accommodate the gothic form better than others. Poe writes before the Civil War, a time period that crystalized the literature of the South and, further than that, Southern identity as a whole (9). It is therefore tempting to discard Poe's affiliation to the Southern Gothic as an anachronism, but Wright argues that although many of his stories are "placeless," their approach to themes of familial decay, nightmarish aristocracy and racial fanaticism establish Poe as an author of Southern Gothic, on a thematic basis at the very least (10).

Poe's personal flavour of gothic, written mid-nineteenth century, is still in many ways closer to "traditional" European Gothic than Faulkner's or O'Connor's would be some hundred years later. This would indicate that the temporal bond is, if not necessarily stronger, at least just as important as the geographical one: different iterations of gothic are related to one another (or far removed) on a temporal as well as a spatial basis:

Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (the first gothic novel) bears as little or as much relationship to Edgar Allan Poe's tales as they do to Clive Barker's *Books of Blood*. Although the terms 'gothic genre' may be singular its incarnations are diverse and often retain only the slightest genuflection towards an original 'core' or formal set of generic properties. Furthermore, the nature of the gothic is so disparate that it can include (because of formal similarities) works of fiction that contain neither supernatural nor horror elements but which do contain similar attitudes to setting, atmosphere or style (Bloom 1).

The non-existence of a "core" which would run across every production of the genre suggests a relation of proximity and evolution between the different waves of gothic fiction, each new branch sprouting from, and building upon, the previous one. This explains the great diversity that exists in the genre, as well as its blurred borders. Kathryn B. Mackee underlines the importance of "understanding not just national boundaries as porous, but generic ones as well" (13). Further than national boundaries, the regional identity has had a deep influence on American Gothic. It has produced several regional variations, more or less successfully: New England Gothic, Midwestern Gothic, Pacific Northwest Gothic... The level of academic

acceptance varies greatly for each term, but they have all gathered some significance in popular culture. One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon is that the United States form a continent-sized country with vastly different climates and landscapes, and that gothic fiction is intrinsically linked to the atmosphere of the land. Although the exact boundaries and, to some extent, the very existence of some of those regional subgenres are subject to discussion, Southern Gothic has unquestionably surpassed the others in reach, volume, and prestige. This gothic subgenre set in the “Deep South” is now firmly established on the American literary landscape, with a tradition including a range of critically acclaimed writers from William Faulkner to, more recently, Cormac McCarthy. Southern Gothic is without a doubt the more vigorous of all American regional gothics.

There is substantial debate regarding which states make up the South and where the borders should be drawn. They shift and blur depending on whether one chooses to approach the question on a cultural or historical basis, and in the latter case, whether to focus on their being a slave state, or part of the Confederation. For the sake of practicality, I will use in this paper the strictest (and most widely spread) acceptation of the term, meaning the eleven states that seceded from the Union during the American Civil War: Mississippi, South Carolina, North Carolina, Louisiana, Florida, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Virginia, Arkansas and Tennessee. Together they make up the “Deep South”, which makes them universally accepted as places that have produced Southern Gothic works. Some of them seem to have generated a steadier (or at least more popular) output than others, whereas some seem to offer a more “typically Southern” aesthetic that lends itself better to a (sometimes cliché) local colour: e.g. the Louisiana bayous, or the lush grandness of historical Savannah, Georgia. In any case, in *South Toward Home*, a 2015 travel memoir constructed around famous Southern authors, Alabamian journalist and critic Margaret Eby points to the fact that, conversely, there are no popular “northern” categories of literature (11). Indeed, ever since the Civil War, Southern authors and literary critics alike have designated a special Southern cultural identity, either to embrace it or reject it.

Although the Southern Gothic genre has benefited from a relatively steady popularity, both in commercial and academic terms, there seems to have been little scholarly discourse about what effectively constitutes a Southern Gothic story. Characteristics are mentioned here and there, but rarely ever expanded upon. In many cases, secondary literature on the subject assumes that the reader is familiar with, if not necessarily the outlines of the genre, at least the general “quality” of it. Many papers seem to work under the assumption that one only has to

take a look at the novels most consensually regarded as being part of the genre to realize that the title does not merely refer to the sum of its parts: the Southern Gothic does not simply encompass all that is gothic and hails from the American South. As professor of Comparative Literature and Cinema Rick Altman wrote, "[w]e all know a genre when we see one" (6). His statement was made about film genre but interpreted about literature, it makes a statement about the visual nature of the popular genre. Gothic as a whole is a good example of it: Robert Hemenway, cited in Teresa Goddu's *Gothic America*, describes the gothic mode as "difficult to define, but easy to classify" (Goddu 3). It proves possibly even truer for Southern Gothic. Because of its shared referents over a vast geographical space that nonetheless was built around the same cultural markers, the genre has a somewhat homogeneous aesthetic. Of course, a literary genre is a hard thing to outline. There is no clear-cut separation: one bleeds into the other, which is even truer in the case of neighbouring subgenres, such as Southern Gothic in comparison to other regional gothics, or the broader category of American Gothic as a whole. This creates room for subjectivity. However, there are some characteristics that permeate Southern Gothic so thoroughly that they can be used as signposts of the genre: the theme of decay, conveyed in many ways (derelict settings, familial dissolution, physical decomposition, etc.), social critique (especially towards poverty and racism), flawed characters, perversity, a tone and a plot using irony and the macabre (Crow 434). It also foregrounds themes of Christianity, sometimes blasphemously, and often through the figure of Jesus Christ. In true gothic form, it is also characterized with an obsession with the past and the seeping of a bygone era into the present. This is sharply illustrated by what is probably Faulkner's most famous quote, written in 1951 in *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." It is, however, even more sharply illustrated by the fact that it has been quoted in a myriad of academic works published about the South since then.

If the gothic mode is indeed best described as a "fiction concerned with the horrifying impress of the past" as Lloyd-Smith argues (61), then in Southern Gothic, that past is of course the ghost of slavery. More than anything else, the genre is "imbued [with] entrapment and despair, flight and pursuit, the inescapability of the past in the present, or the extreme pressures of racial hostilities and a lost southern mythos" (61). About the literature of Faulkner, he writes that "nothing less than the gothic mode is fully able to express the reality of the South" (Lloyd-Smith 61). This view has been shared by many critics who have emphasized the strong bond between the gothic and the Deep South, either to make the point that the gothic is the ideal mode to express the horrors and trauma of the place, or conversely, saying that because of that

looming past, anything generated by and about the South is necessarily Gothic (Lloyd 79). Teresa Goddu hints at a political aspect of those notions, writing that “by closely associating the gothic with the South, the American literary tradition neutralizes the gothic’s threat to national identity” (76). This idea works hand in hand with the assumption that the South is “the nation’s other,” a part of it yet also in contradiction with the rest of the whole (Lloyd 79). As long as it is considered the repository of all the violence and bizarreness of the nation, the South allows the North to keep its image as a place of progress and enlightenment.

Many notable scholars of Southern Gothic literature, among whom Bridget Marshall and Allan Lloyd-Smith, have used the term “strains” to delimitate subspecies of the genre (Borwein 269). Lloyd-Smith splits the genre in four sections: “popular, realistic (or Faulknerian), Afro-American, and supernatural” (quoted in Borwein 269). For Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, there is a greater number of variants, whereas Peggy Dunn Bailey limits her categorization to two strains only: supernatural and realistic (quoted in Borwein 269). Although every one of these classifications can easily be argued for depending on where one places the threshold, the dual system is by far the most practical one, as it leaves very little room for personal opinion. In any case, whether one prefers Lloyd-Smith or Bailey’s approach, the most emblematic strain of Southern Gothic is the one they both call “realistic” and, in Lloyd-Smith case, the one subtitled “Faulknerian.” A general research for Southern Gothic’s key texts, be it online or in printed reference works (including but not limited to: *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South*, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*) displays first and disproportionately realistic works, mostly by William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Harper Lee and Carson McCullers. They are often followed by light supernatural tales, belonging to the magical realism. This shows that regardless of how many strains one chooses to count, the realistic-Faulknerian one is by far the prototype of the genre, most accepted by academia and the general readership alike.

Southern Gothic literature has imposed itself as a popular genre, although a somewhat dormant one. The label has even crossed into other media. In musical terms, it is used somewhat interchangeably with “dark country” or “gothic country” and refers to a subgenre of country music that is heavily concerned with macabre themes. It holds a strong thematic bond to its literary counterpart, as the lyrics tend to share an interest in poverty, death, crime, alcohol, and religion seen from a blasphemous point of view, especially through the figure of the devil. It is interestingly not entirely linked to the South, as Denver, Colorado is identified as being one of

its main scenes.<sup>3</sup> The Southern Gothic denomination has also been co-opted into television, recently with two HBO productions set in Louisiana, the 2008-2014 horror drama about vampirism *True Blood*, which was followed after its finale by the critically acclaimed crime drama *True Detective* from 2014 to 2019. They respectively illustrate the two most popular “strains” of Southern Gothic: the former is a paranormal story, the latter a realistic yet grim take on the region. They both rely heavily on the location to feed the uncanny atmosphere of the narrative, and do so through sight as well as hearing, by using a soundtrack of dark country or religious hymns over shots which highlight the visual specificities of the region. These productions have allowed the genre to endure in popular culture (if not exactly revitalized it), since in literature, there has arguably been no major work of Southern Gothic in the last fifteen years. The recent *Southern Book Club’s Guide to Slaying Vampire*, published by Quirk Books in April 2020, resembles *True Blood* with its premise, but although it tries to address race, class, and crime, the fact that those themes are not foregrounded makes it tempting to ask whether it is simply gothic-inspired paraliterature set in the South, rather than actual Southern Gothic.

## 1.2. Corpus

Since it is impossible to discuss a genre exhaustively, this dissertation will cover Southern Gothic literature through a selection of a dozen novels, which span seventy-five years, as well as a vast range of locations and themes. They are all widely accepted to be part of the Southern Gothic canon, whether they are flagships of the genre, firmly installed among its ranks, or newer, looser takes on the archetypes and themes that constitute it.

William Faulkner being the most emblematic and most critically acclaimed author of the subgenre (and possibly of the American South in general), his use of smell will be analysed over three of his most popular stories. They are, in chronological order of publication: *The Sound and the Fury*, his 1929 novel about a struggling aristocratic southern family, an extremely successful book, both on a commercial and critical scale as it is widely considered a masterpiece. The second is the 1930 short story “A Rose for Emily” about the isolation and downhill trajectory of a rich family represented by its sole surviving member, the old and recluse Emily Grierson. The third is the more political *Intruder in the Dust*, in which Faulkner

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<sup>3</sup> Ricardo Baca. “‘The Denver Sound’ and more.” in *The Denver Post*, 26 July 2006, <https://www.denverpost.com/2006/07/26/the-denver-sound-and-more/> Accessed 14 March 2020.

addresses more directly the racial issues plaguing the South. It tells the tale of a black man being falsely accused of murdering a white man, and the efforts of black and white youths to exonerate him. It was published in 1948, two years before the Mississippian author was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Carson McCullers, a Georgia native who spent her life between New York and the Deep South, constantly wrote and published Southern Gothic throughout the mid twentieth century. This dissertation will use one of her best-known works, the 1940 novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Friend of McCullers's Truman Capote, who later went on to find fame through stories of true crime and New York socialites, grew up between Louisiana and Alabama. His literary roots are firmly planted in the Southern Gothic, as demonstrates his first published novel, the semi-autobiographical *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). In it, thirteen-year-old Joel is sent from vibrant New Orleans to a decaying plantation in rural Alabama, to live with his father. This novel is somewhat singular in the Southern Gothic canon, in that it is at once extremely gothic (in the more traditional, or that is to say European, acceptance of the term) and puts on display an aesthetic that is exclusive to the Deep South. The next author who will be discussed is other Georgia native Flannery O'Connor. Examples will be used from several of her short stories, among which the famous "A Good Man is Hard to Find," published in 1955. However, it is her novel *Wise Blood*, published three years earlier that will be discussed in a more systematic manner, as it offers a very original take on olfaction. In this deeply grotesque story, the enigmatic Hazel Motes gives up religion in favour of fervent atheism after his return from the army. This essay will also address *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning classic novel about racial inequality and the justice system in Alabama, and the singular sensory profile it provides. To examine more recent iterations of Southern Gothic that have nonetheless made a place for themselves in the genre, two novels by Cormac McCarthy will be analysed. The first is *Child of God* (1973), a horror story set in Tennessee about an outcast who becomes a serial killer in order to fuel his necrophiliac impulses. The second jumps over a couple of decades with the post-apocalyptic *The Road*, which was published in 2006 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year.

All of the authors studied as primary literature in this corpus are unambiguously Southerners. The only exception could be found in Cormac McCarthy, who was born in the state of Rhode Island, but he grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. He has been dubbed by the

press “Southern Literature’s Adopted Son”<sup>4</sup> and a “disciple of Faulkner.”<sup>5</sup> He is also the author of the only text in the corpus which is not explicitly about the South. If *Child of God*, the first of his work to be used here, is set in Tennessee and therefore offers a look into the Appalachian South, *The Road* makes no explicit mention of place, except for a “rich southern wood” (13). Wesley Morgan, professor of literature and McCarthy scholar, intended to recreate the path followed by the protagonists of *The Road*. He posits that the path goes through the settings of McCarthy’s first four novels, in Tennessee, and ends up in his hometown of Knoxville (Walsh ix). In a most relevant way, critics have largely accepted it as a southern work due to its themes and tone. Christopher Walsh calls *The Road* McCarthy’s “return to the South,” after a string of stories set in Western and Southwestern settings (ix). Furthermore, in the story, harsh climatic conditions force a father to take his son on a journey *south*, a motif that permeates the text and which, from McCarthy’s part, is hardly insignificant.

Rather than being discussed one after the other, in chronological order, these works will be grouped in this dissertation according to the way in which they address olfaction. Each of them will therefore crop up in different sections all throughout the work, in order to reveal certain patterns running through the whole genre and, potentially, through literature in general.

### 1.3. Olfaction

*The Smell of Books*, Hans J. Rindisbacher’s seminal account on olfaction in European literature opens on the sentence: “Western society has a history of distrust of the senses” (1). He goes on to explain that sensory experiences have long been relegated behind cognitive data: by being intrinsically subjective, varying from one individual to the next, senses have long been seen as chaotic, therefore one would do well not to place too much confidence in them. What is true for senses in general is even truer for smells, although the discourse on olfaction appears to have been more concerned with *disgust* than with *distrust*. Historically speaking, smell has always been “the pariah among the senses” (Adams n.pag.). The hierarchy dates back to Plato, for whom sight was the most deserving of the senses. Smell and taste, which were often said to form a unit, were located at the bottom of the ladder (Reinarz 5). Even further, Plato asserted

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<sup>4</sup> Lindsay Parnell. “Cormac McCarthy: Southern Literature’s Adopted Son.” in *The Culture Trip*, 12 October 2006 <https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/texas/articles/cormac-mccarthy-reinventing-the-southern-gothic/> Accessed 23 January 2019

<sup>5</sup> Orville Prescott. “Still Another Disciple of William Faulkner.” in *The New York Times*, 12 May 1965 <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/specials/mccarthy-orchard.html?>



that smell was a “half-formed” sense, not fine-tuned enough to pick up on subtleties, because of mankind’s poorly designed nasal channels (ibid.). Plato’s ranking has had long-lasting reach in Western thinking: in the early-nineteenth century, German historian Lorenz Oken even ranked the senses, at the same time assigning them to races: the European was the “eye-man,” occupying the first place. Smell came third, associated with Native Americans (Reinarz 45). If Europeans have always given more importance to sight than smell, olfaction has been gaining some attention recently. In 1992, Rindisbacher even affirms that “the olfactory has made it” (289). However, it is far from being a consensus, even at the time: in 1994, Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott write that “smell is probably the most undervalued sense in the modern West” (2-3). Fast-forwarding two decades, Jonathan Reinarz chimes in in 2014: “[t]he sense of smell remains at the bottom of the sense hierarchy, where it has lingered for centuries” (5). For centuries indeed, smell has been considered a taboo subject as it is seen to closely pertain to the human body and its secretions. Smells are only considered by the system and the mass as a nuisance; they correlate to the bestial and the primitive (Miller 75). The only reflection they bring about revolves around how to eliminate them (Miller 228). Immanuel Kant went as far as to call it “the most easily dispensable” of the senses, adding that “[i]t is not worth cultivating or refining in order to enjoy it, for there are more objects of disgust [...] than of pleasure” (quoted in Rindisbacher 149). The only redemptive quality of olfaction is, according to Kant, that it can prove useful as a “negative condition of well-being” (ibid.). That stance was mirrored by a large majority of scholars until the turn of the twentieth century, when smell gradually became an academic topic (147).

Numerous have been the studies that examine a specific time period through the prism of sensory experiences, especially in recent years. Historian Mark M. Smith published in 2008 a monograph titled *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching in History*. In 2017, he published a book using the same approach but focusing on the Civil War, one of the most written-about subjects in history. *The Smell of Battle, The Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* investigates that period through the lens of each of the five senses in turn, and spends a chapter analysing in depth the part played by smell during the battle of Gettysburg. In his note on sources, Smith explains that the sensory field has grown exponentially over the last three decades, and that many historians, regardless of field of study, “have made the sensory turn” (151). Cultural historian Constance Classen has also contributed heavily to the field over the recent past. She has worked on all senses, particularly touch, as well as smell in *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (1994), co-authored by Anthony Synnott

and David Howes. Both Mark M. Smith and Constance Classen are on the editorial board of the series “Studies in Sensory History” published by the University of Illinois Press. The series issued in 2014 a volume about smell, written by Jonathan Reinartz, professor of the History of Medicine at the University of Birmingham, titled *Past Scents: Historical Perspective on Smell*. In it, Reinartz delves into many cultures and periods, synthesizing a large amount of existing research in the field, and offers an invaluable sociological take on olfaction by addressing the relation between smell and class, gender, or race, among others. In so doing, it serves as one of several reference works for this dissertation.

The English-speaking academic world is far from being the only one to have “made the sensory turn.” In the French-speaking world, for example, historian Alain Corbin pioneered the field by publishing in 1982 *Le Miasme et la jonquille : l'odorat et l'imaginaire social*. The more recent *La civilisation des odeurs* (2014) by Robert Muchembled offers a very thorough study of olfaction in France, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century. Because it is quite removed from the place and time this paper focuses on, most of its teachings are not directly applicable here, but in any case, Muchembled’s study offers interesting, universal groundwork. The book frames olfaction as a fundamentally binary experience, designed either for pleasure or disgust, an axiom that is broadly accepted in the field, and will be explored closer in the Eros/Thanatos section of this paper.

In addition to these volumes which centre closely on olfaction, smell is also a recurring topic on historical studies about the perfume industry, disgust, and sexuality. A brief analysis of the field shows that smell has been tackled more consistently on a historical basis than a literary one. Indeed, the “sensory turn” has been slow to make its way into literary studies:

The absence of critical investigation into the representation of the sense of smell in literature is particularly surprising in the light of the general attention focused on the representation of the body in Western culture. Written large in recent critical discourse, the body has been gendered, raced, and classed, but it remains a strangely *odorless* body (Fjellestad 641).

There has been research on the matter, to be sure, but it seems to be mainly composed of papers which analyse olfaction through a narrow and comprehensive prism, such as one novel or one author, and those papers are few and far between. The most ambitious work on the subject is still Rindisbacher’s helpful *The Smell of Books* (1992), as no one seems to have approached the theme of olfaction in literature with such a broad gaze: he addresses no less than five countries over 150 years. Rindisbacher certainly gives an invaluable overview of the question. Nonetheless, his work only considers European literature and, moreover, can obviously only account for critical works published before 1992. There has been virtually no comprehensive

review or follow-up about how this reference work has impacted the research field. Although the discursive dimension surrounding smell has changed since the publication of *The Smell of Books*, olfaction has nonetheless stayed firmly put inside the category of “sub-senses,” along with taste and touch. Scents are still largely considered as something to be eliminated and the public opinion of the sense pertaining to it has not departed from Kantian territory, as it is not seen as an ability worth cultivating. Despite Rindisbacher's claim that “the olfactory has made it,” it still seems to be lagging behind the other senses, even if there has been no comparative study of literary works pitting olfaction against sight, vision, hearing or touch. This would undeniably prove a complicated task, as it would entail precise delimitations and cues for each sense. Indeed, what in a fictional narrative is *not* about sight? The act of reading itself certainly is, although the Braille writing system and audiobooks question even that. Fortunately, in the written medium, smell is often unambiguous. Its semantic field has quite clear demarcations, although the figurative often borrows it in a myriad of phrases.

Except from a few exceptions, the most notable of which are undoubtedly Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) and Patrick Süskind's ground-breaking *Perfume* in 1985, smell rarely takes centre stage in fiction. It could be argued that this explains why so little secondary literature has focused on that aspect of the written word, but it is hard to determine who, between authors and critics, has been more influenced and limited by the long depiction of olfaction as a sub-sense. Among the authors studied in this dissertation, Faulkner appears to be the only one to have been studied on an olfactory basis. No other Southern Gothic smells have been put under the microscope, not even those of Carson McCullers, who uses them abundantly, or Cormac McCarthy's, for whom olfaction is an integral part of the narrative. This state of the field has undoubtedly to do with the fact that Faulkner is the most studied author in the corpus overall. Be that as it may, the fact that Faulkner's smells have elicited some conversation in no way undeserved: his fiction is rife with sensory experiences. Smell forms a well-sized part of the southern landscape in which his novels take place. Authors rarely appear to engage with smell as much as Faulkner does, unless the plot they are writing is explicitly about fragrances. Delving into Faulkner's descriptions of smell leaves no doubt as to the fact that “[t]he thing that will last longest about Faulkner's writing is his uncanny and highly artistic ability to communicate sensation” (Foote 41). It is especially astonishing then to know that Faulkner himself said of his use of olfaction cues that “[t]here's no reason, there's certainly no deliberate intent [for them]” (quoted in Aiken 226). Faulkner never shies away from depicting it in his literary work. On the contrary, he times and

again puts it centre stage, pushing the boundaries of what can actually be conveyed with olfaction. Nevertheless, according to Breanna Muir of the University of Manitoba, the sensory environment in Faulkner's work has received too little attention, smell being the most severely overlooked of the five (1). Given the scarceness of literary criticism on olfaction, the very existence of Paul Carmignani's "William Faulkner: À vue de nez," a paper published in 1990 in the *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines* and cited by Muir, raises the question of how little really is *too* little in comparison with other authors. Carmignani's study is admittedly only a dozen pages long, yet many authors have received even less attention in terms of olfaction. As a result, it is hard to say whether it is Faulkner's use of smell that has been overlooked or simply the sense of smell in fiction in general.

The long dismissal of smell is not the only reason that olfaction makes up so little of sensorial instances in literature or, to be more precise, that reason is two-faceted. Roland Barthes wrote "écrite, la merde ne se sent pas" (820). Rindisbacher adds that the same can be said of all sensorial retellings (14). He explains it as follows: "[i]t is in the nature of language as a reference system to allude to reality not to recreate the 'thing itself,' but to appeal to the imagination to trigger a representation of that thing" (14). The experience of the senses as they appear in literature is therefore a linguistic phenomenon rather than a sensorial one. As a result, the recall potential of any sensorial instance (whether it is a smell, a taste, a noise, a sight or a contact) depends directly on the possibilities offered by language to describe it. Senses are inherently restricted by the vocabulary used to experience or outline them in any given idiom. When wondering why smell suffers from such a bad literary reputation, the first answer is naturally to be found in linguistics. The vocabulary of scents depends on a heavily metonymic language which lacks a "paradigmatic structure" (Rindisbacher v):

The linguistic restrictions for the sense of smell are particularly dramatic insofar as language has not developed an abstract terminology for referring to smells [...] The lack of terminological paradigms as they exist for colors necessitates a linguistic detour through the metaphoric, that is, a breach of reference level in the text each time we attempt to describe smells adjectivally. The same holds true for the common reference to smells in terms of their origins. 'It smells like' or 'the smell of' expresses relations of combination and contiguity rather than of selection and similarity. These two points may serve as a preliminary explanation of why the sense of smell is so often considered the most apt to trigger memory. Its very linguistic structure brings up an Other, a reference to the outside (15).

There is simply "no semantic field of smells"; they can only be referred to by metonymical expressions derived from their origins (Sperber 116), or through a small range of adjectives borrowed from taste (Classen et al. 109). In Robert M. Adams's words: "[w]e can talk of an onion smell, of balsam, roses, or skunks, but cannot categorize the odors themselves convincingly" (n.pag.). According to the Western rationale, senses can only be trusted once

they are communicated, and in the case of smells, words fail us. As literature is entirely reliant on language, it is the first victim of its shortcomings. However, the metonymic state of the vocabulary of olfaction also hints at a different aspect of the literary descriptions of scents. Since smells are pointed out via the objects or phenomena from which they originate, this could mean that the environment an author describes can evoke a scent without it needing to be explicitly acknowledged. In other words, to reuse Adams's examples, simply writing about an onion, a rose or a skunk in a non-olfactory manner could conjure up smells for the reader. Keeping in mind that smell is, out the five senses, the “most apt to trigger memory” for neural reasons (the storage of memories and the identification of smells occur in the same part of the brain), this could mean that any work of fiction creates a *de facto* olfactory tapestry, more or less rich depending on the nature of the narration. It would be personal for every reader and escape the control of the author. Rindisbacher's text already points to that conclusion when it mentions that a work that depicts many explicit smells can leave the reader with an odourless impression and that, as a result, the “simple quantitative account [...] cannot do justice to the reader's subjective impressions” (141). To check to what degree this theory might be true, one would necessitate a more scientific approach, dealing with the cognitive sciences rather than strictly with literature or linguistics. Although such ambitious research does not seem to have been undertaken yet, one should nonetheless keep in mind that explicit references to scents in fiction represent only one side of the coin.

## 2. The Act of Smelling

In his sensory account of the Civil War, Mark M. Smith paraphrases an article published in 1856 in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. The piece, soberly titled “The Senses—Smell” departs sharply from the Platonic stance. It praised the nose and its many abilities, as well as congratulated it on its design, in that it differs from the nose of animals, which is squashed and close to the mouth:

The human nose, on the other hand, was noble because it performed so many functions: breathing, modulating the voice, presenting the character of the person and, above all, smelling. Those with a “fine nose” and possessing a “keen scent” were of sound, refined judgement. The nose could distinguish easily between injurious and noxious smells and joyous, happy ones and, in this regard, was a sentinel against the objectionable and suspect. It could distinguish whether food was foul or safe, the body washed or unclean. It could detect character. In short, the nose was our “watchman” (Smith 67).

If some of the points made above are quite outlandish and would easily be discredited now (the habit of associating certain physical features with character traits has long ago gone out of style), the role of the nose as a guard is more or less universally accepted nowadays, and would have been hard to discredit even at the time. This did not stop antebellum puritanism from disagreeing. Just four years earlier, the very same magazine had published “The Cultivation of the Senses,” an essay which exhorted members of the good society to preserve the nobility of their senses by not exposing them to “impure sensory experience” (Smith 1). Under that vague label resides all the stimuli “that did not cultivate the senses, that jarred, strained and overloaded them” (ibid.). Too much exposure to impure sensory experience could “weaken the character of a man and, by extension, that of the nation” (ibid.). This is a somewhat counterintuitive point of view, considering smell especially is sensitive to habit, and resistance builds quickly when one is confronted to a disagreeable odour (Muchembled 26), yet it was widely shared and embraced in America at the time. Of course, these instructions were destined to the people who were lucky enough to be able to apply them: choosing what smells to surround oneself with was (and still is) a luxury that only the privileged could afford.

The belief that “impure sensory experience” was harmful was shared to some extent in all of the Western world: the massive efforts undertaken in every part of it in order to deodorize cities illustrate that. There existed an assumption, sustained by the social elite, that bad smells themselves carried toxic miasmas and could damage one’s health. Public safety was therefore dependent on the progresses of sanitization (78). It was just as much a cultural question: foul odours, associated with filth, meant a lack of refinement and character, whereas “clean smells denoted not just cleanliness but also decency,” resulting in “civilization and godliness” (78). The notion that pleasant smells signify goodness, and unpleasant ones, evil, is quite simplistic. In addition, it is elitist. However, it translates well into literature: authors can easily use that framework to introduce characters, places or situations as questionable, and put them in opposition with others. When smells appear in fiction, they are often distributed over the spectrum of bad-good smells. By virtue of being what Muchembled calls a “protean” sense (27), smell lends itself readily to descriptions: they can be subtle or intense, describe a habit or an event, be acknowledged by the characters or not. In all of these cases, it is important to determine who (if anyone) is doing the smelling.

Smell does appear often in the corpus in its function as a “watchman.” In that position, it is an act rather than a state of things. It differs from more descriptive occurrences of smells, many of which will be studied later in this dissertation. For the act of smelling to matter,

someone inside the story has to actively carry it out in order to do the discriminating that accompanies it, judging, as olfaction allows, “what [is] good and what [is] bad, what [is] true and what [is] false” (Smith 68). It rarely manifests inside the dialogue, yet is quite common in the narration (or as much as a “sub-sense” can be). Because of smell’s ability to distinguish between harmful and harmless, it is no surprise that, as an action, it appears the most systematically in *The Road*, where the discriminating power of olfaction is literally a matter of life and death. The unnamed father-son pair, to which the narrator refers as “the man” and “the boy,” struggle to feed and sustain themselves in their hostile environment. Since a mysterious catastrophe has hit the world years before the beginning of the story, progress seems to be a thing of the past, and mankind has either reverted back to a lifestyle of foraging or, apparently, has devolved into murder and cannibalism. The father and son are of the first category, and their sense of smell serves as their gatekeeper. It is less a source of pleasure or offense than it is a tool, and an indispensable one at that. The spectrum they work with is not even separated into good and bad smells, because they do not seem to encounter any smells that are particularly pleasing to the nose. The novel opens on the “stinking robes and blankets” they cover themselves in at night (1). In their world of permanent discomfort, even safety and rest are foul affairs. More pertinently, their spectrum is split into neutral-bad and dangerous-bad. If the smells they encounter are not horrendous or terrifying, they are good by default. The post-apocalyptic world the characters live in has stripped them of the luxury of beauty and the appreciation of it. Running for one’s own life is a full-time activity that does not give one time to stop and smell the roses (of which there are none, *The Road*’s America is mostly a large expanse of burnt-down nothingness). Instead, they use their noses to smell mushrooms before biting into them (41), to judge if there is any petrol left at a gas station (5) then later in a boat (242), sniff stones on the bank before going into the water (31), to predict the weather (247, 279, 297), and on numerous other occasions. The nose is their bodyguard, but it is also their guide, a role it shares with sight and hearing. When they suspect a presence behind them on the road, first “they [stand] watching” then they “[stand] listening. [...] No sound of any kind,” and quickly afterwards they can “see the smoke through the trees. A wind ha[s] begun to trouble the top of the spire and the smoke shift[s] and they [can] smell it. They [can] smell something cooking” (211). As a result, when they find themselves advancing in the darkness, they conveniently have two other senses on which to fall back (250).

To a less intense extent, the nose as a watchman emerges in other places in the corpus. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the servant girl Zoo, made by her father to pick up kindling in

the woods, protests the task, objecting that “[t]hey is a wildcat smell on the air, they is, I declare” (120). In *Wise Blood*, one of the two main characters' landlady is “almost totally blind but [moves] about by an acute sense of smell” (93), a piece of information that is particularly striking because one might assume that hearing and touch would be more convenient as replacements for a lost sense of sight. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when a mysterious benefactor leaves candy for the narrator Scout Finch and her brother Jem in the hole of a tree trunk, six-year-old Scout's first instinct is to raise the offering to her nose before determining it is inoffensive: “I examined my loot. The gum looked fresh. I sniffed it and it smelled all right” (37). She was right to trust her nose: it is later revealed that the giver was the mysterious Boo Radley who, despite his gruesome reputation, is a kind man and has been watching over the Finch children from a distance for a long time.

Sometimes distinguishing between smells is a matter of knowledge rather than survival. When Scout and Jem walk past a black settlement near their town, they are met with pleasant cooking smells:

There were delicious smells about: chicken, bacon frying crisp as the twilight air. Jem and I detected squirrel cooking, but it took an old countryman like Atticus to identify possum and rabbit, aromas that vanished when we rode back past the Ewell residence (188-189).

Being inherently subjective by reason of being a sense, smells are not recognized by everyone, nor are they experienced by everyone in the same exact way. Because most of the novels' narrations are focused on one character (or one character at a time), they rarely offer rich grounds for comparisons. In addition, the smells can sometimes be passive: they are mentioned by the narrator, often as a way to detail the setting, but no character actively smells them. However, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* has at its centre a handful of characters which are connected through the person of John Singer, a kind deaf-mute they all individually confide in. Carson McCullers, the author, fills her story with mentions of smells. Even though the way the sentences are formulated happens to make them impersonal, those smells appear to be filtered by each character the narration focuses on. For example, to the art-oriented teenage girl Mick Kelly, who has a rich inner life, the passing of the seasons is a deeply olfactory experience. While hosting a party, she is glad to step outside for a few minutes: [a]fter the hot, bright house she could smell the new autumn in the darkness” (100). Later, and still in her point of view, autumn has moved on from being actively *smelled* to just existing in the air: “[t]he air had a smell in it like autumn” (109). This offers an interesting comparison to the following chapter, centred on the down-to-earth café owner Biff Brannon, who experiences autumn through sight only: “the day was bright and hot, and the first dead leaves of the new autumn scraped in the



sidewalks” (111). Assumedly, the smell is still present in the town, but Biff does not acknowledge it. If, indeed, some have sharper senses of smell than others, Biff does not appear very interested in exercising his:

He visited the kitchen and had a talk with the cook. He lifted the lids and sniffed the food inside, but without heart for the matter. Alice always had done this part. He disliked it. His nose sharpened when he saw the greasy sink with its scum of food bits at the bottom (207).

Biff seems to follow the Kantian philosophy of olfaction: it is not worth cultivating because there are more objects of disgust than pleasure. It is only when smell connects him to his late wife through memory that he finds pleasure in it, an aspect that will be studied more closely in the next chapter.

Mick Kelly, on the other hand, undeniably finds pleasure in olfaction. Many of the chapters that centre on her mention a smell in an atmospheric, almost flippant manner, such as “there was the smell of warm cedars” (108) or “there was the smell of cigarettes and Sunday dinner” (95). If, at first, it is hard to be certain that it is Mick doing the smelling and not simply the narrator, passages like the following help settle the question:

The moon, white like milk, showed in the blue sky and the air was cold. She could hear Ralph and George and Portia in the kitchen. The fire in the stove made the kitchen window a warm orange. There was the smell of smoke and supper.

In McCuller's novel, sensory references are only this extensive in the Mick-centred chapters. What is more, the smell appears, along with sight and touch, in an enumeration that does make her an active participant in the experience through the use of “she could hear.” She is indeed the one seeing the moon “white like milk” and the “warm orange” of the kitchen windows, the metaphorical seemingly coming from her and not from the narrator. What also pushes the reader to interpret the above fragment as her perception is the fact that she is very sensitive to beauty and art. When she discovers Mozart’s music, she is so transcended by the beauty of the pieces that she decides to commit them to memory:

In her mind she could remember about six different tunes from the pieces of his she had heard. A few of them were kind of quick and tinkling, and another was like the smell in the spring time after a rain. But they all made her somehow sad and excited at the same time (37).

Music is a synesthetic experience for her. Not only does she find pleasure in smell, but she even uses olfactory perceptions to describe non-olfactory experiences that delight her, suggesting that she associates positive connotations, as well as a broad range of subtle emotions, to the sense.

It is not the only scenario in which the word “smell” and its semantic field are awarded new meanings. On the contrary, it is quite common for the vocabulary of olfaction to be used metaphorically. Many authors across the corpus do it, or more exactly, many authors have characters do it. Indeed, these (generally informal) phrases in relation with olfaction are uttered by the characters, and rarely by the narrator. There is only one notable exception, Flannery O’Connor, a subject that will be discussed in the chapter “Writing About Smells.” Sometimes the figurative stays close to the first sense, being used as a colloquial substitute for detecting or identifying. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick is surprised to find a larger turnout than she expected at her party. The reason seems to be that “there were even kids she didn’t know at all who had somehow smelled a party and come to hang around” (100). In *Wise Blood*, the protagonist Hazel Motes is told by a blind preacher “I can smell the sin on your breath” (43). This declaration could easily be taken literally if only there was anything to smell. However, Hazel has been a scrupulously virtuous man up to that point. His “sin” is intangible and it would appear that so is the preacher’s sense of smell, which picks up on more than physical scents.

Smell can also mean “know” or “encounter.” Once more in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the spirited black maid Portia tells her father Doctor Copeland all about Mr. Mason, a con man who has scammed several households in town. Mr. Mason pretended he was from Washington D.C. and that he came on behalf of the government to raise money for pensions, but people “[found] out he were from just plain Atlanta and hadn’t never smelled no Washington D.C., or no President” (71). Later in the story, when presented with two twenty-dollar bills, the volatile Jake Blount, a down on his luck, alcoholic communist, tells his benefactor “God knows why you do it. You’ll never smell them again” (304). Through these examples, smell emerges as the sense of contiguity. It signifies proximity and belonging or, if it is being negated, vacancy. This is fairly surprising given that taste, and arguably touch, might have served that meaning better. These are senses that are strictly affixed to the body: the source of the stimuli has to be in contact with the relevant organs for it to be experienced. Sounds and sights, on the other hand, can be perceived from a distance (even though they respectively exist through rays of light and frequencies being interpreted in the body). Smell occupies a liminal space between the two categories: if one believes the mainstream theory of chemical olfaction, it is scientifically-speaking a sense of contact, given that smells arise from airborne particles which lodge inside the nasal cavities (Horsfield et al. 937-977). In the popular consciousness however, sources tend to be conflated with smells, and on that basis, something can be smelled while being located far. In any case, modern olfaction theories would not have been accessible

to McCullers, and even less to Portia and Jake Blount. Either way, spoken by these characters of humble conditions, smell almost appears as the popular sense, the one that belongs to the mass and forms consequently part of its vernacular.

Other times, olfaction is relevant to a situation by reason of the negative connotations it can take on. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the servant Zoo complains about a neighbour prone to making a fuss out of everything, describing her as “that mean Miss Addie down the street that use to be making suchalot of unecesary [*sic*] stink” (73). She utilizes the intrusive nature of smell to underline the size and range of the neighbour’s constant complaining. In the middle of a political tirade, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*’s Jake Blount deplores how the ideals of the people who fought the Revolutionary War have not been upheld, and he declares that the rich “have made the word freedom a blasphemy [...] They have made the word freedom stink like a skunk to all who know” (141). It is difficult to determine exactly what Blount means by that, aside from the simply pejorative. It is possible he means that the word has taken so much space in the discourse that it is nauseating, or that the privileged have distorted the word and have now made it immoral. In any case, the act of smelling never appears in the dialogue with positive connotations. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the pejorative aspect of olfaction is even taken to its extreme: when Bob Ewell, a bigoted and vindictive man, harasses townspeople, he is asked to leave in no uncertain terms: “[f]irst thing you can do, Ewell, is get your stinkin’ carcass off my property” (275). There is no greater olfactory insult considering that Thanatos, the death-smell, is the culmination of all repulsive smells, an aspect that will be explored in the following chapter.

### 3. The Eros/Thanatos Paradigm

Psychology borrows those two labels from the Greek pantheon, for which they are respectively god of love and god of death. Far from being the first one to identify a psychological correlation between love and death, Freud does popularize the notion from 1920 on with his work on human drives (Gamba 2). With the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the “father of modern psychology” identifies a strong relation between the sexual drive, or “Eros”, and what he introduces as the death drive, called “Thanatos”, correlated to a wish for destruction, violence and one’s own death. In very crude terms, those two forces, antagonists by nature, are paradoxical yet complementary (Jackson n.pag.). It is hard to determine with any degree of certainty who first applied this theory to the field of sensory studies. However, Rindisbacher,

was the first one to implement it to literary studies in relation to olfaction. In *The Smell of Books*, Rindisbacher theorizes the paradigm as follows:

bad smells signify repulsion, corruption, decay, and ultimately death [...] Good smells, on the other hand, mean attraction, eroticism, sexuality, birth, life; they mean the creation of bonds. The modern perfume industry is explicitly marketing (erotic) attraction, irresistibility, charisma. The mythical force involved is Eros (103).

With this handy and easily accessible definition, Rindisbacher covers a very large part of all olfactive occurrences present in literature, as a large majority of them (or all, as many scholars would seem to argue) can be sorted out into the “bad smell/good smell” binary.

### 3.1. The Artificial Smells of Vanity

On the more amiable side of the binary paradigm drawn up by Freud and theorized for olfaction by Rindisbacher resides Eros. It is opposed to Thanatos, located on the opposite end, and plays a crucial role in finding a mate or, in perhaps more agreeable terms, influences the laws of physical attraction. Indeed, for all of humanity’s pretences of modernity and of having evolved past animalistic instincts, the importance of smell in the field of sexuality (both in the process of choosing a partner and of seducing said partner) has been proven and demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt. Knowledge and strategic use of that fact can be traced back all the way to ancient Egypt (Stamelman 91). Fittingly, the motif of sexual attraction through scent was much represented in Greek mythology (Reinarz 25). It has been discussed and contemplated in a myriad of ways since then. For example, in *The Scent of Eros: Mysteries of Odor in Human Sexuality*, James V. Kohl and Robert T. Francoeur explain the concept of “love apples”: in Shakespearian times, aristocratic women would place apples in their armpits for a certain period of time, until it was saturated with their scent, then offer them as a gift to their beloved as a seduction technique (67). Many other fragrance scholars have analysed the power of natural smell in the field of attraction, the obsession of the perfume industry to cover or alter bodily smells, and the strong contradiction between the two. The term “pheromone” only appeared in the late 1950s and since then, it has mostly served in giving a name and a scientific explanation to a concept that was collectively (and seemingly instinctively) known by mankind (Reinarz 109). In the late 1930s, Mick Kelly, the teenage girl of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, was already framing her sexual attraction in terms of pleasant scents, thinking “[t]here was a warm boy smell about [Harry],” the boy she has sex with a few chapters later (219) The olfactory Eros is formed by the conjunction of those elements, pheromones and man-made fragrances, however contradictory they may be, and it is this composite that the most famous

Nose of literature, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*, attempts to recreate in its purest form.

Grenouille does so by sacrificing young women in order to bottle their essence. This hints at a larger fact in the history of olfaction: Eros, a strongly gendered notion, has always been closely associated to femininity (Reinarz 114). It is this Eros that the perfume industry attempts to sell; in a broad sense, the olfactory Eros is the goal of every cosmetic effort that has to do with fragrance. Smell is the high place of female attractiveness and female vanity, a fact that has been solidly represented in literature. This has of course reached Southern Gothic. Novels belonging to the genre are written postbellum, in the aftermath of the Civil War loss which resulted in a slow but long-lasting shift in the social classes. For that reason, it is heavily concerned with the conservative, somewhat desperate attempts to hold on to any marker of social class within reach. See, for example, how the supercilious grandmother in Flannery O'Connor's acclaimed short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" prepares for a car trip from Georgia to Florida:

[she] had on a navy blue straw sailor hat with a bunch of white violets on the brim and a navy blue dress with a small white dot in the print. Her collards and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet. In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady (118).

O'Connor's writing being very little concerned with olfaction in general, it is interesting that smell seems here to have insinuated itself inside a very ocular-centric description of clothing, almost distractedly. Indeed, the grandmother wants to be "seen" as a lady at first glance, yet this implies the inclusion of a scented sachet at her neckline to provide an aromatic confirmation of the social class and good character suggested by the outfit. Of course, in true O'Connor fashion, this fragment is extremely ironic, as the grandmother does indeed end up dead on the side of the road fifteen pages later, shot three times through the heart by an escaped criminal. As she pleads for her life, she proves herself to be hypocritical and narrow-minded, prompting her murderer to ponder, in one of O'Connor's most famous lines, that "she would have been a good woman [if only there] had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133). The quick dissolution of the woman's social ideals in the face of danger underlines the artificiality expressed in her speech, her clothing, even her smell. In the face of the grandmother's cowardice and moral instability, the reader is left wondering what exactly were those lady-like characteristics that the sachet and the organdy were meant to convey.

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Truman Capote is also very interested in the performativity of social status. An aesthetic of faded grandeur permeates the whole novel, set in a decaying mansion on an Alabama plantation. This alone draws a clear connexion to the utopic vision of the (rich, white) antebellum South, the nostalgia for which is naturally expressed through olfaction in Capote's heavily sensory and metaphorical writing. Teenage protagonist Joel goes horseback riding with Randolph, another resident of the crumbling plantation house. While they wander, the narration travels through time:

They followed the remnants of a road down which once had spun the wheels of lacquered carriages carrying verbena-scented ladies who twittered like linnets in the shade of parasols, and leathery cotton-rich gentlemen gruffing at each other through a violet haze of Havana smoke, and their children, prim little girls with mint crushed in their handkerchiefs, and boys with mean blackberry eyes (165).

Not only does this suggest a clear distinction between the smells attributed to the genders, but it also hints at the fact that the wish for fragrance is in itself a feminine pursuit. Compared to the verbena or mint assigned to the women and girls respectively, men are associated to the smell of cigar smoke, that is to say a circumstantial odour that results from a certain type of consumption. This idea appears several times throughout the novel. Preparing to go to church in town "[t]he men sport their finest shirts and store-bought breeches; the women scent themselves with vanilla flavouring or dime-store perfume, of which the most popular brand is called Love Divine" (18). Fragrance for fragrance's sake is apparently reserved to the ladies. This crops up in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as well. Miss Maudie, the Finches' benevolent neighbour, invites Scout to sit in on her missionary circle reunion. Scout, characterized as a tomboy, is impressed by the women's looks and smells:

The ladies were cool in fragile pastel prints: most of them were heavily powdered but unrouged; the only lipstick in the room was Tangee Natural. Cutex Natural sparkled on their fingernails, but some of the younger ladies wore Rose. They smelled heavenly (253).

This fragment is not only interesting in the point that it makes, but also in the way it is phrased. The outfits and make-up the ladies wear are defined with the help of descriptive terms: pastel, unrouged, rose, or that is, expressions that refer to colours. Scout, who assumedly knows nothing about cosmetics, is still able to pick up on those subtleties. However, when it comes to smell, she is apparently at such a loss to characterize it that the reader has to make do with the adjective "heavenly."

This impression that perfume is feminine is strengthened, rather than rejected, when its antithesis is presented to the reader. Going back to *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the character most associated with scent in the novel is Randolph, a man. He is said on several occasions to

have a “delicate lemon scent” (67) that comes from the cologne he wears (107). Randolph is an openly homosexual character, presented as effeminate, when it is not as downright womanly: upon arriving to Skully’s Landing, the derelict plantation, Joel finds himself in the garden, looking up at the silhouette of a spectral woman in a scene of classical Gothicism. This “queer lady,” as the narration calls her, is later revealed to be none other than Randolph wearing a Mardi Gras costume. Rather than extending artificial smells to masculinity, the causal relationship between the character of Randolph and fragrance in the book is used the other way around: smelling good, still very much a womanly pursuit in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, is used to drive home the point of Randolph’s femininity.

Undoubtedly, the act of putting on perfume is mainly reserved for women in Southern Gothic literature, and it is more often than not used to represent affectation. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, another character who is closely related to smell is Zoo, the black cook. She adorns herself with cooking ingredients, powdering her face with flour, putting grease in her hair, and wearing vanilla flavouring as a perfume (126). Wearing perfume (or at least something that occupies that same function) is equated to putting on make-up: they are processes of covering up the natural state of the body, in respect to olfaction and sight respectively. They try to alter a certain authenticity, but in O’Connor’s sachet-scented grandmother’s case just as in Zoo’s, the results are all but convincing. Zoo’s efforts appear as an attempt to play at “upper-classness” but by the very nature of the cosmetics she uses, namely cooking ingredients, she is literally plastering her servile status across her face. Vanilla is also used by teenage Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Mick comes from a poor family who takes in boarders in order to scrape by, and she moves from being a child to a teenage girl in the course of the novel. She develops an implicit attraction to the much older John Singer, the benevolent deaf-mute who boards at the family’s house. She starts dabbing on a drop of vanilla, or some of her sister’s perfume “so that if she [meets] him in the hall she [will] smell good” (214). Once again, perfumery is used as a way to play make-believe, as Mick seems to use it in order to convince Singer and herself that she is not a child anymore. For Zoo, Randolph, Mick or the grandmother of O’Connor’s short story, four characters spread across three stories and three decades, perfume is a prop of performative femininity. Not only do they partake in the “social construct of the woman,” as theorized by Simone de Beauvoir (Cavataro 1), but they also couple it with other sought-after identities: performative respectability (the grandmother), performative adulthood (Mick), performative whiteness (Zoo putting flour on her face), performative gender (Randolph). Further than allowing for certain pretences, the

artificial Eros presented by Rindisbacher as the olfactory pole responsible for the creation of bonds is used as a way to bridge certain gaps, whether they are social, racial or sexual.

### 3.2. Memory: The Romantic Tripwire of Smell

Another gap that olfaction is notorious for bridging is time. Scents have a special relationship with remembrance, the reason for which is located in the brain: the olfactory bulb, where smells are processed, belongs to a neural area that also manages storage of memories and emotions (Wilson and Stevenson, 243-247). Smell reaches easily across time to unearth memories, even those buried deep, a phenomenon that is as powerful as it is common. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, it is linked with touch: when John Singer puts his head down on a bench to rest, “[t]he smell and the feel of the slick wood against his cheek [remind] him of his schooldays” (191). According to Diane Ackerman, there is nothing “more memorable than a smell.” She even describes the sudden jolt of remembrance in the following terms: “hit a tripwire of smell, and memories explode all at once” (5). Because of its deep emotional resonance and the fact that it lends itself very conveniently to narrative purposes and poetic language, this phenomenon has been immortalized many times in literature. The most famous example is easily identifiable as it has given its name to the experience itself. The “madeleine de Proust” is now a phrase used to refer to any sensory cue that triggers remembrance in the perceiver. In *Swann’s Way*, the 1913 novel from which the scene comes, the sudden dive into childhood is carried out mostly through taste, with smell following close behind. After all, these two senses share a strong bond, as they work along the same organs, to the point of bleeding into one another and being sometimes undistinguishable. As Ackerman puts it: “we taste only four flavours: sweet, sour, salt, and bitter. That means everything else we call 'flavor' is really 'odor’” (13). This is no accident if Marcel Proust finds himself on many (if not all) lists, found on newspapers, publishers' websites, or blogs, compiling the “best” books that address smells. *Swann’s way* sets an important precedent with its treatment of smell as a literary device to evoke memories, even if it is interlaced with taste:

Mais, quand d’un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l’odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l’édifice immense du souvenir (68).

As both senses are fundamental to the consumption of food, it is evident that remembrance over a dish would call upon them both. In any case, science places smell as being the memory



sense, not only over taste, but over sight, hearing and touch as well. Muchembled even goes a step further, attributing the lacking vocabulary of smell to the close relationship between olfaction and memory:

La raison du mystère [linguistique] provient de la corrélation directe établie entre les senteurs, les émotions et la mémoire, en toute indépendance des parties du cerveau régissant la verbalisation. Le système binaire d'avertissement d'un danger intervient le premier, en un éclair, sans nécessiter une formulation linguistique. Le souvenir laissé n'est pas connecté au reste de la fonction mémorielle et ne peut pas être mobilisé volontairement (Muchembled 35-36).

In its role as a powerful force of emotion related to sex, love and the creation of bonds, the olfactory Eros lends itself extremely well to the phenomenon of the “tripwire of smell” or, as this discussion is about literature, to the literary translation of this phenomenon. If smell is the biological sense of sexuality, this often translates to it being the literary sense of love. Southern Gothic is no exception; examples of erotic and romantic smells abound. *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's 1929 novel about a struggling aristocratic southern family might not necessarily be his most appreciated by academia, yet it is probably the most famous with the general public worldwide. It revolves around the Compson family but cannot be described in a traditional plot overview. What can be said about it however is that one of the novel's main focuses is the obsession that the Compson brothers cultivate towards their sister Caddy. This obsession, in true Faulknerian form, is heavily reliant on sensorial experiences, smell being chief among them. A big part of the narration occurs through Benjy Compson's eyes. He is a “simpleton” and, due to that characteristic, experiences the world in a different way than the rest of the characters. His olfactory skills seem to be exacerbated or, as Carmignani phrases it: “d'ailleurs, s'il est incapable de raisonner, Benjy est parfaitement apte à sentir, à flairer ce qu'on voudrait lui cacher” (4). This is particularly observable in the following observation made during Quentin's stream of consciousness: “[Benjy] smell what you tell him when he want to” (Faulkner 173). This formulation could be dismissed as no more than a metaphoric use of the verb “smell” if it were not for the fact that the rest of the narration points to Benjy's particular relation to olfaction. He can “smell the cold” (22), “the clothes flapping, and the smoke blowing across the branch” (36), even his mother ailment:

The bones rounded out of the ditch, where the dark vines were in the black ditch, into the moonlight, like some of the shapes had stopped. Then they all stopped and it was dark, and when I stopped to start again I could hear Mother, and feet walking fast away, and I could smell it. Then the room came, but my eyes went shut. I didn't stop. I could smell it. T.P. unpinned the bed clothes.

"Hush." he said. "Shhhhhhhh."

But I could smell it [...] A door opened and I could smell it more than ever (69).

His acute awareness to smell is even acknowledged by the entire household: “‘He smell it.’ T.P. said. ‘Is that the way you found it out?’” (70). Later on, Quentin wonders whether Benjy can “smell bad luck” or “that new name they give him” (173). Benjy also associates smells with people in a synesthetic process. His father and Quentin both smell like rain, Versh smells like rain too as well as a dog, and Caddy is repeatedly said to smell like trees and leaves. The synaesthesia also occurs in different contexts, for example in this fragment in which he juxtaposes three senses; vision, audition and olfaction: “Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell” (159). Any disruption to his usual sensorial landscape is seen as hostile: when he catches his sister and her lover together, Benjy is severely affected and screams until she washes her mouth with soap, therefore going back to her original scent (Carmignani 5). This association between Caddy and nature happens on a reciprocal hinge: she reminds him of nature and, once she leaves the house to live with her husband, nature reminds Benjy of her:

Lorsque Caddy cesse définitivement de sentir comme les arbres et part avec son mari, Benjy transfère le souvenir de la soeur bien-aimée sur deux fleurs : le Datura, dit “herbe des fous” ou “herbe aux tombeaux” qu’il pique dans une bouteille (que Dilsey appelle son “cimetière”) et le narcisse (symbole de mort/sommeil/renaissance et d’idéalisation) dont il tient à la fin du roman une tige brisée (5)

Benjy has a particularly close relationship to smells, as can be seen by the simple fact that the chapters he narrates are saturated with references to odours. Rather than pointing out a hundred different ones, there is a limited “cast” of recurring scents to which he keeps going back. Caddy, as an object of fascination, is of particular sensorial and sensual interest to him. In that way, Benjy is very similar to his brother Quentin. Quentin Compson also uses smell to act out his incestuous obsession with Caddy. Her odorous symbolism stays in the nature realm since Quentin associates his sister with honeysuckle (ibid.):

Her face looked at the sky it was low so low that all smells and sounds of night seemed to have been crowded down like under a slack tent especially the honeysuckle it had got into my breathing it was on her face and throat like paint her blood pounded against my hand I was leaning on my other arm it began to jerk and jump and I had to pant to get any air at all out of that thick gray honeysuckle (1995, 237)

He remembers “the smell of [it] upon her face and throat” (233). There are twenty-nine mentions of honeysuckle in *The Sound and the Fury* and they are all, without exception, made by Quentin in relation to Caddy. Paul Carmignani explains the double symbolism of the honeysuckle which exists outside of the novel and is reflected inside of it: honeysuckle is associated with concupiscence but also antithetically with virginity (5-6). This oxymoron of virginal carnality is a perfect metaphor for Caddy's inaccessibility as an object of desire for her

brothers (ibid.). No wonder then that Quentin concludes that honeysuckle is “the saddest odor of all” (257).

The synaesthesia present in Benjy's narration reappears in Quentin's. Quentin mentions that his nose can “see gasoline, the vest on the table, the door” (261), that he can “smell the curves of the river beyond the dusk” (258) or even the “twilight-colored smell of honeysuckle” (179). Of course, in that last occurrence, it is hard to tell whether it is actually a use of synaesthesia or if, at this point, the “smell of honeysuckle” has simply become a euphemism to refer to Caddy herself. In any case, synaesthesia involving olfaction plays an important role in *The Sound and the Fury*, and whether this is a Compson phenomenon or a Faulkner one is an easily answerable question considering that synaesthesia is far from having such a pervasive presence in “A Rose for Emily” and *Intruder in the Dust*.

If the novel mentions and describes many odorous instances, the large majority of them is dedicated to the taboo desire the Compson brothers feel toward their sister Caddy. One thing is certain, and that is the deeply erotic connotations that olfaction endorses in *The Sound and the Fury*. If the novel mentions and describes many odorous instances, the large majority of them is dedicated to the taboo desire the Compson brothers feel toward their sister Caddy. This illustrates the “Eros” aspect of smells as it is described by Rindisbacher, which is the pole of the olfaction spectrum related with “attraction, eroticism, sexuality, birth, life” (103). The emphasis on life is especially pertinent as Caddy is, for her brothers' noses, associated with scents of nature, the ultimate place of rebirth and life cycles.

Benjy and Quentin Compson are far from being the only characters in Southern Gothic to associate smell with desire and love. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Biff Brannon, the widowed owner of the town's central eating spot, emblemize the olfactory power of recollection. Four months after his wife's passing, he stumbles upon a bottle of Agua Florida in the bathroom closet even though he thought he had got rid of all the cosmetics belonging to her:

Biff uncorked the bottle. He stood shirtless before the mirror and dabbled some of the perfume on his dark, hairy armpits. The scent made him stiffen. He exchanged a deadly secret glance with himself in the mirror and stood motionless. He was stunned by the memories brought to him with the perfume, not because of their clarity, but because they gathered together the whole long span of years and were complete. Biff rubbed his nose and looked sideways at himself. The boundary of death. He felt in him each minute that he had lived with her. And now their life together was whole as only the past can be whole. [...] In this room nothing reminded him of her. But often he would uncork the bottle of Agua Florida and touch the stopper to the lobes of his ears or to his wrists. The smell mingled with his slow ruminations. The sense of the past grew in him. Memories built themselves with almost architectural order (198-99).

This fragment is particularly interesting because, in fitting with Freud's theory later translated into smell, the olfactory Eros is explicitly connected to its polar opposite, Thanatos. Here, McCullers does not write about the smell of death in the literal sense, that is to say, the smell of decomposition. Rather, she describes the smell of death as the smell of moments past and of people who have passed away. In short, smells of the past are necessarily smells of death. By its very nature, smell is fleeting and temporary. Duke professor Richard Stamelman explains that "encircled by scent, the body is at once present (as emanation, effluvium, aroma, aura, vapor) and absent (as spirit, trace, memory, and sillage)" (82). An odour can be perceived without its source being seen and sometimes, since the vocabulary to express it is sorely lacking, it cannot even be identified at all. It therefore makes poetic sense, in addition to being scientifically sound, that it would be of all the senses the closest related to remembrance, as olfaction itself is as elusive as a memory.

In a paper such as this one, which touches upon American culture from a European standpoint, it is also interesting to take the time to acknowledge the precise fragrance that McCullers names. Agua Florida or "Florida Water" is similar in nature to its European equivalent "Eau de Cologne," of which it is an "Americanized" version, hence its name. It is composed of alcohol perfumed with essential oils. As its base is a citrus odour with notes of orange and neroli, often combined with bergamot, lavender and cloves. If, in the same way as the Eau de Cologne, its origins can be traced back to the Middle Ages, advertisement from the 1860s prove that Agua Florida was at least already around and relatively popular in America by the second half of the nineteenth century. It was originally created by the perfumer Murray & Lanman as early as 1808. In keeping with the medieval tradition, the brand claimed the product had many spiritual and protective virtues that extend far beyond the simple fact of "smelling nice." By the 1870s, many druggists and pharmacists produced and sold their own. Even though the reasons for its creation might have been mainly commercial (it was cheaper to create it than to import Eau de Cologne from Europe), Florida Water was marketed in a patriotic way, as being "native to the American soil" (Sullivan 78-91). For this reason, Florida Water is undoubtedly an emblematic and distinctively American smell, which makes its mention in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* all the more interesting. It is still commercialized to this day, sold in the original bottle by Murray and Lanman and appears to be particularly used in certain niche religious circles (Voodoo, Santeria and Wicca, to name a few) that praise it for its spiritual properties. This means that an American reader, at the time of the novel's publication and even now, would likely hold a power of recall over the scent upon seeing the

words “Agua Florida,” and would smell it along with Biff, a power which is not shared by the typical European reader. Smells are not only fleeting: they are, for the most part, geographically and temporally restrained.

Later in the story, Biff finds photographs of his wife. No mention is made of them particularly sparking the recollection of memories. Sight is therefore shown as a weaker memory trigger than smell, an impression strengthened by the fact that a few pages later, Biff finds a bottle of lemon rinse that his wife used for her hair. He starts using it somewhat regularly, mimicking the cosmetic rituals he had seen her follow when she was alive. One other sense does come close in that regard for him, and it is hearing. Biff plays particular songs on the mandolin, the tunes of which he relates to the perfume: “These pieces were like the Agua Florida in the way they made him remember. Everything” (208). It is worth underlining that, when one of Biff’s patrons smells the new fragrance he is sporting, and asks him if he is wearing perfume, Biff answers “composedly” with a very brief and slightly gruff “shaving lotion” (202), therefore confirming that the pursuit of a pleasant smell is seen as being an exclusively feminine matter, and as a result, is shameful for “masculine men.”

Faulkner and McCullers, through their respective characters of the Compson brothers and Biff Brannon, define smell as the sense where sexual and romantic desire meet memory. However, naturally, literature (and perhaps in a larger sense, life itself) does not always agree. Nevertheless, even when it does not, it offers an interesting avenue for analysis. In McCarthy’s *The Road*, the unnamed child’s mother does not appear in the novel as she has committed suicide prior to the beginning of the story. The reader gets glimpses of her through the man’s memories, who is able to “remember everything of her save her scent” (17-18). This lack of olfactory memory is especially striking considering that in the same paragraph, the man remembers the sensation of “the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress” when he placed his hand on her leg at a concert (18). If, at first glance, this quote can seem to be contradicting the idea of scent as being the sense of memory, it is not. Indeed, nothing in scientific research points in a very convincing manner to a reciprocal dynamic between smell and memory. If odour is undoubtedly powerful in its triggering of the memory, this does not mean that this necessarily works the other way around. Smells spark recollection, but recollection does not seem to particularly evoke smells in return. What is more, the latter does not have to be proven for the former to hold true. This olfactory amnesia surely has much to do with the shortcomings of language. As there is so little linguistic possibility to make sense of odours and categorize them, imprinting them into the brain can prove tricky and ultimately

impossible. More to the point, this fragment is first and foremost a statement on the utility of smells in *The Road* rather than on olfaction in general. In McCarthy's book, a story about roaming and survival, smells have a pragmatic value. Olfaction is an agent of warning, almost exclusively used as a tool to identify danger or change in the surroundings. If, as this paragraph aims to demonstrate, memory does not necessarily conjure smell, *The Road* does however make an argument for that being the case in relation to taste. The man indulges in utopic fantasies of better times, "lying there in the dark with the uncanny taste of a peach from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth" (17). As taste and smell are so closely related, it could be argued that a "phantom" taste often evokes a phantom smell along with it. Even then, this use would be pragmatic, as it seems evident that a starving body that struggles to scavenge food would spontaneously dream up flavours and odours related to sustenance.

### 3.3. Thanatos: Odor Mortis and Decay

In both of the last two cases mentioned, Biff Brannon and the unnamed father in *The Road*, the complex relation that links smell, memory and love also incorporates death. Whereas Biff uses his late wife's perfume and cosmetics as a way to spark and even organize memories through olfaction, the unnamed man is unable to recall the smell of the person he loved. This also raises the fact that, unlike sight or sound, smell can be created, but not recorded or documented: "we must make do with descriptions and recollections" (Classen et al. 3). In his sensory account of the American Civil War, Smith describes how much smell was a part of the violence at the battle of Gettysburg. He underlines how "the epic battle would become immortalized by sight—the recently developed technology of photography—whereas the intense scent of the bodies in the July heat, an integral and indispensable aspect of the brutality of the battle, simply cannot be recreated" (75). In a similar manner, in *The Road*, the mother has died and her smell died along with her.

The link between Eros and Thanatos is also apparent in *Le Parfum*: Jean-Baptiste Grenouille needs to kill young women in order to preserve their scent. He therefore needs to go through Thanatos in order to create a concentrated version of Eros. Even though they are presented as opposite concepts, Eros and Thanatos cannot exist without each other, in olfaction just as much as in psychology. Rindisbacher concludes that the natural human smell (that Grenouille does not exude, as he is himself strangely odourless) straddles both poles of the spectrum:

for here exists an even more primordial human smell, encompassing both Eros and Thanatos as its constituents. Grenouille, himself lacking this very human emanation, distills various surrogates for himself and then aims at producing one of its components, Eros, in pure form. At the very beginning of the production process, however, stands its other component, death. One is not to be had without the other (320).

It makes sense that beneath cosmetics, perfume, vanity, lies a fundamentally human (or at least, living) scent that contains both Eros and Thanatos. This combination is the essence of humanity in psychological terms (the sexual and death drives studied by Freud) just as much as in more basic, physiological ones. Indeed, the human condition is at its core essentially composed of the instinct to distribute one's genes so as to perpetuate the species, and of an inexorable process of decomposition. In McCarthy's *Child of God*, a novel that is heavily concerned with death and corpses, the solitary protagonist Lester Ballard stumbles upon a couple in a car who seem to have died in the middle of sexual intercourse. Ballard then "[picks] the girl's panties up from the floor and [sniffs] at them and put[s] them in his pocket" after which he rapes the woman's corpse (51). Unable to interact with living people, Ballard brings the woman's body to his cabin and hides it there in order to sustain more easily his necrophiliac impulses. Both Grenouille and Ballard are psychologically deranged characters. In their respective narratives, they show psychopathic tendencies that eventually drive them to serial killing. Interestingly, it is those unhinged characters who offer the most explicit illustrations of the olfactive overlap between Eros and Thanatos; Grenouille for the whole of European literature, Ballard for the Southern Gothic.

Ballard, in spite all of his faults or rather because of them, is a worthy ambassador of the genre. One of its main characteristics is that, whereas gothic literature in the larger sense is deeply concerned with the theme of monstrosity and otherness, Southern Gothic (and to a certain extent, the American Gothic at large, even though this is more pronounced in the South for cultural and historical reasons) is deeply concerned with themes of depravity and moral degradation. The monster within us, rather than being represented through a phantasmagorical creature, is shown through physical and mental deformity. Inside a puritanical society, Ballard is seen as insane, yet he represents a fascination with death that is not only universal, but especially apparent in the South.

Decay is coded into the history of the South. If every culture displays a certain fascination for death and, metonymically, for dead bodies, this keen interest in the corpse is nowhere in America more prominent than in the South. This can be largely explained through a conjunction of the religious and juridical landscapes, as well as climatic conditions. First,

undeadness and the image of the born-again dead necessarily recall the resuscitation of Christ. It also brings to mind the Last Judgement, a recurring theme in Southern Gothic music: the Old Testament states that, come Armageddon, the dead will rise again. The deeply rooted Christian connection makes sense all over the United States, but especially in the South: there is significant overlap between the states belonging to the Deep South and the area known as the “Bible Belt.” If a 2007 Gallup poll indicates that, at the time of the survey, one-third of all Americans took the Bible literally, a large part of this demographic is to be found in the southern states, which also sport the highest percentage of Church attendance (Brunn 515-16). Secondly, it has been suggested that the Bible Belt is becoming the “Death Belt”, because there also is important overlap between the states taking the Bible literally and those enforcing capital punishment (Brunn 518). Moreover, of the 609 death-row cases ending in an execution between 1979 and 2000, 80 percent belonged to the southern states (ibid.). Thirdly, the violent climate prone to hurricanes and tornadoes has prompted the creation of special burial systems, like above-ground burial. This is especially true in Louisiana, where prior to the implementation of special measures, “every time it rained, bodies popped out of the ground” (Rich 34). Policies meant to “handle grave disturbances” in extreme weather are even in place, proving that this problem is far from solved.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon has left deep traces in culture and popular thinking.

In relation to olfaction, Thanatos is therefore a force that has been consistently described and developed in Southern Gothic. Along with the scent of honeysuckle (which, in addition to being omnipresent in *The Sound and the Fury*, makes appearances in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and *Child of God*) the smell of death is the most recurring one. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout’s friend Dill Harris, believed to have been modelled upon Truman Capote, insists he can smell the dying:

'I - smell - death,' he said. 'I do, I mean it,' he said, when I told him to shut up.

'You mean when somebody's dyin' you can smell it?

'No, I mean I can smell somebody an' tell if they're gonna die. An old lady taught me how' (40).

According to popular wisdom, looming death does indeed have a smell. A Rhodes Island cat even attracted the attention of a geriatrician for accurately predicting the deaths of over a hundred patients on the (alleged) basis of olfaction.<sup>7</sup> Of course, in Dill's case, the schooling

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<sup>6</sup> “Louisiana flooding sends caskets far and wide”, *CBS News*, 6 May 2016, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/louisiana-flooding-caskets-calcasieu-parish/> Accessed 17 January 2019.

<sup>7</sup> David Dosa. "A day in the life of Oscar the cat" in *New England Journal of Medicine*, 357 (4) (2007): 328–9.



seems to have been incomplete, since he predicts that Scout will die in three days. For the reader, the prophecy therefore crumbles even as it is being spoken, as the whole novel is narrated by a far older Scout going over memories of her childhood. If the smell of someone who is going to die is elusive, in Southern Gothic, examples of smells of someone who *has* died, or odor mortis, abound. One notable example is to be found in “A Rose for Emily.” This short story written by William Faulkner is doubly valuable to this dissertation because it is a prime ambassador of Southern Gothic. In a story that is barely more than a dozen pages, Faulkner manages to cram a very large number of motifs and themes that are typical of the genre (of course, one should keep in mind that, by being one of the first authors to be recognized as a Southern Gothic writer, Faulkner has in all likelihood created and/or cemented many of the motifs himself). Those motifs are, among others, the rebellion against a rigid code of social conduct, an atmosphere of small-town suffocation, faded grandeur and decrepitude in an era of social change, and the pervasive presence of death. Smell works in the story as a punctual appearance, almost to the point of being characterized, rather than an ever-present influence throughout the book as it is in *The Sound and the Fury*. All instances of odours appear in the second part of the story (there are only four explicit references to smell but, then again, the story is only thirteen pages long). In the first section of the story, the recluse and formerly wealthy Emily Grierson “vanquishes” the tax collectors whom she refuses to pay, since she had a special arrangement with the former administration and wants to keep things that way. The second section travels thirty years prior and starts as follows: “so she vanquished them, horse and foot, just as she had vanquished their fathers thirty years before about the smell” (49). Two years after Emily's father died and she was deserted by her partner, a smell appears around the house, provoking attention and complaints from the neighbours. Contrary to *The Sound and the Fury*, smell here is not an absolute, nor an inherent characteristic relating to a place, a time or a person. In “A Rose for Emily,” the only smell the reader encounters appears and grows, giving it an almost organic lifespan. It is said to “develop” (50) and will later be eradicated.

As was mentioned above in relation to linguistics, the description of smells is reliant on metonymical processes, as odours are identified in relation to their place or process of origin. It is therefore interesting to notice that, in this instance, as its origin is not pinpointed until the end (and even then, only implicitly), the smell in the story is allowed a life of its own, independent from its source. The origin of the smell is as much of a mystery for the reader as it is for the neighbours, but the latter detain the “privilege” of being able to smell it whereas

the reader cannot. By refusing to use a “smells like” or “the smell of” expression of contiguity, Faulkner sacrifices his narrative power of sensorial recall. By circumventing the “origin” rule, Faulkner proves it. Indeed, in order to enable the reader to imagine the bad smell, the story needs to resort to a character commenting that “it’s probably just a snake or a rat that nigger of hers killed in the yard” (50). Without this intervention, there would be no possibility for the reader to recall the smell. This shows the ambivalent relationship that smell and vocabulary share on a more pragmatic plane than the lack of paradigm structure described by Rindisbacher. An odour can be perceived but not identified, and it can appear mysterious to the smeller as long as the origin has not been properly revealed. The sense of smell is closely related to taste, as they share many characteristics, operate on (some of) the same organs and influence one another. The experience of tasting or smelling something blind-folded is a more or less universal one. Anyone can attest to the difficulty of pinpointing a smell or a taste, even very familiar ones, when the origin is unknown. Unidentified smells seem “blurry” (in keeping with the synesthetic theme) and only come into “sharper focus” once the origin is known. As we lack the vocabulary to categorize smells, so do we largely lack this crucial step between smelling a smell and identifying its origin. This means that “mysterious smells” are a hard thing to describe in literature: either they are not identified, and the reader has absolutely no way to recall them, or they are, and in that case the smell is not much of a mystery to begin with.

If Faulkner's use of scents has been quite overlooked by scholars, it is even more so the case for “A Rose for Emily” which has been virtually ignored in terms of olfactory analysis. This is probably due to the fact that, as explained above, the smell appearing in the story occupies a liminal space. It is at once unidentified, not exactly mysterious (because of the many hints pointing to death that Faulkner provides, along with the comment about the killed rat or snake) and difficult to recall. Of course, as we are led to understand as the story unfurls, finally finding “the pot of gold at the end of the olfactory rainbow” (Doughty 156), the smell in question is the scent of human decay. It is called “*the* smell” rather than “the smell of...”. This time around, the smell in question is identified by a demonstrative determiner rather than an origin: it is “*the* smell”, as if it were the *only* smell, the *ultimate* smell. Perhaps it is. Indeed, Rindisbacher would argue that it is one of two ultimate smells, as all scents can be located on one or the other side of the spectrum. One half stands for “good” smells, with sex as its extremity; the other half as “bad” smells, with death at the other end:

Olfactory phenomena in both their materializations, the good and pleasurable on the one hand and the bad, revolting on the other, have their origin in the body. Both originally and ultimately relate to fundamental categories of human existence, sexuality and death. The ultimate

reference for bad smells is the rotting human body; the ultimate reference for good smells are sexual odors. Smells cannot be taught to speak of lofty ideals, nor will they carry abstract messages. They may play on those things- as they are made to do on a large scale in perfumery- but their last words will always be sexuality and death (262).

If this description of the spectrum is pretty straightforward and intuitive, the fact that “the ultimate reference for bad smells is the rotting body” is, however, precisely the point that Jean-Baptiste Grenouille sets to disprove in *The Perfume*, a novel that Rindisbacher analyses extensively.<sup>8</sup> The fact that the ultimate olfactory Eros can only be reached through actual rotting human bodies further insists on (or proves the fact of) the deeply interwoven nature of Eros and Thanatos.

In Faulkner’s work, those two forces are separated mainly by their radically different treatment. Whereas *The Sound and the Fury* concentrates more on the association of olfaction with desire, “A Rose for Emily” (published one year later) takes on the opposite approach. The different treatment of the subject throughout the two stories suggests that while the smells of sexual attraction are fertile grounds for literary experimentation, the “revolting” ones are merely there as a reference, more or less obscure, to the physiological phenomena they denote. This is at least the way William Faulkner uses both olfactory Eros and Thanatos in the stories mentioned.

He is far from being the only one to not describe *odor mortis* in a metonymical manner. In Faulkner’s writing, this vagueness feeds the story, whereas other authors seem to simply “shirk” having to define the smell of decomposition. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, after John Singer commits suicide, he is laid in a coffin in the boarding house’s living room, cheeks painted in order to “make him look natural.” Mick Kelly ponders: “but he didn’t look natural. He was very dead. And mixed with the smell of flowers there was this other smell so that she couldn’t stay in the room” (McCullers 306). Although readers can easily comprehend what that smell is supposed to be, they might not be able to conjure it properly. Contrary to the occurrences of Eros, which are comprised of smells more or less universally known and recognizable,<sup>9</sup> human decomposition is nowadays a smell that offers little to no recall power. This is in no small part due to the sanitation of society that has pushed death to the margins and

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Professor Delville for prompting this observation.

<sup>9</sup> Although one should remember that in the case of perfume, the recall potential of a fragrance is socially and geographically limited. For example, to be able to fully conceptualize the smell of Agua Florida, described above, one would need to know what neroli or bergamot smell like.

has had tremendous importance in the history of smells. Muchembled synthesizes it for the French society:

S'amorce un long mouvement occidental de rejet de la mort loin des yeux des vivants, qui commence par écarter les défunts du centre des lieux habités sous Louis XVI, avant de confiner plus tard dans les hôpitaux le spectacle de la souffrance ou du trépas. L'économie psychique se transforme peu à peu, sous l'effet d'une modernisation inductrice de multiples progrès. L'odorat joue en ce domaine un rôle essentiel. N'est-ce pas également pour combattre l'augmentation des exhalaisons fétides, sensibles durant tout le siècle, encore aggravée par les débuts de l'industrialisation, qu'il s'offre des paradis artificiels floraux ou fruités en transformant les hommes et les femmes en diffuseurs individuels d'odeurs exquises ? (299)

Due to the rejection of olfactory “nuisances”, what was once one of the most central aspects of life, as it is certainly the most ubiquitous, is now almost negligible. People die in hospitals, rest in morgues, the process of decomposition taking entirely place far away from the public eye. Caitlin Doughty, an American mortician who has written several books on the subject of death, discusses at length the marginalization of death in her memoir titled *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory*. In it, she describes the scent of death in a process of metonymy and similes:

For those of you who have not had the privilege of smelling Eau de Decomposition, the first note of a putrefying human body is of licorice with a strong citrus undertone. Not a fresh, summer citrus, mind you—more like a can of orange-scented industrial bathroom spray shot directly up your nose. Add to that a day-old glass of white wine that has begun to attract flies. Top it off with a bucket of fish left in the sun. That, my friends, is what human decomposition smells like (Doughty, 2014, 158).

For the narrator of *The Road*, this complex smell is succinctly described as “sour.” Although it is much shorter than Doughty’s definition, it does not exactly depart from it, at least regarding the “strong citrus undertone.” The Cambridge English, Merriam-Webster and Oxford Advanced Learner’s dictionaries all define “sour” using the word “lemon” in the first sentence. Early in the novel, the father enters an abandoned trailer and encounters “that sour smell he’d come to know” which, the reader learns a page later, emanates from human bodies (47). The connexion is made explicit later on, when the text mentions “the sour rank smell of the dead” (84). Rank is used on other occasions to refer to different smells (quilts, gasoline, the excrements of a new-born child), always to express moderate disgust. Sour, on the other hand, seems reserved for the dead. Semantically, “rank” denotes stronger disgust than “sour”: the same dictionaries place it firmly in the pejorative realm, describing it as offensive, very unpleasant, synonymous with fetid, pungent and malodorous. It is also associated with smell first and taste second (or not at all), whereas sour relates to flavour first, then is broadened to reach the semantic field of smell. Without having to describe the smell of decomposition in

details, by always referring to it as “sour”, McCarthy creates a strong association between the two. For that reason, by the time the father goes into the cabin of a boat, and the text underlines “a sour smell over everything” (the third and last time the adjective appears in the text), the readers believe they know what comes next (240). The association is revealed just in time to be proved wrong, for both the protagonist and the reader: “He was half expecting some horror but there was none” (240).

It is not the only place in McCarthy’s work where that connexion is made. *Child of God*, his second novel in the corpus, ends with a farmer stumbling upon the cave where protagonist Lester Ballard hid the corpses of his victims. Law enforcement men descend into the crevice and are faced with a gruesome scene:

The bodies were covered with adipocere, a pale gray cheesy mold common to corpses in damp places, and scallops of light fungus grew along them as they do on logs rotting in the forest. The chamber was filled with *a sour smell*, a faint reek of ammonia (115; italics mine).

The first, highly adjectival sentence touches upon sight, taste and touch, and does so with overlapping terms. Sound is absent from this fragment. Interestingly, it is almost absent from the whole of that short final chapter. There is no dialogue in it. The only mention of sound is the faint echo of an underground stream that the farmer hears when he attempts to crawl into the cave: “far below he could hear water running (115). Instead of cancelling the quietness of the chapter, this mention of sound underlines it. Even as the ground opens up below the farmer’s feet and swallows his mules and his plow, no shouting or braying, or even rumbling from the earth, makes its way into the text. The subtle treatment of sound contributes in making the moment grave. Smell, on the other hand, is loud. The almost oxymoron “faint reek” and the fact that the smell fills the cave puts it in the foreground of the scene. In the description of the chamber, smell is saved for last, and emphasized, a common occurrence in McCarthy’s writing.<sup>10</sup>

In a previous scene, in which Ballard first brings the bodies of his victims to the cave, they are not “sour” but “rancid”: “he dragged the last rancid mold-crept corpse through the wall of the sinkhole” (90). Both terms relate to food. That is a common thread in the description of smells, considering how closely related the sense is to taste, and especially to human smells. This almost acts as a memento mori, reminding the reader that the body is above all an organic object and that, like food, it rots. In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Ian Miller explains it:

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<sup>10</sup> See for example the similar structure of the next two full-sentence quotations from the book, in the following paragraphs.

Death thus horrifies and disgusts not just because it smells revoltingly bad, but because it is not an end to the process of living but part of a cycle of eternal recurrence. The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot—rank, smelling, and upsetting to the touch (40).

Odor mortis, in spite of its name, is the smell of the *decaying* rather than the smell of the *decayed* or of the *dead*; it is the smell of matter still existing inside the cycle. It still points, however antithetically, to a certain aliveness. The act of stinking belongs to the active, it is the nature of living organisms. Smith even writes (in relation to pictures and written descriptions of stench after the battle of Gettysburg) that smell “animates” the dead (81). Passing through an abandoned town, the father and son of *The Road* encounter bodies that someone has attempted to burn: “The charred meat and bones under the damp ash might have been anonymous save for the shapes of the skulls. No longer any smell” (159). In their landscape of constant olfactive stimulation, mostly unpleasant “even by their new world standards” (172), this appears as a nice reprieve. If the bones are not anonymous in terms of species, they are in any other acceptation. They are nameless and uncountable. They no longer sport any discernible traits. The *finally* dead is, in fact, odourless. This crops up as well in “A Rose for Emily”: the townspeople complain about the smell coming from the Griersons’ house, unaware of its source. As the reader later learns, the corpse of Emily’s fiancé is decomposing upstairs. Taking matters into their own hands, the town council decides to sprinkle lime around the house, to positive results: the smell of the corpse recedes, never to bother the town again.

The mystical Thanatos containing also the process of corruption, it is necessary to take a look at the smell of *dying*. Effectively, this comprises the smells that have to do with sicknesses and ailments. In *The Road*, it appears to be an even more intolerable scent than corpses. When father and son first enter a dark house, they notice “coldness and damp. An ungodly stench” (116). When they hold out a lighter, they discover agonizing bodies:

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous (ibid.).

McCarthy’s use of horror hinges on uncertainty: the threat the characters are running away from is never explicitly named. The reader nevertheless gathers that cannibals are hunting people and, in this house, are keeping them as cattle. The “hideous” smell is therefore understood to be body waste, as well as the smell of unattended wounds. This choice of adjective almost seems synesthetic, considering “hideous” is used more often in relation to sight. However, Merriam-Webster defines it as “offensive to the senses” in general, although it does concede “especially to sight.” This “ungodly stench,” that does not even abide being

described, undoubtedly ranks worse than the “sour rank” of the dead. This might have to do with habit: since father and son are traipsing in the open air, they do not know the particular fetidness of distressed bodies contained in close quarters, but they have come across corpses before. In a chapter of *The Anatomy of Disgust* in which he argues that smell and touch are the senses closer related to disgust, Miller explains that certain qualities of stimuli are more suited to elicit disgust than others (60-64). He does add that categories of disgust are not entirely universal, since a resistance is built out of habit (the way doctors are used to decaying bodies), and that disgust can be born out of unmet expectations (61). If the father and son are expecting to find dead bodies, which they have encountered before, being surprised by the smell of alive people could be more disgusting. Be that as it may, in a novel heavily concerned with how, in certain circumstances, suicide can be an act of kindness towards oneself to alleviate the torture of living, it is worth noting that the text carries that notion to olfactory cues: being dead is less “offensive to the senses” than suffering.

The smell of that suffering is used as a device to convey the horror. Like in “A Rose for Emily,” McCarthy uses no metonymical construction in this fragment. It is not “the smell of”, nor “the smell” like Faulkner, but an “ungodly stench”, an “hideous smell.” McCarthy resorts to adjectives to characterize the olfactory environment, and those adjectives do very little to outline the actual smell, apart from framing them as “very bad.” They offer no recall power. Readers have to reach their own conclusions, based on the fragmented information given in the previous sentences. As mentioned above, father and son are running away from monstrous creatures, but never actually name them, or even see them properly. The smell acts as a stand-in for the violence: it allows McCarthy to describe the brutality without having to actually show it. This echoes the historical occidental philosophy which correlates bad smells with the uncivilized. The threat is all the more terrifying because it is not seen. It is, however, smelled. The scent is used metonymically to indicate the pain that is causing it. When the protagonists flee the scene, they outrun the smell but, most importantly, they outrun the perpetrators of the atrocities that have created the smell.

In a less extreme manner, smell often crops up in Southern Gothic literature as a marker of sickness. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the gloomy mansion the protagonist is sent to “smell[s] of asthma cigarettes, used linen, and whisky breath,” betraying the presence of the physically feeble people who live there (93). Scout, the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the picture of health and vibrant youth. When her brother Jem destroys their neighbour Mrs.

Dubose's garden, he is punished by being made to go read to her every day for a month. Scout decides to accompany him, and is struck by the smell inside the house:

An oppressive odor met us when we crossed the threshold, an odor I had met many times in rain-rotted gray houses where there are coal-oil lamps, water dippers, and unbleached domestic sheets. It always made me afraid, expectant, watchful (64).

It is later revealed that Mrs. Dubose suffers from a morphine addiction; she dies shortly after Jem's punishment is over. In both cases, sickness is accompanied by smells of uncleanness and shocks the young protagonists who almost serve as the antonym of malady. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick's sister Etta falls ill, McCullers uses pure metonymy, writing "the room smelled bad with a sick smell" in the sober prose that is hers (291). Prior to this moment, Etta has always been olfactorily associated with perfume; she is the older sister Mick has been borrowing it from in the hope of appearing more mature. Illness leaves no space for vanity, and Etta is forced to smell bad, meaning to let body odours emanate during her recovery without covering them with artificial fragrances. In contrast, young, vividly healthy people are often described as "smelling clean." When Mick throws a party, she is enchanted to find that "every person was as clean and fresh and dressed up as she was. They smelled good" (98). In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, while the women preparing to go to church "scent themselves with vanilla flavouring or dime-store perfume", the children are "washed clean and given a few pennies" (18). In *Child of God*, a young girl appears to Ballard as an almost angelic vision in the crowd of a fair "with candyapple on her lips and her eyes wide. Her pale hair smelled of soap, womanchild from beyond the years, rapt below the sulphur glow" (38). Cleanliness is an attribute of innocence, goodness, and childhood. This echoes the performative womanhood of young Mick, who play-acts at adulthood by borrowing her sister's perfume, as an attempt to allure the much older Singer. Innocence (symbolized by youth) is clean and by association, smells clean. It is free of the burden of the Eros-Thanatos paradigm, that is only reached with sexual maturity.

### 3.4. Eros, Thanatos, and Sin

In this last quote, the angelic girl is presented as captivating to emphasize the deviant character of Lester Ballard, who later descends into total moral perversity and kills women to satisfy his necrophiliac impulses. Throughout the book, he seems to make little difference between women and girls, yet his only victims are adult. The "womanchild from beyond the years" whose "pale hair smelled of soap" offers a stark contrast to the olfactory description provided



a few pages earlier, when Ballard encounters an inebriated woman sleeping under a tree: “she sat up suddenly, a sweet ferment of whiskey and rot coming off her” (24). The woman's smell of rot (by definition belonging to Thanatos as a smell of decay) is described as “sweet.” If this word first comments on the light intensity of the smell, it overwhelmingly connotes positive impressions. This goes hand in hand with the way the woman is sexualized in the scene. She is wearing a see-through nightgown, and Ballard rips it out while physically assaulting her. Before she wakes up, Ballard even checks to see if she’s dead, which the reader will later suspect is not out of concern but out of hope. Ballard sees the woman as an object of desire, and she is associated with both Eros and Thanatos at once. This happens on more than one occasion in the novel. Unsurprisingly so, considering the theme of necrophilia is the perfect vessel to examine the juxtaposition of Eros and Thanatos. As mentioned above, Ballard keeps the underwear of the dead woman he finds to smell the garment regularly. This echoes Jean-Baptiste Grenouille in *Perfume*. In an article on the relationship between Eros and Thanatos in the perfume industry, Richard Stamelman notes how the relation between the two has been translated into European literature:

Where Calvino presents death as the ultimate defeat of knowledge, love, language, memory, and sensorial experience, Süskind, in *Perfume. The Story of a Murderer*, reveals it as the ultimate preserver of life, as a counter to loss, as a fixative (like those stabilizing ingredients used in perfumery) (96).

Stamelman also points out how the very title of *Perfume. The Story of a Murderer* highlights that juxtaposition, rendering the two forces synonymous (94). While Rindisbacher defines Eros and Thanatos as opposite ends of a spectrum, good smells versus bad smells, texts like Stamelman’s, along with the literature in this corpus, place that spectrum in opposition to another one, composed of odourless bodies and cleanliness. To be sure, “smelling clean” is as artificial an endeavour as perfumes are. It relies on efforts and cosmetics. This being said, whereas fragrances are a prop of (feminine, in Southern Gothic) sexuality, cleanliness is a way of masking the olfactory Thanatos, of keeping it at bay. It belongs to children, which represent not only vitality but freedom from sin.

Southern Gothic in general is largely concerned with themes of sin and redemption. This is true across media: it is one of the main topical resemblances between literature, music and television located under the Southern Gothic umbrella. This has of course to do with the strong hold of religion in that region. Sin is often symbolized by sexuality and vice versa. *Child of God* is the only text in the corpus which addresses sexuality so directly. The fact it does so by representing moral perversity is quite representative of the characteristics of the genre.

Southern Gothic is very concerned with religion and sin, often resulting in an all-or-nothing approach. Along with McCarthy, Faulkner also approaches the theme of sexuality, and this he does obliquely. "A Rose for Emily" hints at necrophilia: after Miss Emily dies, the townsfolk finally get access to her house. They discover in the attic the decomposed body of her fiancé who died years prior, lying on a bed. In the pillow next to him is an indentation and a single grey hair (13). In *The Sound and the Fury*, Caddy's sexual life is alluded to, but mostly as something that must be erased, hidden away, or fixed. Sexuality does permeate the text through the longing of Benjy and Quentin for their sister Caddy. This desire is incestuous, therefore depicting another form of deviant sexuality. The only text in the corpus who eschews this is *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Mick's coming-of-age narrative includes a sexual encounter with a boy from her town, but without being depicted as perverse it is a disastrous experience. Both Mick and the boy immediately associate sex with guilt, and vow to never marry anyone so as to not have to ever relive that. This also marks the start of a series of traumatic events in Mick's life, culminating in her having to leave school and find work to help provide for her family, feeling cheated out of her childhood. With this middle-of-the-road depiction of sexuality, McCullers is an outlier in the corpus. By presenting a view of sexuality that is not depraved but still met with negative consequences, sexuality itself is the sin, in keeping with a strong evangelical Christian tradition in the South.

This is paralleled by the way Benjy deals with his sister reaching sexual maturity in *The Sound and the Fury*. Benjy is the nose in an already heavily-olfactory novel; most of the smelling is carried out by him. As mentioned earlier in the chapter on the act of smelling, he is greatly distressed by the change he perceives in his sister's smell after he has seen her with a lover. Paul Carmignani sees the nose as an instrument of Manichean discrimination: "à l'inverse du regard, involontaire vecteur du Mal, [le nez] serait l'irréfutable instrument de discrimination entre le Bien et le Mal, le Pur et l'Impur, la Vertu et le Vice" (8). Benjy smells the sin, which appears in that case to be as much religious (the shadow of Christianity constantly looming over not only Faulkner's fiction, but the South's in general) as it is personal: Caddy's discovery of sexuality is linked to her independence. She is Benjy's main caregiver at the time and, furthermore, the object of his romantic and sexual desires. That mark of adulthood and independence in her scent needs to be scrubbed away "pour effacer toute souillure et retrouver son odeur habituelle" (Carmignani 5), conflating the smells with their causes. Benjy makes her wash her mouth with soap, the olfactory marker of childhood, innocence, and purity.

In a region (and in a larger sense, a country) deeply marked by the Prohibition during the twentieth century,<sup>11</sup> the smell of sin is also occasionally the smell of alcohol. The sleeping woman Lester Ballard encounters smells of “whiskey and rot,” associating alcohol with Thanatos. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the heavily-drinking Jake Blount is told by a preacher: “Child of adversity, I smell the sinful stink of beer on thy breath” (246). This construction is reminiscent of the similar, figurative one in *Wise Blood* mentioned above, in which a blind preacher affirms he “can smell the sin” on the protagonist’s breath (43). Not only does McCullers correlate alcohol to sin, but also alcohol to disgust. When Doctor Copeland’s daughter Portia comes home intoxicated, Copeland “smell[s] the keen, sweetish odour of gin and his nostrils wide[n] with disgust” (222). Again, bad smells are a marker of the “uncivilized.” It is hard to determine whether Copeland is disgusted by the actual smell of gin or the realization that his daughter has behaved in an undignified manner, but this disgust serves to cement Copeland as the noble black man, a characterization that will be discussed further in the next section.

#### 4. Race: Smelling Blackness

At its core, the South is a region of contradictions. Dubbed the “Cotton Kingdom” prior to the Civil War in reference to the crop that gave it its wealth, it projected a self-image of grandiose plantations, Southern belles in hoop skirts, and lofty principles based on chivalry and Christian charity. This image of the Old South has definitely stuck. It is present in many cultural productions and to this day, the tourism industry still uses a mythologized version of the antebellum south, consisting of an endearingly traditional way of life and the famous Southern sense of hospitality, to sell a version of history from which the unpalatable has been scrapped.<sup>12</sup> Opposite that idealized vision is the discourse relating to racial problematics, deep-rooted white supremacy, and inequalities in general. The stark superposition between “good” and “bad”, between the lovely and the grim, or between Eros and Thanatos as pertains to olfaction in the American South is nowhere as striking as it is in the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit.” First

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<sup>11</sup> Six of the eleven ex-Confederate states still have dry counties, and ten of those states have “moist” counties (partially dry): Hunter Schwarz, “Where in the United States you can’t purchase alcohol” in *The Washington Post* (2014): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2014/09/02/where-in-the-united-states-you-cant-purchase-alcohol/> Accessed 23 February 2020

<sup>12</sup> See chapters 6 and 7 of: Tony Horwitz. *Spying on the South. An Odyssey of the American Divide*. New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2019.

a poem by Northern writer Abel Meeropol, it was later turned into a song and most famously performed by Billie Holliday in 1939. The first two verses of three in total go as such:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

The last stanza perfectly illustrates the dual identity of the South. In addition, it uses olfaction to make that very point. This ushers in the next section of this study: olfaction in relation to race.

For as long as the South has existed as a cultural entity,<sup>13</sup> racial instability has been a constant feature of it. If the same could be argued to some extent for every place on earth, and undoubtedly for the rest of the United States, the Deep South offers a special case for analysis as it was built upon racial oppression. Indeed, the very reasons why the states forming the region are bulked together to form one body are closely related to the enslavement of the African community. The cultural entity itself was formed *inside* the larger country it is a part of, yet seemingly *against it* at the same time. Indeed, although the great trials facing the USA obviously concern all fifty states, it is undeniable that in many aspects, the South has been writing a parallel history to its northern counterpart. From the beginning of the institution of slavery to the White Supremacist “Unite the Right” rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017,<sup>14</sup> the South has been the place where racial tensions, indubitably present in the whole country, are visible, concentrated, and problematized. In much the same way as the South is framed as the nation’s Other and is associated with the gothic to “neutralize the gothic’s threat to national identity” (Goddu 76), the South is displayed as the nest of anti-black racism so the rest of the country can stay faithful to the ideal of the American Dream, which strives to present the country as a multicultural haven that welcomes any and all hard workers, regardless of religion or ethnicity. The fact remains that for social and historical

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<sup>13</sup> Although, arguably, a highly heterogeneous one, as it is composed of a very large territory split in (at least) eleven states.

<sup>14</sup> Officially, the rally was held to protest the removal of a statue of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee in Emancipation Park, previously known as Lee Park, and recently renamed at the time (Park n.pag.). Many journalists and sociologists believe however that this protest (which gathered neo-nazis, neo-confederates, member of the alt-right and of the Ku Klux Klan, to name a few) was motivated by a desire to assert their presence and threaten minorities, encouraged in their ideology by the election of Donald Trump ten months prior (Thrush and Haberman 2017).

reasons, the former “Cotton Kingdom” is marred more vividly by the suffering of African Americans than any other place in the United States.

If possibly not the first, the American literary critic Leslie Fiedler was the most notorious in affirming that the American gothic tradition is distinct from its European parent, rather than being merely a new world translation of the genre and its aesthetic. One of the pillars on which he rests this argument is slavery, even stating in his seminal work *Love and Death in the American Novel* that “the proper subject for American gothic is the black man” (397). In the introduction of *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*, published some forty-three years later, Justin Edwards disagrees, not on the content of the statement, but rather on its generalizing nature. He adds to the discourse by stating that this is reductive, as it negates many other themes that are encoded in the history of the country and that contribute to its natural gothicism, among which religion, gender, homosexuality or genocide (xvii). However, without having to take the Fiedler route and see blackness as the crux of American gothic, there is obvious logic in the academic consensus that places slavery and the racial issues that have persisted so long after the Civil War as an inherently gothic feature of the South. To Christopher Lloyd, it is an axiom “to say that the South is an inherently gothic region whose dark cultural fabric is woven by haunting, traumatic memory and lingering violence” (79). Apart from the at times ruthless climate, this is obviously due in large part to the bloody history of slavery and its aftermath in the South, whether during the centuries that the institution lasted, the Civil War in which the Confederacy fought to maintain it in place, or the segregation and deeply embedded racism that followed.

Teresa Goddu goes even further, arguing that the gothic novel has always had very strong ties with slavery, from the birth of the genre in the late eighteenth century. She writes that “many male gothicists supported slavery and the rise of the gothic novel in England (1790-1830) occurred during a period of increased debate over it” (73). If slavery offers such a fertile soil for gothic literature, it follows that the American South, being particularly haunted by the ghost of the institution, would be an especially relevant setting for the gothic, enough so to give birth to a regional variant of it that is abundant and long-lasting. Goddu explains the close bond that the South has with the gothic because of race as follows:

The gothic, like race, seems to become more visible in a southern locale. Indeed, the South’s “peculiar” identity has not only been defined by its particular racial history, but has also often been depicted in gothic terms: the South is a benighted landscape, heavy with history and haunted by the ghosts of slavery (76).

Indeed, if slavery as a concept occurred in one way or another on many regions of the world, very much including Europe, it is undeniable that the South has a special connection to it for the reasons mentioned above. If this conglomerate of states known as the South exists and is deemed different enough from the North but similar enough to one another to be considered a group, it is because of slavery (Gallagher 22). Whereas northern states abolished slavery from 1780 onwards, the institution was reinforced in the South with the development of cotton growing (Van Ruymbeke 165). A little more than a century later, thirteen states where slavery was still legal formed the Confederacy and seceded from the Union. In spite of the “Lost Cause of the Confederacy,” the negationist ideology that pretends the Civil War was fought over state rights, and that is still gathering believers today, historians have proven time and again that this is nothing more than a retroactive myth (Gallagher 11-29). The war was started unequivocally over the right to own slaves and the fear that the election of anti-slavery presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln would result in them being stripped of that privilege. Despite the anti-slavery North emerging victorious from the Civil War,<sup>15</sup> black people did not find freedom and safety in the aftermath. Instead, they went from the proverbial frying pan of slavery into the fire of segregation. Jim Crow laws were established in the 1880s, starting a long and important movement of social and legal discrimination that would last until the 1960s (Van Ruymbeke 348). If no country or culture can boast an entire lack of racism, the racial climate in the South is infamous for being particularly volatile, as it is directly inherited from an extremely violent history that has resulted in important racial tensions. The identity of the South as a region has therefore been forged around slavery and the racial issues that emanate from its history. Moreover, it is the nature of these racial issues, rather than the Mason-Dixon line, that separates the South from the North. If, as Goddu argues, the gothic and slavery share a strong bond, this bond is nowhere as powerful as in the American South.

If sight makes sense as the sensory marker of race, it is far from being the only one. Historically, the sense of smell has always been used to discriminate between people in two ways. Some classes or ethnicities were perceived to secrete disagreeable smells (meaning: disagreeable to the white nose), or to have a poor or very different olfactory capacity, in other

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<sup>15</sup> To be more exact, in the years leading up to the war, abolitionism was largely considered a radical ideology, even in the northern states. Lincoln himself had a somewhat lukewarm official position on the subject. He was morally opposed to the concept but was against the expansion of slavery, rather than being in favour of its total eradication. As he exposed in his famous “House Divided” speech in 1858, he was of the mind that slavery should be contained to the southern states, until more progressive times arrived, in which it would be ineluctably abolished (Van Ruymbeke 180). Therefore, rather than “anti-slavery North”, the heavier term “anti-expansion-of-slavery North” would technically be more correct here.

words, a faulty sense of smell. In *Past Scents*, Jonathan Reinartz, historian of medicine, traces the link through time all the way to the Roman empire and its obsession with “foreign stench,” but mentions it is only one example among many at the time (85). He also explains how a culture’s reliance on smell, considered a lesser sense in the Western world from very early on, served to justify the presumed inferiority of minority cultures (85). This purported difference between the races’ smell was explained by different factors throughout time, whether having to do with food, cosmetics or perspiration. The term *foetor Judaicus* was coined in medieval times to describe the supposed foul smell particular to Jewish people. It was believed to be innate and to serve as a punishment for their crime against Jesus (Reinartz 94). Later on, the prejudice morphed, attributing the alleged smell to diet and hygiene rather than blasphemy (Tullett 308). This idea persisted for centuries, eventually (and unsurprisingly) finding its way into Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and the Nazi ideology (Reinartz 95-96). Reinartz adds that, prior to the rise of Nazism, “during the First World War, and decades before claiming master race status, Germans even claimed to be able to identify their opponents across no-man’s land by smell” (89). Jewish people were far from being the only racial/ethnic minority targeted in such a way. Supposed “foulness” is so linked to the history of migration that it got to the point where “integration [in the Western world] often involved eradicating odors” (Reinartz 86).

Blackness in America, an identity profoundly marked by a long tradition of being discriminated against, offers to sociologists and historians of senses an interesting example of how olfaction can be used to justify racism when sight no longer suffices. If Native Americans were traditionally considered by the white population to be naturally sweet-smelling (Tullett 310), history is rife with pseudo-science declaring and explaining the alleged offensive odour exuded by black people. In the eighteenth-century, the most wide-spread theory “linked the odour of black bodies to more labile cosmetic practices rather than relying on sweat or innate bodily odour,” namely oil and grease used to protect or adorn the body (Tullett 311). This changed over the course of the century. By the 1800s, sweat was at the centre of the discourse in scientific and medical terms, especially in the South (Tullett 313). This new take on the question surely helped push an agenda in states that were deeply reliant on slave labour. Contrary to cosmetic habits, an olfactory difference that comes from inside the body would suggest (or, more likely, would help justify the already popular idea at the time) that there are biological differences between black and white constitutions and/or bodies, and that they are perceivable and quantifiable. Tullett does add that “the presumption of stench was often used

as a means of discouraging intimacy” (315), alluding to the fact that the olfactory distinction between the races was a social construct with a very clear political agenda.

“Stench” was not only used as a way to encourage racial discrimination, but also as a means to enforce it. During segregation, white Americans were afraid that their black fellow countrymen “could pass as Caucasian” (Reinarz 104). In keeping with the one-drop rule,<sup>16</sup> it was believed that light-skinned people of African descent would retain a smell identifying them as black. Because the reason given for that supposed difference in smell was biological, in other words inherent in the body, a racist medical establishment could therefore “actively perpetuat[e] ideas of difference” (Reinarz 104). Smell even played a role, although covert, in the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* trial. During segregation, the law required railroads operators to provide separate accommodations according to race, and passengers were forced to comply. This prompted the formation of the Citizens’ Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Law in New Orleans (Duignan n.pag.). In 1896, the Committee chose Homer Plessy, a racially mixed man with seven-eighths of white ancestry and one-eighth of African ancestry, to prove that this law could not be upheld with consistency and was unconstitutional (Duignan n.pag.). The U.S. Supreme Court eventually ruled against the plaintiff, a judgement that served as the legal foundation for twentieth-century segregation (Reinarz 105). Although the one-drop rule would have him sit in the carriage reserved for people of colour, Plessy “looked” white. The point of the case was to underline the arbitrariness and inconstancy of racial categories, hence choosing a light-skinned biracial man to be the plaintiff, but “segregationists claimed they could sense race in other ways” and white people “claimed to ‘have developed more sensitive noses’” (Reinarz 105). Therefore, it was stated by the court that sight could not be entirely counted on in order to distinguish between races. Although the existence of particular racial smells never had any basis in science, it kept on being a widespread idea in the century that followed *Plessy v. Ferguson*:

Throughout the twentieth century, olfactory distinctions between blacks and whites continued to be made, the black side of town reputedly smelling of ‘stale perspiration and whiskey,’ or ‘overfried catfish’ and ‘barbequed pork chops.’ Yet tests undertaken by psychologists between the 1930s and 1950s concluded that noses could neither distinguish the ‘peculiar odor’ of a racial group nor differentiate between the sweat of black and white people. Whether or not

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<sup>16</sup> “The nation’s answer to the question ‘Who is black?’ has long been that a black is any person with **any** known African black ancestry. This definition reflects the long experience with slavery and later with Jim Crow segregation. In the South it became known as the ‘one-drop rule,’ meaning that a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person a black. It is also known as the ‘one black ancestor rule,’ some courts have called it the ‘traceable amount rule,’ and anthropologists call it the ‘hypo-descent rule,’ meaning that racially mixed persons are assigned the status of the subordinate group” (Davis n.pag.).



distinctive smells existed, segregationists made them real by constantly invoking their prejudicial stereotypes (105-106).

Despite the lack of empirical data on the question, it seems a fair assumption to say that even today, the notion that different races exude different smells (or, more often than not, that whiteness is “odourless” whereas other ethnicities are not) is still a quite widespread preconceived idea, even though science has refuted it (Reinarz 111). American essayist Diane Ackerman wrote in 1999 about that very question in her book titled *A Natural History of the Senses*, a combination of testimonies, observations and history. In it, she posits that there is “so much anecdotal evidence about different races having distinctive odors [...] that such claims are difficult to discount” (22). She blames the lack of serious and empirical proof on a culture of political correctness, believing that scientists do not dare tackle the topic for fear or being called racist (ibid.). If nothing else (since the vague mention of “anecdotal evidence” that is exempt of exemplification is far from being a compelling argument), this proves how deeply rooted this assumption is or, the very least, was. As Reinarz states, smell, and not solely sight, was and still is “central to the *construction* of racial difference” (Reinarz 86; italics mine).

Logically, the use of smell in the construction of race finds an echo in literature. Southern Gothic, although not always tackling racial issues head-on, is at least always set over a background of social anxiety and deep-rooted guilt. Racism might not always be named, it is part of the mortar with which the genre is built. If some works are explicitly about race and engage with the question in a straightforward way, some authors, like Flannery O’Connor, use themes of alienation and violence to embed issues of racism in their narrative, often without making them explicit. Others set out to write specifically about racial inequality, either as a way to participate in the debate or to chronicle the sufferings of the oppressed from a position of privilege, as a very large majority of authors of Southern Gothic (at least the “Faulknerian strain”) are white. This explains the absence of black writers, or writers of colours in general, in the corpus of this dissertation. Although it is evident that discussing the American South while only basing oneself in accounts from white authors necessarily means leaving a large part of the regional and historical experience behind, the wish to select a coherent group of canonical texts that are deeply Southern Gothic and relevant to the study question, as well as avoiding tokenism, resulted in the present corpus.

Faulkner who, as this dissertation has already attempted to expose, was a keen nose and used olfaction in a myriad of ways, was not one to be outdone on the question of race. This time however, and in contrast with Caddy’s honeysuckle smell, the descriptive addition of

smells is less a literary phenomenon than merely a social one reflected in literature. As the plot of *Intruder in the Dust* revolves around the arrest of a black farmer for allegedly killing a white man, the novel is deeply concerned with questions of racial discrimination in the southern states. To Robert Jackson, the novel registers "southern white anxieties about the pace of racial change [that were] embedded in a much broader cultural milieu" (41), and according to Charles S. Aiken in *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape*, this is done in a very direct way: "[c]ustomarily in the segregated South, conversations about racial matters between blacks and whites, and even among whites, were oblique. However, in *Intruder in the Dust* the discussions of racial issues are unusually candid for the time" (194). As it was published in 1948, *Intruder in the Dust* appears on the literary stage at a particular time:

After the Second World War, as the United States seized its worldwide role as the representative of democracy, the Jim Crow South was regarded as an ideological blemish on the whole nation. At the same time, however, Cold War politics influenced domestic racial politics, and Faulkner was becoming more engaged with these intersecting ideological problems (Marutani 71).

If earlier in his life, Faulkner often expressed prejudice that perpetuated racial stereotypes, by the time he wrote *Intruder in the Dust*, he had started questioning them and analysed them in the platform offered by his prose.

Already in the first chapter of the novel, the description of olfactory cues is potent and assails the pages, exactly as a strong smell would when walking into a fragrant or foul-smelling room. The first mention of odour in the novel is significant: "[a]lready he could smell that smell which he had accepted without question all his life as being the smell always of the places where people with any trace of Negro blood live" (Faulkner 2013, 9-10). This first mention is located only ten pages into the story and sets the scene for its main themes, namely racial relations in the US south or, more precisely, the identities pertaining to race. Lucas Beauchamp, a black farmer, helps white twelve-year-old Chick who has fallen through the ice of a frozen creek. Lucas takes the boy to his home, warms him and feeds him. As Chick spends time in Lucas' house, the narration hovers for a couple of pages on his reflections on smell. The first mention of olfaction quoted above precedes by a few sentences the following passage which, although long, deserves to be quoted in full as it is a striking example of Faulkner's acclaimed "ability to convey sensation" (Aiken 226):

‘Strip off,’ the man said. So he stripped off the wet unionsuit too and then he was in the chair again in front of the now bright and swirling fire, enveloped in the quilt like a cocoon, enclosed completely now in that unmistakable odor of Negroes—that smell which if it were not for something that was going to happen to him within a space of time measurable now in minutes he would have gone to his grave never once pondering speculating if perhaps that smell were really not the odor of a race nor even actually of poverty but perhaps of a condition: an idea: a

belief: an acceptance, a passive acceptance by them themselves of the idea that being Negroes they were not supposed to have facilities to wash properly or often or even to wash bathe often even without the facilities to do it with; that in fact it was a little to be preferred that they did not. But the smell meant nothing now or yet; [so] he just smelled it and then dismissed it because he was used to it, he had smelled it off and on all his life and would continue to [...] He had smelled it forever, he would smell it always; a part of his inescapable past, it was a rich part of his heritage as a Southerner; he didn't even have to dismiss it, he just no longer smelled it at all as the pipe smoker long since never did smell at all the cold pipereek which is as much a part of his clothing as their buttons and buttonholes (Faulkner 2013 10-12).

Olfaction is unequivocally used here to make a commentary on otherness in the American South. According to Charles S. Aiken, this "unconstrained description" runs long and is uninterrupted by dialogue so as to better "reveal the secluded shackles between whites and blacks" (227). Smell is a discriminating agent because it serves to separate black from whites. There is in Chick's opinion no denying that there indeed exists a different odour emanating from black rural homes than white homes, or perhaps the difference lies in the fact that the latter is odourless, as there is no evidence in the novel to the contrary. Chick links the "unmistakable odor of Negroes" to the absence of washing facilities. However, in the post-Great Depression South, poverty was far from being a black-only phenomenon and many white people in rural Mississippi (where Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha county is thought to be located) did not have access to basic hygiene either. This description thus takes on an ambiguous meaning. The narrator, although ascribing the smell to uncleanness a couple of lines later, does speculate that the scent is not that of a special race, nor of poverty in general (therefore tracing a clear demarcation between poor blacks and poor whites) but that of passivity and acceptance of their position on the lower rung of the social ladder.

In light of this observation, the ending of the quotation is even more striking. If one accepts that this "unmistakable" odour smelled by Chick and described by the narrator is the smell of passivity towards oppression, his "rich heritage as a Southerner" appears to be particularly grim. This is especially true in that it is presented as inescapable. A smell can continue to haunt the smeller via sensory memory long after it is not perceivable anymore. Here, it is hard to determine with certainty whether the text waves to that phenomenon, and is saying that the "smell of segregation" will continue on haunting the South's nostrils even after its possible future abolishment (this is certainly the case and is easily observable in the current social climate of the South, where a post-racial society is constantly shown to be a utopia) or whether at the time Chick (and perhaps, consequently, Faulkner) simply sees segregation as unavoidable and definitive. In any case, from the first chapter, the novel traces an analogy between the sociological and the sensorial. As the reference to the smell of smoke impressed

into the clothing indicates, racial inequality is deeply embedded into the fabric of the South, and in an equally indelible manner. What is more, southerners being so used to it, they do not smell it anymore. This fragment hints at the fact that this includes black southerners as well: the text describes them as being immune to the scent of their own oppression, so resigned to their condition that they have stopped noticing it. As Faulkner was white and privileged, this insight might not (and, considering the plurality and subtlety of human experience, probably does not) describe accurately how the majority of the African American rural community considered their own social conditions at the time. However, it should not necessarily be disregarded for that reason. On the contrary, this fragment offers a precious account of white guilt and how some “progressive” whites believed the oppressed blacks considered their social status.<sup>17</sup>

This fragment is especially noteworthy considering it is about a social category, the ever-changing and problematic discursive space par excellence. It is obviously the most prominent use of olfactory cues in the novel since such a feat could hardly be replicated in a work of fiction less than three hundred pages long. In this excerpt, smell is not a physiological process as much as it is a gateway to address another, seemingly unrelated subject, namely race. It appears almost as a pretext to discuss the reality of segregation from early on in the story, yet it also serves to place social reflection on a bodily level. As a result, Chick's pondering is framed as something that is vital. The narration also acknowledges how easy it would be for Chick, as a white person, to never problematize race; yet he finds himself forced to do it, just as he has to breathe in the scent of Lucas' house because "while we can exist, however poorly, without taste or touch, even without sight or hearing, breathe we must" (Rindisbacher 92). Entirely correlating breathing with smelling disregards anosmia, that is to say the loss or impairment of the sense of smell. In the same way that Rindisbacher does, historical volumes on olfaction (which are more concerned with smells than with the act of smelling) have largely ignored anosmia. It has been confined to the medical field (and has gained unprecedented awareness among the Covid-19 pandemic). Mark M. Smith raises the same point as Rindisbacher, but underlines the *theoretical* invasive nature of smells compared to the other senses:

Unlike the eye and mouth, which were “well-defended”—eyes could blink and mouths could shut— the nose “can not close the gates.” Smells are transgressive, punching their way inside,

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<sup>17</sup> “White guilt” in this context is somewhat of an anachronism, as the concept did not gain traction until the mid-sixties (Steele 497; Dictionary.com). Of course, the fact that there was not as of yet a phrase for it does not mean that the concept did not exist.

the only real defense being not to breathe at all. The nose and its sense of smell are always engaged, always in and out of the world (67).

Similarly, through Chick smelling Lucas' house, Faulkner's presents the racial questions as an issue that demands to be addressed in order to live and grow; an issue that the US south, and especially the white man, cannot ward off.

One other potential reason why *Intruder in the Dust* has passed the test of time so well can be found in the fact that it does not resort to racial colour-blindness. This universalist theory stating that all men are born equal (while voluntarily confusing the practical with the ethical) gained traction in the second half of the twentieth century (Ansell 320). Whereas colour-blindness is a sociological theory depicting an ideal, it has often been presented by majority groups as a post-racial reality in order to sweep the subject under the rug and avoid talking about race (Bonilla-Silva 101). Chick's description of smell is in direct opposition to that stance, as it does not deny the differences existing between black and white households and, metonymically, the differences between blacks and whites. On the contrary, this fragment underlines those differences in order to understand them. Chick questions the nature of that particular smell, dismissing the notion that a scent can be intrinsically linked to a race, positing that a scent is only ever reflective of the conditions people of a certain race live in, at a given time and place.

If it is hard to find such an explicit and advanced observation on racial smell a second time in Southern Gothic literature, Faulkner is far from being the only author to openly claim the existence and perceivable nature of a particular "black" smell. After all, this preconceived idea was, as mentioned above, far-reaching at the time. Carson McCullers writes *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940, at the heart of segregation, as much in a temporal sense than a geographical one: in North Carolina, fifteen years before the birth of the Civil Rights movement. This story, her first novel, is first and foremost one of isolation, identity and inequity in the Depression-era small-town South. Through a diverse cast of protagonists, McCullers approaches the different faces that social struggle can take on, whether it does so through poverty, race, disability, gender or ideology. The exposition of racial inequity is an important aspect of the novel and, just like Lucas Beauchamp being falsely accused of murder in *Intruder in the Dust*, it takes on a literal and legal aspect in McCullers' story. Here, Willie Copeland, a young black man present at the wrong place at the wrong time, goes to prison for assault. Once incarcerated, he apparently aggravates white prison guards who decide to lock him and two of his friends in a freezing-cold cell. They string them up by their feet and leave

them in that position for three days. When they are finally freed, Willie's feet have become gangrenous due to the conditions of his confinement and have to be amputated. Rather than having him tell his own tragic story, or showing it directly to the reader, McCullers presents this event through the eyes, ears and feelings of one of her protagonists (and therefore one of the focus points of the narration), Doctor Benedict Copeland, Willie's father. Rather than presenting the most prominent act of racial violence in the story from the perspective of the person living it, McCullers filters it through another character's perception. Benedict Copeland's position in the novel is generally ambiguous. He is set apart from other black characters, mostly by his speech. His eloquent and refined way of speaking is a far cry from the dialogues given to the other black characters, peppered with slang words. He is also college-educated, making him the most traditionally erudite character in the novel and with this, McCullers, a white woman, could be creating a "middleman" between black and white communities. Copeland's presence in the novel allows her to have one of her main characters be black and also not fit seamlessly in his own community, therefore offering the (presumably white) reader an "outsider" insight. In keeping with Faulkner's posterior take on the subject, McCullers' black characters are resigned to their subservient position, with the notable exception of Doctor Copeland, who is passionate about trying to uplift the black community and grows increasingly more frustrated about the passivity he feels running through it.

As this dissertation will later go further into, McCullers is generous with her use of scent, punctuating almost every scene with an olfactory cue of some sort. The question of race is no exception. Probably because of her own racial identity (and because of the fact that, whereas fiction allows the reader to put themselves in someone else's shoes, it appears much more difficult to put oneself into someone else's nose), McCullers uses racial smells from a very obviously white perspective. First of all, she asserts the existence of a "black smell" and makes several mentions of it throughout the book. When Portia, Doctor Copeland's daughter and Willie's sister, leads several white characters into her home in search of a young boy who has run away, the third-person narrator acknowledges a "coloured smell" in the rooms (156). Later on, the same idea is formulated in a stronger wording: two white characters enter that same house, the atmosphere in the kitchen described as "smoke mingled with a certain Negro smell" (253). When Jake Blount, the communist, tries to break up a fight between two men (one white, one black), Blount tackles the latter. The man goes "down with him and they [are] on the ground together. The smell of the Negro [is] mixed with the heavy dust in his lungs" (294). This last example studied on its own would be unclear as to whether the narrator

references simply to that man's individual smell, if it were not for the previous examples of "a certain Negro smell." Indeed, the wordings of the two are very similar and since McCullers has already established the reality of a particular racial smell in her fictional space, it is logical to interpret this last quote as a new occurrence of it.

Contrary to the description written by Faulkner in *Intruder in the Dust*, the "black smell" of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* has nothing to do with uncleanliness. This is made evident by the fact that the particular smell of unwashed bodies appears on various occasions in the story, but relates to poor whites. Biff Brannon, one of the protagonists and the owner of the café, is presented as always "scrupulously clean from the belt upwards" (32). He is contrasted with fellow white man Jake Blount, the heavy-drinking patron who is said to "nee[d] a bath so badly that he [stinks] like a goat" and so unclean that he is "not fit to walk around amongst people" (21-22). The smell presented by the narration as being exclusively "coloured" has thus nothing to do with the lack of facilities in which "to wash properly or often" as described by Faulkner. This is confirmed by the fact that Doctor Copeland, the black erudite, is presented as a rather elegant, well-groomed man. Moreover, if the uncleanliness of Blount is presented in a derogative manner, nothing short of a nuisance, no such treatment is reserved for the "Negro smell" that is only ever described in a very neutral, and therefore mysterious way. Indeed, whereas Faulkner's notion of the smell of the poor rural African American community can be triggered in the reader because of its clear source (unwashed bodies), no such recall can be operated for McCullers' take on it. Only a white, privileged person from small-town Georgia in the early mid-twentieth century could hope to know what she smelled when she wrote of this alleged racial smell and even then, one has to account for the fundamental subjectivity of the senses. It is unclear whether it could be linked with certain hygienic or culinary practices, but in any case McCullers does seem to operate under the assumption that what she calls the "coloured smell" is innate, and that there is indeed such a thing as an actual olfactory marker of race, in the same way that colour is a visual one.

Not only does the narration of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* concur with Jonathan Reinartz's summary of preconceived notions in the twentieth century in that it plants an olfactory difference between racial communities, but it also follows the other aspects that Reinartz points out, namely, food and alcohol. McCullers often comments on food smells which, in their large majority, emanate from black households. However, she does so in a very positive light. In comparison to the neutral "smell of supper" (148), emanating from white kitchens, black cooking is made of "warm smells" (132), "rich sweet odours" (165), among

which “the sweet spiced odour of newly baked cake and steaming coffee” (161). The reason for this might be the fact that the reader’s gateway into the black community is Doctor Copeland, a refined man earning what one might conclude to be a reasonable income, and his children living in his house, therefore in similar conditions. However, when writing about the conditions of Doctor Copeland’s patients, poverty-stricken people from the African American community, McCullers complies very much to the popular white discourse of the time. Her descriptions of “cold, narrow passages smelling of dirt and sickness and fried fatback” (121) and of “the scattered odorous parts of town where the Negroes [crowd] together” from which often emanates “the fine, sharp smell of gin” (176) strike one as fitting perfectly the cliché pointed out by Reinartz of “the black side of town reputedly smelling of ‘stale perspiration and whiskey,’ or ‘overfried catfish’” (105). Later, however, the prejudiced notion that black people necessarily drank (and therefore smelled of) alcohol is acknowledged as being just that, a prejudice. Annoyed by Doctor Copeland’s simple request for an interview with the sheriff, the deputy sheriff replies, entirely gratuitously: “You can’t stand up straight. You been drinking liquor, haven’t you? I smell it on your breath” (229). McCullers’ position in the racial debate is therefore singular. She undoubtedly sets out in this novel to give a voice to the oppressed, putting together a cast of five protagonists who are all part of one (or several) minorities, be they religious, ethnic, social, etc. Of course, one has to be extremely careful when assuming an author’s goal or beliefs by studying their fiction, but one thing is certain: through Willie’s tragic story and the fervent love of Copeland for his community, McCullers depicts the black southerners in a mostly positive light and denounces the extreme violence perpetrated against them. The narration does not disagree with the racial stereotypes of the time; it does, after all, present a poor rural black community that is predominantly resigned to its difficult living conditions and subservient status. Instead, it does seem to regard these stereotypes as neutral markers or race and not of inferiority. Racial smells operate along the same lines: they are described as undeniably existent (to the point of taking for granted that the reader would identify them) but are not used in a depreciative manner. The story perpetuates the rampant stereotypes of the time, yet strips them of their negative connotations and even seems to advocate for tolerance in spite of them.

One had to wait two more decades after *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* for the great plea for tolerance of the American novel (and of the South especially). It is notoriously to be found in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), a chronicle of racial inequity in 1930s’ Alabama. Lee’s position on racial issues is univocal and has been discussed at length in the criticism



published ever since. There is no wonder this book is a "staple of high school syllabuses" all across the United States (Maxwell n.pag.). Indeed, it provides a moral lesson that is at once important and easily digestible, as it is presented through the narration of a six to nine-year-old. Through the character of Atticus Finch, the highly principled lawyer, Lee provides her audience with an allegory of justice and moral integrity. Atticus is presented as a goal of tolerance that her contemporaries (and successors) should aspire to emulate, which is apparent not in small part because he is seen through the admiring gaze of his daughter, the narrator. With this novel, Lee permanently distinguished herself as an advocate for racial tolerance.<sup>18</sup> Her position on the racial question is even explicit through the titular quote of the novel: "shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (99). The mockingbird represents innocence crushed by evil, just as Tom Robinson, a humble black man wrongfully convicted for murder, is destroyed by the racist society that uses him (and by metonymy, uses the black community) as a scapegoat for its own wrongdoings. Lee strongly condemns segregation and the evil deeds perpetrated in its name, in which passive whites are necessarily complicit.

Compared to the previous works discussed for this section, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is by far the most frugal in terms of olfactory occurrences. Lee uses them very sparingly; this absence is particularly striking when contrasted with the real abundance of smells that is found in Faulkner and McCullers's work. In spite of the scarceness of smells in her work, Lee does on several occasions use them in relation to race. The first occurrence is located when Calpurnia, the Finches' black cook, takes Scout and her brother to church with her, an event which Scout describes as olfactorily pleasing: "the warm bittersweet smell of clean Negro welcomed us as we entered the churchyard — Hearts of Love hairdressing mingled with asafoetida, snuff, Hoyt's Cologne, Brown's Mule, peppermint, and lilac talcum" (131). The distinction from the examples analysed above is stark. Scout does recognize a certain racial smell, but it is "clean" rather than unwashed (and therefore suggests the parallel existence of a "smell of unclean Negro") and more importantly, she lists the ingredients which make up the fragrance. The presence of the conjunction "and" between the last two items of the list even postulates that it

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<sup>18</sup> It bears mentioning that there is substantial discussion and debate, as there is bound to be in a healthy literary and academic environment, about whether *To Kill a Mockingbird* is really as progressive and anti-racist as history has believed it to be (see for example Tanya Landman's "Is *To Kill a Mockingbird* a Racist Book?" in *The Guardian* online or Julia Franks's "Let's Stop Pretending *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Progressive on Race" for the National Council of Teachers of English's blog). Be that as it may, the novel's status and importance in the American conversation about race is hard to belittle, let alone erase. It is logical, even reassuring, that the racial lessons to be found in a work of fiction published sixty years ago are now outdated.

is exhaustive. Presented in this way, almost like an artificial perfume made of head and heart notes, Scout dismisses the idea that racial smells are innate or biological. Instead, she describes the “black” smell not only as a compound, but most pertinently as a cultural phenomenon expressed through cosmetics.

Like the narrator of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* also identifies certain “African American smells” in relation to food. Similar to the former, the latter goes against the prejudice described by Reinartz in that it presents those culinary smells as inviting. Walking by a settlement in which poor rural black people live, Scout contemplates the mouth-watering odours: “[t]here were delicious smells about: chicken, bacon frying crisp as the twilight air” (188-189). With several examples to prove it, the reader notices that Scout associates black people with pleasant smells, regardless of their social background. This appreciation does not extend to members of her own ethnicity. Moving through a would-be lynch mob that is trying to get to Tom Robinson in the town jail, Scout has to push her “way through dark smelly bodies” (167). These bodies belong to (predominantly poor and actively racist) white people. It is interesting that despite the paleness of their skin, they should be described as “dark.” If the choice of adjective is factual (the scene taking place at night), it is first and foremost metaphorical. As explained by British cinema academic Richard Dyer, the construction of “the so-called white race has historically been founded on a fundamental symbolic equivalence between whiteness and purity, between blackness (or any putative nonwhiteness) and corruption, sin, filth” (Dyer cited in Reinartz 103). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this Manichean paradigm of the relation between colours and virtues is inverted. Blackness is correlated with purity and innocence, hence the title of the book, whereas ignorant and bigoted whiteness is the force of evil and corruption that needs to be fought. It makes sense that this characterization of moral characteristics (white morals are dirty, whereas black principles are clean) would travel to smells. White and black are located on opposite ends of the spectrum, the former being foul and the latter aromatic and pleasant. This reversal of traditional symbols is not only a staple of Southern Gothic, it is a very Gothic trope in general. Indeed, one only has to look at Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to realize how much gothic literature is concerned with the idea that real monsters are not who tradition or appearances would have them be.

It is not evident to place these examples on Rindisbacher's Eros-Thanatos spectrum of smells, as the racial issue is largely absent from his reference book. The fact that odours as ways to discriminate between races is a social phenomenon present in the collective mind and reflected in literature, rather than being a literary, one could explain why Rindisbacher barely

touches upon the subject. Another reason for this could be the fact that *The Smell of Books* only focuses on European works, and racial segregation was not nearly as palpable and codified there as it was in the United States, especially in the South. However, this would be too short-sighted a point, as no European nation can pretend to exist outside of the racist and imperialist discourses. Nonetheless, through its analysis of olfaction as it pertains to social class, *The Smell of Books* provides us with a rough framework which can be compared to the black/white divide in the three novels discussed in this section. Rindisbacher makes the following distinction between social classes based on nineteenth century German literature: "the good-smelling upper class, the inodorous bourgeois middle class, the implicitly bad-smelling savages outside German culture" (58). It is hard to determine whether a similar hierarchy, after a rewriting of the label assigned to each category (swapping "upper class" for "whites" for example), would have been applicable to the white mentality of the segregated South. In any case, it does not seem to find an echo in the Southern Gothic. The narrator of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* stays particularly neutral, refusing to sort racial smells into the good/bad dichotomy. Scout's distinction between good- and bad-smelling in *To Kill a Mockingbird* has nothing to do with social class, being instead purely related to race. And finally, there is nothing in *Intruder in the Dust* to suggest Chick correlates the black rural class with foul smells. The spectrum Chick is working with is a different one, not distinguishing between repulsive and pleasurable smells, but between fragrant and odourless. This alludes to an aspect of olfaction not addressed by Rindisbacher but briefly mentioned by Muchembled in *La civilisation des odeurs* (26), i.e. the human capacity to sometimes only smell what is alien to us, just as one's own home is inodorous to oneself. In the same way, Chick only problematizes the scents that, although familiar, he is not a part of, therefore prefiguring the result of his search for identity as a white person in the segregated South. Similarly, the white authors of the racist South use the relationships between black and white characters as a way to question their own identity and that of their region through their fiction; the smells they write about is only a facet of it.

## 5. Writing About Smells

The previous chapters have considered when smells occur in the selected novels, and the nature of those smells, but a study of olfaction in literature would be remiss to not stop to examine the way these realizations are written. It says perhaps less about the genre and the setting, and more about the individual authors, which is an aspect also worth examining. Even if it varies from

writer to the next, some of them even possessing very singular voices when referring to the olfactory, some patterns do run across the genre.

First, not all authors are equal in their treatment of olfaction on purely numerical terms. Restraining the count to the explicit only, *The Road* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* come ahead as the most olfactory generous texts of the corpus, with an average of one occurrence of smell every 1365 and 1408 words respectively. This roughly translates to one every 4 or 5 pages. As a result, most scenes contain at least one. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers use smells to paint the picture of day-to-day life in small-town Georgia in the late 1930s. They are mainly markers of human life: food, sweat, perfume, coffee, alcohol, soap, and the elusive “coloured smell” discussed in the previous chapter. McCullers is concerned with smells as a part of the atmosphere: they are rarely relevant to the plot or the action. They are mostly described as a part of the background over which the characters move, and left unquestioned. The novel is written in third person and the focus of each chapter shifts between the five main characters. It is understood that the smells described in each chapter are smelled by the character the chapter is about, but that is rarely made explicit by the syntax. McCullers relies more on “there was the smell of—” constructions than on “he/she smelled—.” Therefore, smells are in the novel an undeniable presence; they seem to exist even when no one is there to acknowledge them. This construction also allows the smells to serve as a mechanism of immersion: “[t]he room was warm and full of the good smells from the supper” (183), “[t]he night was quiet. There was the smell of warm cedars” (108), “[t]hroughout the house there was the sweet spiced odour of newly baked cake and steaming coffee” (161), “[t]he room was cold and the air had a sour stale odour—the mixed smells of kerosene and silver polish and tobacco” (189), “customers lolled at the tables and there were the smells of tobacco and the rustle of newspaper” (200), and many more. Several of these examples show that McCullers combine smells with other senses, like sound and touch (with the mention of temperature).

As previously mentioned, McCarthy has a habit of highlighting smells in *The Road*. The novel sports a heavily sensory writing, but unlike Faulkner’s lush use of smells, McCarthy’s is economical and utilitarian. In a quick and succinct description of a setting his characters are entering, as most of his descriptions are bound to be in his rapid writing style, he regularly includes one short nominal sentence to point out a smell, often saving it for last. In a novel that is deeply concerned with smelling danger, as the characters have been forced to revert back to a heavy reliance on smell to survive, this contributes to giving an impression of urgency and efficiency. The characters (and therefore, consequently, the narration) scan any

new setting and make a snap decision regarding safety on the basis of sight, sound, and smell. In addition to the quotations which already appear in the section on Thanatos, here are more examples: “It was colder. Nothing moved in that high world. A rich smell of woodsmoke hung over the road” (31), “The pistol was a double action but the man cocked it anyway. Two loud clicks. Otherwise, only their breathing in the silence of the salt moorland. They could smell him in his stinking rags” (273-4), “They moved through the streets like sappers. One block at a time. A faint smell of woodsmoke on the air” (83). Because of the numerous mentions of the active act of smelling, as a way to discriminate between harmless and harmful, the reader is trained to perceive these impersonal smells as a quick assessment of the environment. They are automatically interpreted as being information gathered by the characters, then passed on to the reader, instead of “gratuitous” data given by the narrator to set the scene. The following fragment, an entire paragraph and scene located halfway through the book, shows how McCarthy combines both verbs and noun phrases to depict the practical use of smells:

The ashes were cold. Some blackened pots stood about. He squatted on his heels and picked one up and *smelled it* and put it back. He stood and looked out the window. Gray trampled grass. Gray snow. The cord that came through the window was tied to a brass bell and the bell was fixed in a rough wooden jig that had been nailed to the window molding. He held the boy's hand and they went down a narrow back hallway into the kitchen. Trash piled everywhere. A ruststained sink. *Smell of mold and excrement*. They went on into the adjoining small room, perhaps a pantry (114; italics mine).

This quote and the other ones above show at the same time McCarthy's range and the particularity of his use of smell in the novel. If not all of his mentions of smell follow that pattern, many do, often enough for it to be highly noticeable. The examples above are only a sample of all the occurrences of this phenomenon. As discussed in the previous section, even the absence of smell is expressed in that way: “The charred meat and bones under the damp ash might have been anonymous save for the shapes of the skulls. No longer any smell” (159). Consequently, the absence of smell even seems to be a smell in and of itself. At the least, it is so on a pragmatic level: since smelling is a manner of being aware of one's surroundings, the absence of smell constitutes useful olfactory information, at the same level than particular odours.

With regular references to ash, soot, dampness, rain and nature, McCarthy crafts a rich spontaneous olfactory landscape: smells do not necessarily need to be explicit in order to offer recall power to the reader. The only time smell leaves the narration and appears in the dialogue, it is to similar effect:

And it may rain.  
How can you tell?  
I can smell it.  
What does it smell like?  
Wet ashes. Come on. (247)

The burnt forest the characters are travelling through is a perpetual trigger, slowly shifting towards iodine as they reach their goal, the sea. See for example this fragment, early in the story: “[t]he soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop” (2). The mention of particles moving in the wind can, without any words relating to olfaction, create an odorous background. This, of course, is a subjective experience, which is bound to vary not only from reader to reader but also from moment to moment inside the same novel. In the case of McCarthy, by underlining a smell once or twice then regularly mentioning its source throughout the story, the smell has the potential to be invoked again just by process of association. As a result, when a stranger appears near the ending and the narrator states that “he smelled of woodsmoke” (303), readers, who have read enough descriptions of forests and ash throughout the story for it to saturate their olfactory environment, have the right to wonder whether anything in that charred landscape does actually *not* smell of woodsmoke.

Smells are much less omnipresent in McCarthy’s other novel in the corpus, *Child of God*. As a rough comparison, explicit instances of smells or smelling only occur every 15 pages, which is three times less than in *The Road*. Of course, the disparity could simply be ascribed to the time lapse between the release of those two books: *Child of God* came out thirty-three years before *The Road*, giving McCarthy’s writing style ample time to change and develop. More probably, that difference is due to the vast divergences between the plots of the two novels. *Child of God* is not a story of survival. Smell is a much less vital tool to Lester Ballard than it is to the unnamed father and son of *The Road*; the writing therefore reflects that. Whereas in *The Road*, smells are used to maintain the tension by showing how the protagonists (especially the father looking after his son) always stay on their guard, in *Child of God*, the stench is the reflection of Lester Ballard’s moral perversity. The treatment of olfaction in those two McCarthy novels exemplify the difference between terror and horror, one that has often been made in relation to Gothic fiction (Wright 35-56). The distinction dates back to Ann Radcliffe, who theorized it in her posthumously published essay “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1826). Gothic literature scholar Devendra P. Varma summarizes it as such: “the difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization : between the smell of death and stumbling upon a corpse” (130). Note

that, in a theoretical book that is definitely not about olfaction, smell is spontaneously used as the exemplification of terror by being the metonymical reflection of its gruesome source. In other words, terror is concerned with the dread of what *might* happen. It hinges on uncertainty. Horror, on the other hand, deals with the shock of realizing something dreadful *has* happened. McCarthy's novels both present the readers with corpses and their smell, but those smells are presented in different ways in the two books because their goals are different. In *The Road*, awful smells are a product of terror: they represent the grim fate the characters are trying to escape, and even underline how close they come to meeting that fate on several occasions. The reader fears *for* them. In *Child of God*, the tale of one man's descent into monstrosity as a result of his isolation and inadaptability, smells signify horror. They are a symbol of the violent acts that he perpetrates (after they have been committed) and a testament to their atrocity. Here, the reader fears *him*. As a result, the same odours are described to vastly different effects, because the characters doing the smelling have such different motivations.

On purely numerical terms, Faulkner's use of olfaction would be located after *The Road* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. However, in his case, the numbers would be rather irrelevant. Faulkner does not pepper smells in the background of his stories. They are not an atmospheric force, or if they are, it is not their main function. His smells are integrally part of the plot and help move it forward. Faulkner moves powerfully across the whole spectrum, undertaking Eros, Thanatos and the subject of race, but rarely mixes them in the same work. Indeed, those three entities have been analysed over three different stories among his bibliography. He appears to concentrate on the one aspect that is the most relevant to the story at hand, and explores it in depth. By emphasizing the source-destination relations on which the vocabulary of smell depends, Faulkner points out the linguistic shortcomings pertaining to olfaction. Even further, he gives smells a distinctive voice, directly relating to the character or narrator. In *The Sound and the Fury*, they are heavily synesthetic, underlining the peculiar way Benjy Compson processes sensory stimuli and time passing. In "A Rose for Emily," which is narrated by a plural voice encompassing the whole town, *the* smell is a punctual event. It is written as a matter of public knowledge, stuck in the collective consciousness. In *Intruder in the Dust*, the protagonist Chick is a child, learning for the first time to question and problematize some aspects of his life (including his privilege), an endeavour he accomplishes first through smell, reflecting the invasive nature of the sense. To Faulkner, smells are a palpable, tangible thing. They are fluid and have an effect on the lungs as well as on the atmosphere it taints. In the

entirety of the corpus, Faulkner is the author for whom smells are the least incidental. They are not *in service* of the story but *part* of it.

Novels that use smells so regularly, or with such significance, are the exception rather than the rule. Predictably, olfaction is less omnipresent in the rest of the corpus. Flannery O'Connor's characters move in a surprisingly odourless world. On the spectrum of olfactory cues, she sits opposite McCullers: her use of olfaction is striking precisely because it is so scarce. In her 220-page long novel *Wise Blood*, there are only two actual references to smell. The first one mentions a "thin cardboard-smelling store" (20), the second, a museum hall "heavy with the odor of linoleum and creosote and another odor behind these two" (91). Her short stories follow the same rule: inside a 500-page volume, the number of smells which offer recall power can be counted on one hand. In her work, smells are almost conspicuously absent. Admittedly, her prose is not notable for its profuse sensory descriptions. O'Connor's style is to the point and it does not rely too heavily on the setting. Yet it does rest on its sharp and compact descriptions of characters; olfaction *could* have been a part of those. In a way, it is. As mentioned previously in "The Act of Smelling," O'Connor's is much more interested in the verb "to smell" than "the smell of," so much so that she even disconnects one with the other. She often uses the semantic field of olfaction but twists it in service to sight: in *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes thrusts his neck forward "as if he were trying to smell something that [is] always being drawn away (31). The young girl he encounters "[grins] suddenly and then quickly [draws] her expression back together as if she smelled something bad" (43). When Hazel sinks into his devout atheism and starts preaching the "Holy Church of Christ Without Christ," he asks the crowd "Who is it that says it's your conscience?" then looks around "with a constricted face as if he could smell the particular person who thought that" (160). In O'Connor's writing, smelling is a *vision*: it contorts the face into an expression that is witnessed by others. Even when an actual smell emerges in the story, it ends up serving as a way to explore human grimaces. Take for example the scent in the museum cited above, once it is continued:

They went into a dark hall. It was heavy with the odor of linoleum and creosote and another odor behind these two. The third one was an undersmell and Enoch couldn't name it as anything he had ever smelled before. [...] Enoch looked at Hazel Motes to see if he was smelling the undersmell. He looked as if he were (91).

The same phenomenon is present in her short stories, on too many occasions for them to be recounted here: one character has the "look of a man trapped by insufferable odors" (395-396), whereas another looks "at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (276). On the rare occasions that smells are mentioned without supplying a facial expression, they are



abstract or satirical, and do not offer any recall power (a certain judge has a “peculiar odor about him of sweaty fondled bills” [218]). The story “Wildcat” is an outlier. In it, a blind, old black man named Gabriel is terrified of a wildcat he says he can smell. The story is only seven-page long, yet the verb “to smell” appears in it 27 times. Not once does it actually describe the smell that has him so terrified, or any smell for that matter.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas McCarty’s fictional space is saturated with sensorial occurrences, Harper Lee is frugal with her use of smells. It is safe to assume that the reader of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, having so far progressed in a relatively odourless world, will pay extra attention when smells are described. Lee uses olfaction infrequently, but when she does, she often wields metonymical constructions. There is something very simple to the nature of the smells in the novel, maybe due to her addressing a young readership (there is no telling with certainty which demographic Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* for, but it is told by Scout who is six-years old at the beginning of the story, and its language and themes make it appropriate for middle-school students). Scout has strong feelings of like or dislike, almost automatic, and the smells she identifies showcase that. Her new teacher Miss Caroline “look[s] and smell[s] like a peppermint drop” (18). About the nice Mister Raymond “[she] like[s] his smell: it was of leather, horses, cottonseed” (204), whereas the judge of probate at the trial lives “in cool dim hutches that [smell] of decaying record books mingled with old damp cement and stale urine” (179). When Scout moves through a mob of violent men who threaten Atticus and Tom Robinson, the innocent black man in jail, there is “a smell of stale whiskey and pigpen about” (167). Lee provides a comfortable power of recall due to her often mixing several smell sources in one description. Her writing is quite Manichean, pitting the “good black people” with their white allies against the bigoted white mass; her use of olfaction appropriately reflects it. As a result, Lee uses smells in a practical manner, much more than her friend Truman Capote.

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, smells are not used to make a point, nor even to particularly serve the plot. They are mainly tools Capote uses to strengthen his engrossing descriptions of the setting, and they are almost always combined with other types of sensory cues, whether these are sound, colour or taste. Capote’s writing is ornate and detail-oriented; naturally, this travels to the senses. Not only does Capote often associate different senses, he also sometimes conflates them: when a breeze comes into the room, it brings in “the velvet

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<sup>19</sup> This echoes back to the quote of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, mentioned in the section on the act of smelling, in which Zoo declares that “[t]hey is a wildcat smell on the air” (120).

shade sunshine smells of outside” (109); when Randolph burns freshly bloomed roses, their sweetness [fills] the air like a colour” (140). This last example also illustrates Capote’s regular use of similes to describe senses in general: in the stuffy house, some garments give off the odour of mothballs “like a gas” (163-164), meanwhile a tennis ball falling down the stairs thumps “like the sound of an oversized raindrop” (69). They are rarely necessary to the plot but instead serve to craft a lush sensory environment.

The vast majority of smells in the novel can be distributed over three categories, according to their sources: perfume, nature, and the house. The first one has already been addressed in the section on Eros, since Capote's fiction is concerned with femininity, vanity, and the role of appearances in society. The other two categories are well represented throughout the novel too, and described as supremely Southern Gothic. The house is possibly the most Southern Gothic of settings: a decrepit mansion on an isolated plantation in the Deep South. It perfectly symbolizes the faded grandeur that has culturally represented the South since the Confederation lost the Civil War. The size and style of the house allude to a past luxury, but by the time Joel gets to see it for the first time, it is deteriorated, uninviting, subject to drafts and humidity. Everything in it smells sour. The exterior is described in much more favourable terms, even to the point of romanticizing the deeply Southern landscape of rural Alabama. It is a place of exuberance and fragrance. Whereas the house is described as “stifling” and “musty”, “[smelling] of old furniture and the burned-out fires of wintertime” (36), the garden is heavy with “the sultry smells of summer and sweet shrub and dark earth” (52). Capote flips the setting inside out: the house is a place of darkness and cold; its walls and roof represent not safety, but claustrophobia. It is a place of time standing still, meanwhile the surrounding nature, as a place of life cycles and rebirth, is active and healthy. This opposition is also conveyed by the characters: Joel, by virtue of being an outsider, who leaves New Orleans at the beginning of the story and discovers the house for the first time in its second chapter, is also active and healthy. However, the same cannot be said for the characters who have been living inside the mansion. Joel’s stepmother, Miss Amy, is a woman of weak composition and haughty manners. She represents the dying Southern aristocracy. She often keeps a “gloved hand over her nose like a sachet handkerchief” to endure the “bad” smell of Little Sunshine, an old black hermit who sometimes comes to visit Amy’s cousin, Randolph, “breath[ing] a sigh of relief” once he leaves the room (75). Randolph is the second inhabitant of the mansion when Joel arrives. He occupies a liminal place in the novel: between genders, between ages, between outdated and

modern, between living person and ghost. Although he regularly “[dabs] on lemon cologne” (107), he “reek[s] of mothballs” (163) and is often associated with sickly smells as well:

Then, from the breast-pocket of the taffy-silk pyjama top that he wore, he extracted a cigarette, and struck a match. The cigarette had a strange, medicinal odour, as though the tobacco had been long soaked in the juice of acid herbs: it was the smell that identifies a house where asthma reigns (62).

*Other Voices, Other Rooms* is an interesting case study for this dissertation. In terms of olfactory cues, it is not stingy nor particularly lavish, but is instead located near the middle of the curve. It is also a prototypical Southern Gothic story, built around many tropes of the genre. These tropes translate well to senses, including smell. By being so concerned with the Eros-Thanatos paradigm via perfumes and medicinal smells which connote sicknesses, it synthesizes the themes of this paper, proving that they are an important part of Southern Gothic, even when the author places no special emphasis on olfaction.

To offer a comparison, I would like to step briefly outside of the core corpus. *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, published in 1994, is a novel that has often been considered Southern Gothic. At first glance, it could seem to be aggressively so: it is a story of murder set over the luxuriant backdrop of upper-class Savannah, Georgia, and depicts a large cast of eccentric people. It was written by journalist John Berendt, a northerner. Without getting into the self-perpetuating debate of who gets to be a Southern (Gothic) writer, this piece of information is particularly relevant because the book approaches the South in a touristic way. Berendt does not engage with the identity of the South, or its existence outside of the glamorous part of Savannah. Its Gothicism is surface-level, and mainly consists of Minerva, the African American voodoo priestess, throwing grave dirt on people’s doorstep. Similarly, the sense of smell only makes its way into the story in order to support a certain image of the South as it is perceived by the North (and possibly the Western world at large), which regards it with a mixture of fascination for the region’s idiosyncrasies and condescension regarding the horrors of its history. Berendt use smells sparingly, but whenever he does, they belong to socialites perfuming themselves with gardenia, the extravagant decorations of the parties they throw, greasy food, or typical southern flora:

White dogwood blossoms floated like clouds of confectioner’s sugar above the azaleas. The scent of honeysuckle, Confederate jasmine, and the first magnolia blossoms were already beginning to perfume the air. Who needed the chill of New York? (112).

Combined with descriptions of the city “well into the unfolding pageantry of a warm and leisurely spring” (ibid.), this almost reads like a postcard of the antebellum South. In the diner

where the narrator eats breakfast, there floats the “permanent smell of burned bacon grease” (61). At Minerva’s house, in a more run-down part of town, Berendt is met with “pungent cooking smells, of porks and greens” (234). If many authors of Southern Gothic write about culinary smells and some also associate it with African American characters (e.g. Carson McCullers with Portia in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*), Berendt’s use of smell is much more stereotypical. The book has been critically acclaimed, and it certainly gave readers worldwide an accessible insight into the South (tellingly, the book’s success boosted tourism to Savannah).<sup>20</sup> However, people have been quick to label it “Southern Gothic” out of convenience, although its depiction of the South as a land of voodoo witchcraft and “wacky” characters paints it as the nation’s “Other.” Just as in the other novels studied here, the smells of *Midnight* serve the story on their level, but they do so by comforting the mental image of the (presumably Northern) reader.

## 6. Conclusion

According to Diane Ackerman “[s]mell is the mute sense, the one without words” (5). Be that as it may, authors have still managed to find a way to work smell into their work. More precisely, they have found *ways*, as each of the six authors that have been studied here possess a distinct manner of referring to smells, both on a functional and on a syntactic level. They have all managed to work around an inadequate language. It is perhaps because smell is the sense without words that it is particularly interesting to study how exactly it works its way into language. “Surreptitiously” seems to be the answer: either borrowing words from taste, the closest sensory vocabulary we possess, or by merely pointing out the source of the smell. Some, like O’Connor, depict an odourless world, seemingly taking no interest in crafting an olfactory tapestry for their setting. Her stories rely more on characters and dialogues and that is exactly where the vocabulary of olfaction, surprisingly not at all absent from her prose, emerges. Others, like McCarthy and McCullers, seize the possibilities given by olfaction to leave a deep impression on the reader. They saturate their fictional world with scents, either as a way to make the backdrop of the story multisensory, or as a narrative device that underlines the story’s stakes. All of the authors in the corpus use smell in a personal manner, and that manner

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<sup>20</sup> Kevin Sack. “Yankee Who Captured Savannah Is Its Hero,” in *The New York Times* (1996): <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/04/27/us/yankee-who-captured-savannah-is-its-hero.html> Accessed 15 July 2020 / W. C. Wertz. “20 Years After Midnight: A Look Back,” in *South Magazine* (2007), <http://www.southmag.com/Features-Blog/20-Years-After-Midnight-A-Look-Back/> Accessed 15 July 2020.

coincides with their general writing style and the critical discourse that has surrounded them. Faulkner's written olfaction is innovative, Capote's is lavish and Lee's is didactic. All of these uses of scents are adequate microcosms of the writing style of their respective authors. Each of their own, distinctive voices, which have been much studied and commented on by critics, crosses over to smell. If this might appear at first glance to be self-evident, what this does is prove how much smell is an individual experience: the perception of smell being so deeply connected with emotions, takes on different meanings for each person (Classen et al. 2). In literature, some use them as props, others as punctuation. Others choose to engage with what it is we actually do when we smell: we experience the world head on, without being able to shy away from it.

Given that smell is such an invasive force, it is a perpetual process: the nose never shuts down. It is continually participating in the world and making sense of it. Moreover, nothing (whether vegetal, mineral, human or human-made) is ever truly odourless. Applied to literature, this means that not only does every scene exude a certain smell inside the story (differing from the previous one through a divergence in characters, locations, activities or even props), but that the characters are always smelling it. Yet olfaction is rarely present in a story's every scene. This hints at the poor consideration given to smell in the Western world. For contrast, except for experimental prose (consisting solely of dialogues, for example), one would be hard pressed to find a scene in literature that does not contain a single mention of a visual element. The irregular presence of smell is also an accurate representation of human experience: in the same way that we do not always notice the smells that are continually surrounding us, the narration sometimes stays silent on the subject.

This also means that when smells do bore their way into the narration, they are often there with a purpose. Given the many functions that smell endorses in day-to-day human life, this sense offers a great vehicle with which to address any of these themes:

L'utilité de l'odorat est de rapidement identifier, puis de guider, l'approche ou l'évitement de la nourriture, des partenaires sexuels, des prédateurs, des substances toxiques, dans l'intérêt de la survie personnelle et collective. Ce sens protéiforme est celui de la conservation, du contact ou de la répulsion, donc de la solidité du lien social, de la formation des goûts alimentaires, ainsi que de la perpétuation de l'espèce (Muchembled 27).

All of these are represented in *Southern Gothic*. Smell is the sense of avoidance and approach (and as such, the sense of survival) for the father and son of *The Road*, but it can also fulfil that purpose in much lower-stakes situation, as for example Scout smelling the offered piece of gum to determine if she can trust not only the gum, but also her unknown benefactor. In those

examples and many more, it is the smell of conservation. It is also depicted as the sense of contact and sexuality throughout the corpus. The social bond can be romantic, like Mick appreciating Harry's "warm boy smell," (McCullers 219), it can bridge time and death, which is apparent in the way Agua Florida prompts emotional memories in Biff Brannon, and when the bond really has been severed, the smell disappears. Of the mother of his child whom he resents for having committed suicide, the father of *The Road* can "remember everything save her scent" (17).

It is also strongly depicted as the sense of repulsion in relation to death and its intermediaries, rot and sickness. For those who have the privilege of smelling, that privilege is burdensome. Southern Gothic disagrees with Kant: there are not *more* objects of disgust than of pleasure, but there are many objects of disgust indeed. Compared to the engaging, wholesome smells to be found outside, Joel is bothered by the odour of mustiness and decay that reigns in the mansion in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. It represents multi-levels of Thanatos, nestled like Russian dolls: people in bad health, inside a decrepit house, inside a crumbling system. Thanatos is also presented at its peak, death. Wherever death is found in Southern Gothic, olfaction is never far behind. Some authors address it with a certain distance, defining it simply as "this other smell" that has Mick so upset she has to leave the room (McCullers 306). Others have no qualms about depicting death in its most gruesome details: McCarthy uses dead bodies as foul-smelling, horror-inducing props in both of his novels in the corpus, and Faulkner makes the smell of decomposition a powerful force to be vanquished (if "A Rose for Emily" is quite subdued in its depiction of odor mortis for narrative reasons, one simply has to peruse *As I Lay Dying* to realize that Faulkner is entirely willing to write about the grimmest aspects of death).

Olfaction is indeed also the sense of social bonding. In Southern Gothic, it appears through cooking and cigars, coffee and cleanliness, but it is also the sense of social *bonds* as a restraining force. Several authors affirm the existence of a distinct African American smell. They describe it in an us-versus-them manner that is not hostile but still points to a strong difference between black people and white. This difference is either (according to the authors) due to living conditions, inherent, and/or a product of perception. This smell is rarely actually described, with the exception of Chick (*Intruder in the Dust*), who attributes it to poor hygienic conditions, and Scout (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) who provides a full list of what makes up the smell of a "clean" black person readying to go to church. Then again, that smell is entirely dependent on the situation, and is therefore understood to be different from the black

community's "usual" smell. This lack of definition might be due to the fact that the authors thought it self-explanatory, or shirked having to put words to that perceived difference, knowing it could be problematic. It is interesting to note that sight, the obvious sense of the discrimination between ethnicities, does not participate in the racial discrimination. It is perhaps not as strong a marker of difference: thinking back to Chick and his pondering on racial differences, there is indeed nothing about a skin colour that speaks of different living conditions, whereas poor hygienic conditions do. Of course, these mentions hold poorly today. This is fortunate, considering they were written half a century ago. Some of them might even appear to be well-intentioned but still questionable, as they (inadvertently or not) served to uphold a system that was built, four centuries prior, on the assumption that there were fundamental differences between white and black people. Still, for better or worse, they represent the South as it was in the mid-twentieth century. The region's complicated relationship with race has long-lasting consequences that the country at large is still battling today: the state of Mississippi only retired the Confederate emblem in its official flag this summer, in the wake of George Floyd's killing by the police.<sup>21</sup> If olfaction has been used throughout history to justify racial prejudice, the authors studied here take the opportunity to move alleged racial smells outside of the good-bad spectrum (in Harper Lee's case, even flip it) to use it as a reflection on otherness and alienation in the sociohistorical context they live in.

In spite of smell being "the sense without words," there simply might not be a better-suited medium to represent it. Cinema, for example, can only show an odorous source and follow it with a character sniffing. If need be, top it off with a facial expression conveying pleasure or disgust. It is however powerless in depicting the crucial middleman: the smell itself. It simply relies too heavily on sight (which is slightly ironic considering that cinema is a medium which mobilizes two senses, sight and hearing. Literature is the solely visual one). To be able to actually give life to the smell, the audiovisual depends entirely on the audience having the relevant smell stored in the brain. The work of recall is therefore entirely up to the audience. If a talented director might be able to convincingly evoke the "rich sweet odours" of a Georgia kitchen (McCullers 165), they would be hard pressed to represent the scent of oncoming rain, ever present in *The Road*, or Benjy Compson's sharp and synesthetic sense of

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<sup>21</sup> Maanvi Singh. "Governor signs historic bill to remove Confederate symbol from Mississippi flag" in *The Guardian* (2010): <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/30/mississippi-flag-confederate-symbol-remove> Accessed 1st July 2020

smell. Images cannot express what matters most in olfaction, which is the unseen. In the absence of proper technology for it, words, however “marginally up to the task” (Smith 67), are our best shot as a society at capturing smells that are wafting in the air, commit them to memory, and share them through space and time. Literature allows scents to be represented the way they are experienced: with an infinity of possibilities, yet a limited grasp on how to categorize them.

Rindisbacher asks “[w]hat, then, are we talking about when we talk about smells? Seemingly hardly anything in particular, therefore about almost anything” (31). After examining literary smells, contradicting this statement would be a hard case to make. Even in a sample of fiction as limited and cohesive as this one (being all from one genre, and a contained geographical space), the reader is faced with a myriad of different scents. Undoubtedly, a different selection of works would have generated other reflexions and conclusions, and in all probability, even if it had been picked from the bibliography of the same six authors. By virtue of being such a plural sense, it can take on many functions and identities. By permeating the world, smells encompass the world, and they do so in a very primitive way. They link us back to the instinctual and the visceral, speak of what preceded progress and what progress has not been able to supplant.

If every author boasts an individual olfactory trademark, not only do they communicate the vital importance of the “sub-sense” of olfaction, they collectively say something about the genre (and the region) at large. In keeping with smell being a binary sense, the South easily takes on that same duality, glowing with a rusted shine as the literary land of honeysuckle and corpses. However, through the southern writers who commit it to fiction and the characters populating their real or imaginary southernscapes, it proves to be much more. Carson McCuller’s unnamed mill town in Georgia is brimming with smells of changing nature and of racial differences, Truman Capote’s rural Alabama is decomposing above a fragrant nature, Cormac McCarthy’s Appalachian Tennessee reeks of rot and decaying bodies, meanwhile Faulkner’s imaginary Yoknapatawapha county smells of all of these, a fact that is ceaselessly questioned, protested or cherished by its inhabitants.

As any other sense, olfaction is subjective. It is perhaps even more subjective than at least sight, touch and sound, because of how poorly equipped language is when it comes to conceptualizing scents. Smith, in his volume about the American Civil War, is careful to make that very point, treating the sensory accounts of the time with the proverbial grain of salt: “What



did reek mean in the context of 1863? Whose nose was doing the smelling?” (5). McCarthy raises the same question in *The Road*, a novel set in a dystopian and bleak future. When father and son travelling through the grim landscape meet an old man, the narration states that “even by their new world standards he smelled terrible” (172). Furthermore, both of those examples serve to illustrate the strong association between bad smells and what is perceived as uncivilized. McCarthy refers to a future where progress has stopped and mankind has had to regress in order to survive; Smith, to a violent past that, to twenty-first century sensibilities, seems barbaric and archaic. He does underline that the violence of the civil war *was* barbaric and archaic even at the time. He labels the smell at the battle of Gettysburg as a “throwback to a different age” (70), later expanding on that notion:

They fought against diseases, they fought to keep men alive, and they fought to preserve their own sense of civilization. In the days immediately after Gettysburg, the scene offered something antithetical to America’s sense of itself, something primeval. And perhaps most degenerative was the smell of decomposition (75).

Progress has continually striven to repress stink. For centuries, Western society has seen foul odours as a mark of primitiveness to be hidden and sanitized away, lest it suggest that our own humanness has not been as tamed by technological and scientific advancements as we would like to believe it has. Authors like Smith and McCarthy, in history and fiction respectively, remind the reader that society is only one conflict or catastrophe away from devolving back into stink. They also remind us that smells should not be taken for granted: they are a fleeting thing. Written accounts are, as of yet, our best method (really, our *only* method) for freezing scents in time. History has begun the process of the de-deodorization of society: through a renewed interest for the field and the efforts of many scholars, the rich olfactory tapestries of many periods in time have been reconstructed and, as a result, saved. If “smell is a cultural phenomenon,” as Jonathan Reinartz chooses to open his introduction (1), it follows that it also finds deep echoes in literature, a centuries-old medium with a knack for documenting subjectivity and impermanence.

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