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The Prodigal Journey in Modern Fiction

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# The Prodigal Journey in Modern Fiction

Max Eidelman

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Introduction

The innovation of modern narratives often relies on explorations of traditional stories. These stories are sometimes biblical and within these biblical stories are arcs, the maps of the ancient protagonists’ journeys. In the Bible, these traditional arcs are constructed around “type-scenes.” Robert Alter describes “type-scenes” as “certain fixed situations…[with] a set order of motifs” that recur throughout biblical narratives (Alter, 50). Relatedly, the term “archetype signifies a recurring, generic character, symbol, or storyline” (Kim & Anderson, 1). In this essay, archetype functions as the term for the “generic character” whose “storyline” is defined by progression through a specific type-scene. Many modern characters are constructed around explorations of biblical archetypes, and the type-scene outlines those characters’ progress. In complex stories with nuanced characters, recognizing the archetypal framework is useful. That recognition may help a reader interpret perplexing moments in a narrative, and it may help a reader understand the characters. As Alter describes it, “A coherent reading of any art work…requires some detailed awareness of the grid of conventions upon which, and against which, the individual work operates” (Alter, 47). Archetype is one such convention.

In modern fiction of the 20th century, archetype is an essential aspect of narration, and this is evident in the works of William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren. Both writers craft stories of Southerners who grapple with the seemingly inescapable past of the traditional South. This struggle with the abstraction of the past is embodied in the Southerners’ struggle with their human patriarchs. In Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (1936) and Warren’s All the King’s Men

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1 In this essay, “generic character” is referred to as “figure,” and “storyline” is referred to as “arc.”
(1946), the Southern characters’ grapple with the past parallels a type-scene that concerns patriarchy. Both novels include “the conventions of [a] type-scene [that] get revised as a way of applying old meanings in a new context” to explore the conflicting relationship between Southern patriarchal tradition and Southern modernity (Barnaby, “Bible as Lit. document,” 3). In Faulkner’s novel, the Sutpens’ struggle with patriarchy is characterized around variations of an archetype’s type-scene. Adherence to this type-scene defines the Sutpens’ doom. In Warren’s novel, Jack Burden’s and Willie Stark’s struggles with patriarchy are characterized around variations of the same archetype’s type-scene. Jack Burden’s departure from the type-scene defines his independence. The archetype that functions as the foundation of these characters’ modernized structure is an archetype that progresses through a type-scene of rejecting a patriarch, becoming disillusioned in the estrangement from that patriarch, and reconciling with the patriarch. That archetype is the Bible’s Prodigal Son.

As an archetype, the Prodigal Son is the figure who rejects patriarchy, becomes isolated in the estrangement from the patriarch, and then reconciles with the patriarch. These sequences occur in biblical narratives that precede Luke 15. The Prodigal Son is archetypal in the sense that these sequences are presented explicitly in the New Testament, and define the Prodigal Son’s characterization. Figures who progress through this type-scene in other biblical narratives are not exclusively defined by that progress, and so the type-scene does not define their archetypal nature. There are other narrative elements that accompany the sequences of this type-scene. Associated with this type-scene are aspects of fraternal struggle with primogeniture that can be traced back to the earliest stories of Genesis. This type-scene appears to pervade throughout the Old Testament. The Prodigal Son functions as an archetype in the sense that his placement in a New Testament parable is a sequenced culmination of the scattered occurrences of type-scene
motifs in the arcs of various rebellious figures of the Old Testament. In the modern narratives, this type-scene is often rearranged or re-created, but the aspects of rejection, estrangement and reconciliation remain foundational for the purposes of commenting on the alienating shift between Southern modernity and Southern pre-bellum tradition. Edward Edinger comments on this alienating shift. He writes that there is “a need for the alienation experience as a prelude to the religious experience,” which directly relates biblical notions of estrangement to modern notions of estrangement and “alienation” (Edinger, 52). Similarly, Christopher Collins states, “most religions require belief in absent beings that, through certain rites, can become present” (Collins, 30). In the Bible, there is a need for a waywardness prior to achieving an appreciation of, perhaps a need for, the patriarch. There is a cycle to that journey towards the patriarch, the “rites” of passage to filling the absence. The Prodigal Son’s type-scene functions as a parallel for the modern Southerner’s rite of passage out of waywardness. Collins refers to Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of a narrative cycle to describe this concept of rite.

Todorov proposes that there exists “a hierarchal order” in narration that “includes five obligatory elements: (1) the opening situation of equilibrium; (2) the degradation of the situation…; (3) the state of disequilibrium…; (4) the search for and recovery…; (5) the reestablishment of the equilibrium – the return home” (Todorov, 29). The type-scene of the Prodigal Son adheres to Todorov’s model, with “the degradation” manifesting as rejection, the “disequilibrium” and “search for” manifesting as estrangement, and the “return home” manifesting as reconciliation with the patriarch. At a foundational level, many figures in the Old Testament conform to this type-scene of progress as well, but differ in the details. This follows a biblical convention, in which “the same story often seems to be told two or three or more times about different characters” (Alter, 49). In the New Testament, Luke’s parable of the Prodigal Son
is the explicit presentation, the distillation, of the type-scene’s motifs that recur throughout the earlier narratives. In other words, the elements that define the Prodigal Son as an archetype manifest in various figures throughout the Old Testament, but the difference in the details may obscure this commonality in the Old Testament. In Luke’s parable, these common elements appear in basic form as archetypal units of rejection, estrangement and reconciliation. Perhaps a non-archetypal detail in Luke’s parable is the prodigal son’s debauchery, the trait for which he is most commonly known, and maybe this is because it is unique to him.² The link between the prodigal son’s debauchery and the “Prodigal” traits of figures in the Old Testament is the shared experience of disillusion that these figures experience in their estrangement from patriarchy. In fact, the debauchery typically associated with “prodigal” figures can be considered as hyperbole for the loss of guidance typically provided by a patriarch in the Bible. The importance of the Prodigal Son as an archetype in the Bible and Faulkner’s and Warren’s modern novels resides in the consequences of his struggle with patriarchy, not in his depravity.

In the Bible, the figures molded around the traits that are eventually condensed into the Prodigal Son are often successful in terms of ultimately being at peace with their patriarch. In modernity, this success is questionable in the characters who are structured around the archetype. This in turn questions the function of patriarchy in the modern world. While the type-scene leads figures to success in the Bible, in the modern novels it leads the characters to defeat. This tinkering of the archetypal qualities qualifies Alter’s belief that “what is really interesting is…what is done in each individual application of the schema to give it a sudden tilt of innovation” (Alter, 52). Before analyzing the Prodigal Son in modernity, it is necessary to derive

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² Here, the lower case “prodigal son” is meant to distinguish between the prodigal son as a figure of debauchery, whereas the capitalized “Prodigal Son” is the archetypal figure whose relevance to this essay is found in his contention with patriarchy.
the archetype by recognizing the occurrence of the Prodigal traits in the figures of the Old Testament and the instances of the type-scene. This derivation demonstrates that the motifs of rejecting patriarchy, becoming disillusioned in the estrangement, and ultimately experiencing a moment of reconciliation with a patriarch are fundamental to biblical narratives.

**The Bible’s Prodigal Son**

The Bible is a book enmeshed in patriarchy. The figures who populate the narratives often vie for approval and blessing from a patriarch, and matters of inheritance often catalyze the tension between these figures. In many instances, it seems that the surest way to receive patriarchal blessing is to obey, and there are many figures who do just that. As Alter phrases it, “the hero’s success [is] God’s being with him,” and the figures in the Bible strive for God to be with them, often by adhering strictly to notions of patriarchal submission (Alter, 117). However, a close reading and comparison of certain biblical narratives reveals that some figures are not obedient, and these figures are not necessarily punished. In fact, many of the successful protagonists in the Bible, those “with” God, are those who challenge patriarchal authority. Sometimes that authority is embodied in God, sometimes in fathers, but more important than the vessel of patriarchal authority (i.e. in God or a human father) is the concept of patriarchy as a human experience. In this sense, fathers, father-in-laws, and God can function interchangeably as a figure’s patriarch throughout a narrative. It is not necessarily submission or blind faith to the patriarch that guarantee biblical figures an immediate or tangible reward. More often than not, the submissive figures are those who are promised a future reward, one that their descendants will receive.
This motif of a future promise appears explicitly in the narrative of Abraham, to whom God promises, “It is to your descendants that I will give this land,” the land being Israel (Gen. 12:7). Abraham is perpetually submissive to God, leaving Ur without doubting or questioning God’s promises. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac epitomizes his submission, and it causes God to ensure Abraham that his descendants will be granted a “Covenant in perpetuity” (Gen. 17:20). This perpetuity manifests through promise. There is no manifestation of tangible reward. Abraham, submissive, is an instrument of this promise rather than the recipient. Isaac, too, is a submissive figure, passively braced for sacrifice as a son, and as a father he is easily tricked. In many ways, Isaac is “the most passive of the patriarchs,” which juxtaposes the rebellious nature of his son, Jacob (Alter, 53). Abraham and Isaac do not progress through the rebellious type-scene that the Prodigal Son does. They do not struggle with God but are in fact antithetical to figures who do challenge patriarchy. The biblical figures who receive tangible reward struggle for it. They are not perpetually submissive. These figures populate extensive portions of the Old Testament, and are distilled into the archetypal Prodigal Son in the New Testament.

In Luke’s parable of “the lost son (the ‘prodigal’) and the dutiful son,” Jesus narrates a tale about a father, a son, and a younger son. The younger son tells his father to give him his “share of the estate,” which he receives, and then leaves “for a distant country where he squander[s] his money on a life of debauchery” (Lk. 15:12-13). He rejects the patriarch by fleeing from his land. In his misery after squandering the money, the younger son decides that he will return to his father and tell him that he has “sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son” (ibid. 18-19). So far in the parable, the younger son has taken his birthright, spurned his father, and in disillusion concluded that he will renounce his

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3 Jacob is addressed in a later part of the essay.
namesake to be taken care of by his father as an anonymous person rather than as a son. When
the father sees this son returning though, he runs “to the boy, clasp[s] him in his arms and
kisse[s] him tenderly,” and proceeds to throw a celebration for his return, exclaiming, “this son
of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found” (ibid. 21-24). This
celebration infuriates the older son, and so the motif of fraternal strife appears. This son tells his
father, “I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed your orders, yet you never offered me so
much as a kid,” to which the father replies, “…you are with me always and all I have is yours.
But it was only right we should celebrate…your brother…he was lost and is found” (ibid. 29-
31).

In general terms, this parable features a younger son rebelling against his father and an
older son obeying his father. There is submission to patriarchy in the older son and active
rejection of patriarchy in the younger, which leads to fraternal tension. The younger son’s
willingness to abandon his patriarchal name reflects yet another, although passive, rejection of
patriarchy. The Bible being a book concerned with names, the younger son’s willingness to
surrender his patriarchal name is significant. In doing so, he renounces all claims to his
inheritance and blessing. Here, it is important to consider this parable in psychological terms as
well. Edinger writes, “the experience of alienation is a necessary prelude to the awareness of
Self…the experience of the supporting aspect of the archetypal psyche is most likely to occur
when the ego has exhausted its own resources and is aware of its essential impotence by itself”
(Edinger, 48-50). This concept applies to the Prodigal Son, who becomes alienated from his
patriarchy and depletes his resources (i.e. his birthright money), and in this estrangement
becomes aware of the need for patriarchy. It is plausible to link Edinger’s psychological
commentary to the patriarchy in the Bible, and the word “impotence” gives this credibility. The
Prodigal Son’s decision to reject his name is akin to a self-imposed castration, considering that he cannot continue his lineage if he does not have a name that his heirs can pass on.

However, despite the Prodigal Son’s substantial rejection of patriarchal name, the father welcomes his return. This reunion incorporates an element of reconciliation with patriarchy into the story. The juxtaposition between this reconciliation and the older son’s dismay at the lack of reward for his obedience reveals the crux of the parable. Reward from a patriarch in the Bible is achieved through a reconciliation after a struggle. Patriarchal reward is not a gift guaranteed to passive figures, but rather to figures who pursue their own success. In failing to achieve individual success, though, biblical protagonists’ need for patriarchy becomes apparent. Implicitly within the Bible, this supports the claim for the need for God and, by extension, patriarchy. Nevertheless, Luke’s parable celebrates, to a degree, rebellion, and this complicates the claim for the need for patriarchy. This trend is not exclusive to Luke’s parable, though. As an archetype, the Prodigal Son functions as a narrative template in which the common qualities of various rebellious protagonists in the Old Testament are presented in clearer form. He is the archetype who enacts, in a reduced and explicit presentation, struggle and reconciliation with patriarchy. Some of the most famous stories of the Old Testament feature protagonists who progress through varied forms of the journey that eventually is written as the Prodigal Son’s type-scene.

Analysis shows that many successful protagonists in Genesis resemble, to an extent, the Prodigal Son. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are commanded by God not to eat from the tree of knowledge. Regardless, Adam and Eve, persuaded by the serpent, both eat from the tree

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4 In this typology, I introduce the Prodigal Son as an archetype presented in the New Testament, but I then explore the pre-existing “Prodigal” elements found in figures populating the Old Testament that eventually become incorporated into that archetype.
and become self-aware. They disobey God, their patriarch. However, Adam and Eve proceed to become the first parents of the world. In this first story of the Bible, struggle with patriarchy and subsequent reward are presented, albeit in a varied form from other Prodigal narratives. The next story, that of Cain and Abel, features a Prodigal figure as well. Cain is the older son of Adam and Eve, and just as Adam “till[s] the soil,” Cain “till[s] the soil” as well (Gen. 3:24; Gen. 4:3). Just as the older son in the parable of the Prodigal Son works the fields obediently like his father, Cain does too. Abel, however, is the younger son and unlike Adam, Abel is a shepherd. The similarities between the story of Cain and Abel and Luke’s parable become uncanny when God, the ultimate patriarch, becomes involved. When God sees Abel’s sacrifice, he “look[s] with favor on Abel…But he [does] not look with favor on Cain,” which infuriates Cain (Gen. 4:4-5). Cain, just like the Prodigal Son’s older brother, does not understand the younger son’s reward from the patriarch and becomes angry. The fact that Cain kills Abel may appear to contradict the presence of the Prodigal Son archetype in this Genesis narrative, but it in fact demonstrates the flexibility of the biblical type-scene. This tinkering with the roles of figures in the type-scene reflects the ancient writers’ interest in crafting nuanced narratives. Cain kills Abel, and God punishes him, and yet Cain proceeds to father the rest of the human population. His transgression against God, the epitome of patriarchy, does not inhibit his success. Motifs of the type-scene define aspects of Cain’s progress despite the fact that Cain is an older brother, and elements of the Prodigal’s parable define the structure of Cain’s story. The main difference between Luke’s parable and this Genesis narrative is the success of the older brother, Cain, over the younger. However, this inconsistency may explain an interesting aspect of the Bible. Perhaps Cain’s action serves as the kernel of the biblical trope of the older son’s, the first born’s, demise, a trope that’s pivotal to numerous narratives (e.g. Ishmael, Esau, Egyptian first-borns, etc.). Alter mentions this too, how
“the first-born very often seem to be losers in Genesis,” and this forces attention back to the type-scene (Alter, 6). Perhaps the violation of the archetype explains certain protagonist’s failures, and maybe the enacting of the archetype explains other protagonists’ success. In the type-scene, this is enacted through the older brother’s frustration at the patriarch’s forgiveness of the sinful son. The motifs of the Prodigal Son’s story permeate throughout Genesis, with the fraternal tension being one such detail common between the Testaments.

Following Cain’s story is that of Noah and the flood. Seeing the sinfulness of humans, God decides to destroy the first people and start anew with a second humanity, propagated by Noah. Within this decision are two general concepts that are linked to the patriarch in the parable of the Prodigal Son: forgiveness of sin, and narrative emphasis on the “second.” In the case of the flood story, the “second” is the second people who populate the earth after the first people are destroyed by the flood. In the case of Luke’s parable, the “second” is the Prodigal Son, who is the father’s second son. Common to Luke’s parable and the story of Noah are the concepts of pardoning sin and having faith in the “second.” In Noah’s Genesis narrative, these two concepts are introduced as abstractions, while in the parable of the Prodigal Son, these concepts are presented more clearly. That is how the Prodigal Son functions as an archetype. Concepts that appear obscurely in the Old Testament are presented in a more clear form in the New Testament parable. Throughout the Old Testament, other concepts that become essential to the Prodigal Son archetype continue to appear.

Jacob is one of the most important and successful figures in the Old Testament, his God-given name being that of the promised land: Israel. He is born grabbing onto the heel of his older brother, Esau, which foreshadows God’s words to Rebekah that “the elder shall serve the younger” (Gen. 25:23). Again, fraternal strife occupies a rebel’s narrative. God’s prophecy
manifests throughout Jacob’s narrative. He obtains Esau’s birthright and then he steals Esau’s intended blessing from Isaac, using trickery to do so. This too is reminiscent of the Prodigal Son’s journey; he seeks elements of inheritance before they’re given to him, while the older brother waits for his gifts. This confirms a structural trend in “the entire Book of Genesis,” in which there is a “reversal of the iron law of primogeniture,” causing “a younger son to carry on the line” (Alter, 6). This “reversal” is similar to the patriarch’s acceptance of the Prodigal Son in spite of his spurning his father, unlike the older brother. Following this trickery, Jacob is told by his mother to “go away and take refuge,” fleeing his patriarch’s land (Gen. 27:43-44). Jacob’s character is integrated from archetypal aspects that are later presented explicitly in the Prodigal Son’s parable. He succeeds, in terms of tangible reward, over his brother, he obtains a birthright (and blessing) before he’s due to, and he flees his father’s land. The “he” could be either Jacob or Luke’s Prodigal Son. Similarities continue to appear throughout Jacob’s arc.

Away from his father’s home, Jacob is told by God to “Go back to the land of [his] forefathers and…kindred,” which demonstrates yet another aspect of the Prodigal arc: the return (Gen. 31:3-4). However, Jacob never returns to Isaac. He is only there to bury his father. The typical form of reconciliation is absent from Jacob’s arc, and so the place of the patriarch is diminished. Alter addresses this concept of an absence in a type-scene, explaining that “the convention” can be “present through its deliberate suppression,” which is reminiscent of Todorov’s belief that “a tale might omit the last two elements [of the hierarchal order] and end on an unhappy note” (Alter, 48-49; Todorov, 29). Both scholars are here commenting on how the tragic effect of a lack, in this case a lack of reconciliation, can affirm the need for what is absent. Despite this lack of reunion with his father, Jacob does experience other moments of reconciliation. In an alternate form of reconciliation with a patriarch, Jacob “concludes a mutual
nonaggression pact with his father-in-law” (Alter, 55). Additionally, Jacob reconciles with Esau, which is a reversal of the tense fraternal relationship presented in Luke’s parable (Gen. 33:4-11). This reversal of the typical fraternal motif of animosity between brothers magnifies Jacob’s and Esau’s reunion. Perhaps without the patriarch, the sons can become closer. In Jacob’s story, the details of the type-scene are modified, but the foundational presence of fraternal tension with primogeniture remains present, and the sequence of reconciliation remains present as well. However, it is in Jacob’s encounter with “God face to face” that the archetypal reconciliation manifests most profoundly (Gen. 32:31).

Jacob “wrestles” with an entity “who, seeing that he could not master” Jacob, tells him to release him, to which Jacob replies, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Ibid. 26-28). After this, Jacob is told his name is “Israel, because you have been strong against God, you shall prevail against men” (ibid. 28-30). Jacob has literally wrestled with God, demanded a blessing, and prevailed. In its basic elements, Jacob’s wrestle with patriarchy is the same as the Prodigal Son’s. Both figures demand from the patriarch, challenge patriarchal authority through disobedience, and reconcile with the patriarch. The variation between Jacob and Luke’s Prodigal Son is the heroism and details of their struggle, but the archetypal narrative units are the same. Both figures occupy a common type-scene that functions as the foundation of their progress. Taking Jacob’s wrestle with God into consideration along with Jacob’s lack of typical reconciliation with Isaac reveals Jacob to be a figure whose independence is relatively free of subservience to a patriarch. This concept of transcending patriarchal dominance is explored in the modern novels. In the Bible though, the presence in the Old Testament of the motifs in the Prodigal Son’s type-scene demonstrates that the stages of rejection, estrangement and reconciliation are foundational to the entire Bible.
The story of Jonah is another story characterized by the motifs presented in the type-scene. Jonah “decide[s] to run away from Yahweh” and flee to Tarshish (Jon. 1:3). Like the Prodigal Son, Jonah flees from a patriarch and attempts to live in a distant land. A storm disrupts his voyage, though, and in his fear Jonah exclaims, “take me and throw me into the sea” (Jon. 1:12). In a decision similar to the Prodigal Son’s, Jonah decides that he is willing to make a sacrifice in a moment of distress, estranged from his patriarch. Following the trend of the type-scene, God pardons Jonah’s sin and welcomes him back into grace. Jonah’s narrative continues, though, and it reveals a profundity of the patriarch’s forgiveness of the sinful son. God is ready to destroy the sinful city of Nineveh, but the people repent when Jonah warns them of God’s impending wrath. God explains himself to Jonah: “And am I not to feel sorry for Nineveh…in which there are no more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left…” (Jon. 4:11). This notion of forgiving sinners is reminiscent of the two parables that precede Luke’s parable of the Prodigal Son. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus says, “there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous men”; in the parable of the lost drachma, Jesus says, “there is rejoicing among the angels of God over one repentant sinner” (Luke. 15:7; 15:10). Taking the Prodigal Son into consideration, the patriarch forgives the sinful son because he is akin to the repenting sinner. Perhaps by recognizing his son’s need for him, the patriarch recognizes his own power. In a less cynical interpretation, maybe the patriarch simply does not want to see his own creation destroyed. Here, it is important to mention that the parable of Prodigal Son is an exploration of forgiveness, which is foundational to Christianity. This New Testament motif is explored in the earlier story of Jonah, though. This demonstrates how the type-scene of the Prodigal Son is a further exploration and interpretation of notions implied throughout the Old Testament.
Similarly, Faulkner’s and Warren’s novels are further explorations and interpretations of notions presented in the New Testament.

The type-scene and presence of archetypal elements are not exclusive to men. One Prodigal heroine is Ruth. She is born a Moabite woman, not an Israelite, whose Israelite husband dies. In widowhood, Ruth is encouraged by her mother-in-law to return to her own land, her own people. To this, Ruth replies: “wherever you go, I will go,/wherever you live, I will live” (Ruth 1:16). She willingly abandons her own people and land, and yet she eventually propagates the lineage of King David, and by extension, Jesus (Ibid., 4:17). In the tradition of the biblical Israelites, heritage is passed on through the mother. That a non-Israelite establishes the line of David and Jesus forces closer examination of Ruth’s story. She is an essential character in the Bible whose most important contribution is traditionally one reserved for Israelites. Alter notes a peculiarity in Ruth’s story related to this seeming contradiction: “the repeated use of the verb ‘to return.’…I actually coming to the unknown homeland of her new destiny” (Alter, 58-59). Considering Ruth in relation to the Prodigal Son, this peculiarity is clarified. Ruth, by abandoning her heritage, demonstrates characteristics of the archetypal Prodigal Son. She challenges patriarchy in the form of abandoning her homeland and is subsequently rewarded. The type-scene’s return to the traditional patriarch is reversed in Ruth’s narrative; she is embraced by a new patriarch, the Hebrew God. Her “return” is perhaps considered in the Bible as the union to the proper patriarch. Ruth embodies alternated aspects, but not the totality, of the Prodigal Son archetype, leaving her homeland only to embrace a patriarch. It is an archetype that apparently resembles many essential figures of the Bible, and allows for the characterization of women in fiction. In this way, the archetype is explored in modern narratives to characterize the women in the novels.
There are figures in the Bible whose success contradicts the notion of non-submissive, Prodigal figures succeeding in the Bible. The most obvious and profound example of this apparent contradiction is the success of Job. The juxtaposition between Job’s nature and that of the Prodigal Son heightens the degree of obedience in Job, and the rebellion of the Prodigal Son. This contrast is useful for illuminating the most essential qualities of Job and of the Prodigal Son. God describes Job to Satan, claiming, “There is no one like him on the earth: a sound and honest man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:8-9). Satan tells God that Job is only obedient because Job has not been afflicted with pain, has not struggled but rather has been “blessed [in] all he undertakes” (ibid., 10). God wagers with Satan that Job will remain faithful despite whatever misfortunes Satan may bring upon him. Contrary to the Prodigal Son type-scene, the patriarch contests the son’s obedience; it is not the son who initially challenges the patriarch. Eventually, after suffering in many ways from the wrath of Satan, including the loss of his children, Job meets with three of his friends. They tell Job it is wrong to question the actions of God. Instead, he should accept his misfortune as a sign of God’s will. This is epitomized by Eliphaz telling Job, “…you flout piety./you repudiate meditation in God’s presence” (Job, 15:4-5). Job eventually concludes that his “lament is still rebellious,/…If only I knew how to reach [God]./…If I go eastward, he is not there;/or westward—still I cannot see him” (Job, 23:2-8). Job is unwilling to reject God as the patriarch. All of his actions are motivated by a desire to please God. Unlike the Prodigal Son archetype, Job is unwilling to actively challenge patriarchy.

God eventually replies in anger to Job, commanding him to “Brace [him]self like a fighter” (Job, 38:3). He proceeds to ask Job, “Is [my] opponent willing to give in?” and “Job replie[s] to [God]:/…I will not speak again” (Job, 40:1-5). In this moment, God has challenged Job’s weakness and Job has acted submissively. God seems to almost goad Job into fighting. It is
important to notice Job’s resistance to struggle because at the end of the narrative his fortunes are restored, but only in superficial form. Job receives new children rather than his original children and his rewards are described in specific numerical detail. There is no mention of reward for his descendants such as most other figures who encounter God are promised, and there is no reward significant beyond worldly satisfaction (Job, 42:10-17). The nature of Job’s reward from the patriarch is unique in its superficiality. It is important to recognize this because Job displays some elements of the Prodigal Son. He questions his father (i.e. God), desires to find him, and eventually reconciles, but his struggle is perpetually passive. It is God who challenges Job, who in turn promises God that he “will not speak again.” Job does not actively rebel. Nevertheless, he does receive tangible reward. This passive, submissive struggle contrasts with the active struggles of other Prodigal characters.

Evidently, the Bible is populated by figures who resemble aspects of Luke’s Prodigal Son and figures who do not. Often though, biblical stories feature only one figure molded around the Prodigal Son archetype. The biblical narrative of Absalom, however, explores a nuanced account of multiple Prodigal figures, as indicated by its nature as a story of “flight, conflict, and return” between father and sons (Campbell, 143). In this narrative, Amnon rapes his sister Tamar, which infuriates his younger brother, Absalom. Amnon’s father, King David, learns of the rape and becomes angry, but he has “no wish to harm his son Amnon, since he loved him; he was his first-born” (2 Sam. 13:21-22). In response to David’s neglect to seek justice for Tamar, Absalom “foments rebellion…intending to accomplish…what his father, the king, failed to” (Morrison, 181). There is tension between younger and older brothers, and there is rebellion against patriarchy: two elements included in Luke’s parable. In response to Amnon’s actions, Absalom prepares a banquet for Amnon and orders his servants to kill him, which they do (ibid. 28-29).
Absalom then flees Jerusalem. Eventually, he returns and claims, “I wish to be received by the king, and if I am guilty, let him put me to death,” but instead, when he returns to David, “the king kiss[s] Absalom” (2 Sam. 14:32-33). The language of this “reunion underscores that the father kiss[s] the son,” clearly reminiscent of other biblical reunions between father and son that conform to the type-scene (Morrison, 194). So far in the narrative, Absalom has rebelled against patriarchy, fled his homeland and willed himself to return to his father despite the consequences. Upon return, Absalom is embraced by his father, who kisses and embraces him. Here, it is important to consider how this story “expose[s] the details of behavior in such a way” that leaves the “behavior open to scrutiny” (Campbell, 180). As Alter expresses, “Character can be revealed through the report of actions…character revealed through actions or appearance…leaves us substantially in the realm of inference” (Alter, 117). Through deductive inference, by noticing the similarities in the text of 2 Samuel and Luke 15, it is apparent that a common type-scene characterizes Absalom’s and David’s story. The type-scene through which the Prodigal Son progresses is instantiated earlier (in varied form) in 2 Samuel. The archetypal elements of Absalom are those that define the Prodigal Son. Therefore, Absalom can be considered as a figure akin to Luke’s Prodigal Son; he can be considered as a figure that perhaps influenced the creation of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son is distinguished as an archetype in comparison to Absalom because he is presented as a simpler figure in the Bible than Absalom is. Absalom embodies characteristics that Prodigal Son does as well, but Absalom is more complicated. Archetypes function as templates that can be easily understood and manipulated in characterizations. Bearing this in mind, the modern novels are integrations of the archetypal qualities present in Absalom, but that define the Prodigal Son. In other words, the Prodigal Son is a derivation of Absalom, and the modern characters in Faulkner’s and Warren’s novels are
explorations of this derived archetype. Absalom’s progress through the Samuel 2 narrative continues though, deviating from the type-scene.⁵

Living back in Jerusalem with his father, David, Absalom begins to win favor with the Israelites. He effectively appoints himself as a judge and the plaintiffs begin to consult him as opposed to his father, David. It is important to note that this “kind of obeisance is reserved for God, the king, or the prophet Samuel. David shows such obeisance to Saul (1 Sam. 24:8)…Saul shows it to the ghost of Samuel (1 Sam. 28:14),” and this trend recurs earlier throughout the books of Samuel (Morrison, 198). This reversal demonstrates that the people are now “bowing down to the king’s son instead of to the king” (ibid, 198). This is a reversal of the type-scene. The earlier displays of obeisance to patriarchal figures are akin to the Prodigal Son’s reconciliation with patriarchy. In this moment, Absalom, as a son, has usurped the patriarch’s place, thus inverting the conclusion of the type-scene. Feeling threatened by Absalom’s growing influence and power, David flees Jerusalem, which inverts the type-scene; the patriarch flees the son and must seek return to his homeland. Through the lens of the son, Absalom appears to be making an effort to transcend the need for patriarchy. The slave Ziba, however, prophetically claims, “The House of Israel will give me back my father’s kingdom today,” which foreshadows the eventual victory of the patriarch over the son, reinstituting the type-scene (2 Sam. 16:3). That a slave makes this comment stresses the submissiveness associated with the continuation of the patriarch’s dominance. Ultimately, the armies of Absalom and David prepare to fight and David orders his soldiers to “treat young Absalom gently,” which indicates his continued sentiment for his younger son Absalom (2 Sam. 18:5). Absalom is killed, though, without a son “to preserve the memory of [his] name,” (ibid., 18). This inability to pass on a name is a fulfillment of the

⁵ This deviation has consequences addressed in both Faulkner’s and Warren’s novels.
Prodigal Son’s willingness to surrender his name. Yet again, aspects of the type-scene are presented in Absalom’s arc in varied form. Additionally, this moment of Absalom’s arc reflects an element of the Prodigal Son’s: the reconciliation. In Absalom’s story, the reconciliation does not conclude Absalom’s arc. Estranged from his father, Absalom is killed. Alter’s notion of reaffirming the presence of a type-scene’s motif through the suppression of that motif is demonstrated in this story with the absence of a concluding reconciliation. Here, it is important to reconsider David’s rise to power when examining Absalom as a figure akin to the Prodigal Son. David too usurps power from a patriarch, Saul, and fights wars with him. Eventually, David even mourns Saul’s death in a manner very similar to his mourning of Absalom (2 Sam. 1:11-12). Taking the narratives of David’s and Absalom’s struggles for power into consideration, the similarities between father and son become apparent. This narrative trope of son’s mirroring fathers is prevalent throughout the Bible and explored in the modern novels as a form of reconciliation. This nuanced narrative is a demonstration of the various ways the Prodigal Son archetype is explored throughout the Bible and is applied to the characterization of biblical heroes and antiheroes.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are figures who struggle with patriarchy and there are figures who submit. A comparison between various texts reveals which specific elements are common to these figures. The successful figures in the Bible, in terms of receiving tangible, rather than promised, reward, rebel against patriarchy, become estranged from patriarchy, and ultimately reconcile with patriarchy. In each narrative, the manner of these three stages differs, but the stages are common in abstraction, and they culminate in a type-scene. In fact, “this kind of revisionary work is central to the Bible’s compositional logic,” in which narratives are constructed upon revisions and re-imaginings of earlier tales (Barnaby, “Bible as Lit. document,”
There is no shared term for the figures who develop through the type-scene in the Old Testament, though. The figures each have different names and each inhabit their own story. In the New Testament, a term is provided for the biblical figures who progress through these three stages of rejection, estrangement, and reconciliation. The Prodigal Son is the derived presentation of the rebellious biblical figures whose progress is bound to this type-scene, and so the Prodigal Son functions as narrative tool. The Prodigal Son is the archetype for the figures who grapple with patriarchy in a specific sequence of rejection, estrangement and reconciliation in order to receive reward and achieve success. In the fiction of Modernism, the Prodigal Son archetype is integrated and re-imagined in the characterization of modern characters who grapple with patriarchy in order to understand the relationship between the traditional pre-bellum past and the present of the post-bellum South. In the modern narratives, progression through the type-scene leads the characters to their defeat. Reunion with a patriarch is analogous to submission to the past, while departure from the patriarch is analogous to entry into modernity.

The Prodigal Son in *Absalom, Absalom!*

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner crafts a narrative based upon Absalom’s story in 2 Samuel. There are explicit parallels between Thomas Sutpen and King David, Henry and Absalom, Charles Bon and Amnon, Judith and Tamar. The parallels between the biblical story of Absalom and Faulkner’s story of Sutpen function as a template around which the modern narrative is constructed. However, beyond this level of similarity is yet another biblical foundation with which Faulkner experiments, which is the Prodigal Son archetype. In the Bible, the figures who conform to the traits of the Prodigal Son achieve success in terms of being with
God, with patriarchy. However, Faulkner “uses a variation…of a biblical meaning to achieve irony,” with his characters’ progression through a modernized version of the Prodigal Son’s type-scene (Coffee, 2). Reconciliation with patriarchy, in Faulkner’s novel, is akin to being consumed by the past, the pre-bellum tradition of the South. This reconciliation in fact inhibits the characters’ progress into modernity. In this sense, the type-scene is not a journey towards being at peace with the patriarch. Instead, the type-scene is a journey of defeat by the patriarch. In regards to the manipulation of the Prodigal Son type-scene, Faulkner’s narrative “change[s] biblical meanings” and “takes liberties” with the tropes, which demonstrates “less concern for biblical accuracy than for dramatic effectiveness” (Coffee, 2-3). Therefore, the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* do not adhere strictly to the type-scene throughout. The type-scene itself is often rearranged. The purpose of recognizing this foundational presence of the Prodigal Son in the novel is to clarify the progress of the characters. This progress is severely fragmented by Faulkner’s prose and plot-sequencing, and so it is useful to read this novel with an understanding of the foundational narrative elements.

While there are multiple fathers in *Absalom, Absalom!*; Thomas Sutpen is the pinnacle of fatherhood among the characters. He can be considered the “King David.” He is described as “a man who so far as anyone…knew either had no past at all or did not dare reveal it,” which characterizes him as Prodigal in nature, having abandoned his past (10). The majority of the people in Jefferson know nothing about Sutpen’s past, with Colonel Compson being the only man to whom Thomas confides any information of his past life. Because all of the information about Sutpen and his family is revealed to Quentin by these people, that lack of a past is (perhaps incorrectly) translated into a denial of a past. This perception of Sutpen’s denying the past manifests throughout the narrative. As a child, Sutpen is denied entrance to the house of a
plantation owner by a slave. He feels inadequate and rejected, reaching the conclusion that it is “just a matter of where you [are] spawned and how” that determines social position (183). From Sutpen’s earliest stages of life, the motif of rejection accompanies his place in Faulkner’s narrative. As a result of this imposed rejection, Sutpen decides to actively reject; he leaves his family and never sees them again. In doing so, he enacts the rejection sequence of the Prodigal type-scene, and proceeds to do so throughout his adult life. Like the Prodigal figures of the Bible, Sutpen does not accept his born condition, but instead struggles with it in variations of the archetypal stages.

Having left the land of his father, Sutpen comes to Jefferson, seemingly “not having any past,” and therefore with an inconsequential name (40). In terms of the Prodigal journey, Sutpen rejects his patriarchy and becomes estranged from it, his lack of a past indicating this. To account for his namelessness, Sutpen must marry, and not only that, but he must marry a respected name. In the same way that the Prodigal Son cannot escape patriarchy, Sutpen can’t either. He must reconcile with a patriarch. Mr. Coldfield is one instantiation of this patriarchal reconciliation that Sutpen’s progress is bound to. Rosa explains how “there was nothing else [Sutpen] could want from papa” other than the associated respectability in the form of his daughter, Ellen (20). Sutpen only desires the name, and in this way he way requires a father—in the form of a father-in-law, but a father nonetheless. Common to the Prodigal Son and Sutpen in regards to patriarchal name, is the eventual return to a patriarch despite being estranged from him. This return to a patriarch is iterated throughout Sutpen’s place in the narrative. For example, in Mr. Compson’s letter to his son, Quentin, he writes: Sutpen “did want, not the anonymous wife and the anonymous children, but the two names, the stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law” (39). The fact that this notion of patriarchy is presented in a letter from a father to a son yet
again incorporates the motif of patriarchal reconciliation into Sutpen’s characterization. Sutpen has rejected patriarchy, become estranged from it, and ultimately reconciled with it. His progress is bound to variations of the type-scene. Interestingly, in the context of the Prodigal Son archetype, Sutpen’s relationship with Mr. Coldfield is not exclusively linked to the reconciliation, but to the rejection as well. This demonstrates how Sutpen’s characterization is an intricate and modern extrapolation of the Bible’s Prodigal Son.

After marrying Ellen, Sutpen does “not even come to [Coldfield’s] house to the noon meal…he [has] neither the courage to face his father-in-law nor the grace” (49-50). Even the non-biological father that he chooses to unite with is a source of estrangement to Sutpen. Seemingly trapped within the type-scene of the Prodigal Son, Sutpen perpetually rejects and reconciles with fatherhood. Even his grave lacks a birthdate and -place, which demonstrates the perpetuity of Sutpen’s boundedness to the rejection sequence (153). However, one of the more modern interpretations of the archetype manifests in Sutpen’s Prodigal reconciliation. A uniquely modern mode of reconciliation in Absalom, Absalom! is the “son’s” resemblance to the patriarch. By aping the father, the son cannot escape the grip of patriarchal influence. This resemblance is reminiscent of how Absalom’s effort to usurp David mirrors David’s effort to usurp Saul. With Sutpen, this reconciliation via resemblance manifests in his likeness to Coldfield, his biological father, and a man named Wash Jones.

Both Sutpen and Coldfield become owners of small shops and both men become estranged from their daughters. Additionally, in the same way that Sutpen arrives to Jefferson with only “the clothes on his back and a small saddlebag,” Coldfield establishes himself in Jefferson with supplies “from a single wagon” (24, 32). These similarities are perhaps minor elements of the story, but they’re necessary to consider in relation to Sutpen’s reconciliation via
resemblance. Of his biological father, Sutpen doesn’t “know just where [he] had come from…or even if his father knew, remembered, wanted to remember and find it again” (181). Just as Thomas is introduced as a man estranged from his past, his biological father is as well. This motif of resemblance is constantly intertwined with the Prodigal tropes of rejection and reconciliation. Perhaps the most profound similarity Sutpen shares with his father is one that catalyzes Sutpen’s rejection of his father. His father is “not allowed to come in by the front door,” in the same way that Sutpen is not allowed to (183). Considering how the denial at the door motivates Sutpen to flee his father, this resemblance is substantial. It is a unique combination of rejection and reconciliation; Sutpen rejects his father after he encounters an experience similar to his father’s. In a way though, Sutpen vicariously returns to his biological father, and that manifests in his relationship with Jones.

Sutpen forms a rapport with Wash Jones. Jones is defined by a poverty similar to Sutpen’s father’s. He is treated almost, or at least looked upon, like a slave. Jones talks improperly, lives in shambles, steals his food and is even laughed at by slaves (226). His social status is similar to the inherited social status of Thomas and, by extension, Thomas’ father. In fact, similarly to Sutpen and his father, a slave denies Jones entrance into a house. Clytie tells Jones to “stop right there white man…you ain’t never crossed this door…and you ain’t never going to cross it,” when he tries to come into Sutpen’s home (226). This scenario is identical to Sutpen’s experience as a child, and Sutpen’s father’s experience. This uncanniness magnifies the significance of Jones. Jones, in many ways, resembles Thomas’ father, and so Thomas associates with him as a way of reuniting with his father. Other potential reasons for their association have little validity. Sutpen only considers the sexual potential of Jones’ granddaughter at a late period in his relationship with him, and so Sutpen does not spend time with Jones solely for the sake of
using her. Jones works on Sutpen’s Hundred for minimal, if no, charge, but that also is no reason for Sutpen’s spending time with him; Jones’ idolization of Sutpen is enough to motivate him to work for Thomas. An example of Jones’ idolization appears when Jones looks at Sutpen and thinks: “a fine proud man. If God himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that’s what He would aim to look like” (226). It is reasonable to conclude that the cause of Sutpen’s and Jones’ friendship is psychological.

As Freud writes, “the human sense of guilt goes back to the killing of the primal father…His sons hated him, but they loved him too. After their hatred had been satisfied by their act of aggression, their love came to the fore in their remorse for the deed” (Freud, 126-127). Further validation of this psychological notion is found in the fact that modern characters typically reflect “the guilt of the new type of man [that] makes him a Cain-like figure,” burdened with his past transgressions (Siebald, 10). Sutpen spends time with Jones because Jones reminds him of his father. He acted out his aggression by abandoning his family, and out of his guilt for rejecting his family, “love” and “remorse” resurface. Sutpen’s Prodigal reconciliation occurs vicariously through Jones. The irony is that Jones kills Sutpen, who is himself like a father to Jones. Freud’s patricide is enacted, and the Prodigal narrative is twisted and manipulated. Sutpen rejects his father, leads a life of disillusionment (between the death of Ellen, the estrangement of his sons, and the lack of a self-aware descendent, it is difficult to find aim in Sutpen’s life), but ultimately does return to his father. Jones’ murder of Sutpen complicates the presence of the type-scene in a way reminiscent of Shakespeare’s tinkering with the type-scene in As You Like It. In the play, the father of the two sons, Orlando and Oliver, is dead, subsequently leading to a reversal in the “Prodigality” of the brothers.6 In Faulkner’s reversal, the symbolic patriarch kills

6 Addressed in more detail further in the essay.
the symbolic son (Jones murders Sutpen). This comparison between Faulkner and Shakespeare is meant to show that the incorporation of a type-scene in a narrative is often a source of creative manipulation. Taking that into consideration, it is evident that Thomas Sutpen can be understood as an exploration of the Prodigal Son archetype. His progression ultimately leads to a sense of reconciliation with patriarchy, but this coincides with his doom, his inability to transcend the grip of the pre-bellum Southern tradition. This reflects how the biblical type-scene parallels a modern condition. Reconciliation with a patriarch (in the Bible) is akin to a consumption by the patriarchal forces of the past (in the modern novel). The type-scene functions as a common foundation between the biblical narratives and Faulkner’s modern narrative. Similarly, Sutpen’s own sons, Henry and Charles Bon, are characterized around the Prodigal Son archetype and succumb to the influence of the traditional South.

Signs of Henry’s rejection of his father appear throughout the novel. As a child, Henry witnesses one of his father’s fights and becomes physically ill. This serves to foreshadow his latent discontent with Thomas and the eventual renunciation of his namesake. Henry renounces his “birthright and the roof under which he [has] been born” after Thomas tells him Bon is his brother (62). He formally spurns his birthright. Taking the details of 2 Samuel into consideration, “Like Absalom, Henry becomes estranged from his father” (Coffee, 18). Henry proceeds to go to war, but, like the Prodigal Son, he becomes disillusioned in his estrangement from patriarchy. Bon’s letter to Judith demonstrates this disillusionment. After commenting on eating stove polish, Bon writes “what WAS is one thing, and now it is not because it is dead, it died in 1861…you now hold the best of the old South which is dead” (104). Additionally, Henry and Bon are seen “with unkempt hair and faces gaunt…in worn and patched gray weathered,” which further illuminates the sense of disillusion (105). Henry’s characterization is Prodigal in the
nature of his rejection of patriarchy and his estrangement from it. His progress through the type-
scene is not complete though. Much like his father is bound to the archetype, Henry still has “to
play his final part in the family’s doom” (67). Henry fulfills the Prodigal’s motion through the
type-scene when he meets his father at the camp. After rejecting his namesake and leading a life
of disillusionment in the war, Henry meets his father and they “embrace and kiss…moved by
what of close blood…reconciles” (282). The Prodigal return is fulfilled with an embrace just like
it is in Luke’s depiction of the Prodigal Son. Henry has progressed through the Prodigal Son’s
type-scene: the rejection, estrangement from the patriarchal name, and the reconciliation. The
fact that he dies in his father’s house further instantiates the Prodigal nature of Henry. Moreover,
his death in Sutpen’s Hundred hyperbolizes Faulkner’s ironic incorporation of the type-scene.
Reconciliation does not lead to success, but rather to destruction and defeat. Henry’s
characterization around the Prodigal Son manifests in a tradition not too different from the
Bible’s narration. Nevertheless, his resemblance to Sutpen is a modern means of binding his
character to the Prodigal Son’s journey, and it is worth further investigation.

Throughout his life, Henry bears an uncanniness to Sutpen. The most profound similarity
between the two is the nature of their repudiation of patriarchy. Henry is described as a “son
gone, vanished, more insuperable to [Sutpen] now than if the son were dead since now (if the son
still lived) his name would be different” (148). Just as Thomas flees his father and rejects his
name, Henry does as well. Other, minute but relevant, similarities percolate throughout the
narrative. Mr. Compson tells Quentin that Henry “was as tall as his father…he sat the mare with
the same swagger” (56). Henry and Thomas are also in fact both fourteen when they experience
life-changing moments: Henry when he witnesses Thomas fighting, and Thomas when he
abandons his father (40). These are both moments in which the two Sutpens, to a degree, reject
their heritage. There is yet another similarity between Henry and Thomas that manifests during their moments of crisis. After Sutpen is denied entrance by the slave, he goes “into the woods” where “he could be quiet and think” (188); after Thomas tells Henry that Bon has black heritage, Henry goes to “a lonely place and leane[s] against a pine…with his head back so he could look up at the shabby shaggy branches” (283-284). This pattern affirms the notion that “the biblical type-scene occurs…at the crucial junctures” of a character’s progress” (Alter, 51). The type-scene is essential to the characters’ journey because it functions as the foundation of the most substantial moments in the novel. Similarly, many of the figures in the Bible who progress through the type-scene spend time in the wilderness during their journey (e.g. Jacob, Jesus, Absalom). If anything other than further illuminating the similarities between Henry and Thomas, this similarity simply serves to demonstrate, yet again, the biblical elements present in the novel. The main difference between Henry and Sutpen is the form of their return to patriarchy. Henry reconciles with his father in a manner more akin to the biblical narrative, while Sutpen’s return is more modernized.

Henry’s function in Faulkner’s narrative is bound to his journey through the archetypal Prodigal Son’s type-scene. As Sutpen’s son, Henry is one of the “accursed children on whom the first blow of [his] devil’s heritage” is inescapable (108). He is trapped within a modernized sequence of the type-scene, unable to escape patriarchy. Throughout the novel, Henry is in fact described as doomed, doomed to perennially return to Sutpen, and by extension, the South. As Coffee writes, “Henry…is unable to get rid of the past,” and therefore cannot prevail over his father, who is a pinnacle of the traditional South that the Civil War defeated (Coffee, 19). In this way, Faulkner’s narrative contradicts the Bible’s. In the Bible, the Prodigal Son’s return to patriarchy seems to indicate a need for patriarchy. In Henry’s case, it is the inescapability of
patriarchy that in fact defines his doom. Henry is not heroic, but is instead tragic in his fulfillment of the Prodigal Son archetype. By progressing along the type-scene, Henry reveals the tragedy that Faulkner presents: the inescapable legacy of the Southern past.

Henry’s older brother, Charles Bon, is tragic as well. His tragedy is bound to the progress of the Prodigal Son, but, unlike Henry, it is not his fulfillment of the type-scene that defines his tragedy. Instead, it is Bon’s unachieved desire to reconcile with patriarchy, his divergence from the Prodigal journey, that defines his tragedy. This reaffirms Alter’s argument that a lack of an expected occurrence in a type-scene can reaffirm the expectation for the foundational presence of the type-scene. Bon is characterized by certain elements of the Prodigal Son archetype, but ultimately he never reconciles with his patriarch. He is instead destroyed by him. He is described as having come to Jefferson “almost like Sutpen himself came into Jefferson: apparently complete, without background or past or childhood” (74). He is introduced as a Prodigal character, rejecting patriarchy by not even having it. In this sense, Bon is “not so much openly rebelling against paternal authority, but rather slowly eroding this authority…eclipsing the father altogether” (Siebald, 4). The passivity of Bon’s estrangement from patriarchy contradicts the active rejection that defines the archetypal Prodigal Son. Nevertheless, Bon grows up without his father, in fact not even knowing him. Additionally, he is described as “the rich city man” who spends money “on his whores and his champagne” (84, 241). He is estranged from his father, and he lives in explicit debauchery. These are two traits identical to Luke’s Prodigal Son, and in fact reinforce the typical notion of the “prodigal son” as a figure traditionally associated with debauchery. This is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s fraternal reversal in *As You Like It*. In the play, Shakespeare “appears to conflate two different parts of the parable by rewriting the elder brother’s (now perverse) behavior as the cause of the (now innocent) younger brother’s
degradation” (Barnaby, 363). Similarly, Faulkner’s narrative situates Bon, the older brother, in a state of estrangement from his father, and perhaps his debauchery serves to force attention to his placement in the Prodigal type-scene. This becomes apparent as Bon’s desire to reconcile with Sutpen manifests throughout the novel. He tells Henry, “[Sutpen] will say to me…you are my oldest son,” but Bon eventually realizes that Sutpen “has never acknowledged” him as a son (277, 279). He is unable to reconcile with Sutpen in the traditional mode of the Prodigal Son. However, just as Sutpen resembles his father and Henry resembles Sutpen, Bon resembles Sutpen as well, reconciling through resemblance.

The most substantial similarity between Thomas and Bon manifests in the consequences of their mixed marriages. Both men marry women of mixed blood and both abandon these relationships. Bon’s son, Charles Etienne, is described to have “had no childhood” upon arriving at Sutpen’s Hundred (159). In the same way that Bon arrives to Sutpen’s door without a past, Charles Etienne does as well. The response Etienne receives is in fact the same that Bon does: rejection. Etienne is told to “go away, disappear,” and he’s given “money to go on” (165). The “money” that Etienne is given is reminiscent of Luke’s Prodigal Son receiving his “share of the estate.” In the case of Faulkner’s narrative, the patriarch denies the son, though, inverting the type-scene. It is not the son who initially eschews the patriarch. Nonetheless, after Etienne leaves Jefferson, he eventually returns, “none ever to know what incredible tale lay behind that year’s absence” (166). These similarities may seem trivial, but they demonstrate how predominant the Prodigal Son’s type-scene is in the Sutpen family’s progress, the scene in fact being the “fatality which [chooses] that family” (81). All of the Sutpens are trapped in a narrative sequence, in which they leave their fathers and find themselves lost, and subsequently try to return to their patriarchy. It is not the reconciliation, though, that completes Bon’s characterization. Seemingly
trapped in the archetypal stages of rejection and estrangement from patriarchy, Bon’s characterization is that of the hero who might in fact succeed without reconciliation, the son who might transcend patriarchy. Bon’s potential reflects a trend in Faulkner’s novel, in which there is a “call for man to break out of the stultifying patterns of the past, or, indeed, out of any abstract formulation which clouds…the present” (Rollyson, 3).

In the same way that Absalom begins to win favor over David’s kingdom in the Bible, Bon wins favor over Sutpen’s family, particularly Judith and Henry. Having taken Henry to New Orleans, Bon introduces him to vice and says, “perhaps we do not even want to be God,” again echoing Shakespeare’s fraternal reversal in *As You Like It* (91). At one point, Henry tells Bon, “if I had a brother…I would want him to be older than me…and I would want him to be just like you” (253). In both of these moments in the narrative, Bon has eclipsed his place as a son, subservient to a patriarch. By not desiring to be God, Bon demonstrates no interest in traditional patriarchy. Henry clearly looks at Bon like a father-figure, and Judith wants to marry him. Henry’s and Judith’s attraction to Bon diminishes Sutpen’s place in their minds as their patriarch. Instead, Bon, a character estranged from his patriarch, occupies the place Sutpen normally would in the tradition of the Bible. However, Bon’s efforts to fulfill the Prodigal reconciliation with Sutpen lead to his death, defining his tragedy. He goes with Henry to Sutpen’s Hundred, thinking, “So at last I shall see [Sutpen]…he will let me know…that I am his son” (255). Sutpen never gives him this recognition though. Unlike the Prodigal Son, Bon is unable to return to his father after being estranged from him. This rejection catalyzes Bon’s progress along a new arc: the arc of Amnon, Absalom’s older brother.

Bon is an innovative integration of Amnon, the older son who is killed by the younger. The fact that Bon embodies some aspects of the Prodigal Son (rather than being exclusively
molded around Amnon) demonstrates the modernity of Faulkner’s biblical interpretation. However, once Bon realizes that Sutpen will not acknowledge him, his characterization ceases to be Prodigal, and is instead that of the tragic first-born. In the same way Amnon commits incest with his step-sister, Tamar, Bon intends to commit incest with his step-sister, Judith. Bon explains his motivation for incest to Henry, saying, “He should have told me…But he didn’t do it. If he had, I would have…promised never to see her or him or you again” (272). Bon’s intent to commit incest is a retaliation against Sutpen, who is never able to reconcile with Bon. In this way, Faulkner’s narrative is an extrapolation of the biblical narrative in the second book of Samuel, a narrative that incorporates the type-scene that the Prodigal Son inhabits. Bon’s journey in fact concludes with the victory of the Prodigal Son over the older son; Henry shoots Bon to death. Just like in Luke’s parable, Faulkner’s novel juxtaposes the fortunes of the younger son and the older. In fact, Faulkner’s narrative is a hyperbolized instance of the younger son’s success over the older, manifesting in the older son’s death. The irony in Faulkner’s story is that Henry then flees Jefferson until he returns there to die. Unlike the triumph of the Prodigal figures of the Bible, who tend to succeed in the place of their older brothers, Henry’s Prodigal triumph is tragic. It ruins Judith’s chance for marriage, it transforms Henry into a fugitive, it is defined by the murder of Bon, and all the events surrounding the Sutpens afterwards are moments of defeat. Like Absalom, Henry is a younger son who is the instrument of his older stepbrother’s murder. He is also a son estranged from his father who returns to his father’s love. However, Henry’s link to the archetype of the Prodigal Son catalyzes the destruction of the Sutpens. All Bon desires is for Sutpen to say: “you are my oldest son” (277). He simply wants reconciliation, and his inability to achieve this leads to his death at the hands of his brother. Bon is the character who ought to be “marked by the desire to part with the past and former authorities…encouraged to
hold [his] own right against the older generation” (Siebald, 3, 13). He is not though. Instead, he is consumed by a desire to reunite with his father, and thus “the distinctions between past and present seem to be dissolving” (Rollyson, 39). Bon is trapped within the mindset of the traditional South, unable to move forward into the modernity of the post-bellum world.

The archetype is not consigned to the Sutpen men alone. The women in the novel embody aspects of the Prodigal Son as well. They too grapple with the mindset of the traditional South in confrontation with modernity. One of these women is Judith, Sutpen’s daughter. In the context of the story of Absalom, there are similarities between Judith and Tamar. They are both sisters and both associated with incest. Although Judith remains untouched by Bon (whose relationship to her is identical to that between Amnon and Tamar) her close association with the biblical narrative forces attention to her characterization as an interpretation of a biblical figure. She is partly molded around the Prodigal Son archetype, for the most part consigned to reconciliation through resemblance. Judith is very similar to Thomas, in fact described to be “too much like him…with the ruthless Sutpen code” (82, 95). For example, as a child, Judith witnesses her father fight the slave that same night as Henry, but she’s unaffected by it. In the same way that Thomas is stoic, Judith is as well. This stoicism is exemplified by her reaction to Bon’s murder: upon learning of Bon’s death, Judith is “absolutely calm…cold and tranquil” (121). She appears unaffected by tragedy. Like Thomas, Judith does not express any emotional reaction to an intense moment of reality. Instead, she upholds herself austerely. Her persistent similarity to Sutpen appears to contradict the notion that the Prodigal Son is relevant at all to Judith’s characterization in terms of rejecting patriarchy. Nevertheless, she does reject Sutpen, albeit in suppressed ways.
Judith’s rejection of Sutpen becomes apparent in her death; the grave bears no inscription of Thomas’ name: “Judith Coldfield Sutpen. Daughter of Ellen Coldfield” (171). Despite living with Sutpen and on Sutpen’s Hundred after his death, Judith does not accept Sutpen as a patriarch in her mind. While she is not a character shaped around the Prodigal Son to the degree that Thomas and Henry are, Judith is characterized partially and incompletely around the archetype. She resembles Thomas’ stoicism to a further extent than any other character in the novel, and yet she clearly does resent her father. Denying his name’s inclusion on her grave is a demonstration of this resentment. In Judith’s characterization, there are traces of the archetype, but they are not fully realized. Like Henry, Judith is tragically bound to patriarchy, unable to escape it. She is one of Sutpen’s “doomed children,” created “to destroy one another and [Sutpen’s] own line” (12). This “doom” is the entrapment of the Sutpens in a journey based upon the Prodigal Son’s type-scene. In this way, Judith is portrayed as “receiving an undesirable patrimony,” which may reflect the undesired inheritance of the past that modern Southerners, like Faulkner, inherit (Coffee, 12).

Sutpen’s other daughter, Clytie, also bears traces to the Prodigal Son archetype. Clytie works as a slave for Sutpen on Sutpen’s Hundred, but she receives benefits as well, living in the house and being treated more gently than the other slaves. There is some sense of a paternal relationship between Sutpen and Clytie. Rosa tells Quentin, “Judith and Clytie waited for [Sutpen]: because now he was all we had,” but then she proceeds to say, “We did not need him, not even vicariously” (124). It seems that Rosa is aware of the doom, the fate, of the Sutpen family. Even though Clytie does not need Sutpen, she can’t escape from him, in fact choosing to stay on his land after death. However, Clytie is instrumental in the destruction of the Sutpen patriarchy, burning Sutpen’s Hundred while she and Henry are in it. This moment epitomizes the
tragedy of the Sutpen’s entrapment in the Prodigal type-scene. The only way Thomas Sutpen’s children can escape the grip of his patriarchy is through death. Clytie commits suicide and murders Henry by destroying Sutpen’s Hundred, symbolically destroying the legacy of the patriarchy as well. It is important to recognize that the destruction of the Sutpen patriarchy comes from the hands of a black character.

In a wider commentary on the racism of the South in which Sutpen lives and constructs his “kingdom,” perhaps the destruction of that Southern patriarchy must come from the black community, as embodied in Clytie. Considering that black characters in Faulkner’s novels are often characterized nobly, such as Dilsey in *The Sound and The Fury*, this notion is plausible. Faulkner is even quoted as saying, “Dilsey is one of my own favorite characters, because she is brave, courageous, generous, gentle, and honest” (*Paris Review*, No. 12, 1956). Clytie too is a noble character, being the person who “used to watch” over Charles Etienne and then Etienne’s son, Jim Bond, as well (169). Considering Clytie as a Prodigal character complicates her taking care of these two Sutpen descendants. In a way, by watching over Etienne and Bon on Sutpen’s Hundred, Clytie keeps them under the Sutpen patriarchy. At the end of the novel, though, as Sutpen’s Hundred burns down, Bond escapes. His presence as the only living Sutpen is important to explore. Like Benjy from *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), Jim Bond is mentally disabled. In the same way that Benjy is a descendent of the fractured Compson patriarchy, Bond is a descendent of the fractured Sutpen patriarchy. The destruction of the Compson and Sutpen families reflects the disintegration of the ante-bellum tradition of the South. Bond’s and Benjy’s mental handicaps can be understood as allusions to the sins of the fathers being punished through their sons in the Bible. Just as Clytie can only escape the Sutpen patriarchy by dying, Bond can
only escape the Sutpen patriarchy by lacking any sense of awareness. Both characters suffer from the patriarch they inherit and try to escape from.

The characters in Absalom, Absalom! are consumed by the inheritance of their patriarchy and this patriarchal inheritance symbolizes the more general inheritance of the past. This destruction by forces of the past occurs through a variation of the type-scene of rejecting patriarchy, becoming estranged, and eventually trying to return. Structured around the archetypal foundation of Prodigal Son archetype, Faulkner’s characters are explorations and variations of the archetype. Their arcs do not strictly adhere to the type-scene throughout the entirety of the novel, nor are the characters simply re-iterations of the biblical figures. Instead, their arcs include variations of the sequences and their qualities are variations of the simplified qualities characteristic of biblical figures. This demonstrates the modernity of Faulkner’s biblical interpretation. While in the Bible the reconciliation with the patriarch is bound to notions of success, in Faulkner’s modern novel, the reconciliation is bound to tragedy. Consequently, it appears that “any such a notion of a loving, welcoming father…[is] out of the question” in the world Faulkner portrays (Siebald, 12). The forces of the Southern past, as embodied in ante-bellum patriarchy, are forces of destruction that inhibit progress into modernity.

**The Prodigal Son in All the King’s Men**

Warren’s novel, All the King’s Men, follows the progress of two characters: Jack Burden and Willie Stark, the two of whom are drastically different in nature. Willie is a man of action and decision, while Jack is a sulking and excessive intellect, constantly trapped in his head. However, as different as they are, Jack and Willie are bound together in an arc of progress, and that arc can be understood in relation to the Prodigal Son’s type-scene. As Randy Hendricks
explains, “Southerners as much as any other group of modern writers were being influenced by the mythic method…apparent in their stories are biblical and classical modes – the Prodigal Son” being among these modes (Hendricks, 16-17). Jack Burden and Willie Stark progress along modernized versions of the journey of the Prodigal Son in the novel, but ultimately they both try to escape their patriarchy. The difference between the two is the result of this effort. While Willie’s divergence from the progress of the type-scene of the Prodigal Son leads to his doom, Jack’s divergence leads to his independence. Unlike Faulkner’s exploration of the Prodigal Son archetype, Warren’s exploration of the archetype demonstrates the consequences of the son who transcends the need for patriarchy, the Southern son who escapes the burden of the past. It seems appropriate that Jack Burden is the son who escapes from his patriarchal land (Burden’s Landing) and achieves success. In contrast, Willie Stark’s efforts to alter the South he’s inherited never lead him away from that land. The juxtaposition between Jack’s progression through the biblical type-scene and Willie’s progression highlights the difficulties of reconciling the modernizing south and the traditional south. Consequently, “the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story” (157). This story is that of the Prodigal Son who tries to abandon rather than reconcile with patriarchy.

On his way to his father’s home, Willie says, “a man goes away from his home…and they say: come back,” which is a vocalization of Prodigal tropes (11). Once at this home, Willie poses for photos with his family and his old dog, portraying an image of retaining heritage. This moment is complicated by the fact that this house contains “modern improvements you couldn’t see from the road” (29). This tension between modernity and tradition appears throughout the novel, and it mirrors the father-son tension characteristic of the Prodigal type-scene. Unlike Luke’s Prodigal Son, who returns to his father in complete favor, the characters in this modern
narrative do not reconcile completely or stably. The modernity of Warren’s story manifests in his exploration of this instability, and this instability percolates throughout Willie’s interaction with his father. Willie’s father wants Willie to stay at his home for the night but Willie says no. This causes Jack to think, “when you get born your father and mother lost something out of themselves…they know they can’t get it all back” (35). The journey of the Prodigal Son is entwined with the parental desire to reclaim the child achieving independence. Clearly, Willie has escaped from this reconciliation, telling his father “it is not business…it is pure pleasure” that motivates him to not spend the night in his father’s home (35). In relation to the Prodigal Son’s journey, Willie appears to reject the need for the patriarch, only returning superficially. Nevertheless, the fact that Warren’s novel begins with Willie at his father’s house, sharing time with him and considering him his father (as opposed to being estranged) introduces to the narrative the father-son dynamic of reconciliation and independence. It is Willie’s Prodigal rejection that permeates more interestingly through the novel, though, demonstrating the experimentation with the type-scene.

As a younger man, Willie struggles to establish his name as an important figure and presents himself meekly. He lives with Lucy on his “Pappy’s farm, helping with the chores,” sometimes complaining about the morals of the political figures he’s trying to influence (61). Like his father, Willie perceives the world naively and is passive in his actions, trapped in a personality of over-humility. It is not until Sadie Burke challenges Willie’s masculinity and introduces him to alcohol that Willie alters his course of action. She tells him that he’s “the sacrificial goat…the ram in the bushes…a sap” (81). These insults are in fact biblical allusions. They refer to Isaac, whose story is entwined with the tropes characteristic of the Prodigal Son, with Abraham being too submissive to God and Isaac too submissive to Abraham: sons who
cannot escape their patriarchy independently. It is significant that Willie embraces the aggressive attitude he does only after Sadie refers to him as these biblical figures who do not embrace aggression. In relation to the Prodigal Son, it is at this moment in Warren’s narrative that Willie rejects his patriarchy (in terms of behaving like his father) and embraces a new approach to life, different from tradition. Here, it is important to recall that “the biblical type-scene occurs…at the crucial junctures” of a character’s progress (Alter, 51). The persistence of Willie’s alcoholism reflects the Prodigal Son’s debauchery, but it is also a modernized manifestation of his rejection of patriarchy, considering that his “Pappy doesn’t favor drinking. Never did.” (30). While Willie doesn’t reject his father in the biblical sense of literally leaving his homeland and rejecting his name, he does depart from patriarchy in terms of establishing his own lifestyle, different from his father’s. Considering how modernism historically coincided with the Roaring Twenties’ culture of debauchery, Willie’s embracement of alcohol alludes to the modern movement itself, albeit implicitly (perhaps unintentionally). The type-scene of the Prodigal Son functions as a template around which a portion of Willie’s arc can be understood. Willie’s relation with his own son, Tommy, reinforces the presence of the Prodigal Son archetype as well, and this too is demonstrative of how the classic tropes are manipulated in modern narratives.

Tom is introduced as “an arrogant bastard,” living a youthful lifestyle that Willie and Old Man Stark never experienced (35). The word “bastard” functions well in understanding Tommy as a son entwined in Prodigal tropes, inhabiting a tense relationship with patriarchy. Willie encourages Tommy’s debauchery, saying “I never had any fun growing up. Let him have some fun!” (230). Tommy enacts the classic “prodigal” tendencies of debauchery, eventually causing a drunk-driving accident. Willie appears to be vicariously enjoying this sense of rebellious youth through Tommy, and so in a way Tommy’s persistent transgression is a way of fulfilling his
father’s desires. This reverses the traditional biblical narrative; Tommy’s recklessness is not a source of estrangement from the patriarch. Considering this, Tommy’s relationship with Willie is one of unification, Willie in fact encouraging Tommy to go astray. This is made apparent in a discussion Willie has with Jack. Willie tells Jack that Lucy is “going to ruin [Tom]. Make him a sissy…said he had to stay home and study” (154). Willie does not condone the habits of obedience, not wanting his son to perpetually stay home. The “studying” is important to note because in his youth, Willie stayed home and studied. He does not want Tom to progress through the same life that he does, instead preferring Tommy to play football. It is ironic that Tom’s debilitating injury occurs at a football game. In the way that Tommy seems to conform to the Prodigal type-scene through his mischief and debauchery, he is in fact fulfilling his tragedy through this adherence to the motifs. By leading the rambunctious lifestyle that Willie designs for him, Tommy progresses through a unification with his father in terms of fulfilling his wishes, but this unification leads to his death. In this way, the fulfillment of the type-scene, the debauchery and the simultaneous fulfillment of the patriarch’s wishes, is tragic. This pattern reverses the type scene: “Willie, searching for a future” for Tommy, “may be said to kill his son” (Beebe, 7). Like Willie’s relationship with his father, Tommy’s relationship with Willie can be understood as a modern exploration of, and experimentation with, the archetypal framework of the Prodigal Son. However, further analysis of Willie’s arc does not now relate to the Prodigal Son archetype. Jack Burden is the character whose arc is most significantly structured around the Prodigal Son type-scene. He is the son who can perhaps escape the grip of his patriarchy.

Jack is introduced as a character surrounded by Prodigal tropes. He drives “back to Burden’s Landing,” thinking to himself that it is “named for the people from whom I got my name, and which was the place where I had been born and raised,” and he even thinks of himself
as “the thing that always [comes] back” (36, 115). Burden’s Landing functions as an explicit instantiation of the patriarch’s home, both its name and Jack’s relationship to the name forcing attention to this detail. The wordplay is a reminder that Jack’s journey through the narrative is bound to the archetypal journey of the Prodigal Son struggling to return home. Burden’s Landing is not simply Jack’s home though. It is the home of his father, and therefore associated with tradition. Robert Slack addresses this combination of tradition and patriarchy in Jack’s life, writing, “within the tradition there are [two] men who could have supplied [Jack] with a father-image…Judge Irwin” is one of them (Chambers, 52).\(^7\) Despite the fact that Jack doesn’t learn Judge Irwin is his father until the conclusion of the novel, he considers the judge as “a father,” and so yet again, Jack fulfills alternated stages of the Prodigal Son’s journey in relation to the father-son dynamic (40). This dynamic is complicated by Jack’s relationship with the Scholarly Attorney, the man who Jack believes is his biological father. Jack reflects how he cannot “think of anything but getting away from” the Attorney whenever he’s with him, which incorporates an element of rejection into this relationship (202). Taking Judge Irwin into account, Jack’s sentiment towards the Attorney is ironic, considering how he thinks “you cannot ever really walk away from the things you want most to walk away from,” when he doesn’t realize that he’s perpetually leaving and returning to his actual father, Irwin (43-44). This irony complicates the reconciliation with patriarchy. Unlike the biblical presentation of the type-scene, Warren’s narrative modernizes the simplified framework of the Prodigal Son and explores the son who tries to exist without patriarchy. This is analogous to the modern effort to “make it new” and create without precedent. The modern effort is Prodigal in the sense that much of the innovative

\(^7\) Slack argues that Governor Stanton is the second father-figure, but Stanton is not addressed in this essay.
work (Faulkner’s and Warren’s included) creates from a foundation of the classics, such as Shakespeare and the Greeks, the Bible. The modern effort to create new material reconciled with the traditional stories. Tangents aside, the relationship between Jack and Irwin, in which Jack does not know Irwin is his father, reflects the complicated nature of reconciling with the past. Therefore, Jack is a disillusioned character for the majority of the novel, estranged as a wayward son.

Jack is Warren’s “wandering protagonist…isolated because he has rejected the traditional community” of his past (Hendricks, 9). He often claims to “not give a damn,” to “lack ambition,” and he drinks alcohol excessively (29, 54). Jack exists in the disillusion of the Prodigal Son archetype, and by often returning and leaving Burden’s Landing, he traps himself in the biblical type-scene. This demonstrates that “Jack Burden…has need of a father to whom he can attach himself” (Chambers, 51). Consequently, much of Jack’s progress through the narrative can be understood through the template of the Prodigal Son. This framework of his characterization creates a parallel between Jack’s relationship with his own past and the more abstract struggle of the modern southerner identifying with the traditions of the South. As Hendricks phrases this parallel, Warren’s “handling of the wanderer…as a figure akin simultaneously to an archetypal ancient wanderer and to a generic modern exile” links the fictional characters to modern reality (Hendricks, 48). Considering how the Prodigal Son’s type-scene is defined by this concept of grappling with inheritance, “it is not surprising that the authors…liked the parable” (Siebald, 12). Warren specifically “uses an Americanized prodigal to tell a…story of flight and return” and understanding Jack Burden as an integration of the archetype is essential to understanding Warren’s examination of the South (Hendricks, 40). As previously noted, Jack wanders throughout Warren’s story. He drives to do errands for Willie, he drives West, and he
occasionally “[makes] ready to go back to the place and the things [he]…come[s] from” at Burden’s Landing (310). Constantly, Jack has “the notion that [he is]…running away” (313). In relation to the Prodigal Son, Jack is estranged, torn between returning to patriarchy through Burden’s Landing or rejecting it by working for Willie Stark, whose politics contradict those of his father, Judge Irwin. Interestingly, through the lens of reading the novel as an experimentation of the Prodigal Son type-scene, “the pseudo-father to whom Jack is drawn” can be considered to be Willie Stark (Chambers, 52). If this is the case, then the discrepancy between the two characters’ drastically different natures can be understood. Jack is undoubtedly a disillusioned character, one of Warren’s “wanderers.” On the contrary, Willie Stark is decisive and acts quickly. It is reasonable to conclude that “Jack gives his allegiance to Willie because he sees that Willie possesses a burning inner conviction…Jack’s own scattered purposelessness is drawn together by the forces of Willie’s personality” (Chambers, 52). This affirms the earlier-mentioned notion that Jack “has need of a father,” and so must experience a reconciliation. However, this sense of archetypal reconciliation is complicated by the animosity between Jack’s true patriarchy (in Burden’s Landing) and his chosen patriarchy (in Willie Stark).

The difference in political opinion between Irwin and Willie leads to tension between Jack and the people in Burden’s Landing. This intertwines elements of the Prodigal rejection and reconciliation. At a dinner, a man named George tells Jack that Willie has changed the government so much that “a fellow can step in and grab the whole state,” and he proceeds to criticize Willie (124). Jack consequently ruminates that George and the people in Burden’s Landing assume his “heart [is] in Burden’s Landing and they [have] no secrets…maybe [his] heart [is] in Burden’s Landing”; Jack then speaks in Willie’s defense, criticizing the people of Burden’s Landing (125). Moments such as this one reveal Jack’s struggle to reject his
inheritance and simultaneously his strained process of reconciling with it. These tropes surround Prodigal characters. In another moment, Jack refuses financial help from his (unknown to him) father, Irwin, and the fact that Jack’s family name is different from his biological father’s is reminiscent of the biblical renunciation of namesake (127). Yet again, there is rejection of patriarchy. Nevertheless, Jack uses his family money, that of the Burdens, to enjoy what he labels “blowout[s]” (120). In this sense, Jack fulfills the classic notions of “prodigality,” enjoying debauchery and aimlessness. While Jack may not adhere exactly to the type-scene of the Prodigal Son, the archetypal elements do surround his progress, which reveals him to be a modernized exploration of the biblical figure. There is a redundancy to Jack’s Prodigal nature, and so the profundity of the archetype’s function in the novel does not simply reside in Jack’s relationship with Burden’s Landing and Judge Irwin (though that is essential). Through Jack, the Prodigal Son archetype functions as way of understanding the relationship between the Southern past and the modernizing present as abstract concepts. Consumed by his past, Jack is “hiding from the present…[taking] refuge in the past” (160). This consumption of the past manifests partly through Jack’s investigation of Cass Mastern.

As a self-proclaimed student of history, Jack occupies his mind with studies of the pre-bellum South, specifically with his studies of Cass Mastern. It appears that Jack is the “wanderer…who has…to live in two times, in two worlds,” vicariously existing in the 19th century via Cass (Hendricks, 72). This is similar to Quentin’s study of the Civil-War era Sutpens. Jack learns that Cass was “born…in a log cabin…[and] in later years…supped from silver” (161). His progress appears to have been characterized by moving away from his inheritance. The Prodigal nature of Cass becomes more apparent as Jack researches his history more extensively. Jack reads about Cass being “led…to the bottle, the gaming table, and the race
course,” as he lived his years away from the log cabin (177). Like the Prodigal Son, Cass embraces debauchery in his life away from his inherited home, in fact considering himself the “chief of sinners,” much like the Prodigal Son who claims he has sinned against God and his father (182). Yet, in his disillusion, Cass frees his slaves. Despite fighting for the Confederate army and living in the South, Cass rejects the teachings of his inheritance. He is not Prodigal in the sense that he reconciles with his patriarchy in the traditional way of returning to his father. Nevertheless, Cass remains in the South and this is essential to understanding his nature and Jack’s nature.8 Both men live in the South and struggle to identify with the tradition of their past, Cass Mastern struggling with the past of slavery, and Jack struggling with his family’s past and also the more general past of the Southern tradition. Recognizing the foundational presence of Prodigal tropes in Jack’s and Cass’ characterizations allows for a comparison between the two.

While Jack struggles to escape the grip Burden’s Landing has on life, Cass is able to depart from his Southern tradition and escape the type-scene of the Prodigal Son to a degree; he rejects his inherited tradition of slavery. However, like the Prodigal Son archetype, Cass can never wholly escape his patriarchy, living in the same land of the South he’s inherited. The Cass Mastern study foreshadows Jack’s eventual divergence from the type-scene of the Prodigal Son.

After wallowing in California, Jack decides to “go back home again, after not coming home for a long time” (111). It is important to recognize that Jack mulls over his past for the entirety of his stay out West, seemingly lost in a thought process that fixates on the past rather than confronts the present or even thinks about the future. In this mindset, Jack is unable to be

8 It is important to recognize that Cass Mastern is similar to Thomas Sutpen. Both are born in rural Southern settings and impoverished conditions, and both ascend to higher social standing. The main difference between the two is their reactions to slavery; Cass rejects the practice while Sutpen maintains it.
“part of…exodus from the rural South” into modernity (Hendricks, 16). He seems doomed to be
trapped in the type-scene of the Prodigal Son, needing to retain the past he wants to depart from.
It is only when Jack decides that he “can keep the past only by having the future, for they are
forever tied together,” that he is ready to achieve an independence (310-311). Jack is ready to
depart from tradition. Nevertheless, this independence is born out of a form of reconciliation
with his father, Judge Irwin. Jack returns to Burden’s Landing and informs the judge that he’s
learned of his past corruption. Irwin is shaken by this, but he realizes that if he tells Jack that he is in fact his father, Jack may not inform Willie of the judge’s corruption. Instead though, Irwin
says, “I could just tell you something…But I won’t” (347). He doesn’t inform Jack of his true
patriarchy, and yet this moment is characterized by the elements of the Prodigal reconciliation.
Irwin tells Jack, “it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you, Jack…this is a celebration, I want to
celebrate your coming to see me!” (342). These are almost the exact same words that the
Prodigal’s father uses at moments in Luke’s parable. Clearly, this moment between Jack and his
father is an experimentation with the template of the reconciliation between the Prodigal Son and
his father. It is modernized though, made new and more profound.

The reconciliation between Jack and his father doesn’t conform to the simplified mode of
the archetypes in the Bible. The judge proceeds to kill himself once Jack leaves, and Jack’s
mother tells him that the judge is his father. In a way, it appears there is no patriarchal
reconciliation, but instead rejection. It is not this simple. Jack comes to believe that the judge
“had not been good…but he had done good” (353). He proceeds to inherit the judge’s estate, and
in the most profound moment of Jack’s experience in the narrative, he begins to weep, feeling
“like the ice [was] breaking up after a long winter. And the winter had been long” (354).
Additionally, once Jack is in Irwin’s house, he feels “fully at peace with himself’ (433). Slack
analyzes this moment in the novel too, writing, “the fullness of Jack’s acceptance of his heritage is sketched…[when] he takes up residence in his father’s house (temporarily, it is true; but it symbolizes his acceptance of his heritage…” (Chambers, 56). There is a reconciliation between Irwin and Jack that takes place in Jack’s emotions and mind. Ironically, perhaps tragically, Jack begins to experience healthy emotion only once his father has died, but this constitutes the modernity of Warren’s exploration of the Prodigal Son archetype. This reinforces Alter’s notion of employing the type-scene by exploring the “deliberate suppression” of some sequences. (Alter, 49). The reconciliation does not conclude Jack’s development. Jack’s progress as a character is structured around, not defined by, the type-scene of the Prodigal Son. While he does reconcile with his father, it is in an estranged manner. This is epitomized by the fact that Jack sells Irwin’s house to a bank and chooses to “never live” in Burden’s Landing again, but only briefly “come back” to visit (438). Jack is able to achieve an independence without patriarchy, while still experiencing a sense of reconciliation with it. Unlike Willie, Jack is able to disembark from tradition while reconciling with the past.

In All the King’s Men, Jack evolves through an arc that is foundationally structured around the type-scene of the Prodigal Son. In modernized ways, Jack rejects patriarchy, becomes estranged in waywardness, and ultimately reconciles with patriarchy. What distinguishes Jack, though, is that he does not become consumed by patriarchy. He achieves an independence after his reconciliation. The death of Judge Irwin in the reconciliation phase of the type-scene reveals the agenda of modernity in Warren’s South: to reconcile with the legacy of the antiquated Southern tradition and then progress into modernity—to not remain bound to the antiquated tradition. As a character structured around the Prodigal Son, Jack fulfills this agenda and his progress “reinforces a major thesis: the interdependence of past and present” (Chambers, 120).
Willie’s progress contradicts this notion. The life he leads as a demagogue does not reconcile with his former life as a humble, honest politician. His efforts to give his son, Tommy, a life of pure fun does not reconcile with Willie’s own upbringing, in which he was forced to study and lead a humble life. Most profoundly, Willie’s efforts to change the modern South are unable to reconcile with the past notions of politics, as embodied in Judge Irwin’s politics. Jack, however, makes an effort to live in the present by taking the past into account and reconciling with it. His journey towards reconciliation is a modernized progression through the type-scene of the Prodigal Son, and allows Jack, as a Southerner, to enter into modernity.

The Prodigal Son in Modernism

Faulkner’s and Warren’s modern novels feature characters molded around the same archetype, and so these characters bear substantial similarities. Common to these characters is progress through an arc built upon the foundation of the type-scene of the Prodigal Son’s rejection, estrangement and reconciliation with patriarchy. Symbolically, this type-scene functions as a means of exploring the characters’ relationship with the past. Their isolation from patriarchy is analogous to their isolation from the present. In this way, “Warren, like Faulkner, sees the past as the arbiter of the present” (Chambers, 116). Therefore, the “distinction between thinking about and reliving the past seems temporarily to be abolished” in these characters’ lives, which is demonstrated by their disillusions (Rollyson, 45). Reconciliation with patriarchy is akin to a consolidation between the past and the present, but among the characters in these two novels, Jack Burden is the only one whose consolidation allows him to live in the present. The other characters perish in the process of reconciling with the patriarch. Comparisons between the estranged relationships Jack, Quentin Compson, Henry, and Bon have with their fathers reveal
the various ways these characters try to manage their symbolic estrangement from the present moment.

Like Quentin, Jack constantly ruminates on the past and almost lives in it. In one moment, Jack thinks to himself, “I stood there in what was the present. But there was the past” (204-205). His research into Cass Mastern is even reminiscent of Quentin’s research into the Sutpen’s past, a history that only unfolds through his research. Quentin’s obsession with the past consumes him, and this becomes increasingly apparent as the novel develops. For example, he thinks, “a man never outlives his father,” which reveals a microcosmic, if not specialized, form of being overpowered by the past (222). Specifically, this excerpt exposes Quentin’s latent sense of being inferior to the patriarchy before him. Jack, in contrast, does not idealize the past. Unlike Quentin, Jack believes that he “can keep the past only by having the future” (310). In comparison to Quentin’s comments on being unable to “outlive” the past, Jack’s outlook is optimistic. The pessimism and impracticality of Quentin’s statement exposes how his neurosis is characterized by a feeling of defeat from forces that predate his existence. This reinforces the idea that the reconciliation of the type-scene is a parallel to consumption by the past in Quentin’s case.

In another moment, Quentin thinks that Sutpen “died. Without regret…save…by Quentin Compson,” which indicates an obligation Quentin feels to accept a specific burden of the past, a burden he may have no obligation to accept (5). In fact, Rosa, who relays much of the Sutpen history to Quentin, tells him that she assumes he’ll never “come back…[to] a little town like Jefferson since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man” (5). The tangible land of the South is likened to the intangible notion of being an inhibiting anchor for progress into modernity, as embodied by the “Northern.” In other words, the South represents the tradition that modernity attempts to progress forward and away from,
just like the Prodigal Son attempts to progress forward and away from his traditional patriarch. Nevertheless, Quentin tells his Northern roommate, Shreve, “I don’t hate [the South]…I don’t hate it!” (303). These juxtaposing influences create a conflict in Quentin (though he creates most of it himself), in which he struggles to live in the present (at Harvard in the North) while accounting for the past (listening to tales of Sutpen in Jefferson). Considering how in Faulkner’s novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin commits suicide after a day of ruminating on the past, it is apparent that Quentin’s doom is defined by his obsession with the past. This relationship, in which the past blurs into the present, parallels the Prodigal Son’s relationship with patriarchy. Despite trying to flee inherited elements of the past, Prodigal figures ultimately confront their inheritance. As Faulkner says, “There is no such thing as was—only is.” (*Paris Review*, No. 12, 1956). In Faulkner’s novel, the reunion with patriarchy is not cause for celebration like it is in the Bible. Quentin is a character who cannot overcome his patriarchy, and this doom is arrived at through progression along the Prodigal Son’s type-scene. Rollyson addresses this too, writing, “the whole Sutpen story…[becomes] a symbol for the past itself…instead of being dead and buried, Sutpen and his story continue to confront Quentin,” just as his own patriarchal past does (Rollyson, 42). Vicariously through the stories of the Sutpens, Quentin is consumed by the past in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Similarly, Jack Burden thinks excessively of the past, in fact dubbing himself, “a historical researcher,” and student of history (228). After he learns that Willie and Anne have begun an affair, Jack drives to California where he mulls over his past intimacy with Anne and “dream[s] gently back over the years,” rather than deal with the present (272). This, in addition to his years spent studying history and living in a dilapidated apartment, demonstrates Jack’s unhealthy obsession with the past. For most of the novel, Jack is displaced from a grip on the
present, which mirrors his displacement from his father. This conforms to a trend in the “writing of twentieth-century Southerners…[who] deal with the exile’s outward journey…[and] with the exile’s return” (Hendricks, 8). The words “exile” and “return” force attention to the Prodigal Son archetype, and so comparing Jack to Quentin (who is also influenced by the archetype) is useful. Unlike Quentin, Jack escapes the grip of the past by diverging from the type-scene.

Reconciliation does not end Jack’s arc as a character. Jack reconciles with the Judge in a dysfunctional manner, but he reconciles nonetheless (as analyzed earlier). The fact that the Judge commits suicide after this reunion, coupled with the unintentional nature of Jack’s reunion with patriarchy (i.e. he does not know the Judge is his father during their final meeting) signals that Jack is departing from the traditional progress of the type-scene. This qualifies the concept that the “Southern wanderer reverses the quest” of traditional archetypes (Hendricks, 9). Jack does not become consumed by the past since he is able to develop as a character along a trajectory not bound to the type-scene. He leaves Burden’s Landing. He leaves his patriarch’s home to enter “the awful responsibility of Time,” and the word “Time” forces attention to the parallel between patriarchy and the past (438).

Hendricks explains how “it is necessary for human beings to see themselves involved…with the past…to lose such a sense of identity…is to become a wanderer” (Hendricks, 1). This notion applies to type-scene through which the Prodigal Son develops. He is a wanderer whose “sense of identity” must reconcile with the patriarch that he is estranged from. In Warren’s and Faulkner’s modern novels, the concept of wandering away from the past manifests tangibly in the characters’ estrangement from their fathers. The type-scene is a common foundation for the authors’ commentary on the relationship between father and son, and the past and the present. Different between the authors’ commentary, though, is the consequence of their
characters’ confrontation with patriarchy and the past. Faulkner’s characters are defeated by the past when they return to their patriarch, but Jack Burden is not. He doesn’t necessarily triumph over the past, but instead “reconcile” is the proper word, and this is apparent in comparison with the Sutpen sons, whose “reconciliation” with patriarchy is in fact defeat.

Henry is the son has “repudiated the very roof under which he ha[s] been born,” but he nevertheless returns to die under that “roof” at Sutpen’s Hundred (10). His progress from repudiation to return is defined by the type-scene through which the Prodigal Son progresses. The intensified nature of his death (the house-fire) forces attention to Henry’s climax as a character. Unlike Luke’s Prodigal Son, whose return is marked by rejoice, Henry’s return is marked by tragedy and death. The biblical commentary on patriarchy is reversed in Faulkner’s narrative. Return to patriarchy, specifically the patriarchy of the traditional South, inhibits movement into modernity. It is not a cause for celebration. This incorporation of the biblical archetype in an exploration of modern progress “utterly transform[s] it, by making it new according to the modernist writer’s credo” (Rollyson, 66). Jack’s “success” in comparison to Henry’s defeat demonstrates this transformation. Henry and Jack are both characterized by elements of the Prodigal Son; Jack also “has been dispossessed of his natural inheritance” (Chambers, 48). However, Jack ultimately departs from the type-scene, leaving Burden’s Landing once he receives “his natural inheritance” as stipulated in Irwin’s estate. This explicitly contrasts with Henry’s progress: he returns to Sutpen’s Hundred and dies. The juxtaposition between Jack’s nature as a character molded around the Prodigal Son archetype and Henry’s nature demonstrates the modern reversal of the type-scene. In comparison to Jack, Henry is a tragic character, and the uncanniness between Henry and Jack (i.e. the common archetype) reveals that the type-scene is the framework of this demise. In relation to Jack, Henry does not
escape his “Burden’s Landing,” while in relation to Henry, Jack does escape his “Sutpen’s Hundred.” Both characters’ arcs arrive at the same potential ending in the type-scene’s reconciliation. The distinction between the two is that Jack progresses after the reconciliation while Henry does not. Through comparison, it becomes apparent that the type-scene is the framework for Jack Burden’s and Henry Sutpen’s progress. Henry’s inability to develop outside of the type-scene inhibits his progress away from the traditional South. Jack’s ability to develop outside of the type-scene leads to his progress away from the traditional South into modernity.

Similarly, a comparison between Bon and Jack illuminates the depth of the Prodigal Son’s place in modernity. There is a juxtaposition between Bon’s defeat and Jack’s success that forces attention to the commonalities and differences of these characters. The contrast between the two reveals the implicit presence of the type-scene in their arcs. This juxtaposition is similar to that between Job’s obedience and the Prodigal Son’s disobedience, which also reveals the implicit presence of the type-scene in their arcs. Unlike the Prodigal Son, whose success is bound to progression through the type-scene, Bon’s defeat is linked to his progression around, and departure from, the type-scene. However, Bon is the character in Absalom, Absalom! with the most potential to escape this scene because Sutpen disowns him as an infant; Bon is severed from his patriarch. This likens him to Jack, who is severed from his patriarch and who ultimately does escape the path of type-scene. It is useful to recognize some seemingly trivial similarities between the two characters before exploring their contrasting relationships to the type-scene. Recognizing the minute commonalities heightens the moments of contrast between the two, and this contrast reveals that Jack and Bon are inverted integrations of the same archetype.

Bon’s mother tells him, Sutpen “is your father…and denied you his name,” which catalyzes Bon’s efforts to reconcile with his father (238). Jack’s mother is also instrumental in
orchestrating his efforts to reconcile with patriarchy, as indicated by Jack’s thinking, “my mother gave me back the past,” after she tells him Irwin is his father (432). The difference between these two characters’ mothers is their opinions of the fathers whom their sons are estranged from. Bon’s mother abhors Sutpen, while Jack’s mother admires Judge Irwin. This difference demonstrates that Bon and Jack can be considered as inverse characters: Bon the one who is defeated and Jack the one who succeeds. There is another relationship common to Bon and Jack that casts them as inverted characters: their romantic interests. Bon intends to marry Judith, who is his step-sister. Similarly, Jack loves Anne Stanton, who he sometimes considers to be like his “little sister” that he grew up with in childhood (296). Bon’s pursuit of Judith is unnatural and leads to his death. Contrarily, Jack only leaves Burden’s Landing after marrying Anne Stanton. Again, Bon and Jack appear to be inverted characters who share common foundations in their relationships with other characters. They differ, though, in the consequences of these relationships. These similarities may seem minute, but they demonstrate how the arcs of Bon and Jack share structural qualities. It is important to recognize that these common arcs culminate in juxtaposing conclusions. The inversion between the two characters’ progress heightens the tragedy of Bon and the success of Jack. This inverse is only apparent by recognizing the common “trajectory” of these characters’ development, and that trajectory is the type-scene of the Prodigal Son.

Bon is murdered by Henry, but only after Sutpen encourages Henry to do so by inciting Henry’s racism. Henry cannot tolerate the interracial ancestry of Bon; it is “the miscegenation, not the incest” with Judith that provokes Henry’s intolerance of Bon (285). Henry inherits the same racist notions of the pre-bellum South that his father, Sutpen, maintains, and these are notions that motivate Sutpen himself to abandon his first family and Bon. Thinking of the
Prodigal Son’s type-scene, this inheritance of Henry’s, the intolerance, yet again demonstrates the modernized reversal of the Prodigal’s reconciliation. By succumbing to the forces of the past, Henry is defeated by his inability to reject the notions of the people and the land he inherits. Bon, however, has potential to abandon his patriarchy and embrace the modernity of the post-bellum South in New Orleans. Like Jack, Bon is placed in a situation distanced from his father in childhood. His entry into the type-scene begins in the stage of estrangement. Unlike Jack though, Bon chooses to try to reconcile with patriarchy. He instigates his own doom. Bon’s effort to reconcile with Sutpen leads to a dangerous journey of war and murder, and this demonstrates that the “attempt to recapture the past is dangerous” in the context reconciling Southern modernity with pre-bellum tradition. (Rollyson, 44). In Bon’s case, it is better not to seek approval from a patriarch who embodies the tradition that Sutpen does.

In contrast to the Sutpen brothers, Jack is able to escape this “dangerous” grip of the past. He is not trapped within his patriarchal inheritance and he is not obsessed with reuniting with his father; Jack doesn’t even know the Judge is his father until he learns of the suicide. It is no surprise, then, that Jack continues to progress as a character after reconciling with his father. In fact, “Jack, searching for a past, kills his father” (Beebe, 87). Warren’s exploration of the type-scene reverses the consequences of the Prodigal Son’s reconciliation. Rather than return to his father, Jack’s reunion kills his father. In this way, Jack is akin to Absalom, who momentarily usurps his father’s power. Transposing this father-son encounter into a past-present encounter, Jack’s confrontation with the past extinguishes its grip; the “death” of the past allows Jack to enter the present. Because Jack does not allow himself to be obsessed with reuniting with patriarchy like Bon does, he can achieve independence. Again, the consequences of Jack’s and Bon’s actions are inverted. Jack’s and Bon’s relationships with their fathers are like their
relationships with their mothers and romantic interests. In all three relationships, there is a common foundation, but the conclusions are polarized. Bon’s active effort to reconcile with Sutpen leads to his death. Jack’s passive moment of reconciling with Irwin leads to Irwin’s death, and Jack’s own independence. Like Bon, Jack grows up estranged from his patriarchy, both from the Scholarly Attorney and from his actual father, Irwin. His involvement with Willie Stark, whose policies contradict those of Irwin, is akin to Bon’s lifestyle in New Orleans, where he embraces vice and urbanization in contrast to Sutpen’s traditional Southern inhabitance. Bon and Jack are both in a position conducive to a “departure from older…beliefs and practices,” but only Jack enacts this departure (Collins, 197). This comparison illustrates how adherence to the type-scene of the Prodigal Son leads to doom in modernity, whereas departure from the type-scene leads to a stable existence in modernity.

Separate Identity

Faulkner’s and Warren’s stories are ultimately explorations of discovering identity, as nearly all stories are. The Prodigal Son is an archetype for the character whose search for identity is tenaciously linked to his relationship with a patriarch, and by adhering to the type-scene, the Sutpens are unable to sever their individuality from their patriarchal inheritance. Jack Burden does sever his individuality, and just prior to leaving Burden’s Landing, Jack reflects on a conversation he has with the Scholarly Attorney, a patriarchal figure in his life. The Attorney tells Jack, “The creation of man whom God in his foreknowledge knew doomed to sin was the awful index of God’s omnipotence…it would have been a thing of trifling and contemptible ease for Perfection to create mere perfection…Separateness is identity” (437). These words are similar to Willie’s when he tells Adam Stanton, “…simple goodness. Well you can’t inherit that
from anybody. You got to make it…you got to make it out of badness” (257). It is important to mention that Adam shoots Willie and is responsible for his death. In a similar vein of thought, Bon tells Henry, when they are at war, “Not God; evidently we have done without Him for years…if you don’t have God…there isn’t anything for pride and honor to climb on and hold to” (279). Similar to the events between Willie and Adam, Henry shoots Bon to death. These ruminations on God and identity and inheritance revolve around the characters’ modernized journeys through the Prodigal Son’s type-scene.

The Sutpens and Jack Burden are disillusioned in their present moment, constantly struggling to manage their relationship with their patriarchs. Thinking of God as the epitomized patriarch, if humans are “doomed to sin,” then the journey of the sinful Prodigal Son struggling with the patriarch is an inescapable human journey. The Sutpens don’t allow themselves to experience a “Separateness” from Sutpen, and so they cannot discover an individual self-identity. As Bon understands it, without a patriarch (“if you don’t have God”) then all else is lost, or in his words: “there isn’t anything.” Bon’s effort to reconcile with Sutpen eliminates the possibility of his forming a unique identity in relation to the world he lives in. This illuminates the truth of Willie’s words, that the only way to create it to create “out of badness,” and that there are experiences “you can’t inherit from anybody.” Creating an identity is one such experience. The Prodigal Son is the archetype for the character who creates an identity out of badness, out of a disobedience to the patriarch, but ultimately reconciles with the patriarch. Jack Burden is structured around this archetype, but he is not consumed by his patriarchal inheritance. He does form an identity of “Separateness,” made “out of badness,” instigating his patriarch’s death.

Herein lies the nature of the legacy of slavery and ante-bellum tradition in the South, as portrayed in the novels. The Southern characters must sever themselves from their patriarchs in
order to exist in the present moment in relation to the legacy of the past. As the destruction of the Sutpen family (and the Compson family in other of Faulkner’s novels) demonstrates, the legacy of the Southern past retains a grip that is akin to a patriarch’s grip over a child. The Prodigal “fate” to return to the patriarch is the doom of the Sutpens. They are consumed by the inherited legacy of ante-bellum tradition, which is embodied in their patriarchs. Jack’s potential doom is bound to the type-scene of the Prodigal Son as well, but in contrast to the Sutpens, he escapes this fate, this type-scene. Jack reconciles with his patriarch, both his actual father, Irwin, and the Scholarly Attorney, but he is able to live in the present moment. He can reconcile, but then lead an independent life. In Faulkner’s and Warren’s narratives, the characters’ journeys through the Prodigal Son’s type-scene structure their efforts to understand the distinction between the past and present. The type-scene’s placement in the modern novels demonstrates the presence of a question that writers have wrestled with through time. This is the question of how we understand the past we inherit. The study of the Prodigal Son reveals that the legacy of the past is not an inheritance to be consumed by or rejected. It is a legacy to be confronted and accepted in the formation of an identity, but ultimately separated from in the present moment.

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