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CHAPTER

12 Modernism's Cares: Reading For and With

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Abstract

Modernist authors used innovative narrative forms to represent the inherently uneven social and affective dynamics of care. Modernity had a transformative impact on the social organization of dependency and the nature of care work, and modernist literature explores the contradictory effects of such changes on vulnerable persons and those who sustain them. This may seem a surprising claim about a movement known for embracing youth, vigor, and newness. However, relations of care—and associated conditions of dependency, frailty, and toil—remain central to modernist aesthetic and social commitments, overlapping the more familiar preoccupations with subjectivity, relatedness, collaboration, and temporality. Two celebrated modernist works—Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* and William Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*—serve as examples of how interdependency and care provide a critical lens for reading literary texts, illuminating overlooked characters and themes, and offering new insight about their experiments with form.

Keywords: [modernism](#), [modernity](#), [care](#), [dependency](#), [work](#), [form](#), [Gertrude Stein](#), [William Faulkner](#)

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NEAR the end of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, James Agee describes an incident of uncomfortable intimacy. As night falls, his car gets a flat tire, forcing him back to the house of his informants, a family of Alabama sharecroppers living in abject poverty. They rouse themselves to care for their guest according to their gendered roles. Mrs Gudger, half asleep, toils over a simple but enormous meal, while her husband makes conversation and wakes the children to make room for the unexpected visitor. Agee finds himself awash in conflicting sensations of gratitude, compassion, and regret for inconveniencing people who are so generous, despite having so little of their own. He feels guilt at his inability to lessen their misery and a deep sense of kinship arising from their shared humanity. But no matter how fervently he throbs with empathic recognition, his body recoils in disgust at the unappetizing dinner and squalid environs of the poor (Agee and Evans 1988). He chokes on their food and his skin crawls at their flimsy, bedbug-ridden mattress.

Throughout the book, he struggles mightily with the affordances of his chosen medium—the literary—to capture this ambivalent fusion of identification and repulsion, while maintaining the dignity of his subjects. In this way, *Famous Men* is an extended meditation on human interdependency, the universal obligation to care it entails, and the gaping asymmetries in resources, status, and ability that divide persons and communities.¹ How modernist literature sought innovative narrative forms to represent the inherently uneven social and affective dynamics of care is the subject of this chapter.

p. 247 Modernity had a transformative impact on the social organization of dependency and the nature of care work, and modernist literature explores the contradictory effects of such changes on vulnerable persons and those who sustain them. This may seem a surprising way to describe a movement known for embracing youth, vigor, and newness. ↪ However, relations of care—and associated conditions of dependency, frailty, and toil—remain strikingly central to modernist aesthetic and social commitments, overlapping the more familiar preoccupations with subjectivity, relatedness, collaboration, and temporality. Care is also an evident, if seldom acknowledged, dynamic in modernist literary treatments of family, aging, motherhood, child rearing, domestic work, and disability, all of which have been the subject of recent scholarly analysis (Herring 2022; Martell 2019; Phillips 2016; Reed 2004; Rosner 2020; Wilson 2004).

Care is work, an attitude, and an ethical ideal. Although the need for care is universal among human animals, history and culture shape who counts as dependent, what kind of care they receive, and how caregivers are compensated for their work. In what follows, I briefly sketch out the evolution of institutions, policies, and social organization of care as a context to reconsider the narrative concerns and aesthetic experimentation of American literary modernism. I treat the history of care as a contextual frame but also take care as a critical method for reading literary texts with attention to relatedness, intimacy, emotion, and the uneven distribution of vulnerability among persons and environments. It also allows consideration of form by asking how the dynamics of interdependency inspire modernist innovation at the level of narrative structure, pacing, and choices about inclusion and exclusion. I begin with a more extended account of the ethical principles and social history of care, which intersect with modernist literary concerns at a moment when the caregiving role of an emerging welfare state, the presumably instinctual obligations of maternal care, and the work of paid domestic servants were entangled with newfound intensity. I then turn to two celebrated modernist works—Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1973) and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1946)—as examples of how interdependency and care can serve as a critical lens for reading literary texts, illuminating overlooked characters and themes and offering new insight about their experiments with form. While Stein’s *Three Lives* has been recognized for its unusual focus on working-class women, my reading concentrates the centrality of care to the work (paid and unpaid) that her protagonists do and how the asymmetrical interdependencies that structure care relations motivate the pacing and emphases of Stein’s narrative form. I then turn to the very different case of Faulkner, whose decisions about narrative perspective make visible the uneven distribution of care work within a family: white men who are the subjects of care are also entitled to first-person narrative, while the women who care for them are narrated from without. For the novel’s Black characters in particular, the absence of first-person perspective is a sign of subordination but also of expertise, knowledge, and relationships that remain inaccessible to their white employers.

Care, Modernity, Modernism

p. 248 I define care as the intimate and necessary labor, paid and unpaid, required to sustain those who are in a position of dependency. Immediate relations of care involving direct contact between individual persons do not take place in isolation but rather are embedded in broad and often fragile webs of interdependency. My attention to narrative representations is informed by care ethics, particularly as developed by feminist scholars. In place of the abstract universals favored by moral philosophers, the ethics of care focuses on the local and specific, on relatedness rather than discrete, bounded individuals. It eschews the philosopher's traditional claim to objectivity, attending to emotion, partiality, and embodied particularity. And instead of defining selfhood in terms of capacity for reason, philosophers of care claim that persons are bound together by shared vulnerability and interdependence (Held 2006; Kittay 1999; Ruddick, 1989; Tronto 1993). Dependency is a universal human condition, but it is unevenly distributed among persons and groups, as is the work of caring for those who are dependent. These basic principles are the bedrock for attitudes and practices that vary widely across cultures and historical periods.

All human animals require care at some stage of life, but perceptions of dependency and care are socially constructed (Boris and Klein 2012; Fineman 2005; Fraser and Gordon 1994; Glenn 2010; Tronto 2013). In the monarchial societies of Europe, ordinary people were subjects, rather than citizens, and dependence was the norm. The public submission of monarchial subjects was replicated within individual households, where wives, children, and servants were socially and legally subordinate to the family patriarch. Each class of person was assigned a place and corresponding duties in a hierarchy believed to be dictated by natural law and structured to sustain the well-being of family and community (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 312–314). The radical innovation of the American Revolution was to make independence the foundation of national identity. Where formerly independence meant the possession of land or wealth, it was redefined as the capacity to work and ownership of one's labor. Independence was a status extended to all white men regardless of whether they owned property, guaranteeing them an avenue to rights and political representation. Dependence was no longer the norm but a status identity assigned to subordinate classes. These included children but also women, enslaved persons, and Native Americans, who were understood to be inherently weaker, more vulnerable, and childlike (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 313). Denied direct representation in the public sphere, dependent persons would be represented by white male citizens who recognized their needs and spoke on their behalf.

p. 249 Modernity reshaped the definition of dependency and obligations of care. Families became smaller, generations that once cared for one another dispersed, and children were newly inspired to make their own way in the world. Diverse populations of strangers lived crowded together in growing cities, proximity giving new visibility to disparities in health, income, and social stature. The arrival of industrialization sharpened divisions within existing social hierarchies, reinforcing the separation and gendering of public and private, work and domestic life, care and labor. Wage labor was valorized over domestic activities, making the time-consuming, physically taxing activities of caring for the home, and dependent family members, increasingly invisible as work. Historians Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon note that, under capitalism, working men were designated as “independent”—meaning possessed of the capacity to work and freedom to engage in contractual relationships with an employer—even as they were subordinated within the system of wage labor. This understanding of independence obscured the conditions of their exploitation, while narrowing the definition of “dependency” to economically marginalized groups such as paupers, women, and non-white people (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 315–319). It was during the period of industrialization that disability was reconceived as the inability to work (Rose 2017). This definition persists into the present, where being “on disability” means being unemployed because of a physical or mental impairment that precludes “any substantial gainful activity” (Social Security Administration 2020). Dependency became an increasingly pejorative term linking economic need to moral qualities of weakness,

inability, and poor character, and caregiving activities were increasingly separated from understandings of meaningful work.

New divisions also emerged within the private sphere, separating the moral and spiritual aspects of domesticity from the physical labor of running a household. Women responsible for presiding over the home and maintaining domestic virtues were elevated above those who did the manual work of care (Glenn 2010: 42–87). The availability of appliances, consumer goods, and mass entertainment put greater emphasis on the housewife as a consumer of merchandise and leisure activities than as a producer who contributed to the household economy (Cowan 1983). Although the use of household servants had declined somewhat by the early twentieth century, Mary Wilson notes that they remained a common enough feature of domestic life to make regular appearances in modernist literature (Wilson 2016).² Poverty and overwork hampered the ability of servants to care for their own families according to the ideals established by more affluent households. Those unable to meet new standards of cleanliness, nutrition, and emotional labor were seen as inadequate mothers and caregivers. Their perceived failures gave rise to social reforms targeted toward improving domestic and maternal caregiving skills among the poor, assimilating immigrant women and children, and uplifting Native American children by removing them to residential schools (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 317–318; Glenn 2010: 42–87). As the state became increasingly involved in such projects, it assumed a contradictory role, at once newly committed to caring for those most in need and imposing new forms of dependency.

In the early twentieth century, the United States followed many European countries in developing nationwide social welfare programs to care for the poor, sick, and disabled who once would have relied on their families or local charities (Garland 2016). In official language, the stigmatized “pauper” was replaced by the term “dependent” to describe recipients of government aid, such as children and single mothers (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 319–323). Yet, despite the name change, the moral judgments associated with poverty persisted, branding dependent adults as burdensome, lazy, and unproductive. These connotations were reinforced by New Deal era programs divided between “entitlements” for the elderly and unemployed — understood to deserve the support of a system to which they had contributed — and “aid” for the dependent poor — seen as getting something for nothing. When poor women needed to care for children or disabled relatives, their labor was not seen as work and they were described as dependent on state aid. By contrast, those who received social security were called “claimants,” sustained by benefits that aimed “to prevent old-age dependency” (Mandell 2010: 17, 24). This language held up “dependency” as the stigma that deserved government entitlements were designed to forestall. Where dependency had once been a neutral description of a social relation, by the mid-twentieth century it had become firmly associated with such flaws as weakness, laziness, low intelligence, and lack of motivation. As more people of color qualified for benefits, dependency was increasingly racialized and Welfare came to be seen as a program that served (often undeserving) Black women (Fraser and Gordon 1994: 319–325; Glenn 2010: 161–174, 191–192).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, modernist authors and artists prided themselves on living in bohemian opposition to many of the bourgeois values that would soon be crystallized in policies of the welfare state (Gluck 2005; Stansell 2000). Where state programs addressed the vulnerability of women and children, modernist women were proud of their independence and autonomy, and some defied the feminine imperative to marry and reproduce (Miller 2017). Modernists replaced the wholesome, precious children of Victorian literature with feeble degenerates and broke apart the image of the family as a site of warm, nurturing activity idealized by domestic fiction of the nineteenth century (Rosner 2020: ch. 5). Where Welfare addressed the dire financial needs of dependent persons, modernist artists often romanticized poverty, refused or disparaged wage labor, and subverted the capitalist economy with barter and gift giving. Instead of defining personal worth through the ownership of property, they experimented with alternative communal living arrangements.³ And where modernity valued standardization, efficiency, and productivity, modernist artists embraced unreason, disorder, and asymmetry (Jones 2004; Rosner 2020).

As they sought alternatives to the priorities and values of modern society, modernists recognized the social importance of caring relations and, perhaps more surprisingly, found them an unexpected source for aesthetic inspiration (Davidson 2019; Sanchez 2016). Many saw interdependency—reciprocal relationships that acknowledged the mutual dependency of all parties—as an opportunity for creative potential that had been obscured by the narrow individualism of modern work and social organization. Where romanticism celebrated the artist as an individual genius, some modernists explored the forms of creativity that arise when artists work collectively. Collaboration and mutual inspiration were all the rage in modernist salons, communes, and group households, publishing collectives like the Bloomsbury group, group art forms like manifestos, murals, or the surrealists' exquisite corpse, inter-art projects like *Famous Men*, and celebrated couples like Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, Georgia O'Keefe and Alfred Steiglitz (Curkpatrick 2020; Gluck 2005; Pontellier ↵ 2019; Potter 2012).⁴ The same intimate entanglements that might lead to generative productivity could also devolve into more burdensome codependency, as was famously true of the Woolfs, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, or T.S. and Vivian Eliot.⁵ Complex interdependencies, both generative and debilitating, were a lifestyle and a creative method but also a topic of modernist literary works such as Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Mercier and Camier*, or Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. In literary representation, as in life, these relationships could be inspiring, but they also involved the daily work of caring for another. When vulnerability is unevenly distributed, the maintenance of dignity and personhood is an ongoing negotiation. The ebb and flow of dominance and submission, ability and need, are part of any long-term caring relationship. The readings to come show how such imbalances find their aesthetic analogue in the modernist concern with asymmetry and telling variations in narrative perspective.

Another point of intersection between modernist creativity and care is a shared skepticism about the temporalities of modern life. Modernity ushered in an era of routines, schedules, and fixed trajectories for human development. Standardization of time was key to such modern developments as factory labor, mass transit, and international commerce. New imperatives to efficiency and order governed modern institutions of care like hospitals, schools, and residential facilities for the disabled and elderly. But modernists balked at the notion that human life should be organized around clock time or that temporal experience could be measured out in predictable units (Christian 2011; Felski 2000; James 2016; Levenson 2011; Olsen 2009; Rancière 2014; Randall 2007; Rosner 2020; Schwarz 2010). They were inspired by Albert Einstein's discovery that time and motion were relative to the observer and, influenced by philosopher Henri Bergson, they sought to depict time as it is experienced and remembered rather than as measured by a clock (Gontarski and Ardoin 2013). Authors like Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and Marcel Proust experimented with the slowing down or speeding up of remembered time and sought forms to capture how memory is measured out in the accumulation of qualitative impressions. Modernists recognized care as an activity that exemplified their own commitments to temporal plasticity. Compassion cannot be documented on a time sheet, measured in units of effort, or quantified with any of the typical gages used to record and compensate labor. And care had no regard for whether the future is bright; indeed, it is often most necessary and intense when there is no future except immanent loss and death.⁶ These points of connection among the awareness of ↵ human interdependency, performance of care, and modernist aesthetics are the basis for the readings that follow, as well as a model for further readings of modernist literature and beyond.

The romantic partnership of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas was premised on an interdependency so profound that Stein felt herself capable of writing Toklas's autobiography (even as she laid solitary claim to the genius emerging from Alice's caring ministrations). Where Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* depicts Gertrude and Alice caring for each other, each according to her capacities, her earlier novella, *Three Lives*, makes the dynamics of interdependency and care a narrative focus and the ordinary experiences and inner lives of working-class women its subjects (Stein 1990; 1973). Although its title promises to capture the totality of particular lives, each of the three narratives skips over the dependencies of infancy and childhood to begin with the stage of maturity when working-class women are burdened with the care of others,

following its protagonist through the inevitable onset of illness, advancing age, and then death. All three stories take interdependency as a structuring principle, centering on a woman's intimate relationships with romantic partners, employers, and friends. As with all prolonged relationships, these interdependencies are dynamic and shifting. The roles of caregiver and recipient evolve over time or on a daily basis. Those who provide care also need it; their bodies tire, age, weaken, and experience debilities of their own, while those who require care reciprocate by exuding welcome and gratitude or sometimes resistance and denial. For example, in the first story, Anna's employer, Miss Matilda, enjoys having a servant who allows her to be "always without care," a claim immediately modified by the observation that Miss Matilda finds it "a burden to endure" Anna's prodding and managing (Stein 1973: 22). This sentence captures the intimate relatedness and subtle asymmetries of power involved in care work. Within the overarching power dynamic of domestic service are more subtle negotiations in which the employer benefits from a servant, but must also reciprocate, however unevenly, by accommodating the servant's needs and temperament. Where often this side of the equation goes unmentioned, Stein builds it into the description of the mistress and her domestic helper.

Each story in *Three Lives* follows the linear chronology of a life, but they develop according to the temporalities of affiliation rather than the measured clock time of modernity. In place of predictable work routines or phases of individual development, time in *Three Lives* moves in accordance with the ebbs and flows of interconnection among lives. The narrative eddies around conversations and emotionally fraught interactions, then flows quickly over large periods where relationships remain relatively stable. Stein is particularly interested in the temporalities of chosen relationships of friendship or romance rather than those sanctioned by custom or biology. Her concern with the arc of interdependency is aptly captured in this reflection on the changing dynamics of an intimate female friendship:

In friendship, power always has its downward curve. One's strength to manage rises always higher until there comes a time one does not win, and though one may not really lose, still from the time that victory is not sure, one's power slowly ceases to be strong. It is only in a close tie such as marriage, that influence can mount and grow always stronger with the years and never meet with a decline. It can only happen so when there is no way to escape.

(Stein 1973: 54)

In contrast to marriage, unromantically described as a bond with "no way to escape," friendship evolves, along with relative degrees of power and influence over another. The changing tides of relationships that absorb long stretches of narrative attention contrast starkly with this abrupt account of Anna's middle age: "So Anna's serving and her giving life went on, each with its varied pleasures and pains" (Stein 1973: 52). A single, unadorned sentence captures the life's work of a woman devoted to "serving" and "giving." A similar rhythm characterizes the middle story, "Melanctha," which takes up the bulk of *Three Lives*. The most extended episodes follow the redundant give-and-take between the protagonist and her lover, Jeff Campbell, as their need and desire for one another waxes and wanes. Much of the remaining narrative recounts the shifting balance of dominance and submission within Melanctha's female friendships. All three lives unfold without dramatic emphasis on conflict, extreme tragedy, or notable achievement; instead, each narrative dwells on the mundane and repetitive patterns of care entailed by women's toil, obligations, and relationships.

Three Lives recognizes the gendering of care work, acknowledging its unavoidable prominence in women's experience while also seeking to dismantle the view that women are naturally predisposed to nurture and compassion. Stein's commitment to denaturalizing care is striking, given that she engages in various other kinds of essentialism, most notably connecting Black people with spontaneity, emotion, and humor but also depicting the immigrant Lena as "simple and human, with the earth patience of the working, gentle, german woman" (Stein 1973: 241). While Stein willingly attributes some aspects of temperament and

character to her protagonists' ancestral origins, she refuses to associate women's biological role in reproduction and childbirth with an ingrained proclivity for mothering activity. It isn't that her three protagonists are incapable of forming warm, caring intimacies, which they enjoy with friends, lovers, employers, and even pets, but none extends these sentiments to children. Melanctha is a daughter but has no children of her own; "Anna had no strong natural feeling to love children" (Stein 1973: 25) and she maintains only an obligatory, but cool, acquaintance to her biological family. Lena is the only one of the three protagonists to become a mother, and the epithet in her story's title "The Gentle Lena," suggests qualities of a more promising caregiver. But despite being a biological mother, she has no feelings of attachment toward her own children. Instead, motherhood seems to bring on a permanent state of depression in which she "dragged around and was careless with her clothes and all lifeless, and she acted always and lived on just as if she had no feeling (Stein 1973: 276). Where Lena is lethargic and uninterested in her children and domestic responsibilities, her husband, Herman, is more genuinely inclined to mothering. After Lena dies, Herman cares for the children of their loveless marriage with devotion and joy. Their family attests to the fallacy of assuming that gender predetermines who will be the more willing or capable caregiver.

Three Lives was published some thirty years before the emergence of a welfare state in the United States, and its characters suffer from the absence of a government-sponsored safety net to care for the dependent poor. In youth, all three women are vigorously capable of caring for themselves and others. But with time they encounter the inevitable frailties of advancing age, combined with the draining effects of worry and sacrifice. In a time before Social Security or Medicare, former employers seem to feel no sense of obligation to care for their debilitated servants. The wearing away of the working poor is particularly evident for the once robust Anna, who

worked, and thought, and saved, and scolded, and took care of all the boarders, and of [the dogs] Peter and of Rags, and all the others. There was never any end to Anna's effort and she grew always more tired, and more pale yellow, and in her face more thin and worn and worried.

(Stein 1973: 80)

Not only is Anna's body depleted by physical and emotional toil, but also she is constantly spending money to care for needy members of her community with no hope of repayment. Moreover, Anna has no children of her own to care for her in old age. Consistent with a life where she "could never take a rest" (Stein 1973: 81), she dies abruptly during a surgery.

Care, for Stein's three protagonists, is a social obligation as well as an assumed proclivity of their status as women. All women are somebody's daughter, but immigrants like Anna and Lena have left behind parents and other relatives who might need their care, while the American-born Melanctha fulfills the obligations assigned to daughters despite feeling no love for her biological parents. The difference between Melanctha's fate and that of her mother bespeaks the transition from more traditional modes of nursing the ill to the impersonal, bureaucratic systems of modern health care. Melanctha's mother remains at home through a long illness because she has the attentive care of her daughter, overseen by visits from the doctor, Jeff Campbell. At the turn of the twentieth century, home care for the frail elderly was still the norm for those lucky enough to have capable female relatives, while hospitals were reserved for more involved medical procedures and containment of infectious disease. Charitable hospitals, associated with suffering, contamination, and immanent death, were a last resort for the poor and destitute (Risse 1999; Starr 1982). When she gets sick, Melanctha endures the grim fate of an African American woman with no financial means or family attachments. There is no return on the time and effort she expended in caring for her mother; absent a daughter or other female relative, Melanctha dies alone, her last days captured in two simple sentences:

Melanctha went back to the hospital, and there the Doctor told her she had the consumption, and before long she would surely die. They sent her where she could be taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died.

(Stein 1973: 236)

The impersonality of Melanctha's plight is captured by an anonymous "they" that sends her away. The doctor's pronouncement that "she would surely die" is a judgment of his patient's physical condition, but also a prescription for diminished care. At a "home for poor consumptives" her well-being and comfort is by no means guaranteed since such facilities were notorious for overcrowding and squalor. The next sentence concludes by succinctly fulfilling the doctor's deterministic pronouncement with the conjunction, "until she died." In this way, Melanctha's story reflects the decoupling of medicine from care that occurs under modernity. The professionalization and technological sophistication of health sciences meant that doctors (almost always male) would be increasingly occupied by diagnosing, ordering treatment, and performing surgery, leaving care to nurses (almost always female), who were lower in salary and status. Where more prestigious medical procedures would be conducted in hospitals, care for a Black woman like Melanctha, who suffers from an incurable illness, would be outsourced to charitable homes.

Three Lives captures the weathering effect of a lifetime devoted to caring for others, effort that cannot be explained away as effortless or instinctual. It attends to the affective, as well as material, costs of modern life on family and community at a time before the safety net provided by the Welfare State. And it employs a narrative form that attempts to measure out a woman's life in terms of the work she does, both paid and unpaid, and the imperfect net of interdependencies that embeds her, instead of the usual milestones like marriage and motherhood. The three lives of Stein's protagonists are storied through the give-and-take of interdependency, each woman's position shifting, with the passage of time, through positions of dominance and submission, generosity and neediness, provider and vulnerable dependent.

Care is equally relevant to my second example, William Faulkner's modernist novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, although it could not be more different from *Three Lives* in style, setting, or plot. Both works employ a kind of literary cubism, an interest in depicting multiple points of view of a similar subject; however, in Faulkner's novel each section is part of a larger story, a device that attests to the interdependency of its characters' lives and how differently the same events can be experienced and interpreted. Critics have been particularly interested in the novel's opening chapter, narrated in first person by a non-verbal intellectually disabled character, Benjy Compson. Benjy has long been seen as a symbolic figure for vulnerability, innocence, or unreason or as a device to experiment with atypical minds, as modernists also did in adopting the perspectives of children, primitives, and mentally ill people (Cecil 1970; Minter 2001; Lester 1995; Parker 1996; Waid 2013). More recent critics have brought attention to Benjy's condition as a disability since it is rare to find intellectually disabled narrators in American literature. Michael Bérubé, for example, observes that Benjy is the moral center of the novel, a character whose intellectual difference also "enables a potential democratization of narrative representation" (Bérubé 2005; Garland-Thomson 2005; Oswald 2016). Because Benjy's section comes first, it conditions the reader to proceed with patience and attention to difference as well as establishing moral standards to judge later sections narrated by Benjy's brothers, Jason and Quentin. Taking Benjy's difference more seriously as a disability invites attention to its social and historical meanings as well as its symbolic resonance. Reading with care in mind, it also might prompt questions about the circumstances that left him so utterly dependent, the support he receives, and how caregiving responsibilities are delegated within the Compson household. Through Benjy's disjointed narrative, we see that his helplessness is learned through never being taught or invited to care for himself, that his male relatives speak about but not to him, that Dilsey and Caddy are the only people who offer him affection, and that the physical work of his care is performed entirely by the family's Black servants. The Appendix discloses that, after his mother's death, Benjy will suffer a dehumanizing fate: castration and confinement to an institution. This tragic outcome bespeaks the costs of a modern society that equates

personhood with productivity, reason, and self-sufficiency. Assumed incompetent, a person like Benjy is relegated to a lifetime of dependency simply by virtue of the diagnostic label “idiot.”

The Sound and the Fury is equally notable for the voices it excludes: women and African Americans who play important roles in the plot are narrated only through the perspectives of white, male characters. It is as if Faulkner, even as he gave voice to a non-verbal person, found himself unable to imagine the voices of these gender and racial others—except as they are heard by white men—but also unable to write about domestic life without putting them squarely in the center of the action. These asymmetrical social relations motivate the form of *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel that makes domestic work a focus of narrative interest and draws attention to the processes of marginalization that deprive women and people of color, particularly those engaged in care work, the capacity to tell their own stories. Denying certain persons control over their own narratives is thus both a structuring principle of the society inhabited by Faulkner’s characters and of the novel he crafts about them.

Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels and short stories chart the degeneracy of the Compson family. Their decline is due, in part, to a complete failure to do the physical or emotional work required for social reproduction, meaning that each generation suffers more greatly and is more damaged by a surfeit of care. Only in the Appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* does the reader learn the full details of the Compson family history prior to the events that unfold in the novel: that the family patriarch, Jason III, presides over a shabby and diminished household, selling his ancestral land to pay for his daughter’s wedding and his son’s first year at Harvard; that his sickly and neurotic wife, Caroline, spends most of her time in bed, feebly issuing orders for others to care for her children and household; and that the four Compson children are reared almost entirely by the housekeeper, Dilsey, who reminds them of this burden at every possible opportunity.

p. 257 Each descendant’s character flaws can be seen to stem directly from a failure of care. Quentin (the elder) is depressed, self-centered, and incestuously drawn to his own sister, committing suicide after his first semester at Harvard. His younger brother Jason is cruel, dishonest, and fiercely independent, embittered by being denied the resources offered to his older siblings, Quentin and Caddy, and the burden of supporting his dependent relatives. Benjy spends his days mourning the loss of his sister, Caddy, the one person who cared for him, his tragedy described as a perpetual inability to “remember his sister but only the loss of her” (Faulkner 1946: 424). Caddy, the only female sibling, does not get to speak for herself. Depending on who is describing her, she may appear as the one person who genuinely understands and cares for her disabled brother or as a fallen woman who cares only for herself. Speaking to the gendered distribution of labor within the family, Caddy’s mother (overheard by Benjy, the narrator) tells her, at the age of seven, that she will inherit responsibility for Benjy: “Someday I’ll be gone and you’ll have to think for him” (Faulkner 1946: 8). In this context, the duty to “think for him” is a weighty burden that means anticipating the needs and best interests of a person considered worthless, incapable of self-representation, and utterly dependent.

While Caroline bequeaths the work of thinking for Benjy to his sister, the people who actually take on those duties are the African American servants, Dilsey and her family. Although Dilsey does not get her own narrative section, her contribution to the well-being of the household and the Compson family is evident throughout the novel. She is constantly in motion with the work of raising all four Compson children, as well as Caddy’s daughter, Quentin, cooking, cleaning, and overseeing the other domestic help. The novel’s final section, narrated in third person, describes Dilsey repeatedly hauling her body—heavy and aching from a lifetime of domestic service—up and down the stairs to tend the needs of the bedridden Mrs Compson and other family members. Dilsey’s son, Versh, and grandson, Luster, are charged with caring for Benjy but under her direction and regular interventions to check the quality and constancy of their attention. She does all the emotional work of comfort and empathy. When Versh or Luster are neglectful or unkind, Dilsey steps in to soothe and care for Benjy. When Benjy is disturbing someone else in the family,

Dilsey takes responsibility for figuring out how to calm or remove him. Her laboring body pauses only to quiet Benjy with rocking and gentle sounds.

p. 258 Given Dilsey's centrality to the novel's action, her absence as a narrator draws attention to the limits of what can be known about her. In addition to the uneven distribution of resources and power between a domestic and her employer, paid care work involves an epistemic asymmetry, where the provider must know the intimate details of a recipient's body and daily life without disclosing many aspects of her own life experiences and embodied condition.⁷ Dilsey is a constant and enduring presence within the Compson household; she is completely immersed in the lives of her employers, while they have only partial access to hers. This unevenness is captured formally when the narrative recounts dialogue and action among servants that will never be known by the Compsons. It is further underscored in the Appendix, which provides almost twenty-five pages of biographical information about the Compsons, ending with Quentin, Caddy's illegitimate runaway daughter, and less than half a page on Dilsey and her family. The final paragraphs begin with a sentence that sounds like an ending: "And that was all," positioning what follows in a lower margin almost completely out of view of the narrative proper. "These others were not Compson," the narrative continues, "They were black." It provides abrupt accounts of Dilsey's children and grandson, TP, Frony, and Luster, saying of Dilsey, simply, "They endured" (Faulkner 1946: 427). With this ending, Faulkner's novel perfectly captures the imbalance between a family whose fate is recorded in history largely because it is white and one that—because "they were black"—is destined to the anonymous work of maintaining their white employers. Equally striking is that Dilsey's fate is described with the plural "they," as if to capture how the life story and subjectivity of a Black servant is absorbed by those she has cared for.

With such devices, *The Sound and the Fury* emphasizes that Dilsey's work is not only physical but also what Arlie Hotherschild calls "emotional labor" (Hotherschild 2003). She is the affective center of the book, constantly aware of, evaluating, and responding to the feelings of others. She provides Benjy with the tenderness required to calm his outbursts of distress and, under her management, her family develops skills to supplement that care. They understand the circumstances that make Benjy agitated and give him comfort: watching the fire, an old slipper of Caddy's, going for a ride in the carriage. Their attunement to Benjy makes them aware of his unacknowledged intelligence: "'He know lot more than folks thinks,' Roskus said," speculating on Benjy's dog-like ability to sense impending death, "'He knowed they time was coming, like that pointer done. He could tell you when hisn coming, if he could talk. Or yours. Or mine'" (Faulkner 1946: 37). While it is unlikely that Benjy has the kind of clairvoyance Roskus describes, Roskus recognizes that Benjy has knowledge and understanding far beyond his capacity for expressive language. Dilsey's grandson Luster is often impatient but also feeds Benjy "with skill and detachment" (Faulkner 1946: 345) born of extensive experience as well as an underlying empathy. Luster's brief mention in the Appendix centers on his competence at caring for Benjy. Only after the narrative ends does the reader learn that he is only fourteen—an age when a young man is especially unlikely to be patient and nurturing—before describing him as "capable of the complete care and security of an idiot twice his age and three times his size, but could keep him entertained." Calling Luster a "man" emphasizes that a person of his race and class is typically required to bypass youthful self-absorption and freedom from responsibility. Sociologists call this premature burdening of Black youth "adultification bias," meaning they are more likely to be judged by adult standards than are their white peers (Epstein et al. 2017). Moreover, the brevity of Luster's biography underscores the imbalance between the deep and expert knowledge he is required to have of his charge and what is considered worth knowing about him.

p. 259 Having established a pattern of epistemic asymmetry that prioritizes detailed knowledge about the Compsons, it is notable that the Appendix gestures to a future when Dilsey's family will part ways with her employers. Having devoted herself to knowing the intimate details of the Compsons' life and the physical and emotional work of sustaining them, Dilsey is eventually worn out, subject to the same weathering forces as the protagonists of Stein's *Three Lives*. When the town librarian thinks she recognizes a photo of

Caddy in a gossip magazine, she seeks out Dilsey for confirmation. She finds the aged former servant in Memphis, living in a “neat yet cluttered bedroom” in the household of her daughter, Frony. Her body attests to the wearing effect of caring for the Compson family. Once “a big woman,” Dilsey is now shrunken and nearly blind. Her literal inability to see the photo also suggests a more symbolic unwillingness to care about Caddy’s fate. Yet, despite the debilities caused by age and physical strain, Dilsey enjoys one of the most peaceful endings in all of Faulkner’s fiction. She has succeeded in raising her own children alongside the Compson siblings and the Appendix finds her resting and enjoying the care of her daughter.

What would Dilsey say if she had a story of her own? Dilsey is certainly not voiceless. Her voice is heard frequently throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, her scolding, bossing, and comforting a soundtrack to daily life in the Compson household. But it is always filtered through the perspective of others, whether Benjy, Quentin, Jason Compson, or the third-person narrator of the novel’s final section. What would Dilsey say in the privacy of her cabin or her daughter’s home? How might she address the contradictory demands of paid care work and emotional labor inherent in her position as a servant, a Black woman, and a mother? Alice Childress offers one set of possibilities in her brilliant and overlooked 1956 novel, *Like One of the Family*, a series of vignettes told by Mildred, a Black domestic worker. Her spirited, biting monologues respond to the microaggressions, blatant insults, injustice, and acts of courage that take place behind the closed doors of the affluent homes where she works. In the novel’s eponymous chapter, Mildred describes chiding her employer for treating her like an animal:

In the first place, you do not love me; you may be fond of me, but that is all. ... In the second place, I am not just like one of the family at all! The family eats in the dining room and I eat in the kitchen. Your mama borrows your lace table-cloth for her company and your son entertains his friends in your parlor, your daughter takes her afternoon nap on the living room couch and the puppy sleeps on your satin spread ... and whenever your husband gets tired of something you are talkin’ about he says, ‘Oh, for Pete’s sake, forget it. ...’ So you can see I am not just like one of the family.

(Childress 1956: 2)

Narrated retrospectively in the first person, this passage must be read as washed with wishful thinking, since few domestic workers are in a position to speak so frankly to their employers. It is nonetheless a powerful rendition of unspoken fantasy, addressed more to an imagined white reader than the mistress in the story itself. As such, it is a reminder of the uneasy intimacies of employers and domestic servants and the agency of care workers to perceive, if not to act out on, injustice in their work environments.

p. 260 And what would Agee and Evans’s sharecroppers say? Although they were allowed no direct speech in the massive book about their lives, some eventually had an opportunity to talk back. Between 1986 and 1988, journalists Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson retraced the steps of Agee and Evans’s journey, publishing a follow-up to *Famous Men* called *And Their Children After Them* (1989). It describes what happened to many of Agee and Evans’s informants, their memories of the visiting journalists, and reaction to seeing themselves depicted in *Famous Men*. One particularly damning revelation concerns Clair Bell Ricketts, who had an accident that left her in a coma during the journalists’ visit. In *Famous Men*, Agree predicts she would not survive for long, while Evans’s bleak photograph shows the body of a young child lying on the porch, her face and upper body covered by a thin cloth. While the vision of Clair Bell’s vulnerability fit well with the story told by *Famous Men*, a different version emerges in Maharidge and Williamson’s follow-up. They interview fifty-four-year-old Clair Bell, who reveals that one of the visiting journalists caused her injury during an episode of rough play. Clair Bell further reports that when Agee revisited the families in 1937, he found her alive and well but did not revise his grim story. Obviously, it made better drama to depict Clair Bell’s life as short and fragile and the journalists as anguished onlookers, instead of complicit participants.

These dissenting voices add welcome complexity to the stories told by literary modernism, but they are not required for the method I describe as reading for and with care. More often, the voices of the most vulnerable dependents and the caregivers who maintain their homes, bodies, and emotional well-being go unrecorded. But reading care fully and reading carefully means approaching modernist literature with attention to aspects of form, theme, and historical context that might otherwise be overlooked. As in life, literary representations of care often take place at the margins or off the page altogether, but we can read for them even when the voices of care workers or dependents are not represented and even when care is not an overt narrative topic. Returning to these works at a moment when income inequality and antipathy to state-sponsored welfare is taking a particularly devastating toll in the United States, we can see the modernist era—and the contradictions among care as an obligation of government, a form of paid work, and an affective bond that its notable authors sought to represent—as an instructive historical mirror. In it, we see that dependency and the need for care are universal human conditions even as their meaning is shaped by modern preoccupations with individualism, productivity, and growth, and reshaped anew as modernist authors respond to their historical circumstances. For readers in the present, modernism's inventive narrative forms illuminate how past inequities are shaped by historical forces but perhaps also give us license to imagine a future that is otherwise. This recognition can be the starting point for rereading an established canon and keeping it dynamic by adding new works with care in mind and body.

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Notes

- 1 As the collaboration of a writer and a photographer, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is also a meditation on interdependency at the level of form since the work's meaning arises from the sometimes complementary and sometimes tense interaction of written and visual media.
- 2 On servants in nineteenth-century literature, see Bruce Robbins' excellent *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1993).
- 3 On modernist attitudes toward class and poverty, see Joseph Entin (2007).
- 4 Scott Herring's chapter on the less well-known late-life partnership of Henri Ford and Intrad Tamang makes a fascinating addition to the scholarship on modernist collaboration and interdependency.
- 5 Thanks to Victoria Rosner for suggesting this detail.
- 6 For further reading on the relationship between care and time, see my forthcoming book, *Critical: Care, Narrative, and the Art of Interdependency*. My argument draws on writing about temporality in queer theory and disability studies by Lee Edelman (2004), Jack Halberstam (2011), Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), Alison Kafer (2013), Robert McRuer (2018), and Ellen Samuels (2017).
- 7 I discuss the concept of epistemic asymmetry in more detail in my forthcoming book, *Critical: Care, Narrative, and the Art of Interdependency*.