Delta Darkness: Weighing the risks in Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*

By Christina Bryson

A Senior Comprehensive Project in English

Submitted to the Department of English at Allegheny College

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Bachelor of Arts Degree

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Professor Ben Slote _____

Professor Jennifer Hellwarth _____

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the college community as a whole.

_____

Christina Bryson

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Introduction

The following pages consider what is at stake in Lewis Nordan's magical realism novel *Wolf Whistle*. For reasons that become quite clear through this project, it is important to first understand the historical context surrounding the novel in order to examine the effectiveness of the text's function.

The introduction of my project focuses on the novel's historical context, looking closely at the events of Emmett Till's death. Additionally, this section explores the social hierarchy of the South, providing insight into how such a brutal, racially driven murder could occur. Because Nordan roots his novel in Till's history, it becomes necessary to understand the culture in which Mississippi operated in 1955 to recognize the significance of Emmett Till's case. Testing the fairness and accuracy of a fictional rendition is only possible with a clear understanding of the true historical events. Only with this context can we recognize the risks of constructing *Wolf Whistle* and decide whether or not Nordan stays fair to history.

Lewis Nordan, a Mississippi native, writes his novel *Wolf Whistle* as a fictional narrative constructed from Emmett "Bobo" Till's murder in 1955. Till's murder became a martyr tale for the civil rights movement: a northern boy visiting family in the South subjected to the unforgiving racial violence of the Mississippi Delta. As Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff explain, the difference between Till's lynching and countless other racial murders in the South was "the interest of the Negro press" and the mass influx of reporters from the North (Roberts 86). The northern press was able to expose race-based legal corruption in the South by using Till's case, shocking northerners about the continued violence against African-Americans (Roberts 86). Emmett Till's death was the racial murder to remind blissfully ignorant society of the hate and violence still prevalent in white southern culture. In a sense Till became a sacred

subject. He became a cornerstone to the civil rights movement. And it is because of this historical reverence that Nordan, a white author, has the potential to be condemned for his narrative. Nordan risks misappropriating Till's story in his novel and trivializing a significant historical event. In order to fully understand the risks associated with *Wolf Whistle*, it is important to know the history behind the novel's inception. The facts of Emmett Till's murder are still contested today and are presented as ambiguous truths, but the following information is what the majority of sources record as history.

Till, popularly known by his nickname Bobo, was a fourteen-year-old African-American youth from Chicago, Illinois. Stephen Whitfield describes Till "as a prankster, a risk taker, and a smart dresser…To his mother Bobo was trustworthy, considerate, and industrious…Cousins remembered him as 'the center of attention' who 'liked to be seen. He liked the spotlight'" (Whitfield 15).

In late August, Till was on a trip visiting his uncle Moses "Preacher" Wright at Wright's home in Money, Mississippi—the heart of the Mississippi Delta. On August 24, three days after arriving, Till experienced first-hand the wide-spread culture of racism so heavily protected by white southern culture in Mississippi.

Till, along with some of his cousins, took a trip on August 24 to visit Bryant's—the local store. According to Wheeler Parker, a cousin of Till's who was interviewed in a 2003 PBS special, as Till was leaving the store, he whistled at Carolyn Bryant, the white woman running the shop. Till and his cousins hurriedly drove home in a panic. Till begged the others not to tell his uncle of the incident (*The Murder of Emmett Till*).

Days passed and nothing more was said of the supposed "wolf whistle," which later became a defining characteristic of the case. However, at approximately 2:00 a.m. Sunday morning, August 28, Roy Bryant—Carolyn's husband—and his half-brother J.W. Milam showed up armed and looking for Till at Wright's house (Metress, *The Lynching* 204).

Whitfield notes that Wright pleaded with Milam and Bryant, saying that Till was from the North and did not understand the southern way. He begged the men to just give Till a whooping. Wright recalls that Milam asked him his age. "Sixty-four," Wright responded. "You make any trouble you'll never live to be sixty-five," Milam said as the two brothers took Till, loaded him into the truck and drove away (Whitfield 20).

Three days later, on August 31, a severely mutilated body was found floating in the Tallahatchie River. Unrecognizable upon discovery, the body was only identified as Till's by the engraved ring on his finger, a ring which belonged to Till's late father, L.T. In addition to Till's tortured body there was a cotton gin fan weighing approximately seventy-five pounds attached by barbed wire to Till's neck (Whitfield 22).

Upon the discovery of Till's body, a grand jury indicted Milam and Bryant who were already being held without bail on kidnapping charges, for the murder of the fourteen-year-old. As Manfred Berg notes, critics were surprised by law enforcement's swiftness of action in arresting two white men for a race crime, considering the prevalence of a white supremacist attitude in the Mississippi Delta (Berg 173). At the time, the South was under pressure to appear unbiased in legal action. Therefore, the South was willing to place Milam and Bryant in custody, as to appear fair at face value, but in reality was unlikely to convict two white men of murdering a black youth.

Prior to the trial, Mamie Bradley, Till's mother, demanded her son's body be returned to Chicago for burial. Because of the condition of Till's body, Bradley was advised against opening the crate. She rejected that notion, not only looking at the body herself, but holding an open-casket viewing for all of Chicago. "I think everybody needed to know what had happened to Emmett Till," she explained in a 2003 PBS interview (*The Murder of Emmett Till*). More than 50,000 people came to the viewing and *Jet* magazine, a black publication, published photographs of Till's body.

On September 19 the trial against Milam and Bryant began. Berg poses the question of whether or not white men would be found guilty in a court of law for a hate crime:

> Would an all-white Mississippi jury convict two local white men for a crime against a black person, or would the traditional impulse to close ranks prevail? Despite threats to his life, Moses Wright testified against Bryant and Milam, who did not deny they had abducted Emmett Till but insisted they had only scared him a little and let him go unharmed. The defense surmised that the disfigured body found in the Tallahatchie River was not even Till's. The NAACP and other 'northern radicals,' the defendants' lawyers insinuated, had contrived a conspiracy to discredit Mississippi. Their appeal did not fall on deaf ears. After one hour of deliberation, the jury acquitted both men. Later one of the jurors relayed that the jury could have come out after ten minutes but took its time to make things look good. (Berg 173)

Despite initially condemning the crime, the majority of the southern white population quickly came to Milam's and Bryants' aid during the trial, justifying the defendants and rationalizing their actions. One journalist noticed this shift in moral perception and published an exposé of the "real" events four months following Till's murder.

William Bradford Huie, often referred to as a chequebook journalist because of his unique choice to pay sources—considered an unethical practice in journalism—paid Milam and Bryant for an exclusive interview on the truth behind Emmett Till's murder. On record, Milam recounted to Huie the night of August 28. He writes that Milam's and Bryant's "intention was to 'just whip [Till]…and scare some sense into him,'" (Metress, *The Lynching* 206) but the brothers' plan changed when Till refused to give into their white-hierarchical, southern mindset:

> Milam: Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and I can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place…And when a nigger even gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin.' I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we've got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. 'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. Goddam you, I'm going to make an example of you—just so everyone can know how me and my folks stand.' (Metress, *The Lynching* 207)

As was common in the 1950s, Milam specifically expresses resentment towards progressive racial organizations, such as the NAACP. By saying, "'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble,'" Milam solidifies the southern sentiment of the time—outsider conspirators intent on ruining the southern way of life.

The specifics of Emmett Till's murder are still open to conjecture, even today. Some accounts say Till's cousins dared him to make moves on Carolyn Bryant, others say he merely stuttered trying to order candy. Carolyn Bryant, herself, testified that Till physically grabbed her

and asked for a date, while some of Till's cousins adamantly rejected such accusations but attest to Till whistling. As far as Huie was concerned, the closest he could get to the truth behind the Emmett Till mystery was talking with the acquitted murderers since Till's side of the story is ultimately unknown.

Huie published the information he obtained from Milam and Bryant in the article "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," and followed it up one year later in 1957 with the article "What Happened to the Emmett Till Killers?" In Huie's second article, he continues exploring the curious choice of white Mississippians justifying the brothers' actions. However, despite still believing that the population approves of Till's murder, Huie recognizes that Milam and Bryant have become pariahs in the town. Huie notes that Milam "understands why the Negroes have turned on him, but he feels that the whites still approve what he did. Why then, should they be less co-operative than when they were patting him on the back…and calling him a 'fine, red-blooded American?'" (Metress, *The Lynching* 212-213). White support for the defense grew when the reality of sentencing two white men to jail—and possibly to death—was realized. The possibility of a legal system ruling in favor of an African-American defense became a threat to the white social hierarchy of the time. In the 1955 Mississippi Delta, maintaining social norms mattered more than an African-American's life; wealthy whites were going to band together even with their redneck brothers all to avoid a social upheaval. However, following the not guilty verdict, Milam's and Bryant's community approval began to falter. The Double Jeopardy Clause of the Fifth Amendment assured the brothers could not be tried twice for Till's murder, so their supporters were able to revert back to their initial disapproval of the murder (Metress, *The Lynching*, 213).

Social hierarchy in the Mississippi Delta, an area often referred to as "the most southern place in the world," was the center of everyone's life, black or white. As Jennifer Ritterhouse explains, if you were black you were constantly worried about repercussions for breaking the order and if you were white you were constantly aware of blacks' lesser status (Ritterhouse 25). These ideas were not just particular to small-town Mississippi; instead these ideas have been ruling race relations in the United States since America's slave-era.

Since the nation's founding, social order has been given legitimacy through race relations. Whites—specifically the Anglo-Saxons—asserted themselves as the 'dominant' race when colonizing the Americas. Within that superior mindset, Anglo-Saxons perceived any race unlike their own as lesser. For the sake of analysis, I am going to focus solely on white and black relations in America. Until President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, slavery was legal in the states, but freedom did not guarantee equality. Following the abolition of slavery, whites enacted new laws and social practices to ensure their racial dominance. Catherine and Richard Lewis explain that there is no official Jim Crow law. Instead, the title grew to encompass "a series of state, local, and county statutes, as well as unwritten codes of conduct, that evolved into a restrictive, punitive system of widespread segregation, created in the North and later concentrated in the American South" (Lewis 43).

Race relations have been ruling the southern way of life for centuries. Because of a continuous enforcement of laws limiting African-American power, a social hierarchy based on wealth and race is a set standard in southern culture and an exaggerated standard in the Mississippi Delta—the epitome of the southern way of life. Lewis Nordan understands the southern hierarchy having grown up in Mississippi and dominantly includes this characterization of the South in his novel *Wolf Whistle*. But despite first-hand knowledge of the time period he

sets *Wolf Whistle* in, Nordan still opens his novel to various levels of risk, which we will examine further in Chapter 1.

In this project, I will examine the risks of constructing a fictional narrative rooted in a racially sensitive historical event by looking at Lewis Nordan's 1993 novel *Wolf Whistle*. *Wolf Whistle* can be read as a fictional account of Emmett Till's murder in 1955. Nordan sets the novel in fictional Arrow Catcher, Mississippi and explores the lives of lower class white characters amidst Bobo's murder by Solon Gregg, the novel's equivalents to Till and Till's murderers, respectively.

Chapter 1 looks closely at the risks of the novel, categorizing them through racial, historical and moral perspectives. Racially, Nordan's whiteness appears problematic because of the novel's content, Emmett Till's murder—a key event in African-American history, readily recognized as a catalyst for the civil rights movement. The historical reverence associated with Till's case then also becomes a risk to *Wolf Whistle* because Nordan chances trivializing history by freely distorting the narrative. Nordan's choice of literary aesthetic, in particular his use of magical realism, then proves morally challenging because of his surreal approach to historical narrative.

Conversely, Chapter 2 takes those risks and examines how they work in Nordan's favor. This chapter wants to acknowledge that the historical narrative can be contested and thus I look at journalistic coverage of Till's case, specifically examining its polarized perspectives. Historical narratives like journalism do not admit to their potential bias, rather presenting their narratives as truth, but Nordan admits on every page that his rendition is artistic, surreal. The obviousness of Nordan's surrealism encourages thinking about Roland Barthes' theory of

writerly versus readerly texts and also how other authors use surrealism relative to contentious historical narrative. This chapter ultimately functions to exonerate the racial, historical and moral risks of *Wolf Whistle*'s construction.

Chapter 1: *Wolf Whistle*'s risky business

Born in 1939, Lewis Nordan was just fifteen years old at the time of Emmett Till's murder. Nordan grew up in Itta Bena, Mississippi, just about twenty miles from Money, Mississippi. In an interview, Nordan explains how close he was to the tragedy growing up, saying that his father was even friends with J.W. Milam (Ingram 84). It took Nordan close to forty years to construct a narrative account based on his teenage memories of Emmett Till's murder and trial. However, when *Wolf Whistle* was released in 1993, Lewis Nordan had to contend with racial, historical and moral risks.

Even thirty-eight years after Emmett Till's murder, Lewis Nordan still has to tread racial waters to write his novel *Wolf Whistle*, constructed around the Emmett Till murder and trial of 1955. During the civil rights era, authors both black and white took to writing race-related narratives, some presenting more problematic accounts than others had. William Styron authored the infamous *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, published in 1967. Nat Turner is a well-known African-American slave of the nineteenth century who led a rebellion killing approximately sixty whites. The aftermath of the rebellion cost up to 200 African-Americans their lives, including Turner who was sentenced to death for leading the revolt (Hill 418-431). Styron, a white author, took Turner's history and altered it in *Confessions*, limiting Turner to a white stereotyped mold—Styron's Turner viewed his master as *good* and pined for a white woman, when in reality Turner was wed to a black slave and condemned slavery. In addition to altering the historical context of Turner's life, Styron also directly appropriates Turner's character, writing the novel in first-person. Styron's experiences as a white man keep him from being able to establish Turner outside of a white-supremacist hierarchy, ultimately misappropriating Turner's voice. Despite winning a Pulitzer Prize for the novel, Styron received

a significant amount of backlash for *Confessions*, mostly from the African-American community.

Interestingly enough, most of the African-American critics did not fault Styron for his work in *Confessions*, though they did not support the novel he writes. John Williams explains that "Since I do not believe that the right to describe or portray or in other ways delineate the lives of black people in American society is the private domain of Negro writers, I cannot fault Styron's *intent*" (Williams 45). For Williams, Nat Turner's story does not belong to African-Americans, but at the same time, he does not respect Styron's approach to the content, saying he doubts Styron's intent was to honestly portray Turner's character (Williams 46). John Oliver Killens echoes a similar feeling, saying that "Styron tells us *about* the story of Nat Turner, but he is not *of* the story, and the reader does not feel it, does not live it, for the simple reason that the author has not felt it, has not lived the reality of being black in a white supremacist society" (Killens 44). Styron's privilege and race prevent him from fully understanding Nat Turner's imprisonment in slavery. Therefore, it is fair to say that Styron misappropriates Turner's voice in *Confessions*, turning Turner into a stereotypical slave from the white man's perspective.

William Styron poorly portrayed African-American history and racial oppression in his fictional rendition of Nat Turner's life. Being white and raised in a racist society, Styron was unable to remove white-supremacist influence from his writing. He contributes to an infamous legacy of misappropriation of African-American voice by white authors in literature. Being white and basing his fictional novel on Emmett Till's history—another prominent African-American figure in history—Lewis Nordan risks joining the legacy of white authors like Styron. Nordan, like Styron, grew up during a time enforcing a white-supremacist hierarchy, and as Alvin Poussaint writes, may unwittingly fall "victim [to] his own unconscious white racism"

(Poussaint 22). Because of the influence the Emmett Till murder had on the African-American community, the question of whether Nordan even has the right to write *Wolf Whistle* comes to mind. Nordan's whiteness dictates his approach to the subject, and risks a trivialization of revered black history.

In addition to racial risk in Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*, there is also historical risk in writing Emmett Till's murder and trial as fiction. Nordan has the potential to inappropriately blur historical truth; parts of Emmett Till's murder and trial are still in contention today and by writing a fictional version of a semi-ambiguous, racially-sensitive event, Nordan chances adding a greater misperception and less clarity to the history. Through fiction, authors have freedom to explore true narratives through a distortive perspective; fiction as a medium for historical commentary does nothing to clarify ambiguous historical context. Therefore, writers must carefully consider the subject matter into which they delve and develop a fictionalized narrative that respects the history it represents. Christopher Metress addresses this idea saying that,

> as long as black writers continue to remember [Till] and agitate on his behalf in the court of literature, Emmett Till can continue to have the final word while his murderers, who sought to silence him, are themselves consigned to silence and brought before the bar of judgment. What, in the end, could be more just than that? (Metress, "No Justice" 101)

Addressing Emmett Till's murder becomes a matter of respect and reverence for the subject, however, Metress only establishes this point in concordance with African-American authors. Metress omits the white writer from remembering Till, suggesting that because Emmett Till's murder was a race-driven crime, the black community has more right to the history. Because African-Americans are a minority group that has experienced oppression and persecution, they

have more authority to appropriately discuss an event driven by racism than Caucasians—the majority race leading the oppressive charge.

Because Nordan is white, he may not therefore be able remember Till as Metress suggests black writers can and should. Nordan avoids creating an explicit black voice in the narrative by keeping the novel in a white perspective, but he still chooses to explore a history not considered within his ultimate authority.

Even with racial and historical risk deeply imbedded in the context of *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan still chooses to construct his novel around Emmett Till's history. However, the risks associated with the novel's background pale in comparison to the moral risks Lewis Nordan takes by employing certain literary techniques. Nordan's use of magical realism—seen through the nontraditional villain and constant humor—proves morally challenging for a writer to invoke. Joseph Flora summarizes that magical realism in the American South

> freely distort[s] 'reality' to demonstrate [the] concern for the operation of human grace…Magic realism is a language charged with metaphorical novelty, humor and anagoge or multilayered meaning…[it] violates ordinary apprehension shocking readers into finer vision…[and it is the] difficult mission of the writer to return the audience to the bitter and wonderful burdens of the real world. (Flora 468)

Magic realism, therefore, provides Nordan with an avenue to explore narrative more freely, but it also provides opportunity to immorally depict history. If used effectively, magic realism can bridge meaning between the surreal and the real, but it is ultimately the author's responsibility to provide that link. With magic realism, Nordan writes a civil rights narrative through distorting and hyper-sensitive images, establishing risk in his historical approach. Therefore it is Nordan's duty to relate the postmodern aspects of his narrative back to real-world implications; unless the

author can link the surreal and the real, magic realism becomes a morally dangerous medium through which to approach history.

One of Nordan's most dominant examples of magic realism in *Wolf Whistle* is his use of characterization as seen through the novel's antagonist. From Solon Gregg's first introduction in the novel, his character is near impossible to understand. Solon is the novel's parallel to J.W. Milam and presumably the villain of the text. However, through magic realism Nordan creates Solon in a separate realm from Milam—historically, Milam has become the ultimate villain of the Till tragedy, but Nordan gives Solon a less one-sided character, "freely distorting" historical truth.

The narrator first refers to Solon's character indirectly, characterizing him through his son's near-death injuries. Mrs. Gregg, Solon's wife, tells Alice Conroy and Alice's fourth-grade class the story behind Glenn's injuries: "Mrs. Gregg said, 'Glenn poured gasoline, Glenn poured gasoline, right on his daddy's bed; he was trying to burn up his daddy, when he burned up hisself instead'" (Nordan 17). From the start of the narrative Nordan portrays Solon in a negative light; what kind of father must Solon be if his ten-year-old son attempts his murder? Additionally, the composition of Mrs. Gregg's statement adds to the surrealism in *Wolf Whistle*. Mrs. Gregg is commonly known to speak with an impossible stutter but overcomes her speech impediment by speaking to the tune of "Here Comes Santa Claus." Though an indirect characterization of Solon, this moment of the text becomes a smaller example of the novel's function—Nordan explains Glenn's accident through a well-known Christmas carol just as he develops Emmett Till's history through a surreal perspective. Everything about this scene, from a child's attempt at murder to Mrs. Gregg's coping mechanism is a direct representation of Nordan's use of magic

realism. However, at the same time, this very surrealism takes a real life tragedy and simplifies it in a trivializing context.

Nordan continues his trend of magical realism in characterizing Solon as seen through the varying forms of his character. It is difficult to tell what feeling Nordan wants to evoke in the audience because his tone concerning Solon changes frequently. For instance, one of Nordan's initial descriptions of Solon presents him as a heartless murderer: "Sometimes in New Orleans Solon didn't even remember the men he robbed…He might have killed somebody and not remembered it, he honest to God couldn't be sure. He hoped he left at least one of those perverts bleeding in a hotel room" (Nordan 59). But then, when the audience expects Nordan to write Solon with no redemption, as in the scene where he kidnaps and murders Bobo, Nordan chooses otherwise:

> So Solon sho did hate for Bobo to be out there behind the truck, scared half out of his wits and cutting his feet on sharp gravel, just because he was taking him out to kill him. It was a shame, a crime and a shame. And dark out there, too, don't you spect? Pore thang, blind in that Delta darkness, don't you just know he is, cain't see a blessed thing, do't know where he's running to…Got to be awful for the boy, ready to breathe his last breath like he was, sho does, jess awful. (Nordan 170)

In this instance, Nordan explicitly uses free and indirect discourse for narrative action; even though he keeps the narrative in third person, the ideas and mindset the narrator present are distinctly Solon's character, keeping the audience aware of Solon's sympathies. Rather than assume his fictional murderer has no redemptive qualities, Nordan at surprising times writes Solon with a sympathetic lens, however contradictory to the setting. In the scene where Solon is ready to murder Bobo, Solon describes Bobo's fears to the audience. Solon understands it must

be “awful for the boy…to breathe his last breath,” but he is still unable to recognize the evil of his actions. Solon becomes a lost character in this moment because the audience briefly sees a moment of sympathy, establishing Solon as more than the one-dimensional villain that Milam, historically, has been established as. However, once the audience begins to understand Nordan’s sympathies for Solon’s character, he uproots the antagonist reverting Solon back to the hateful villain. When Bobo’s uncle is about to point Solon out as the man who kidnapped his nephew during the trial, Solon represents the epitome of southern culture, embodying centuries of racial hatred:

> The scream of villainy and old rage that Solon released from his troubled and violent guts spewed forth from him like spontaneous fires from deep in the Gehenna bowel-pits of the Arrow Catcher garbage dump, flames leaping out, unexpected and dangerous, into peaceful air…He screamed, ‘You better not point your nigger mother-fucking finger at me, you nigger motherfucker nigger motherfucker motherfucker motherfucker motherfucker! Oh Christ, you goddamn nigger, you better not!’ (Nordan 255)

Solon’s repetition and over-the-top rage positions him securely as the novel’s antagonist. In this moment, Solon becomes the ultimate villain the audience expects him to be. Nordan uses surreal imagery to represent a satanic villain in the otherwise “peaceful” town. Though Nordan ultimately ends Solon’s character as the determined antagonist of the novel, the audience is still left thinking about Solon’s moments of sympathy, of humanity—like when he talks fondly of his sister in New Orleans (Nordan 57). Nordan allows glimpses of humanity into a character historically rendered as the villain—Milam. By jumping so quickly from human to villain, Solon

becomes an unknowable caricature of a person; the audience can never fully grasp either spectrum of his self; they understand one or the other but not together in one character.

It appears that Nordan believes Solon was not born a bad man, but because he was brought up in an abusive, perverted household, he did not become a good man. Yet, by not writing Solon purely as the antagonist, Nordan risks misrepresenting Till's story. By sympathizing with the murderer of his fiction, Nordan's sympathies are questioned in regards to J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. However, in an interview, Nordan explains the justification behind constructing a vulnerable villain:

> This was a potential problem in *Wolf Whistle*, which dealt with a very sensitive subject—the murder of an African-American child. I believed the real life murderers, Milam and Bryant of Money, Mississippi, were monsters. Still do. I was glad when they were dead. I was glad when bad things happened to them. And yet when I drew the murderer in *Wolf Whistle*, I felt a strange sympathy for him. I tried very hard not to justify him. I tried very hard not to excuse him or apologize for him, but he was a damaged and vulnerable and fragile person himself, and I wrote about him in a way I could never write or think about the actual murderer. (Ingram 79)

In this context, Nordan describes Solon as if he is a realistic character, contradicting his portrayal of Solon throughout the narrative; Nordan consistently writes Solon with exaggeratory features, keeping Solon at a distance from the audience's understanding. However, despite the unreality of Solon's character, Nordan still constructs him with the intent to create a complex character. Nordan attempts to justify his authorial choice of creating a sympathetic villain, by distancing his thinking from the real-life murderers in the interview, but without the explicit justification this interview provides, Solon can still be seen as a version of Emmett Till's real life murderers.

Nordan's Solon becomes a representation of history, constructing a realm of sympathy for J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. Having sympathy for Solon might not be tolerable in a culture that sees Milam and Bryant in black and white terms—either good or bad, no middle ground. Writing a murderer that the audience can humanize then becomes a moral risk to the novel because it negates the absolute idea of Milam and Bryant as purely villains; sympathy for Solon suggests humanity for the real murderers in one of the most well-known racial crimes of the South.

Solon as a surreal villain not only risks eliciting sympathy from the audience but it also forces the reader to focus his attention on Solon's story, almost forgetting Bobo. Nordan makes use of Emmett Till's history, but chooses to omit the main character of that history. Randall Kenan notes that,

> Aside from those few pages in which Bobo is seen as a swaggering 14-year-old boy from Chicago—playing the 'spote' and bragging about white girlfriends up North …and committing the impudent but wholly innocuous act of wolf-whistling at Lady Montberclair—he is gone from this book. We see his shadow fight Solon Gregg; we hear his dead body speak in sweet visions of pastoral phantasms and curious agape-like love of the earth and its people; but never are we invited into the head of a child who becomes a scapegoat who becomes a martyr who becomes a loss. (Kenan 594)

Nordan has the opportunity to "remember and agitate" on Till's behalf—like Metress suggests black authors should do—, but Nordan chooses to omit Till's character from the novel. Instead Nordan creates a multidimensional villain with whom the audience can sympathize and a one-dimensional martyr, who is sexualized and characterized as brash. For example, Bobo is dared to ask Sally Montberclair on a date "since he liked white girls so much, since he's all time carrying on about a white girl, toting a white girl's picture in his wallet, axe her Bobo, go on and

axe her, you so smart, you such a spote" (Nordan 34). Nordan hardly represents Till's character in the novel, but when he does, he creates Bobo through secondhand narrative—other characters attribute qualities to Bobo, but the audience still never explicitly sees Bobo. Bobo's friends coax him, identifying him as a brash teenager that does not follow the social norms of the segregational South. Nordan chooses to limit the reader's interaction with the novel's representation of Emmett Till, suggesting his priorities reside in the development of his white characters. Nordan focuses his attention on sympathizing with the villain rather than with the martyr which proves problematic when historically an audience's sympathies lie with Emmett Till, not his murderers.

In addition to attaching sympathy to Solon's villainy, another moral risk *Wolf Whistle* takes through its use of magic realism is embedding the novel with unfaltering humor. From the first page to the last, Nordan's text forces the reader to laugh at fictional renderings of revered history. Since *Wolf Whistle* relies heavily on Emmett Till's murder, adding humor to its history potentially mocks the reverence associated with that history; Nordan makes light of a topic almost impossible to see as anything other than heavy. Despite Nordan's intent to use humor from a critical perspective, he still invokes risk. Moral risk becomes prominent when humor and serious historical narrative become synonymous concepts.

Lewis Nordan firmly establishes his novel as "funny" from the start of the narrative. Most of *Wolf Whistle*'s explicitly humorous excerpts focus on every-day concepts, but some points of humor also become obvious examples of Nordan's absurdity. For instance, an audience would assume the schoolteacher Alice Conroy to be portrayed more socially aware because of her education, but Nordan keeps her oblivious to generally regarded social norms. Alice had an

affair with her professor Dr. Dust and shows only confusion as to why Mrs. Dust is hostile towards her. Alice considers calling Dr. Dust but remembers that "Mrs. Dust always answer[s] the telephone and call[s] Alice a slut in a loud voice and slam[s] the receiver in her ear. If Mrs. Dust would only be a little forgiving, Alice thought, they might be friends. They might share many things" (Nordan 2). The audience readily understands Mrs. Dust's anger, and laughs at the thought of the mistress having a civil relationship with the wife. Nordan uses these moments of humor in society to establish the atmosphere of the novel. But while Nordan often uses surreal examples of humor in the text, not all instances of humor prove unrealistic. One example focuses on the very real social status difference that men and women occupied in the 1950s. Lady Montberclair, characterized as a "modern" woman, goes to Red's shop to buy tampons, a seemingly harmless act by today's standards, but unheard of in the conservative twentieth century (Nordan 29). Red becomes embarrassed by Lady Montberclair's request and thinks to himself that "Usually men bought Kotex. A man knew how to purchase a box of Kotex" (Nordan 30). Unlike the previous example of societal humor, this excerpt describes a potentially real scenario. Nordan uses humor to portray not only the unreal and absurd aspects of his text but also to present real and believable ideas as well. Mixing humor between the surreal and the real then becomes a challenge for the novel because the audience may not be fully aware as to the concept at which they are laughing, blurring what is real and what is fiction. Regardless of the novel's historical content, Nordan intends for his audience to experience a humorous rendition of society at the time of Emmett Till's murder and trial, risking the novel's moral integrity.

One of Nordan's most consistent uses of humor in *Wolf Whistle* is through his portrayal of children. From the start of the book, Nordan characterizes children as more mature than their

age. For example, when Alice Conroy, the new fourth grade teacher in Arrow Catcher, arrives on her first day of class hoping to connect with her students, she discovers that her:

> fourth graders missed their injured classmate, Glenn Gregg…'Don't hold back,' she told the children, her fourth graders. 'Ask anything you like.' So they said, 'Is he dead?' and 'Is he still on fire?' and 'Am I going to die?' and 'Are we all alone in the world?' Her education was already paying off, Alice thought. See how they opened up? See how inquisitive, how willing to reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings? (Nordan 1)

Less than a page into the narrative and Nordan has children asking profound questions, unlikely to come out of a nine- or ten-year-old's mouth. Nordan invites the reader to laugh in this moment, acknowledging the absurdity of his characters and setting the tone for the rest of the narrative. Usually characterized as figures of innocence and hope in literature, the children in *Wolf Whistle* are anything but. Nordan characterizes the children in his novel with the same vulgarity and racist undertones as he does adults, commenting on the encompassing nature of racism in the South. Children become scapegoats for Nordan's humor, initiating humorous encounters between children and adults. For example, Nordan openly invites the reader to laugh at Roy Dale's and Alice's verbal interaction:

> Roy Dale was fourteen. His skin was very white, with big copper-penny freckles. He walked up to the parrot's cage and put his face up to the bars. He said, 'Pussy is good, pussy is good'…Alice said, 'If you're doing that to get my goat it's not working.' Roy Dale kept his face in the bird's cage. He said 'Pussy is good, pussy is good'…Alice said, 'Roy Dale, you wouldn't know what to do with a piece of pussy if it flew up and hit you in the face.' (Nordan 81-82)

Though Alice attempts to put Roy Dale in his place, Nordan still chooses to explicitly sexualize a fourteen-year-old kid. Emmett Till was just fifteen years old when he was murdered and one of the most common criticisms of his portrayal in history—from white news outlets in particular—was an emphasizing of Till's sexuality. By sexualizing a boy younger than Till, Nordan does nothing to suggest Bobo as any less of a sexualized character. By association, Nordan's portrayal of Roy Dale might reinforce the idea that Emmett Till's sexuality led to his murder—partly blaming Till for catalyzing the chain of events that led to his death. By using humor to portray corrupted youth, Nordan risks the moral integrity of *Wolf Whistle* by inviting the reader to understand all children, Bobo included, as adults.

In addition to inviting the reader to laugh in the novel, Nordan also uses humor among characters, maintaining a link between children and adults. Both age groups make jokes about racism in the South—though both age groups are also oblivious to the severity of their humor. One of the most startling portrayals of a lack of innocence emerges in the locker room scene following Bobo's murder. The boys in this scene spend their time callously joking and laughing at Bobo's death. For example, one of the boys said, "'They give you a day off from school if you can find a dead nigger. I'm own find me one this afternoon, might see can I find two or three, I been needing a little vacation.' Roy Dale and Wesley giggled, they snorted, they said *shh¸ shh¸ shh,* they laughed their durn heads off, they was so tickled" (Nordan 199). Rather than sympathize with Bobo, a child their own age, the boys make light of his death because of their racial difference—white boys joking about a black boy's death. Racial hierarchy in the South prevents any understanding across the racial divide. Nordan specifies that this segregation has no bounds—kids and adults alike have similar humorous reactions to the murder. For instance, when the northern reporters flock to Arrow Catcher for Solon's and Lord Montberclair's trial,

they exhibit a parallel reaction to the town as the locker-room boys had for the murder. The reporters from the North,

> They noticed the statue of the Confederate soldier in front of the court house, with a hand up to his brow to shade the sun. Somebody said, 'That old boy is facing south.' Somebody else said, 'He's planning his retreat.' This gave them a laugh. They had a few good, strong male laughs about this. 'He's planning his retreat!' they said, many times over. (Nordan 212)

Nordan writes the reporters' reaction exactly as he did the boys' reaction, except with the reporters, they are joking about the whole South, not one child's death. Additionally, by linking children and adults as one in the same, Nordan not only comments that children in the South have a lack of innocence but that adults act like children—oblivious to the reality of racism. Both examples present startling images of society, but by using humor, Nordan presents his criticism in a light-hearted realm. Making light of a history associated with such reverence can trivialize the historical context if done too callously and risk the novel's moral integrity

Humor, when used in relation to serious content, presents risk to the text because of the connotations associated with the device; using humor to contrast a generally regarded solemn event can strengthen an author's argument, but it also has the potential to discredit the narrative if used ineffectively. When considering humor in relation Emmett Till's history, Bethany Perkins reminds the reader that historically "humor has often been used perniciously in relation to racial issues" (Perkins 698). In order to avoid inappropriately using humor, Nordan must bridge the surreal and the real in his novel; as Flora notes, it is the "difficult mission of the writer to return the audience to the bitter and wonderful burdens of the real world" (Flora 468). Therefore, humor only becomes an effective literary device if it serves the text as more than just

funny narrative—the author needs to make the audience question what makes them laugh and delve into the immorality of the humor.

Lewis Nordan not only writes *Wolf Whistle* in the face of racial and historical contention, but he also uses literary techniques that prove morally risky concerning the novel's content. By focusing a narrative—constructed adjacent to Emmett Till's history—on a villainous murderer that Nordan appears to sympathize with and using humor as the consistent medium to produce social commentary, Nordan risks the integrity of his novel—racially, historically and morally.

Chapter 2: Avoiding "hubristic misappropriation"

As we saw in Chapter 1, there are inherent risks Lewis Nordan faces when constructing a narrative based on historical racial violence. But ultimately, rather than condemn his work, these risks give Nordan flexibility in *Wolf Whistle* to avoid grossly mistreating the subject matter. In order to understand how these risks work in Nordan's favor, it is vital to examine the historical record of Emmett Till's murder and trial. From the introduction we understand parts of Till's story to still be in contention today, suggesting that the historical narrative may be slanted. Recorded history then becomes a subjective concept, with journalistic documents—often viewed as fair and accurate documentation—even demonstrating varied accounts of history. While Nordan is not constructing a factual narrative account of Emmett Till's murder in *Wolf Whistle*, he still uses elements of Till's history in the novel. It is hard to argue against Nordan's seemingly selective and distorting treatment of history, and yet, there's a chance that when we closely examine any history, we can see its ambiguities and biases. On one hand we acknowledge that using sensitive history establishes risk in Nordan's text, but on the other hand, history's subjectivity allows Nordan to freely explore Emmett Till's case. One way to help exonerate Nordan's book—racially, historically and morally—is to examine the distortions and biases common in the initial coverage of Emmett Till's murder and trial by the press.

Emmett Till's murder and trial became a martyr tale in African-American history. Till's murder reminded the North that issues of discrimination and racism were still prominent in the United States; the blanket notion of freedom and equality between the races was nothing more than a legislative charade. A law granting a person's rights means nothing if society does not uphold and enforce it. African-Americans, most noticeably in the South, were treated as inferior despite their "free" and "equal" status. This inherent racial inequality was fully realized with a

northern African-American boy's murder in the Mississippi Delta; at that moment in time, Americans became noticeably aware of the power of racism in the country. However, before Emmett Till's story became bigger than itself, according to Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, it "was just another in a long history of racial murders in the Mississippi Delta" (Roberts 86). What moved Till's story past being lost in an ever-growing list of race crimes, and what turned it into the martyr tale so readily remembered today, was the presses' hold on the story. Till's murder and the trial were heavily reported by both the white and black press. Roberts and Klibanoff assert that never before had the

> Negro reporters…felt such a sense of journalistic agreement that all the disparate, disconnected events leading up to [Till's murder] suddenly were linked and being propelled toward some goal. It wasn't choreography, but it was movement, and the Negro press was not only moving with it but sometimes leading it. (Roberts 86)

Historically, the African-American press covered race crimes more aggressively than the white press. Without the presses' avid interest, Emmett Till might have become just another name in a long list of racial violence. While the presses' coverage ensured Till's place in history, its polarized reporting still produced ambiguity and an array of "truths."

Emmett Till's murder served as a reminder of blatant southern and national racism which was widely apparent through the contrasting coverage by the black and southern white press—the black press wrote for an oppressed audience while the southern white press wrote to validate racism[1]. For instance, *The Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper, specifically calls out the social acceptance of black oppression in Mississippi. In an article published on September 10, 1955, *The Defender* writes:

> The blood of 'Bo' Till is on the hands of the five candidates for governor of Mississippi who campaigned on an anti-Negro platform in the recent elections. They charged the atmosphere for the state for acts of violence. We accuse these racist rabble-rousers with contributing directly to the murder of 'Bo' Till and the lynching of American reputation for decency and respect for law and order in the eyes of this entire world. (Metress, *The Lynching* 25-26)

J. P. Coleman, Fielding Wright, Paul Johnson, Ross Barnett and Mary Cain—the five gubernatorial candidates—all had positions of power in society, and all of them favored segregation ("Coleman"). *The Defender* is directly challenging these candidates' platforms which are validating a culture's acceptance of racism, doing nothing to advance equality. A society actively condemning racism and oppression would not face the considerable number of race-crimes found in the Mississippi Delta; only in a society outwardly spewing hate and normalizing black oppression could Emmett Till's murder have occurred. Through *The Defender*'s lens, Emmett Till's murder is on the hands of the American people. However, the *Jackson Daily News* presents a contrasting opinion. The *Jackson Daily News* is the local white newspaper of Jackson, Mississippi—just south of Tallahatchie County where Till's murder and trial took place. In an editorial published by the *Jackson Daily News* on September 4, 1955—four days following the discovery of Till's body—Tom Ethridge writes that the NAACP and the black press are flaunting an over-the-top response to Till's murder:

> To read the inflammatory statements from Negro leaders of the North, one would suppose that young Emmett Till was the victim of a gigantic conspiracy involving every white person in our state…If our nation adopts the theory that the entire people of an entire state are to be punished for the crimes of individuals, then Chicago itself

> will be in for a bad time. While few if any sane persons condone the brutal murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, this is by no means the first atrocity committed in the United States. Illinois certainly has no spotless record. In fact, that state has more crime than any in the land, with the possible exception of New York. (Metress, *The Lynching* 22-23)

While Ethridge does suggest it is absurd to condone Till's brutal murder, he does not present any regret on the white man's behalf; he lumps Till's death with every other violent crime—not strictly race-related—in the United States. Ethridge is unwilling to link the severity of racial tension with criminal violence in the South. Instead of realizing that the white-power hierarchy in the South creates an atmosphere condoning brutal racial violence, Ethridge deflects and places blame elsewhere, saying Illinois "has no spotless record." The southern white press defends the South's reputation, while the African-American press condemns it.

Even following the trial, after the not guilty verdict, the press continues its coverage of the Emmett Till case, maintaining its opposing frameworks. The black press writes the verdict as an inhumane treatment of justice while the southern white press supports the verdict. An article published on October 8, 1955 in *The Chicago Defender* writes:

> After all, [Northern whites] have been brought up to believe in the magnolias and chivalry of the South. Hollywood has handled the South romantically; and writers, intrigued by the soft southern drawl, have helped to perpetuate the fraud. Actually, few places in the world can be as savage and inhuman. Few people nowadays remember that back in the 1930's Adolph Hitler sent a mission to the U.S. to study the South's treatment of Negroes, so that he could more efficiently terrorize the Jews. (Metress, *The Lynching* 131-132)

There is no subtlety in *The Defender*'s criticism of the cultural acceptance of southern racism. *The Chicago Defender* wants its reader to understand how problematic it is to romanticize a culture that inspired what is to be considered one of history's most inhumane events—the Holocaust. Milam's and Bryant's verdict of not guilty preserves an ingrained acceptance of racial hierarchy and disregard for equality in law. Meanwhile, the *Jackson Daily News* reports the not guilty verdict as a fair judgement of the law, with no links to black oppression in the South. A September 25, 1955 article reads:

> The cold fact concerning the acquittal in Tallahatchie county of the two alleged slayers of a Negro youth from Chicago is that the prosecution failed to prove its case…Guilt must be proven. It cannot be assumed. Practically all the evidence against the defendants was circumstantial evidence…The NAACP cannot truthfully contend that a Mississippi court was guilty of 'an atrocious miscarriage of justice,' as its loud-mouthed leaders are shouting. (Metress, *The Lynching* 116-117)

In order to maintain southern white appeal, the *Jackson Daily* chooses to frame the trial as a fair deliverance of the law. It does not matter that society—black and white—accepted the fact that Milam and Bryant murdered Emmett Till; what mattered for the *Jackson Daily* was that the court of law worked—guilt was not proven despite an overwhelming acceptance of the parties' guilt. As Roberts and Klibanoff assert, "the trial became the mechanism not for seeking justice but for celebrating the white man's dominance" (Roberts 103).

The opposing reports of the Emmett Till case establish polarized perspectives of history. History is written by the observer and can never be free of bias, and in the case of Emmett Till, history is written from two polarized points of view, both of which were emotionally invested—African-Americans looking to condemn racism and southern whites looking to maintain a

romanticized perception of the South. Both presses wrote from their framework of the truth, but the African-American press is more historically accepted as a fair portrayal of events. An understanding of racial oppression gives the black press more authority on reporting the subject matter, but it does not give them sole ownership. A white author—for example, William Bradford Huie—can approach Till's case and not write from a strictly segregationist framework like the *Jackson Daily News* chose to do.

William Bradford Huie became the most notorious journalist to cover Till's case. After the trial, he spoke directly with J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant, receiving their confessions to lynching Emmett Till. However, despite outing the murderers publically, Huie was condemned for his article "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." During the interview with Huie, Milam justified his murderous actions by emphasizing Till's sexuality, describing him as a danger to white women. Huie used this description of Till's character and included it in the article, outraging African-Americans at the suggestion of Till's murder being his own doing. One challenge with Huie writing a voice for Till in the article is that he never received Till's side of the story. Huie depicts Till from a white perspective, potentially misappropriating his subject. Granted no one has Till's side of the story, at least with an African-American author's rendition of Till, he would have more authority on the subject of racial oppression. Despite the backlash Huie receives from his coverage, he also raises important moral qualms concerning—what he perceives as—the martyr propaganda presented by the African-American press.

Within *Wolf Whistle and Other Stories* a collection of work that Huie publishes, he writes a memoir exploring the process of writing "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi." In that memoir, he includes a letter from an African-American woman condemning his portrayal of the Emmett Till case. She writes: "Not only have you made

Emmett Till into a less sympathetic character, but after I read your account I felt sorry for *everybody*: for the murderers as well as the brash young Negro" (Metress, *The Lynching* 244). From this woman's perspective, Huie butchered the story because he did not portray Emmett Till as the poor martyr of his time, as much of the African-American press wrote. Instead, Huie wrote from a more critical perspective of society's support of race-crimes—as Roberts and Klibanoff would call it, a "community-approved murder" (Roberts 103). Huie responded to the woman's concerns explaining that

> To me a brash young Negro preoccupied with sex is not an unsympathetic character. And when I explain a murderer, I am not seeking forgiveness for him; I am seeking a cure, for him and for those who come after him…Your propaganda presented this case as the wanton murder of a 'child' by apes. My truth presents it as the deliberate murder of a youth by a man who is not an ape, but who was sober, who holds a commission in the United States Army Reserve, and who, when he fired an expanding bullet through Emmett Till's head, thought he was doing *right*. And many Americans, not all of them Southern, have commended him. Now I ask you: which of our pictures of this murder is the more disturbing one? (Metress, *The Lynching* 245)

Huie is right to depict Emmett Till's case from this framework. A "community-approved murder" is more savage an act than a single villain committing a crime. The villain that Huie wants to argue is not strictly Milam and Bryant, the villain is the community that acquits them, the society that preaches racism and the culture that fosters racial oppression. Huie received immense criticism for his reporting, but by not writing Milam and Bryant as the ultimate villain in the narrative, Huie opens a more important moral consciousness to consider: racism is

embedded in society, and in order to progress forward you must address the root of evil rather than react to it—the same idea Lewis Nordan explores in *Wolf Whistle*.

Journalism took hold of Till's story catalyzing its influence in American literature. As Christopher Metress asserts, "Till's murder has woven itself into the fabric of African-American poetry, drama, fiction, and memoir, and Till's image has emerged as one of the most powerful and haunting reminders of racial injustice in America" (Metress, "No Justice" 89). Because of the reverence associated with this history, Lewis Nordan takes risks in *Wolf Whistle* by constructing a fiction based on Till's murder and trial. Historical fiction risks inadequately educating the reader of the real events on which the literature is based. In Nordan's case, because he features such a significant historical event containing ambiguity and polarized narrative, the pressure and challenge to appropriately portray the subject matter is prominent. Nordan's use of magical realism seems to make light of a significant historical event, and therefore, potentially risks trivializing the narrative. But rather than illegitimize his work, Nordan's literary techniques work to validate *Wolf Whistle* rather than to condemn it.

Significantly, it took Lewis Nordan close to forty years after Emmett Till's murder to be able to conceive a literary response. As he explains in an interview,

> I was unable to write the Emmett Till story for all those years in part because I didn't feel it was my story to write…Finally it came to me that I had a story—the white trash version of the Emmett Till murder. I had the story of the people who were on the periphery of this terrible thing, who didn't know what was going on, didn't quite understand their own culpability in the situation. That was the story I had to write, the murderers' story, the family of the murderers, the friends and drinking buddies of the murderers. That's when I knew I could write the story, and *Wolf Whistle* poured

> out of me…It was the poor white version. So in one sense I had every right to write it. (Ingram 84)

Nordan's race defines how he approaches discussing Emmett Till's story. Being white, Nordan automatically risks inappropriately portraying a contentious racial event. As seen through the journalistic coverage, the African-American press more readily discussed the oppressive society in which race crimes operated. However, some white authors—like William Bradford Huie—also brought up concerns with the white-supremacist southern mindset, doing justice to Till's memory. Nordan operates in the same consciousness as Huie, using a "white-trash" version of Emmett Till's story to critique the South's 1950s segregationist culture. For example, many of Nordan's main characters associate themselves with "white-trash" poverty. Nordan even goes so far as to discuss the class divide among whites in addition to the racial divide between white and black. During the trial scene in *Wolf Whistle,* Nordan explicitly points out Solon Gregg's and Lord Montberclair's—the novel's parallels to Milam and Bryant—financial differences:

> A New Orleans lawyer was named for the defense. Poindexter Montberclair could afford it. Solon Gregg was flying on Lord Montberclair's coattails…Now that was a surprise, people said. It didn't look like Lord Montberclair would want his name attached to the Gregg name in this public way, people said. Even if they did do the killing together, those people said. White trash like Gregg and a fine man like Lord Montberclair, well, my gracious, what won't they think of next. (Nordan 216-217)

In the 1950s South, being white puts you above the law when the law concerns racial minorities. The community does not view Montberclair or Solon any differently than they did prior to Till's murder; in the community's eye, "Even if they did do the killing together," Montberclair is still a "fine man" and Solon is still "white trash" (Nordan 217). It is precisely their whiteness that

keeps them in positions of power in the law. For instance, the community is in shock that Montberclair would associate himself with white trash but effortlessly accepts the reality of two white men murdering a black youth. Not only does Nordan depict the reality of a corrupted legal system, but he also comments on the futility of social status. In writing "White trash like Gregg and a fine man like Lord Montberclair, well, my gracious, what won't they think of next," Nordan effectively criticizes racial oppression in the South (Nordan 217); if it is so absurd to link two white men of opposing social classes, then it is hopeless to think race relations can overcome inequality. Through his social criticisms, Nordan effectively writes from his intended white-trash perspective, maintaining blatant irony focused on criticizing racial oppression in the face of white supremacy.

As a person who grew up in the Mississippi Delta at the time of Till's murder, Nordan has every right to create a narrative about the event, but he chooses to respect the historical significance and write from a strictly white point of view. Therefore, Nordan avoids misappropriating the subject matter despite a considerable use of surrealism which could invalidate the novel.

Wolf Whistle is constructed through Emmett Till's history, but Nordan's use of magical realism exempts him from inappropriately creating an alternate version of history. However controversial the construction of *Wolf Whistle* seems, Bethany Perkins notes that Nordan effectively uses literary devices to keep from misappropriating the topic: "Southern rhetoric, humor, magical realism…These methodologies allow Nordan to avoid hubristic misappropriation of Till's historically significant African-American voice" (Perkins 709). His controversial techniques prove effective by Perkins' logic; using surrealism does not invalidate a narrative, instead, it provides an extra layer of commentary. Through all his risks, Nordan is able

to make implicit commentary on the social order so respected in the South; creating a sympathetic villain and relying on humor does not trivialize Till's story, instead it adds to a greater point by the author, one that goes beyond the historical facts. Magic realism not only acts as an effective medium to freely explore significant historical events as Perkins suggests, but it also creates a space for the author's commentary to stand out to the reader. As Huey Guagliardo writes in "A Life of Loneliness and Oddity," when reading *Wolf Whistle,*

> One is reminded of Flannery O'Connor and her famous statement explaining why the violent and the grotesque were essential to connection with her audience. According to O'Connor, 'you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you have to shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures'… a writer must be wily in order to be heard. (Guagliardo 66)

Nordan embodies shock in *Wolf Whistle* because he portrays a delicate subject matter through vulgarity—his characters do not follow expected literary norms and coarse humor becomes a staple in the narrative. One of the most startling and obvious examples of southern racism in the novel appears when Bobo's uncle is on the witness stand about to indicate Solon as the murderer; Nordan leaves nothing to the audience's imagination, explicitly allowing Solon's words to speak for the sentiment so common in the South. Solon yells, "'You better not point your nigger mother-fucking finger at me, you nigger motherfucker nigger motherfucker motherfucker motherfucker motherfucker! Oh Christ, you goddamn nigger, you better not!'" (Nordan 255) Through this excerpt, Nordan is able to both figuratively and literally shout at his readers, ingraining in them an understanding of the hate so common in that time period. Magical realism allows Nordan to "draw startling figures" for the audience; he can put across the idea that racial violence in the South goes beyond the act—it is an inherent aspect of southern white culture.

Additionally, because Nordan's text is so apparently surreal, the reader is drawn to the narrative's composition more so than the story. Nordan's use of magical realism creates a "writerly text" as Roland Barthes coins (Eagleton 119). Nordan never pretends for *Wolf Whistle* to be realistic; his literary techniques ensure that. As Terry Eagleton describes, in writerly texts, "The reader…shifts from the role of consumer to that of producer" (Eagleton 119). One example of Nordan forcing his audience to be the producer of the text occurs through his characterization of youth. From the start of the novel, Nordan characterizes Alice's fourth grade class more maturely than their age suggests. For example, in the courtroom, Alice asks her class if they understand the events. The classes' responses include central themes of the novel—"'The misuse of power is the root of all evil?'…'There is no justice on the earth?'... 'We are all alone in the world?'... 'The greatest depth of our loss is the beginning of true freedom?'... 'The disposal of human waste is the responsibility of the brokenhearted?'" (Nordan 246-247). The audience understands the children spouting profound social commentary to be Nordan's voice, not the voice of a ten-year-old. In this sense, the audience does not take Nordan's characters exactly for who they claim to be, but instead reflects on the meaning of Nordan's words, using his themes to think more significantly on the human condition. While it is inherently risky to use literary techniques that seem to make light of a serious historical event, the obviousness of Nordan's criticisms prevent him from inappropriately portraying the narrative. The reader readily recognizes the absurdity throughout the narrative and looks closer at Nordan's process rather than fully immersing themselves in the plot.

It is worth pointing out that Nordan is not alone in establishing a distortive aesthetic process regarding Emmett Till's history. In fact, other literary responses to the Till story that depart from a realistic approach include the work of African-American writers. Like Lewis

Nordan, James A. Emanuel's literary response to Emmett Till's murder took years to create; however, for Emanuel, he published the poem *Emmett Till* in 1963, eight years after the murder. Emanuel, although a poet, uses similar techniques as Nordan in his literary construction. For instance, both reference the discovery of Till's body from the Tallahatchie River through surreal imagery. Emanuel writes:

I hear a whistling
Through the water,
Little Emmett
Won't be still.
He keeps floating
Round the darkness,
Edging through
The silent chill,
Tell me, please,
That bedtime story
Of the fairy
River Boy
Who swims forever,
Deep in treasures,
Necklaced in
A coral toy. (Emanuel 1-16)

Emanuel describes a serene setting in the text, starkly contrasting the true events within its history. By turning the discovery of Emmett Till's body into a bedtime story "Of the fairy /

River Boy," Emanuel establishes his poem as surrealism. He presents the idea that Emmett Till will never and should never be forgotten, suggesting Till's spirit remains in the Delta. Additionally, Emanuel uses ironic imagery, including his reference to the cotton gin fan—which weighed Till down in the river—as a coral toy, to symbolize Till's youth at the time of his murder. Nordan describes Till almost exactly as Emanuel's poem. In *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan has Sugar Mecklin and Sweet Austin, two young white boys, discover Bobo's body. During the scene of Bobo's initial discovery, Nordan turns Bobo into a surreal character, calling out to the two boys in his death: "Bobo's voice was as sweet as the voice of an angel which is what a mermaid is, in water not air…Bobo sang, *I am the mermaid, the lake angel, I am the darkness you have been looking for all your sad lives*" (Nordan 184). Both authors eternalize Till, making him forever a presence in the South. And both authors use magical realism, a potentially trivializing literary device, to highlight ironic imagery emphasizing the real horrors of Emmett Till's death. Two writers of different races construct Emmett Till from near-identical surreal images and with equally powerful effect.

While undisputedly a major event in African-American history, Emmett Till's murder affected more than just the black community. Till's murder was not between Till, Milam and Bryant, it was within the entire racial divide in the United States. A century of inequality and inherent hatred created a system that, rather than condemns the murderers of a child, admires their preservation of a white-supremacist social order. Emmett Till's history, while heavily rooted in African-American context, is also the history of the people who committed the murder, the society that pardoned it and the culture that accepted it. All of America was involved in Till's case. History does not function from one single perspective, but rather it encompasses everything surrounding the event. Emmett Till's murder was the product of racial violence in the

American South and deserves to be told from a perspective fair to that history—whether the author is black or white. Nordan understood the bigotry so evident in Till's case and wrote from a critical perspective of American society. He has every right to explore Till's death in *Wolf Whistle*. Emmett Till's death was more than just an African-American issue; it became a national, even world-wide concern and hearing multiple versions of history is important to a critical understanding of the time.

Conclusion

As we have seen through this project, *Wolf Whistle* is an inherently risky fictional narrative rooted in sensitive racial context. Lewis Nordan's race, the novel's historical background and the text's aesthetic composition all function as challenges for the novel. Chapter 1 explores these risks in depth. In it we learn Nordan's whiteness dictates his approach to the subject of Emmett Till by looking at William Styron's 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron's privilege and race prevent him from appropriately exploring the subject of his narrative, causing him to misappropriate Nat Turner's character. By association, Lewis Nordan functions in a similar realm as Stryon, as he attempts to explore Emmett Till's murder and trial through his white perspective. In addition to the racial contention in *Wolf Whistle,* Chapter 1 also explores the historical risk of fictionalizing revered history. Emmett Till is an important figure to African-American history and the facts behind Till's story, as we learned in the introduction, are still contested today. By writing an ambiguous historical event through a distorting medium, Nordan risks trivializing Emmett Till's story. The final risk discussed in Chapter 1 explores the novel's moral integrity. Nordan relies on magical realism in his text, celebrating the surreal, making light of heavy content. The two examples of magic realism Chapter 1 examines are Nordan's construction of a sympathetic villain and his unrelenting use of humor. Characterizing Solon Gregg as both human and villain has the potential to blur the audience's understanding of who Solon's character represents in real life—J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. Additionally, humor forces the audience to laugh at moments of history they may not otherwise view as "funny," risking the seriousness of the novel's content. However, despite all these contentious opportunities for misappropriation and trivialization in *Wolf Whistle,* Chapter 2 serves to justify Nordan's authorial choices in constructing his novel.

Chapter 2 begins by looking more closely at the ambiguities in Emmett Till's history, examining the polarized coverage of Till's case by the African-American and the southern white presses. Both presses write from biased points of view—the black press writing to condemn the treatment of African-Americans in the South and the white press writing to justify the southern way of life. While neither is free of bias, the African-American press is understood to be the more accurate authority on the subject, but not history's sole owner. William Bradford Huie, a southern white journalist, publishes an exposé on J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant after directly receiving their confessions. However, despite his intent to portray the true facts of the case, Huie is condemned for his work. Huie even receives a letter from an African-American woman denouncing his work because of the sympathies it evokes for the murderers as well as for Till. However, Huie justifies his narrative account, saying he provides a more realistic and therefore more unnerving depiction of the murderers—what's more unnerving, an outlier who commits murder or a society that stands by that murder? Lewis Nordan functions in the same realm as Huie, intending to write from a more critical perspective of southern society. While Nordan does focus his novel on Emmett Till's history, he does not write from Emmett Till's voice. Nordan specifically chooses to frame *Wolf Whistle* from a white-trash perspective, looking at the story of the murderers, the murderers' friends and the society that supports their crime. Additionally, Nordan's use of magic realism through the narrative works more in his favor than against. Magical realism allows Nordan to more freely distort Emmett Till's history and establish a surreal narrative. Through magic realism, the reader is also more cognizant of Nordan's words on the page, having the narrative understood as a "writerly text" to quote Roland Barthes. The audience is more aware of what Nordan writes and its criticizing intent than following the storyline as a believable account of history. The chapter concludes its justifications by relating

Nordan's novel *Wolf Whistle* to James A. Emanuel's poem *Emmett Till*. Both authors write from similar surreal perspectives with the only difference being their race. Despite their racial differences, both authors' works understand Emmett Till's history through near-identical perspectives, creating equally powerful narratives.

Ultimately I assert that Lewis Nordan does right by his novel *Wolf Whistle*. Despite the risks of the text, Nordan carefully constructs a social criticism of the southern way of life that fosters racial oppression. While his race prevents him from writing the novel for close to forty years, Nordan eventually realizes he has a right to the story, as does all of America. Hearing multiple versions of history, even through fiction, becomes important to maintaining awareness and understanding of historical truths. While Nordan's novel may not be historically perfect, it encompasses the mindset so common in the South in the 1950s and creates a surreal narrative account of an unbelievably heinous crime in American history, ultimately respecting Emmett Till's reverence.

In light of current events concerning race relations in America, like Black Lives Matter and The University of Missouri protests, I think it is important to create a senior project that fits into these conversations. Lewis Nordan could have very easily written *Wolf Whistle* from an inappropriate framework, further hindering race relations, but as we have seen, he writes a well-informed, socially conscious narrative account criticizing the 1950s way of life. *Wolf Whistle* then becomes worth examining because it does not ultimately condemn the South, but rather it suggests solutions for a better future. Its social critiques shock the reader's understanding of history, making them more aware of the realities of racism both past and present, and reminding them how little removed they are from one of America's most unforgivable racial crimes. My project matters to the social consciousness of race in the United States because it not only

explores the risks of delving into racial tension, but it also suggests the benefits of effectively doing so.

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Endnotes

[1] It is important to note that not all white-press coverage supported a white-supremacist mindset. For example, some liberal—and mostly northern—white papers such as *The New York Times* presented Emmett Till's trial more fairly than the *Jackson Daily News* did. According to Roberts and Klibanoff, John Popham, a southern correspondent for the Times, covered the region for years "seeking out and writing about 'voices of sanity,' the progressives who saw hope for the South to avert its own self-destruction…Popham's South was multidimensional" and hopeful about the future of race relations (Roberts 91). Additionally, Popham's rapport with the South gave him a direct line into the trial, even "landing a lunch with the trial judge…who truly intended to run a fair trial" (Roberts 92). Despite Popham's and *The New York Times*' intention to report the South through a positive race-relations framework, it is more important for the sake of this analysis to understand the rigid polarity of press coverage—black press and segregationist white press—and its influence on historical context.