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Fiction vs. Doctrine:

Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*

Abstract

Eclipsed by the canonization of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a much stronger novel of the Jim Crow South, Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* (1944). Controversial yet widely read, *Strange Fruit* centers on the double life of Tracy Deen, caught between his love affair with the black Nonnie Anderson and his engagement in the eyes of the community to his prim and proper neighbor, Dorothy Pusey. Deen's misconceived attempt to resolve this state of affairs by marrying Nonnie off to his black servant drives the novel to an unthinkable tragic, yet all too credible conclusion. In addition to being a novelist, Smith was a crusader for racial equality; and yet not only does *Strange Fruit* stand on its own, without need of help from the author's other writings, it illustrates but poorly the psychological precepts of her major nonfictional work, the semi-autobiographical *Killers of the Dream* (1949). In particular, the deforming effect of segregation on "personality" is less evident in *Strange Fruit* than Smith leads us to believe. Enjoying a certain freedom from the author's teachings (as well as from the interpretations of its text given in her letters), *Strange Fruit* represents a striking case of the divergence of literature and doctrine.

Like millions of other children, I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) in an English class, in my case only a year or two after it had been published. In retrospect, I imagine my earnest teacher believed with Louise Rosenblatt that literature is "an educationally liberating force," expanding "the necessarily limited scope of the student's environment . . . with expressions of other phases of society and other types of personality."¹ What more wholesome tonic for Northern students in the early 1960's than the tale of a miscarriage of justice in the Jim Crow South?

When I first encountered it, I could not have known that *To Kill a Mockingbird* upstaged a much stronger novel, Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* (1944), a tale of cross-racial love and white justice set in and around the fictitious town of Maxwell, Georgia, in the years following World War I. Depicting as it does a cascade of events culminating in the lynching and burning of an innocent man, *Strange Fruit* (which sold some three million copies) makes the Harper Lee novel seem expurgated by comparison. It also famously features an unprintable word and touches repeatedly on the topic of abortion, in both cases with a dramatic propriety unlikely to be appreciated by some readers. Five years later, as if trying to get down to the roots of a culture in which lynching had become a communal ritual, Smith probed the diseased mind of the South in the semi-autobiographical *Killers of the Dream*. If *Strange Fruit* was controversial, *Killers of the Dream* was that much more so, in that the author dared attack Jim Crow in psychiatric depth and without the mediation of fiction. How, if at all, are we to reconcile the narrative of *Strange Fruit* with this work's diagnostic pronouncements?

More often seen as a crusader than a serious novelist during her lifetime, Smith resented being reduced to an editorialist on behalf of racial equality² and claimed that *Strange Fruit* embodies the same deep psychological truths expounded in her other writings.³ Nevertheless, it seems to me that because *Strange Fruit* recounts a series of events while *Killers of the Dream* purports to delve as far below the surface of events as it is humanly possible to go, it would be unwise to expect concordance between the two. In the end, *Strange Fruit* stands on its own; indeed, the same artistic decorum that keeps the use of an unprintable word and an unmentionable topic in character precludes, for the most part, the use of *Strange Fruit* itself as a vehicle of psychoanalytic instruction.

An ardent advocate of civil rights before that cause became a movement, Lillian Smith viewed Freud as a great liberator and undertook in her nonfictional writings to expose the family patterns and twisted emotions that were both the cause and effect of segregation. But if emotions are badly twisted—if, for example, those associated with piety are really warped expressions of guilt and self-hatred so deeply hidden that the subject does not even realize they are there—how is this to be shown in narrative? How is the hidden to be displayed? Of one thing we can be certain: the unconscious does not appear in consciousness. Yet Lillian Smith chose to employ stream-of-consciousness in *Strange Fruit*, listening in on the thoughts of one party after another. As it happens, the consciousness of whites in *Strange Fruit* gives little evidence of the “inward suspicion and guilt and fear that still gnaws [sic] on the white southerner’s mind,” according to *Killers of the Dream*.⁴

Even so, the severe character defects which are bound up with segregation according to Smith’s didactic writings do lend themselves to depiction. Comments the author in a characteristic passage of *Killers of the Dream*,

Something was wrong with a world that tells you that love is good and people are important and then forces you to deny love and to humiliate people. I knew, though I would not for years confess it aloud, that in trying to shut the Negro race away from us, we have shut ourselves away from so many good, creative, honest, deeply human things in life. I began to understand slowly at first but more clearly as the years passed, that the warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. Each is on a different side of the frame, but each is pinioned

there. And I knew that what cruelly shapes and cripples the personality of one is as cruelly shaping and crippling the personality of the other.⁵

That segregation not only injures the oppressed but poisons the oppressor is central to Smith's thinking on the matter of race. Thus, in a posthumously published self-interview she laments

the effect of segregation upon the personalities of all children. For all children are injured by it. It is as harmful to a child's personality to *segregate* as it is to *be segregated*; as injurious to emotional growth and sanity to think one's self superior as it is to think one's self inferior. Arrogance injures character in a different way but as seriously as humiliation injures character. The cultural pattern of segregation is in different ways crippling every child who grows up in it, white and colored.⁶

Similar psychological assumptions flow into Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), which cites Lillian Smith by name as an honorable exception to the rule of white indifference and seconds her judgment that segregation harms the moral being of all concerned. "All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality." Such a noxious effect on personhood itself ought certainly to be portrayable in fiction.

And yet the heroine and (arguably) the hero of *Strange Fruit* do not exhibit the deforming effects of segregation. Although the author envisioned *Strange Fruit* as a fable encoding the same truths proclaimed in *Killers of the Dream*, the fact is that it has only an

indirect, cousinly relationship to her didactic writings. It is as if fiction and doctrine spoke different dialects.

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Strange Fruit turns upon the double life of 26-year-old Tracy Deen (white), caught between his love affair with the younger Nonnie Anderson (black, though light-skinned) and his engagement in the eyes of a Georgia community to the prim and proper young lady across the street, Dorothy Pusey (white). Deen seems to feel precious little of the guilt over transgressing the color line that Lillian Smith's didactic writings would lead us to expect. According to the psychosexual theorizing of *Killers of the Dream*, a raging guilt lies at the dead center of the white psyche;⁷ yet Deen seeks to get out of his relationship with Nonnie not because he can no longer bear the thought of loving someone of an inferior race (a feat he has managed for years without great strain) but because he can no longer hold out against the pressure of family and community and craves the approval that marriage to Dorothy Pusey will bring. At the beginning of *Strange Fruit* we learn that a revival meeting is in progress, and the conception of the novel calls for Deen to suffer not a crisis of conscience but an inability to resist the demands, suggestions, entreaties and expectations that besiege him, a nonbeliever, in a season of religious fervor. Informing Nonnie at a critical point that he has given Dorothy a ring, he confesses pathetically, "Mother's so glad."⁸

Lest we forget that *Strange Fruit* is a work of fiction and not a socio-psychological study, its plot rests on the contrivance of a double coincidence. Much as Odysseus happens to be

released from Calypso's island just as the crisis in Ithaca reaches its breaking point, matters come to a head at the beginning of *Strange Fruit*, with Nonnie now pregnant, her brother coincidentally just returned to Maxwell with the intent of rescuing her from its confines, and the town also coincidentally in the throes of a revival, "the time folks give up their sins" (SF 2); Nonnie herself being Deen's sin, at least in the eyes of others. But how is he to abandon her? With help from a poorly chosen mentor—none other than the evangelist stirring up the town—Deen arrives at what looks to him like a tidy solution to his troubles: he will pay a black man, his servant Henry McIntosh, to marry Nonnie, thereby all at once protecting her from scandal (as if anything could possibly silence the tongues of Maxwell), freeing himself to wed the good Dorothy, and keeping open the possibility of sly visits to Nonnie after the fact. (If Deen were seeking to appease his own conscience rather than the community, he would not be dreaming of these trysts before proposing his scheme to Nonnie.) From Deen's lame attempt to carry out this delusional arrangement the catastrophe of the novel follows with shocking speed and inevitability.

A college graduate reduced to a menial looking after a brain-damaged toddler, Nonnie Anderson poses a stunning exception to the rule that the humiliations visited by segregation embitter the soul. "I'm happy as I am," she says. "I've always been happy" (SF 90). These are not just words. Endowed with a strange serenity or "superiority to hurt" (23), Nonnie simply does not act like someone whose character has been scarred by the injuries she meets with daily. In the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" King envisions a six-year-old child who begins to contract a sense of inferiority when she learns why she can't visit an amusement park; in the first chapter of *Strange Fruit* the obscenities of a white youth who tries to pull off her clothes

leave the six-year-old Nonnie unwounded. Her attachment to Tracy Deen dates to the moment he put a stop to the boy's assault, grows romantic as she comes to imagine him her Galahad, and persists undiminished for years over the course of his comings and goings. Some may object to the portrayal of Nonnie as a quietist who utters not a word of protest of things as they are, evidently because her being is filled with love of Tracy Deen.⁹ In reply it can be said that the figure of a lover who is "completely passive, completely unchanging" over years of vicissitudes—like Nonnie—is of ancient lineage and bears within "some precious kernel of folk humanity," as Bakhtin observes.¹⁰ In any case, it is clear that Lillian Smith did not blunder into portraying the heroine of *Strange Fruit* in a manner inconsistent with her own precepts but crafted her as a character with a distinctive grace and a love for another that challenges understanding.

It appears that by idealizing Tracy Deen to the point of naming him her knight at the age of "most thirteen" (*SF* 93), Nonnie guards herself from the crudity of the males, both white and black, who beset her. She does not flee a reality that has become too prosaic like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina, but constructs a romance in order to weather reality as it is. In artlessly confiding to Deen, at the same age, "I belong to you" (93), she means not that she is Deen's to dispose of but that her attachment to him is her security against the overtures and insults of others. (In a roughly similar way, others might not dare assail a servant who worked for, "belonged to," the Deen family.) As she grows into her sexuality, she apparently envisions sex as a giving of herself to Deen. All of this has exactly nothing to do with the author's theory of segregation, according to which pollution is entirely a white obsession; but in the light of their history Deen's attempt to dispose of Nonnie in the end seems nothing less than a betrayal. He

betrays Nonnie because it is easier than breaking with Dorothy Pusey, not because he sees her as subhuman, and Nonnie as a child tells Deen she belongs to him not because segregation has so degraded her that she views herself as chattel but because by idealizing Deen as her defender she shields herself from the degradations that others seek to inflict.

If Nonnie's very character had been distorted by the system of segregation under which she has lived her entire life, she would lack self-respect; and lacking self-respect, she would presumably accept the \$200 (a sum representing more than a year's wages) which Tracy Deen offers in an attempt to buy her off and thereby free himself to wed the young lady he is expected to wed. Nonnie does no such thing. She does not touch the money, quite as if it were polluted—as in fact it is. "He held the package [containing the money] out, but Nonnie's hands were motionless on the picket fence" (*SF* 152). The money is untouchable because it means that Nonnie has a price and that she accepts marriage to the Deen servant Henry McIntosh, who has already joyfully pocketed \$100 from Deen to act as her husband in the eyes of the world.¹¹ If for the romance heroine there is "a fate worse than death,"¹² for Nonnie Anderson that fate would be marriage to Henry McIntosh. And in a wrenching turn of events for which irony is too weak a word, none other than her imagined protector subjects her to that prospect.

It is in this connection and this connection only that the word "fuckin" appears in the text of *Strange Fruit*. As Deen makes the breathtaking proposal that she marry Henry McIntosh so that her child (which is also to say, *his* child) will appear to have been born in wedlock, Nonnie flashes back to a moment when she was eleven and upon meeting her on the way home from school, Henry proposed with a lewd grin, "Say, how about fuckin with me?" (*SF* 152). (When she tells Deen two years later that males have learned "it's no use" accosting her

[93], Nonnie appears to refer to overtures like this.) Despite references to repressed memories and mental fortifications in Lillian Smith's didactic writings, there is no indication that Nonnie buried the memory of this incident because it was so shocking; on the contrary, the text of *Strange Fruit* implies that the moment left an indelible impression because upon learning about it, her mother, a moralist, taught Nonnie to hate "lousy minds" like Henry's (152). As for the unprintable word, the jolt of seeing it in print should not distract us from the outrageousness of the simple word "Say," connoting as it does a casual suggestion, a matter of no weight. In context, the obscenity is Tracy Deen's proposition that Nonnie now marry Henry McIntosh: an obscenity not less because Tracy adds, "But if he ever—if he dares touch you, you come straight to me" (152). Are we to imagine that Henry will marry Nonnie on the condition that he is never to touch her?¹³ Only if Nonnie had been profoundly debased by segregation would she consent to marry for Deen's convenience a man she detests. As it is, she is no more tainted by the obscenity of Deen's proposal than Marina in *Pericles* is defiled by the brothel that holds her.

How is it that Deen comes to believe in a preposterous scheme to get rid of and yet provide for this woman of unusual physical and moral beauty? He does so because it is suggested to him privately, and in so many words, by the same revivalist whose sermon he listens to with blank boredom in the early pages of the novel. ("The same old stuff he'd heard all his life" [*SF* 29].) Just as Deen hopes to be welcomed back into the community of white Maxwell like a prodigal son, and just as he hopes that once free of Nonnie he will enjoy the "new life" of one born again (126-27), so he accepts every word of preacher Dunwoodie's scheme for the amendment of his life as if it were a revealed truth. (Like a profane reduction of the central Christian concept of redemption, Deen will be freed from captivity [to Nonnie] by

the payment of a ransom [\$300 in total].) Outside the pages of *Strange Fruit* Lillian Smith maintains that the system of segregation that decrees the strict repression of the black race on the one hand and the sexual impulse on the other is underwritten by Christian belief. The catastrophe of *Strange Fruit* ensues when a protagonist who avowedly lacks such belief (54; 59; 94) tries to reinstate himself in the community of good citizens by adopting every syllable of a preacher's advice for getting rid of his lover and returning to the fold. Contrary to what the reader of Smith's didactic writings would expect, then, it is not because Tracy Deen is a man of Christian ideals but because a preacher's scheme offers an irresistibly cheap substitute for these ideals that he commits the outrage that precipitates the tragedy of *Strange Fruit*.

Just as Tracy Deen does not devise a scheme for buying his way out of his troubles but borrows it root and branch from a traveling evangelist, so he borrows from his mother the \$300 he needs to make all well. It seems our hero finds it easier to lean on others than to think and act independently. Representing as it does a wretched attempt to escape through the back door from a crisis of his own making, his proposal to Nonnie (a sort of vile parody of a proposal of marriage) exposes Deen as a moral failure. *Strange Fruit* does not imply that he suddenly became a failure when Nonnie fell pregnant and his fidelity was put to the test, but that he was a failure already and Nonnie's love for him was such that it did not concern her. It would be straining argument to claim that segregation has made Tracy Deen the person whom an itinerant preacher gives ideas to, a mother funds, a servant is to stand in for, and the young lady across the way is to make respectable: a kind of active nonentity. The man's problem is that he is weak, not warped. He is like anyone and everyone else, Southern or not, who stands convicted of that notorious mid-20th-century failing, inauthenticity or bad faith or moral

cowardice. If sheer will is “that adventurous instrument which makes [the existentialist hero] so different from sticks and stones and billiard balls and greengrocers and bank managers,”¹⁴ the weak-willed Tracy Deen lacks the resolve to commit himself one way or the other, evidently intending not to break with Nonnie definitively but to keep her for himself even after marrying Dorothy Pusey.

King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” deplores “the paralyzing chains of conformity.” Pressed by respectable others to act with propriety and unable at last to hold out against them, Tracy Deen is unmistakably and unforgettably portrayed as a conformist. And his lack of independence stands out all the more against the nascent independence of his sister, who was subject to much the same influences but has managed to carve out some autonomy in opposition to her redoubtable mother—the same woman made “so glad” by Tracy’s now-formal engagement. Laura Deen is aware, moreover, that she and her brother make for a study in contrast. As she waits to hear his steps, not knowing he has been killed, she thinks to herself, “He didn’t have it in him to go straight. . . . It was as if he had to fail—as she had to succeed.” A few minutes later: “Why had he always failed and she succeeded?” (*SF* 165). Laura is more correct than she knows, for it is in a misconceived attempt to go straight—to get rid of Nonnie so that he can wed the belle across the street, as his parents wish—that Tracy gets himself murdered. Afterwards, Laura, assuming that Nonnie is the killer, wants to ask her, “What did he do that gave you the courage?” (217). Strangely lacking in anger, this question rightly divines that Tracy Deen was not in the wrong place at the wrong time but brought death upon himself by his own actions.

If *Strange Fruit* hinges upon Tracy Deen's scheme for buying his way out of his entanglement with Nonnie, he gets this bright notion from Brother Dunwoodie only because his mother arranged for the two to meet and evidently briefed the evangelist about his double life. That Deen walked compliantly into this set trap is another example of his ineffectuality. Does Lillian Smith mean to imply that he became the failure he is at the hands of an overbearing mother? ("Could [Laura Deen] not see that all her life Alma had slaved to make something out of that boy?" thinks the mother, deaf to the irony of her choice of words [*SF* 47].) After all, there was a time when the psychoanalytically inclined, and Lillian Smith was one of them, found such explanations compelling. Yet Deen was not so incapacitated by his mother that he was unable to serve in France during the First World War.¹⁵ Besides, the text of *Strange Fruit* does not show Alma programming Deen for failure; if the reader intuits that she has already done so, that presumption is read into the text. Nor, for that matter, does the theory of the mammy advanced in *Killers of the Dream* account for the love affair between Nonnie and Tracy Deen. That Tracy Deen was nursed by Henry McIntosh's mother and years later fell in love with Nonnie does not establish that his feelings for his nurse somehow evolved into or determined his feelings for Nonnie. For the reader of *Strange Fruit*, the theory that "white male desire of the black woman [is] founded on an incestuous desire for the (black) mother"¹⁶ is an incongruity, as if a passage from a textbook had been patched into a work of fiction. Deen's love of a beautiful young woman who loves *him* requires no explanation, let alone a forced one.

What about Deen's killer, Ed Anderson? Having returned from Washington, D. C., to Maxwell with the intention of removing his sister Nonnie from its hopelessness, Ed resolves on murder almost immediately after overhearing Henry McIntosh boast drunkenly in a café that he

has been paid \$100 to marry Nonnie. Whereas die-hard segregationists used to ask ritually, “Would you want your sister to marry a black man?”, in this case a black man explodes upon learning that his sister is to marry a certain member of his own race, albeit for a white man’s benefit. (It does not occur to Ed that no power on earth could actually make Nonnie marry Henry McIntosh.) After cursing Henry with the ultimate racial epithet and knocking him to the floor, “Ed turned away from the still man, stumbled out of the café. He had no more time to waste on Henry McIntosh. No more time to waste on n-----s [my elision]. Only Tracy Deen’s face could he see, only Deen’s slow, tired, sarcastic voice rang in his ears” (*SF* 148). Some might say this sequence of events, from blind rage directed at Henry McIntosh to the same directed at Tracy Deen, shows Ed Anderson transferring a visceral hatred of his own race into an intention to kill the man who would donate his sister to a Henry McIntosh. If Ed’s murder of Deen is really just a disguised expression of self-hatred, then Lillian Smith’s dictum, “humiliation injures character,” comes to life at a fateful crux of the plot of *Strange Fruit*. But this is a highhanded use of the word *really*. To construe the killing of Deen as an inverted form of self-hatred rather than a morally fitting (if legally indefensible) response to an outrage is to indulge in the interpretive license that ultimately eroded the credibility of psychoanalytic criticism.¹⁷ If Ed *really* just hates his own race, why does he lament that “A decent educated Negro—her own kind—wasn’t good enough for [Nonnie]!” (148) even as forms the intention to kill Deen?

One character in *Strange Fruit* may illustrate the author’s thesis of emotional stunting: Henry McIntosh himself, whose inability to keep quiet about his newfound wealth suggests a thoughtless surrender to impulse: the same quality that inspired a lewd suggestion to an 11-year-old girl. After Tracy Deen’s body is found, the town idiot vows that he saw Henry kill Deen

(when in fact Henry simply dragged the body off the footpath where he found it), and it is on the strength of this testimony—literally a tale told by an idiot—that Henry is hanged and burned by local vigilantes. The horror of the execution, which in the ancient tradition of tragedy is vividly rendered without being shown, reduces all commentary on Henry’s undeveloped mental life to irrelevance. (As shocking as this collective murder is, it is clearly not modeled on the barbaric psychodrama described in *Killers of the Dream* wherein the lynched man is shot by every single member of the mob, “a receptacle for every man’s forbidden feelings” [KD 162].)

In the midst of proposing to Nonnie that she marry someone she happens to loathe both physically and morally, Tracy Deen seems to sense that he has made a great mistake. “And suddenly it was as if he had begun to see things through her eyes . . .” (SF 152). From his misbegotten scheme to Henry’s fatal error of blurting it out in the presence of Ed Anderson to Ed’s wholly mistaken assumption that “they’d made a whore out of” Nonnie (148) to the execution of an innocent man, *Strange Fruit* tells of a catastrophic chain of errors. For Nonnie the outcome is tragic, not in some academic sense but simply in that events inflict on her a grief beyond measure and comprehension. Not only does her idealized lover reveal himself as indescribably base but he is murdered by her own brother, who in fleeing the scene leaves another to suffer certain death in his place. We can scarcely begin to perceive this unthinkable vortex of events through Nonnie’s eyes or fathom the emotions set off in her by it. An authentic tragedy like this one resists all efforts to temper it or explain it away, and no such pedantry appears in the pages of *Strange Fruit*.

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Lillian Smith would have disagreed with many of the readings of *Strange Fruit* offered here. In a letter written shortly after its publication, she maintained that it *does* document segregation's deforming effect, portraying "a whole way of life that has crippled both white and Negro personalities."¹⁸ In another letter Smith specifically affirmed that his mother makes Tracy Deen the failure he is: "Tracy, weak, yes; but made so by a dominating woman who was a symbol of our era . . . a modern Romeo weakened by a mother who sucked the life and courage out of him."¹⁹ The author seems to forget that she made Deen a soldier who served honorably in the First World War. So committed was Smith to the theory of causes rooted in family dynamics that she held that Ed Anderson kills Tracy Deen "because *Tracy was his rival*" for the love of Nonnie,²⁰ a pronouncement that will bewilder every reader of *Strange Fruit* except those able to make out the invisible evidence of Ed's incestuous passion. (If Deen is Ed Anderson's romantic rival, why does Ed wait to kill him till he is in the process of abandoning Nonnie?) As if *Strange Fruit* were a Freudian case history, Smith also asserted privately that Alma Deen destroys the nude figurine of her daughter's lesbian confidante out of "angered jealousy."²¹ While to the reader of *Strange Fruit* Laura Deen's stirrings of lesbianism are a sign of growing independence, according to the author the unlucky Laura was "pushed by [her mother] into the by-paths of Lesbianism," a way of life judged by Smith a "deviation."²² The theory of the domineering mother who drives her child into homosexuality by "closing the path to mature genitality" is laid down in *Killer of the Dream* (153), whose original readers did not know that Smith herself was a lesbian and could hardly have been forced into that mode of

sexual expression by a mother described in the same pages as “a wistful creature who loved beautiful things like lace and sunsets and flowers in a vague inarticulate way and took good care of her children” (33).²³ The deep readings of *Strange Fruit* propounded by the author in letters reflect psychosexual theories and precepts as questionable as the ex cathedra judgment of homosexuality in *Killers of the Dream*.

The idea that *Strange Fruit* exists on its own, independent of the teachings of *Killers of the Dream*, did not come easily to Lillian Smith. As a letter written shortly before its publication suggests, she preferred to believe that *Strange Fruit* portrays in narrative form the deep truths of the psyche unriddled in *Killers of the Dream*—in other words, that it is not just a novel but a fable, and a universal one at that. After claiming that the family drama enacted in its pages stands for “the unending tragedy of parents and children”—even though Tracy Deen’s parents are alive and Nonnie’s are not (her father having died when she was five)—Smith went on to suggest, astonishingly, that the same underlying dynamic is responsible not only for “the First and Second World Wars” but “the story of mankind” in toto. She added, “Maybe no one but me sees all this in the book; but all the time I wrote it I felt that I was writing a kind of world fable.”²⁴ How ironic that *Strange Fruit* should achieve universality by virtue of indiscernible motives like Ed Anderson’s incestuous passion or a lynch mob’s guilt over its sins. It is fortunate for the reader that the author’s belief in such covert determinants of behavior did not lead her to write them into the text itself. There is no telling what *Strange Fruit* would have looked like if Smith had not had the native wisdom to rein in her concept of human life as one great psychodrama and allow the tale an autonomous existence. “I don’t like books where points are pushed too hard,” she confessed.²⁵

It was presumably because she wanted to learn about Tracy Deen rather than making him a cardboard figure of her own preconceptions that Smith found it necessary to stop and think about him for months at a time during the seven years of the composition of *Strange Fruit*.²⁶ If Deen had simply mirrored the white mind so authoritatively anatomized in *Killers of the Dream*, no such period of reflection would have been needed, because Smith would already have known his psyche inside out. In the end she came to envision Deen not as a faithful reflection of white Southern culture at all, but as one who failed to adjust to it.²⁷ To a reader looking for congruence between Smith's didactic writings and *Strange Fruit*, Deen fails as a character; "we never quite grasp what it is that drives him."²⁸ To a reader who takes the novel on its own terms, it is clear that Deen seeks to reinstate himself in the good graces of white Maxwell despite his lack of religious conviction, his lack of love of Dorothy Pusey, and his dubious commitment even to a final severance from Nonnie: a sort of maneuvering that makes him more, not less, credible as a character.

To Lillian Smith, as we have seen, Alma Deen is a vampire and a "symbol" of something wrong with an entire era. To the reader of *Killers of the Dream* she represents all those Southern mothers who inculcate the system of taboos on which segregation is founded. Whether she is a monster, a symbol of an age, or a representative of Southern womanhood, she has lost the particularity she possesses in *Strange Fruit*, where she appears as a strongly drawn matriarch, puritanical in her aversion to the body, her care of the family's pennies, and her vigilance over her children's hearts and minds.

In reply to the self-posed question, "What do you want *Strange Fruit* to do?" Lillian Smith answered, "It was written because the author wanted . . . to set down the 'truth' about

human relationships as she sees it.”²⁹ *Killers of the Dream*, in its determination to bare the most unspeakable secrets of the Southern psyche, lays down the truth with no scare quotes. There, in sum, is the distinction between the two works. The saving grace of *Strange Fruit* is that it does not pretend to doctrinal truth, though its tonal difference from the other work is precarious at times, subject to narrowing and erasure. When “a door slam[s] in his mind” and suddenly Tracy can see only his lover’s race (*SF* 40), we behold before us an exact enactment of the principle that southern whites learn to conform “by closing door after door until one’s mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality,” as *Killers of the Dream* puts it (29). That work likens the South to “an iron box” (75); of Dottie Pusey, the young lady Deen is expected to marry but does not desire, it is said that “all of her life [was] completely contained in the rigid little box which shut the right way to do things away from the wrong” (*SF* 28-29). Elsewhere, Laura Deen comes close to sounding like someone under the direct tutelage of Lillian Smith; and if Smith had required her characters to think and act in conformity with her precepts, and in particular her thesis of the soul-poisoning effect of segregation, readers would have felt that they themselves were being tutored. As it is, we have a heroine blessedly immune to mental poisons and a hero whose moral failures cannot be blamed on the iniquity of segregation, notwithstanding the author’s claim to the contrary.³⁰ Certainly both Nonnie Anderson and Tracy Deen live under a hideous regime, but their thoughts and deeds are not determined by it. When Deen, leaving the false impression that he has a gambling debt, borrows \$300 from his mother to buy his way out of his relation with Nonnie, he does not behave like an automaton doing what it was constructed to do but makes a decision at once peculiarly unsavory and, as it turns out, fateful.

If Lillian Smith had used *Strange Fruit* to enforce her judgments about the deeply held secrets of the Southern psyche, it would not have been worth the reader's investment. At the time of its publication in 1944 she had presumably already arrived at the psychoanalytic conclusions announced in *Killers of the Dream* a few years later; indeed, the lynch mob in search of Henry McIntosh is said to be "hunt[ing] a black victim to sacrifice to an unknown god of whom they were sore afraid" (*SF* 221)—a transposition of the language of the later work into the earlier one. But a novel conceived and designed to stage ready-made conclusions as to the twisted soul of the South would have been a morality play with walking stereotypes. As we learn in *Killers of the Dream*, Anglo-Saxons are and have always been fundamentally guilt-ridden and sadistic: sadistic because guilt-ridden (*KD* 118). The black race is just the opposite, so that "by the historical 'accident' of slavery, our slaveholding puritan ancestors were juxtaposed to a dark people, natural, vigorous, unashamed, full of laughter and song and dance, who, without awareness that sex is 'sin,' had reached genital maturity" (*KD* 116). The artist in Lillian Smith had the sense to exclude this lamentable caricature from *Strange Fruit*.

To those who measure Lillian Smith the novelist by Lillian Smith the crusader, the worst of the shortcomings of *Strange Fruit* will surely be the portrayal of Nonnie as a beautiful quietist whose characteristic act, if it can be called an act, is waiting for Tracy Deen (as in the novel's first sentence). Two decades after *Strange Fruit* the author sketched a young sit-inner who goes into action because his mother, who reads like a spiritual descendant of this very figure, is denied a place at a lunch counter:

I saw Mom, suddenly. Right there standing in front of my whole life. Gray-eyed, gentle, poised. My god, where did her serenity come from! She'd never said a bitter word in her life against the whites, not to me; and she wasn't a handkerchief-head, either; talk about white folks giving you back your "dignity"—Mom's dignity couldn't have been taken from her, it went down to the center of her soul.³¹

Nonnie, too, is gentle, poised, serene, without bitterness, and it is as if Lillian Smith in 1964 set out to redeem her passivity by making someone very like her an inspiration of the civil-rights movement. In *Strange Fruit* itself, however, there is no suggestion that anything good comes of or can come of the suffering inflicted on Nonnie—the violent collapse of her world. Any such message would be foreign to the animating vision of tragedy.

In a review of *Strange Fruit* in the year of its publication, Malcolm Cowley wrote that "Everything that happens in this story seems to have deep roots in childhood, in custom, in an evil past that nobody is brave enough to reject."³² A world where the past hangs over the present like a spell is indeed ripe for tragedy. And yet, that Tracy Deen became inept, base and faithless at the hands of a tyrannical mother is more than we know—much more. In the case of Nonnie, however, we learn just enough about her early attachment to Deen to acquire some sense of its roots. Nonnie first tells Deen she belongs to him at the age of six (a scene given in flashback in the novel's opening chapter), reiterates this message six years later after reading of the Knights of the Round Table, and in time gives herself to Deen sexually, as if ratifying her fixed idea in deeds. Thus, by the time Deen undertakes to dispose of her like something that literally belongs to him, Nonnie has been enthralled for most of her life to a romantic

conception of him as her hero, an illusion the more powerful in that she authored it and grew up with it. Eventually the words “I *am* yourn” spoken by a six-year-old picking flowers come back to haunt Nonnie like a curse. This ultimately tragic account of a young woman living in a dream not only owes nothing to *Killers of the Dream* but invokes a sense of “dream” quite without the social uplift of the other usage.³³

And it is because the tale she actually wrote comports poorly with the revelations of *Killers of the Dream* that Lillian Smith struggled privately to reconcile the two. Toward the end of her life, she even claimed that *Strange Fruit* “is a book about dreamers compelled to kill their own dreams”;³⁴ but what precisely she meant remains unknown.

¹ Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995; orig. pub. 1938), 204.

² Lillian Smith, “Personal History of ‘Strange Fruit’: A Statement of Purpose and Intention,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, Feb. 17, 1945, 9-10.

³ Beth Harrison, “Lillian Smith as Author and Activist: The Critical Reception of *Strange Fruit*,” *Southern Quarterly* 35 (1997), 17-22.

⁴ Lillian Smith. *Killers of the Dream* (New York: Norton, 1994; orig. pub. 1949), 122. Hereafter abbreviated as *KD*.

⁵ Smith, *KD* 39. On Smith’s prophetic fury and psychoanalytic leanings, see Fred Hobson, *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983), 307-23.

⁶ Lillian Smith, “Lillian Smith Answers Some Questions about *Strange Fruit*,” *Georgia Review* 66 (2012): 477; runs 474-79. Hereafter abbreviated as “Self-interview.”

⁷ See e.g. *KD*, 101, 152.

⁸ Lillian Smith, *Strange Fruit* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1972; orig. pub. 1944), 151. Hereafter abbreviated *SF*.

⁹ For a critique of the politically deficient portrayal of Nonnie Anderson, see Tracy Thompson, "Southern Cassandra," *American Scholar* 88 (2019): 104-10; Cheryl Johnson, "The Language of Sexuality and Silence in *Strange Fruit*," *Signs* 27 (2001): 1-22.

¹⁰ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 105.

¹¹ On the sale of a wife in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, see my discussion in *The Apple of Discord: Ten Tortured Marriages* (Viva Books: New Delhi, 2009). The auction of Susan Henchard is shocking but not utterly indecent; Deen's attempt to get free of Nonnie by marrying her off is indecent in the highest degree.

¹² Northrop Frye, *Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976), 82.

¹³ The Second Nun's Tale of the *Canterbury Tales* tells of a woman, Cecilia, who is not to be touched by her husband.

¹⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 225.

¹⁵ Tracy's recollections of France establish that he served unremarkably and was therefore not so undone by his mother that he was unable to serve at all. The issue of American men rendered unfit by overbearing mothers was a hot topic during World War II when *Strange Fruit* was written. My thanks to Michael Mayer for light on this point.

¹⁶ Richard King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford UP, 1980), 188.

¹⁷ On Ed's father's urge to kill a white man who spoke indecently of his (Ern's) wife, see *SF* 189.

¹⁸ Letter to Frank Taylor, May 2, 1944 in *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith*, ed. Margaret Rose Gladney (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 83.

¹⁹ Letter to Jerry Bick, Sept. 9, 1961 in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 279. Alma Deen never gave Tracy a chance: 72.

²⁰ *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 279; emphasis in the original.

²¹ Letter to Margaret Sullivan, Dec. 9, 1965 in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 338.

²² Letter to Jerry Bick, Sept. 9, 1961 in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 279.

²³ She also burns bad books: 31. On Alma Deen as book burner, see *SF* 48.

²⁴ Letter to Frank Taylor, July 26, 1943 in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 72-73.

²⁵ Letter to Frank Taylor, July 26, 1943, 73.

²⁶ Self-interview, 477.

²⁷ Self-interview, 478.

²⁸ King, *A Southern Renaissance*, 192.

²⁹ Self-interview, 479.

³⁰ Letter to Jerry Bick, Oct. 27, 1961 in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 288.

³¹ Lillian Smith, *Our Faces, Our Words* (New York: Norton, 1964), 27-28. At one point this work actually cites *Strange Fruit*; see 126.

³² Malcolm Cowley, "Southways," *New Republic*, March 6, 1944, 321; runs 320-21.

³³ An ad for the first edition of *KD* identifies "the dream" as "the dream of freedom on which our Western civilization is based." Reproduced in Matthew Teutsch, "Lillian Smith and Martin Luther King, Jr.," <https://interminablerambling.medium.com/lillian-smith-and-martin-luther-king-jr-edfd794c752a>. The post is dated July 24, 2020.

³⁴ Letter to Felicia Geffen, Oct. 16, 1965 in *How Am I to Be Heard?*, 327.