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## The Serpent of Lust in the Southern Garden: the Theme of Miscegenation in Cable, Twain, Faulkner and Warren.

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THE SERPENT OF LUST IN THE SOUTHERN GARDEN:  
THE THEME OF MISCEGENATION IN CABLE, TWAIN,  
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THE SERPENT OF LUST IN THE SOUTHERN GARDEN:  
THE THEME OF MISCEGENATION IN CABLE,  
TWAIN, FAULKNER AND WARREN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
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CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS . . . . .	ii
ABSTRACT . . . . .	iv
CHAPTER	
I. MISCEGENATION AS LITERARY THEME AND METAPHOR .	1
1. Guilt and Retribution . . . . .	12
2. Miscegenation and the South's Sin . . . . .	20
3. The Mulatto as Victim-Avenger . . . . .	29
4. The Question of Identity . . . . .	34
II. GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE AND THE RIDDLE OF SOUTHERN EXPERIENCE . . . . .	39
III. PUDD'NHEAD WILSON: MARK TWAIN'S EXPANSION OF THE THEME . . . . .	67
IV. TWO VISIONS OF SOUTHERN HISTORY: <u>ABSALOM,</u> <u>ABSALOM!</u> AND <u>GO DOWN, MOSES</u> . . . . .	92
V. THE MULATTO'S SEARCH FOR SELF: JOE CHRISTMAS AND AMANTHA STARR . . . . .	127
CONCLUSION . . . . .	167
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	172
VITA . . . . .	183

## ABSTRACT

Throughout its history, this nation has been deeply race-conscious, and, as a result, the concept of miscegenation has generated a profound influence upon the American literary imagination. Quite naturally, this influence has been felt most forcefully by writers in the South, where the question of sexual relations across the color-line is still surrounded by sinister associations of horror, guilt and outrage of a particularly virulent sort. Despite the persistence with which Southern writers have returned to the theme of miscegenation, however, little has been done to explore the reasons behind their fascination with mixed blood, and few critics have addressed themselves to a systematic consideration of the unique literary potential of the theme.

In an effort to correct this situation in part, my dissertation begins by defining the dimensions of the theme of miscegenation through an analysis of a paradigmatic short story, Joel Chandler Harris' "Where's Duncan?" A careful reading of that story yields four fictional motifs that appear repeatedly in the works of other Southern writers: (1) a basic narrative pattern involving the progression from guilt to retribution; (2) a tendency to identify the particular "sin" of miscegenation with the racial "sins" of the South as a whole; (3) the portrayal of the character of mixed blood as both victim and avenger; and (4) the question of

the mulatto character's crisis of identity. I offer a hypothetical explanation for each of these aspects of the broader theme based on a survey of abolitionist tracts, anti-slavery fiction and antebellum travelogues treating the question of miscegenation in the South. I then proceed to trace the theme in the works of George Washington Cable, Mark Twain, William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren.

In works like "Tite Poulette," Madame Delphine and The Grandissimes, Cable uses the plight of the New Orleans quadroon caste to point up the dehumanizing aspects of the South's inheritance of racial wrongs. Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson is a novel which begins as an indictment of specific Southern shortcomings and ends as a bitter satire on the "damned human race" in general. It points toward the author's final conviction that "the skin of every human being contains a slave." Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses stand as the two most successful novels growing out of the theme of miscegenation and are dealt with in some detail. The final chapter of this study concerns itself with the way in which the identity crisis of the mulatto character prefigures the situation confronting contemporary man who is increasingly faced with a sense of alienation and uncertainty regarding who and what he is. Faulkner's Joe Christmas in Light in August and Warren's Amantha Starr in Band of Angels are remarkable cases in point.

Although this study is by necessity limited in focus, one of its purposes is to suggest the breadth of the tradi-



tion in question and to demonstrate the range of its literary potential.

## CHAPTER I

### MISCEGENATION AS LITERARY THEME AND METAPHOR

Characteristically, one might say, popular attitudes of the rest of this nation toward the South and, indeed, the South's attitudes toward itself have been both ambiguous and ambivalent throughout much of American history. On the one hand, the South has oftentimes been regarded as an idyllic land of plenty, blessed with a temperate climate and a rich fecundity of soil and inhabited by a happy and hospitable people for whom life is pleasure and pleasure a way of life. The hold this vision of the South exercises over the collective imagination of Americans is attested to by the willingness with which Northerners and Westerners alike continue to participate in the Old South nostalgia of Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the Wind, both as fiction and as cinema. On the other hand, however, the South has also been conceived of as a kind of nightmare world of torrid and stifling heat in which uncontrollable passions and senseless acts of violence become the outward manifestations of a blighting inner corruption, a secret sin poisoning the mainstreams of Southern life. In this connection, it is worth noting that Faulkner's first commercial success was Sanctuary (1931); and the reading-public's interest in lurid accounts of Southern depravity remains strong, as any trip to the corner newsstand

suffices to prove.

These two sharply contrasting visions of the South merge into a rather shaky synthesis in the minds of many Americans so that the South becomes at once attractive and repulsive, a land simultaneously blessed and cursed. Metaphor is one way of reconciling such seemingly irreconcilable popular feelings, and one of the oldest and most significant metaphors for expressing the ambivalence of the collective consciousness toward the South has been the image of the South as a spoiled garden, or, expressed in Biblical terms, Eden after the Fall.<sup>1</sup>

An 1887 Harper's article, "The Recent Movement in Southern Literature," provides an interesting example of this metaphor. Discussing the fiction of George Washington Cable, the author remarks that Cable writes of an "enchanted, semitropical realm, beautiful with flowers, yet marked by the

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<sup>1</sup> The general image of the New World Garden is, of course, of great significance throughout American literature. Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950) and Leo Marx's The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) are two classic studies that touch upon this question. The South, in particular, with its long growing season, conveniently lent itself to consideration as a garden of the world in early promotional literature like Captain John Smith's Generall Historie (1624). The title of William Byrd's Journey to the Land of Eden (1733) is clearly an outgrowth of this same tradition. In the agrarian and pastoral focus of Jefferson's Notes on Virginia (1785), the idea of the Southern garden is implicit; and slavery is the implicit corruptor of that garden. This notion deserves fuller attention than it has received previously, but it lies beyond the limits of the present study.

trail of the serpent."<sup>2</sup> This early critic's observation is a perceptive one, for Cable, a Southerner whose own ambivalence toward his native region was especially acute, implicitly evokes the same metaphor in an address delivered in 1890. Cable begins by cataloging the many ways in which the South has been blessed:

Natural beauty, military defensibility, harbors, navigation, mineral treasures, forests, fertility of soil, water supply from spring and cloud, equable climate, abundant room.<sup>3</sup>

However, Cable is quick to add that, in spite of all these advantages of a natural paradise, there is still "something wrong" in the South, something deeply wrong. For Cable that "something wrong," the serpent in the Southern garden, so to speak, is the burden of evil resulting from the white man's injustice toward the Negro.

It is instructive to compare Cable's view of the South with that of Isaac McCaslin, the youthful protagonist of Faulkner's "The Bear." Isaac, too, pictures the South in terms of a kind of paradisiacal garden, a natural Eden nevertheless cursed as the result of a regional sin inextricably bound up with the institution of slavery. That sin is dramatized for him when he learns that his grandfather had been guilty of miscegenation and of subsequently committing incest with his mulatto daughter. Significantly, in certain of

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<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Coleman, Harper's Magazine, 74 (1887), 840.

<sup>3</sup> "What the Negro Must Learn," in The Negro Question, ed. Arlin Turner (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 206.

Cable's works as well, the specific sin of miscegenation becomes a convenient fictional symbol for the South's broader guilt over the whole question of slavery and the racial wrongs arising from it.

It is hardly a coincidence that Cable and Faulkner, widely separated as they are by time, background, and temperament, should both have placed so great a stress on the theme of miscegenation in their respective writings, working with it in such a way that the traditional serpent of illicit and tabooed lust comes to represent that greater and multi-headed serpent, slavery. Rather, these two writers can be seen as working within a lengthy and easily discernible tradition to which virtually every significant Southern writer since the Civil War has contributed. This tradition has its emotional genesis in the sexual guilt and repressed self-condemnation of the Southern psyche and its literary roots in the abolitionist rhetoric, anti-slavery fiction, and fugitive slave narratives of the antebellum period. It is a highly fertile tradition, vital and broad enough to include writers of such violently antithetical viewpoints as the humane reformer Cable and the wildly Negrophobic Southern apologist Thomas Dixon, Jr., a tradition to which works as diverse in form and substance as Shirley Ann Grau's The Keepers of the House (1964) and Carson McCullers' Clock Without Hands (1961) can both be said to belong.

In the broadest sense, this tradition in American fiction is by no means purely Southern. The question of

mixed blood has long fascinated both the literary and public imaginations in this country and has been used by writers like Cooper and Howells, as well as by scores of pulp writers over the years. As Francis P. Gaines has remarked, to call the role of American works in which the theme of miscegenation appears would be tedious.<sup>4</sup> But significantly, it is in the works of Southern novelists that the theme receives the greatest attention and takes on the greatest power.

Curiously, up until this time little has been written concerning the importance of the theme of racial mixture in Southern literature. Scattered essays like Penelope Bullock's "The Mulatto in American Fiction,"<sup>5</sup> Gaines' "The Racial Bar Sinister in American Romance,"<sup>6</sup> and Jules Zanger's "The 'Tragic Octoroon' in Pre-Civil War Fiction"<sup>7</sup> taken together constitute a basic background for understanding certain aspects of the theme as it crops up in the history of Southern fiction. Such indispensable surveys as Sterling Brown's The Negro in American Fiction<sup>8</sup> and Nancy M. Tischler's Black

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<sup>4</sup> The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and Accuracy of a Tradition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924), p. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Phylon 6 (1945), 78-82. Although the term "mulatto" technically means a person who is half-white and half-Negro, Miss Bullock uses it in the broadest sense to denote anyone with a percentage of Negro blood. The present study follows her lead in this matter.

<sup>6</sup> South Atlantic Quarterly, 25 (1926), 396-402.

<sup>7</sup> American Quarterly, 18 (1966), 63-70.

<sup>8</sup> (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1968).

Masks: Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction<sup>9</sup> provide some indication of the vast extent to which the theme of miscegenation has intrigued the Southern literary imagination. The essays included in Images of the Negro in American Literature, edited by Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, likewise touch upon this question, in part.<sup>10</sup> Prior to this study, however, there has been no systematic attempt to account for the various thematic strains at work in this fictional tradition and little effort to trace them schematically in the work of the more outstanding Southern novelists since the Civil War.

For these reasons, the present study will concern itself with isolating and schematizing the basic theme of miscegenation by analyzing the way four selected Southern writers--Cable, Twain, Faulkner and Warren--have drawn upon it for fictional purposes. Pertinent works by each of these novelists will be examined in some detail, not only as they relate to the tradition in question, but also as they reflect the personal concerns of each author. They will be viewed alternately as cultural documents and as individual works of art. In this way, by concentrating on two of the most important Southern writers of the nineteenth century and two of the most important writers of the Southern Renaissance, this investigation hopes to make intelligible the theme of

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<sup>9</sup> (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

miscegenation both in terms of its significance in Southern consciousness and its immense literary potential, a potential that enables the theme, in the hands of more gifted writers, to transcend purely regional significance and take on universal implications.

Prior to speculating on the origins of what might honestly be termed the "myth" of miscegenation as it is to be treated in the works of these four writers, it is perhaps useful at this point to examine in some detail a fictional text that might be said to serve ideally as a kind of working paradigm of the way in which Post-Civil War Southern writers have approached the issue of miscegenation in their fiction. The text in question is that of a little-known short story by Joel Chandler Harris, a story in which that author reaches a level of technical sophistication and a depth of seriousness that far exceeds that to be found in his more familiar writings.

The story is entitled "Where's Duncan?," and its dramatic context is established at the very outset. An aged narrator, a white Southerner presumably of the upper class, feels himself compelled to relate to a second party (most likely the author himself in his actual role as journalist) a "happening" out of his youth, a series of events which has, he confesses, "pestered me at times when I ought to have been in my bed and sound asleep."<sup>11</sup> The narrator senses that

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<sup>11</sup> "Where's Duncan?" in Balaam and His Master and Other Sketches and Stories (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), p. 150.



the story he is about to tell is one of considerable importance, but he insists--in a spirit of naïve objectivity maintained throughout the narrative--that he lacks the skill necessary to tell it as it should be told. For this reason he is entrusting it to his silent listener, hoping that the latter will be better able to articulate the significance behind the events themselves. The story, as we have it, is the seemingly unedited version as the speaker himself delivers it, and the fact that Harris allows the hidden meaning of the story to emerge implicitly, rather than explicitly sermonizing over it, contributes powerfully to the work's final effectiveness.

The story is a tale of initiation on two levels. It begins with the speaker as a boy taking on his first position of adult responsibility and ends with his growing awareness of an evil at the very core of Southern life. As the narrative begins, the boy is entrusted with taking a wagonload of cotton to market. On the road, he encounters a "thick-set, dark-featured, black-bearded" stranger, a man who is to remain nameless throughout most of the rest of the tale and who finally hides behind an alias. The stranger agrees to accompany the boy on his difficult trip until the caravan in which they travel reaches that point toward which he is bound. At one point along the way, the stranger tells the boy a story in the form of a "riddle." It concerns a certain man who sold his own son to the "nigger traders." The narrator's youth and innocence prevent his understanding what

the stranger is getting at, but he is able to sense the tragic implications which surround such a tale:

I could not unriddle the riddle, but it seemed to hint at such villainy as I had read about in the books in my father's library. Here was a man who had sold his own son; that was<sup>12</sup> enough for me. It gave me matter to dream on....

At last, the caravan reaches the stranger's destination, a white plantation house set in the midst of a grove of beautiful trees, a fitting symbol of the plantation ideal. As the party prepares to camp for the night, an aged, though still handsome, mulatto woman arrives upon the scene and invites them to supper at the big house, hinting at the same time of her master's severe parsimony. The stranger greets this woman with the question "Where's Duncan?" and reiterates it several times. His question drives the woman into a frenzy, and she retires to the plantation house. Shortly thereafter, the stranger disappears.

That night the narrator is awakened from his sleep to find that the big house is on fire. As he and his friends arrive at the scene, they catch a glimpse of the mulatto woman struggling insanely with her master in the midst of the flames. She finally plunges a knife into him, and seconds later the entire house collapses. This culminating scene is presented with a kind of nightmarish realism which gives it a peculiarly Kafkaesque intensity. Through the juxtaposition of various images--the raging fire, the mulatto woman screaming "Where's Duncan?" at her terrified master, the final

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

collapse of the fiery house on its occupants--the narrator is able to achieve a vividly horrifying climax. Afterwards, the narrator learns from one of the Negroes present that the stranger, too, was in the house when it collapsed, rocking away in a corner, seemingly pleased by the hellish spectacle being played out before him.

What we have in this story is clearly a prototypical "Southern" tale, as Leslie Fiedler conceives of that sub-genre, a Gothic "series of bloody events, sexual by implication at least, played out . . . against a background of miasmatic swamps, live oak, Spanish moss, and the decaying house. . . ." <sup>13</sup> It is a fable in which, as Fiedler also says of the "Southern," is figured forth the "deepest guilts and fears of transplanted Europeans in a slaveholding community, or more properly, in a community which remembers having sent its sons to die in a vain effort to sustain slavery." <sup>14</sup> While Harris' narrator refuses to speculate aloud on the inner significance of the events he relates, that significance is quite clear to the student of contemporary Southern literature. Here is a story constructed around a mythical pattern of guilt and retribution, a pattern which will arise time and again, in whole or in part, in the works of subsequent writers. It is a story in which miscegenation and the unnatural treatment of bi-racial offspring conveniently stand

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<sup>13</sup> The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 18-19.

for the South's real sins--the prostitution of an entire race of black bodies for the gratification of the white man's "lust" for wealth and power and the resultant violation of those "family ties" traditionally associated with the Christian notion of the brotherhood of man. As such, it prefigures remarkably in terms of basic outline a later work, Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936), with Harris' stranger as a prototype of the victim-avenger Charles Bon in Faulkner's novel. Both stories end significantly with a conflagration that reduces a great plantation house--the physical realization of the antebellum dream--to smoldering ashes. Indeed, in the person of Harris' narrator himself, with his conscience troubled by a vague, unarticulated and illogical sense of complicity in the events he relates, it is tempting to see a type of the narrator in Absalom, Absalom!--the neurotic and history-haunted Quentin Compson, who, in struggling to understand the human truths contained in the concrete events of the past, in turn prefigures, as Louis Rubin suggests, the contemporary Southern writer himself.<sup>15</sup>

Viewed in this way, as a paradigm of the basic myth of miscegenation as it is to appear in the works of the writers with whom this study will be concerned, Harris' short story can be broken down into four thematic motifs that are to play a significant role in subsequent fiction; these are: (1) the archetypal pattern of guilt and retribu-

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<sup>15</sup> The Writer in the South: Studies in a Literary Community (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 2.

tion noted above; (2) the tendency to identify the specific sin of miscegenation with the sin of slavery and caste as a whole; (3) the dual role of the mulatto protagonist as both victim and avenger; and, (4) the implicit, yet important, question of the mulatto's identity. In Harris' story, as in certain of the other works under consideration here, each of these elements naturally complements the others so that they finally tend to coalesce to form a single, potent fictional structure.

At this point, before beginning our examination of these thematic strains as they function within the works of Cable, Twain and the others, some speculation as to the origins of each of these aspects of the broader theme of miscegenation is useful; and although such speculation must by necessity remain hypothetical, it helps to account logically for the peculiar fascination the question of miscegenation has exercised over the Southern literary imagination.

#### 1. Guilt and Retribution

The theme of guilt and punishment is the most basic element of our total thematic structure. It is most basic because it contains within itself the seeds of a narrative sequence involving one of the oldest of Western mythical constructs, a theme of immense significance within the framework of the Judeo-Christian tradition. While the basic pattern of human transgression and divine punishment is applicable to cases of individual culpability, it is most powerful when conceived of in collective terms, as it is embodied

in the rhetoric of the Old Testament prophets who saw in historical adversity the wrath of a righteous God angered into punitive actions by the collective sins of Israel. St. Augustine, with his own peculiarly developed sense of the communal nature of sin, was only one of several patristic writers who were fond of evoking the threat of collective punishment for collective sins. This same Old Testament-Augustinian stress on the societal species of sin was introduced into this country quite early via New England Calvinism. Indeed, the Puritan jeremiad, taking its name from that most virulent of Hebrew prophets, Jeremiah, was to become a characteristic form of sermon in which the divine punishments visited upon the Children of Israel were viewed as a type of those calamities the New World Israelites might expect should they refuse to humble themselves through acts of communal penance.<sup>16</sup>

Charles A. Barker has noted that from its earliest times American anti-slavery thought has been an outgrowth of religious sentiment.<sup>17</sup> In view of this fact, it is natural enough that anti-slavery writers should have come to conceive of the wrong of slavery in accordance with religious terms. Picturing slavery as the South's regional sin, they warned slaveholders of the impending wrath of God. The Quaker

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<sup>16</sup> A thorough discussion of the jeremiad appears in Perry Miller's The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 27-39.

<sup>17</sup> American Convictions: Cycles of Public Thought, 1660-1850 (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), p. 151.

visionary, John Woolman, wrote, following a 1746 tour of the Southern colonies, that Negro bondage was a "dark gloominess hanging over the land," and he prophesied that "the future consequences will be grievous to posterity."<sup>18</sup> With the consolidation of abolitionist feelings after 1830, the tendency to identify slavery as a sin became even more overt. Article Two of the Constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society (1833), expressly defined slavery as "a heinous crime in the sight of God."<sup>19</sup> William Ellery Channing warned in 1841 that slavery was an evil that Christians could not afford to ignore, "a guilt which the justice of God cannot wink at, and on which insulted humanity, religion, and freedom call down fearful retribution."<sup>20</sup> Theodore Parker, waxing apocalyptic, likewise foresaw an inevitable "Fire of Vengeance" sweeping the South,<sup>21</sup> and the Reverend George B. Cheever warned the Southerner in 1857 that "The slave holds, under God's hand, a note against you, with compound interest for the crime committed against his father."<sup>22</sup> In William Lloyd

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<sup>18</sup> The Journal and Essays of John Woolman, ed. Amelia Mott Gemmere (New York: MacMillan, 1922), p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Murry Eisenstadt, ed., The Negro in American Life (New York: Oxford Book Co., 1968), p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> Emancipation (Boston: E. P. Peabody, 1840), p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> God Against Slavery, and the Freedom and Duty of the Pulpit to Rebuke It as a Sin Against God (New York: Joseph H. Ladd, 1857), p. 132.

Garrison's definition of slavery as "an earthquake rumbling under our feet--a mine accumulating materials for a national catastrophe," the same concept of collective guilt and divine punishment, stripped of Biblical rhetoric, is nevertheless implicit.<sup>23</sup>

The popularity of such prophetic attacks upon the institution of slavery is evidenced by the fact that poets of an anti-slavery persuasion were quick to echo the warnings of the prose propagandists. In Barlow's Columbiad (1807), that early attempt to Virgilize the past, present, and future history of America, Atlas prophesies that the course of human events holds for the slaveholder "A vengeance that shall shake the world's deep frame,/ That heaven abhors, and hell might shrink to name."<sup>24</sup> And Longfellow, too, threatened catastrophic retribution in "The Warning":

There is a poor, blind Samson in this land,  
Shorn of his strength, and bound in bonds of steel,  
Who may, in some grim revel, raise his hand,  
And shake the pillars of this Commonweal,  
Till the vast Temple of our liberties  
A shapeless mass of wreck and rubbish lies.<sup>25</sup>

Such rhetoric was soon to be translated into the actual events of history. On his way to a Virginia gallows, John Brown, assuming his self-professed role as latter-day

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<sup>23</sup> Selections from the Writings and Speeches of William Lloyd Garrison (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> (London, 1809), p. 260.

<sup>25</sup> The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ed. Charles Welsh (New York: Bigelow, Brown and Co., 1909), p. 274.



prophet, ventured one last warning to slaveholders: "Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins."<sup>26</sup> To contemporary witnesses, Brown must indeed have seemed prophetic when, as Edmund Wilson points out, Northern armies marched South singing Mrs. Howe's celebration of their divinely-ordained crusade to wreak the wrath of God on the enslavers of the Negro.<sup>27</sup>

Southerners themselves were not altogether insensitive to charges that slavery was an institutionalized evil. Prior to the 1830's, abolitionist sentiment was particularly strong among evangelical sects in the older Southern states.<sup>28</sup> The Kentuckian Cassius Clay remarked that "Slavery is our great national sin, and must be destroyed or we are lost."<sup>29</sup> As Robert Penn Warren suggests, the very fact that there was to be considerable Confederate feeling in favor of banning the foreign slave-trade was a tacit confession that not all Southerners believed that slavery was the absolute good that writers like Thomas Roderick Dew, for example, insisted.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Robert Penn Warren, The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 91-98.

<sup>28</sup> W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Vintage, n.d.), p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> The Writings of Cassius Marcellus Clay, including Speeches and Addresses, ed. Horace Greeley (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1848), p. 358.

<sup>30</sup> The Legacy of the Civil War, p. 88.

Early in the National Period, Thomas Jefferson, himself the uneasy owner of slaves, had written in his Notes on Virginia (1785), "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."<sup>31</sup> He went on to note that divine justice "cannot sleep forever," and that the perpetuation of slavery meant certain disaster. Jefferson's fears suggest the possibility of a slave revolt in which the Negro would rise up and smite his white tormentors. From the vast amount of evidence we have of the South's obsessive fear of slave insurrections, it is tempting to surmise that such terror was, in part, the result of the white Southerner's unarticulated awareness of guilt with regard to the black race. As Tocqueville remarked, the "danger of a conflict between the white and black inhabitants of the Southern States," a conflict he saw as inevitable, haunted the American imagination like a bad dream.<sup>32</sup> There is a terrible irony in the inconsistency between the antebellum South's rational insistence that slavery benefited all concerned and its irrational phobia over the possibility of slaves rising up to demand bloody vengeance for past wrongs. This is an irony that emerges quite forcefully from a reading of U. B. Phillips' American Negro Slavery, but that historian's biases cause him to overlook it. These hidden feelings of guilt on the

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<sup>31</sup> Notes on the State of Virginia, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), p. 163.

<sup>32</sup> Democracy in America, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage, 1954), I, 391.

part of Pre-Civil War Southerners provide some clues to the South's hysterical reaction to an event like the 1831 Southampton Insurrection of Nat Turner, who, after all, claimed to have spoken with God and to have been the instrument of divine punishment:

. . . I heard a noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the Sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.<sup>33</sup>

With the conclusion of the Civil War, the South, its own theology largely Calvinistic in orientation, seemed clearly convicted of collective sins by the inexorable, but nevertheless just, workings of a providential history. The visitation of wrath threatened in the writings of the abolitionists was an accomplished fact. Defeat and widespread destruction were its unmistakable outward signs. As James Truslow Adams points out, "Even nature seemed to take a hand in the general ruin."<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Weaver notes that many Southerners began to suffer from feelings of religious guilt as a result of the Northern victory.<sup>35</sup> No doubt many Southerners silently agreed with the young South Carolinian who told John T. Trowbridge in 1866, "I think it was in the de-

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Murry Eisenstadt, ed., The Negro in American Life (New York: Oxford Book Co., 1968), p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> America's Tragedy (New York: Scribner's, 1945), p. 385.

<sup>35</sup> The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Post-bellum Thought, ed. George Core and M. E. Bradford (New Rochelle: Arlington House, 1968), p. 271.

crees of God Almighty that slavery was to be abolished in this way; and I don't murmur. . . . we brought it all on ourselves."<sup>36</sup>

The intensified sense of regional guilt growing out of the South's defeat in the Civil War, coupled with the humiliation of the Reconstruction experience, left its effects on generations of Southerners to come, as such widely different students of Southern civilization as W. J. Cash, C. Vann Woodward, James MacBride Dabbs and Ralph McGill tacitly agree.<sup>37</sup> The post-Reconstruction novelist, Thomas Nelson Page, attempted to mitigate the South's sense of guilt by arguing that slavery was a tragic necessity of history, forced upon the region by Northern slave-traders and the dictates of climate. Still, he regarded it as the "curse of the fair land where it flourished "<sup>38</sup> There is a defensiveness about Page's apology that is a far cry from the positive arguments of antebellum pro-slavery writers, though the seeds of this historical excuse for slavery can

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<sup>36</sup> The Desolate South: A Picture of the Battlefields and of the Devastated Confederacy, ed. Gordon Carrol (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce-Little, Brown, 1956), p. 155.

<sup>37</sup> Cash, in his book cited earlier, deals with the South's defensiveness throughout his work, and his own ambivalence toward the region quite possibly reflects a personal sense of guilt on his part. The title of Woodward's The Burden of Southern History speaks for itself. Dabbs' The Southern Heritage (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958) brings a Christian perspective to bear on the general question of Southern guilt. McGill's The South and the Southerner represents a liberal Southern newspaperman's reflections on this point.

<sup>38</sup> The Old South: Essays Social and Political (New York: Scribner's, 1896), p. 32.

also be found in John C. Calhoun's last speech to the Senate in 1850. This very defensiveness is itself implicit evidence to the extent a sense of regional wrong permeated the Southern consciousness. The young Carson McCullers put it well when she observed that Southerners suffer from a special kind of guilt, "a seeking for something had--and lost, . . . a consciousness of guilt not fully knowable, or communicable."<sup>39</sup> It is precisely this kind of guilt that compels the narrator of Harris' "Where's Duncan?" to tell his story, a secret uneasiness of conscience that provides the vital impetus for the tradition of fiction under consideration here. But why should this sense of collective historical guilt express itself so often in terms of the more-or-less private sin of miscegenation? Some speculation on this question is necessary at this point.

## 2. Miscegenation and the South's Sin

In the Old South, the slave was property and was meant to be used. The fact of illicit sexual relations between the white master class and female slaves, a fact incontrovertibly attested to by the physical presence of an ever-increasing number of light-skinned Negroes both on plantations and in the cities, was to become the single most vulnerable chink in the South's moral defense of slavery. While the conscientious slaveholder might argue divine sanction for slavery because of its presence in the Old Testament

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Ralph McGill, The South and the Southerner, p. 217.

and assert, along with George Fitzhugh and William J. Grayson, its virtues in contrast to the vices of wage-slave capitalism, he could not escape from charges that the unsanctified sexual liaisons stemming naturally from slavery constituted an indefensible evil. In Christian orthodoxy, fornication, in and of itself, had long been considered one of the two or three most reprehensible sins. An extra portion of sinfulness attached itself to the concept of miscegenation, growing out of a sense of the violation of ancient taboos and the breaking of those natural laws of which the philosophers had written. Winthrop Jordan has noted the traditional loathing of Anglo-Saxons toward darker races, an antipathy that evolves out of an archetypal polarization of light and dark, white and black.<sup>40</sup> Couple this irrational aversion with the fact that the mulatto offspring of white masters were legal property and could be bought and sold, and it is easy to see how the question of miscegenation became so effective a weapon for self-righteous assault on the slave system as a whole, a weapon peculiarly equipped to prick Southern consciences. As might be expected, anti-slavery polemicists were quick to use it to indict the South in general. "The South," wrote Wendell Phillips, "is one great brothel."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 6-10.

<sup>41</sup> "The Philosophy of the Abolition Movement," in Speeches, Lectures, and Letters (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1870), p. 108.

As early as Colonial times, Samuel Sewall, in his anti-slavery pamphlet "The Selling of Joseph" (1700), had singled out for special condemnation those who sought to "connive at the Fornication of their Slaves."<sup>42</sup> Yet connive they did, at an accelerating rate. John Hope Franklin points out that in 1850 there were 246,000 mulattos in a total slave population of 3,200,000 persons; in 1860, there were 411,000 mulattos in a population of 3,900,000 slaves.<sup>43</sup>

Travellers in the antebellum South took a particular relish in taking Southerners to task for their indiscretions with slave women. Ann Royall, the author of that interesting relic of the 1820's, Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the United States, reported that she was moved to "feelings of horror and disgust" by the large number of persons of mixed blood she encountered on her tour of the slave states. The practice of holding one's mulatto children as chattel moved her to vehement rage. Any man who would "doom his own children" to bondage is, she insists, "not only . . . void of virtue; but guilty of the most indignant crime."<sup>44</sup>

C. G. Parsons, a Northern physician, records similar sentiments in his Inside View of Slavery; or A Tour Among the Planters (1855). He tells also the story of how a formerly

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Lorenzo Dow Turner, Anti-Slavery Sentiment in American Literature Prior to 1865 (Washington, D.C., 1929), p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans (New York: Vintage, 1969), p. 205.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Turner, Anti-Slavery Sentiment, p. 35.

apathetic Boston merchant was converted to the anti-slavery cause after seeing a "fancy girl" up for auction, thus illustrating the power of the miscegenation issue in shaping Northern opinion on slavery.

A British visitor, Henry A. Murry, who viewed American institutions with a good-natured condescension, nevertheless wrote in his Lands of the Slave and the Free; or Cuba, the United States and Canada (1857):

Over and over again have I seen features, dark if you will, but which showed unmistakably the white man's share in their parentage. . . . Can anything be imagined more horrible than a free nation trafficking in the blood of its co-citizens? Is it not a diabolical premium on inequity, that the fruit of<sup>45</sup> the sin can be sold for the benefit of the sinner?

Perhaps the most valuable of all antebellum travelogues is that of Frederick L. Olmsted, whose unusual objectivity and conscientiousness has made his book, The Cotton Kingdom (1861), a central source for information about conditions in the Old South. The problem of miscegenation, to be sure, does not go unnoticed by him. While visiting in Virginia, Olmsted reports that he was "surprised" by the number of "nearly white-coloured" Negroes he saw there.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the prevalence of mulattos in New Orleans, and the elaborate system of concubinage responsible for many of them, is a point of particular interest for Olmsted, and he spends a considerable number of pages in reviewing the plight of the

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<sup>45</sup> (London: G. Routledge and Co., 1857), p. 381.

<sup>46</sup> The Cotton Kingdom, ed. Arthur Schlesinger (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 32.



quadroon caste.<sup>47</sup> While sexual relations between the races were practiced unabashedly in New Orleans, Olmsted is quick to note that they were practiced elsewhere on an equally widespread, albeit covert, basis. He learns from one Southerner that

"There is not . . . a likely-looking black girl in this State that is not the concubine of a white man. There is not an old plantation in which the grandchildren of the owner are not whipped in the fields by his overseer."<sup>48</sup>

In a passage of remarkable interest, Olmsted writes of travelling on a Red River steamboat on which copies of Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) are being sold and of a conversation with a native of that region who complained of a lack of verisimilitude in the Red River sections of the novel. The Southerner explains that "'no coloured woman would be likely to offer any resistance, if a white man should want to seduce her.'"<sup>49</sup> It requires little imagination to reconstruct the righteous indignation such a statement would have stirred up among readers in the North. There is little wonder that, in Northern eyes, the South was, as one writer phrases it, the ID personified.<sup>50</sup>

The poets sympathetic to abolitionism were also quick to focus their attacks on what they viewed as the prevailing sexual debauchery of the South. In Longfellow's "The Quadroon

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp. 235-40.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>50</sup> Earl E. Thorpe, Eros and Freedom in Southern Thought (Durham, North Carolina, 1967), p. 87.

Girl," a planter sells his daughter to the white man who lusts after her. And in "The Farewell of a Virginia Slave Mother to her Daughters Sold into Southern Bondage," Whittier stresses the fate that awaits young slave girls sold down the river: "Toiling through the weary day,/And at night the spoiler's prey."<sup>51</sup> Mrs. Frances E. W. Harper, a Negro abolitionist-poet, reiterates this same theme when she writes of "young girls from their mother's arms,/Bartered and sold for their youthful charms."<sup>52</sup>

Anti-slavery novelists, likewise, were fond of focusing their attention on the more lurid and sensationalistic aspects of the theme of miscegenation; the presence of this theme in Uncle Tom's Cabin has already been noted. Mrs. Stowe's treatment of the subject is restrained, however, in comparison with a book like Richard Hildreth's The White Slave: or, Memoirs of a Fugitive (1852). In that novel, a work written with the avowed purpose of teaching the slaveholder's conscience "how to torture him with the picture of himself" by invoking "the dark and dread images of his own misdeeds,"<sup>53</sup> not even the master's own daughters are safe from what Francis P. Gaines has termed "paternal lust."<sup>54</sup> Indeed, so popular was the theme of miscegenation with abo-

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<sup>51</sup> Anti-Slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), p. 57.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Samuel Sillen, Women Against Slavery (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1955), p. 73.

<sup>53</sup> (London, 1852), p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> The Southern Plantation, p. 32.

lition novelists that a whole tradition of fiction grew up around the vicissitudes of the "tragic mulatto," usually a young woman with only the slightest trace of Negro blood who is subjected to a lengthy series of torments and temptations which serve to illustrate the wide range of evils nurtured by slavery.<sup>55</sup> The fact that the slave protagonist in such novels was to all appearances white made for ready identification with her plight by white readers, and this situation enhanced the propagandistic effect of these writings on Northern audiences.

One of the most typical of these novels is William Wells Brown's Clotelle (1853), which is particularly significant because it is the work of this nation's first Negro novelist, a man who was himself a mulatto fugitive slave. Clotelle wastes no time in introducing the main thrust of its indictment of the slave system:

With the growing population of the Southern States, the increase of mulattos has been very great. Society does not frown upon the man who sits with his half-breed child upon his knee, whilst the mother stands, a slave, behind his chair.<sup>56</sup>

For Brown, miscegenation serves as the best example of the degrading influence of slavery upon all it touches. Brown stresses the fact that miscegenation is a peculiarly Southern evil, no doubt much to the gratification of self-righteous sentiments in the North:

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<sup>55</sup> Jules Zanger's article (Note 7, above) catalogues the recurring elements in the portrayal of this heroine.

<sup>56</sup> Clotelle, as reprinted in J. Noel Heermance, William Wells Brown and Clotelle (Archon Books, 1969), p. 5.

When we take into consideration the fact that no safeguard is thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave women to be pure and chaste, we will not be surprised when told that immorality and vice pervade the cities and towns of the South to an extent unknown in the Northern States.<sup>57</sup>

Charges of this sort could not help but have a devastating effect upon the collective conscience of the Bible-reading South. Questions of sexual morality temporarily aside, however, the very presence of anti-miscegenation laws on the books served to convict many Southerners of hypocrisy at the least. Not all the fathers of illegitimate slave children were devoid of basic paternal instincts; many planters freed their mulatto children, but this was not always the case. Manumission became increasingly difficult in the years preceding the Civil War, and sometimes fathers waited until it was too late. Tocqueville provides an interesting case in point:

I happened to meet an old man . . . who had lived in illicit intercourse with one of his Negresses and had had several children by her who were born the slaves of their father. He had . . . thought of bequeathing to them . . . their liberty; but years elapsed before he could surmount the legal obstacles to their emancipation, and meanwhile his old age had come and he was about to die. He pictured to himself his sons dragged from market to market . . . until these horrid anticipations worked his . . . imagination into a frenzy. When I saw him, he was a prey to all the anguish of despair; and I then understood how awful was the retribution<sup>58</sup> of Nature upon those who have broken her laws.

Nor did all the public attacks upon miscegenation in the South come from outside sources. Southern women, themselves often the silent victims of their husbands' preference

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.      <sup>58</sup> Democracy in America, p. 396.

for the women of the darker race, had special reason to feel the evils of the practice, and they were not always content to live patiently with such an awareness. One such woman was Angelina Grimké of South Carolina, who referred explicitly to certain of the wrongs growing out of miscegenation in her tract, An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South (1836), a work the effectiveness of which may be judged by the furor of denunciation it received throughout the South following its initial publication. Olmsted reprints a letter from yet another such woman, a Virginia lady sent to prison for teaching slaves to read and write. A portion of that letter is of particular interest in view of the way in which it magnifies the "curse" of miscegenation to an extent previously reserved for the institution of slavery itself:

"There is one great evil hanging over the Southern Slave States, destroying domestic happiness and the peace of thousands. It is summed up in the single word--amalgamation. This, and this only, causes the vast extent of ignorance, degradation, and crime that lies like a black cloud over the whole South. And the practice is more general than . . . the Southerners are willing to allow."<sup>59</sup>

Once this identification of miscegenation with the South's regional "black cloud" has been made, miscegenation quite naturally becomes emblematic of the sins of slavery as a whole. Feelings of sexual guilt on the part of Southerners may well have preceded feelings of institutional guilt, as Earl E. Thorpe suggests.<sup>60</sup> But for the writers under consid-

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<sup>59</sup> The Cotton Kingdom, pp. 239-40.

<sup>60</sup> Eros and Freedom in Southern Thought, p. 15.

eration in this study, the two kinds of guilt tend to become for all practical purposes inseparable.

### 3. The Mulatto as Victim-Avenger

If illicit bi-racial sex and the selling of mulatto children can be said to represent the South's sins writ small, and, as we have seen, sins bring on inevitable retribution, it is not difficult to understand the unique role the mulatto character assumes within the tradition of fiction under consideration here. After all, given the racial stratification of Southern society, the very presence of a person of mixed blood can be an embarrassment, at the very least. In My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), Frederick Douglass, himself the mulatto son of a white planter, wrote:

Men do not love those who remind them of their sins-- unless they have a mind to repent--and the mulatto child's face is a standing accusation against him who is master and father to the child.<sup>61</sup>

The mulatto, then, is a symbol of sin; and, as a character in much fiction, he becomes quite literally the physical realization of the white Southerner's violation of the slave's humanity. Jules Zanger puts it well in his perceptive article, "The 'Tragic Octoroon' in Pre-Civil War Fiction":

The octoroon . . . represented not merely the product of the incidental sin of the individual sinner, but rather what might be called the result of cumulative sin, since the octoroon was the product of four generations of illicit, enforced miscegenation made possible by the slavery system. The very existence of

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<sup>61</sup> (New York: Arno, 1968), p. 59.

the octoroon convicted the slaveholder of prostituting his slaves and of selling his own children for profit.<sup>62</sup>

By imaginative extension, as a living symbol and constant reminder of the South's historical guilt resulting from slavery, the person of mixed blood (whatever percentage) became the fitting instrument through which the eternally-just workings of Providence would be likely to exact retribution for past wrongs. In this way, the pathetic victim of the "tragic mulatto" tradition was gradually transformed in the figure of the righteous avenger.

The seeds of this characterization of the mulatto were already present in the anti-slavery fiction of the antebellum period. While heroines of mixed race were portrayed, with few exceptions, as hapless and passive victims of the slave system, the male mulatto protagonist was oftentimes pictured as an indignant rebel. He felt intensely the demeaning role placed upon him by the institution of slavery. A fierce spirit of freedom, attributed by writers like Hildreth to the mulatto's white blood,<sup>63</sup> burned within him, and his resentment over the wrongs perpetrated against him by white society threatened continually to express itself in violence. Hildreth's Archy Moore, wronged continuously by his white father, is precisely such a character, as is Harry Gordon, the protagonist of Mrs. Stowe's Dred (1857), who is the victim of his half-brother's unnatural cruelties. George Harris, the

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<sup>62</sup> American Quarterly, 18 (1966), 66.

<sup>63</sup> The White Slave, p. 240.

husband of Eliza in Uncle Tom's Cabin, is perhaps the best-known of these figures. The case of George is a particularly interesting one, for he finally vows to endure the abuses of his master no longer and becomes a runaway like his historical counterparts William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass, two mulattos who made their grievances against slavery manifest through the active roles they assumed in the anti-slavery struggle.

It is interesting to note, in this respect, how history tended to parallel and reenforce imaginative literature, in view of the fact that the lives and attitudes of men like Brown and Douglass prefigured the careers of male mulatto protagonists in fiction. No doubt the fame of such fugitives served to color the novelists' portrayal of the discontented mulatto, much as Nat Turner provided the inspiration for Mrs. Stowe's Dred. There is inescapable and, indeed, highly appropriate irony in the fact that the sins of slaveholders returned to plague them in the persons of their illegitimate offspring and further irony in the fact that many of the most significant Black leaders during Reconstruction were also of mixed ancestry. This latter irony is gleefully noted by the anonymous author of An Appeal to Pharaoh (1889), a tract written in response to Albion Tourgée's An Appeal to Caesar (1884). The author's remarks are of obvious relevance to this discussion:

The white people of the South have abundant reason to regret that any of their number ever transgressed the natural limits which separate the different orders of mankind. Like every other law, the law



that keeps the races apart carries its penalties in its bosom . . . , and we may be sure that it will vindicate itself as often as it is defied.<sup>64</sup>

Here we have, expressed implicitly, a statement of the basic formula behind much of the fiction in the tradition with which this study concerns itself: Miscegenation is a sin, and like all sin it involves punishment; there can be no more fitting agent of that punishment than the living embodiment of the sin itself, the haunting figure of the wronged mulatto.

There is a literary bond, then, connecting the vengeful stranger in Harris' story with mulatto characters like Honoré Grandissime and Palmyre Philosoph in Cable's The Grandissimes (1880), a bond that will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Yet it is perhaps significant to note that the figure of the mulatto avenger appears at his most threatening in the Reconstruction novels of two Southern apologists, Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, Jr.

In Page's Red Rock (1898), the animal-like mulatto rabble-rouser, Moses, is a thorn in the sides of the war-and-defeat-stricken white community. Finally, however, he pushes his new-found liberty too far and attempts to rape the local belle. He subsequently flees the vicinity with a band of chivalrous vigilantes on his heels. In Dixon's The Klansman (1905), the radical Republican leader, Stoneman, is persuaded to crush out Southern civilization at the sly

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<sup>64</sup> (New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1889), p. 114.

promptings of his mulatto mistress. Another scurrilous mulatto, Silas Lynch, becomes Stoneman's chief agent in humiliating the prostrate South, and he repays his benefactor's trust by making advances toward his daughter. Dixon's lesson to negrophiles is clear. Fortunately, for Dixon at least, the Ku Klux Klan saves the day.

This is not the outcome, however, in Dixon's The Sins of the Father (1912), his most elaborate treatment of the theme of miscegenation. In that work, Dixon admits that mixed blood "is not merely a thing of to-day . . . but the heritage of two hundred years of sin and sorrow."<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, in Dixon's view, the real fault lies with the sensuous and amoral mulatto women of the South, who prey upon the virility of the Southern gentleman. Dixon's Cleo is pictured as a violent, catlike creature who is spurned by her white lover. As a consequence of her bitter sense of rejection, Cleo succeeds, systematically, in bringing ruin and destruction to a proud old North Carolina family.

The mulatto avenger appears in novels of the Southern Renaissance as well. A notable example is the figure of Yellow Jim in Allen Tate's only novel, The Fathers (1938). When George Posey violates the humanity of his half-brother by trading him for a race-horse, the inevitable curse on the House of Posey ensues. Faulkner's Charles Bon and Joe Christmas are perhaps the best-known characters that fall into this type and will be dealt with in detail in subsequent

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<sup>65</sup> (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1912), p. 122.

chapters.

#### 4. The Question of Identity

One aspect of our paradigmatic theme of miscegenation remains to be considered--the question of the mulatto figure's need for self-definition. In Uncle Tom's Cabin, the St. Clare's cook chastizes a group of light-skinned Negroes with the reminder, "Arter all, you's niggers, much as I am."<sup>66</sup> She is quite right in one sense, for given the sharp lines of demarcation separating the races in Southern society, one drop of Negro blood is sufficient to preclude a person from qualifying as a member of the dominant race. The problem of definition is not quite so simple for the person of mixed blood himself, however, and this is particularly the case when the percentage of black blood is so slight as to elude immediate detection.

The problem of defining one's identity was a concern of slaves in general. Stanley M. Elkins has argued that there are analogies between the institution of slavery as it existed in the antebellum South and conditions in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>67</sup> If Elkins is right, servitude allowed little opportunity for the fulfillment of the slave as a person, and, consequently, the slave was forced to take on the pseudo-identity of the stereo-typical masks assigned him by

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<sup>66</sup> (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969), p. 309.

<sup>67</sup> Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 81-139.

white racist theory. A firm concept of family was in most cases denied the slave; there was no psychological security of the surname. William Wells Brown makes it clear how intimately related his search for freedom was to his search for a "name," for identity.<sup>68</sup>

If the average slave was the victim of uncertainty as to his identity as a man, it is only natural that the person of mixed blood should have suffered from a particularly acute identity crisis, for he was caught quite literally between the two irreconcilable racial polarities of Southern life. Writers of fiction seem to have recognized the essential pathos of the mulatto's isolated plight from the very beginning, for the alienation of the mulatto is a standard aspect of the "tragic mulatto" tradition.

Even a writer like Dixon is capable of handling this aspect of the mulatto character with sympathy. In The Leopard's Spots (1902), Dixon traces the career of George Harris, Jr., the son of Mrs. Stowe's Eliza and George. The young man is nearly white and is cultured and educated. He is the protégé of the Northern philanthropist, Lowell, who tells him that all men are naturally equal. George takes Lowell at his word and asks him for his daughter's hand, only to learn that the latter is unprepared to practice what he preaches. Disillusioned, the mulatto tries to make his

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<sup>68</sup> The Narrative of William Wells Brown, in Four Fugitive Slave Narratives, ed. Robin Winks, Larry Gara, Jane H. and William H. Pease, and Tilden G. Edelstein (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 43.

own way in the world, but he finds that he does not fit into either white or black society. He at last undertakes a bizarre pilgrimage throughout the country and visits, one by one, the heaps of ashes that mark the places where Negroes have been lynched and burned by white mobs. Ironically, Dixon, the fanatical negrophobe, has left one of the most memorable images of the mulatto's faltering search for Self.

As might be expected, Black writers have been particularly drawn to the fictional problems raised by the person of mixed blood and his need to establish a stable sense of identity. The result has been a considerable "literature of 'passing,'" in which the mulatto wavers between living deceitfully as a white man or embracing his negritude. The way in which Black novelists utilize this theme and the way in which their use of it prefigures the Negro's own quest for identity in American life is a question worthy of a full-length study in its own right, but it lies beyond the boundaries of the present consideration.

Rather, this study is particularly interested in the way in which the theme of the mulatto's search for self-definition parallels the alienated and isolated condition of contemporary man, the man who finds himself repeatedly in a world in which the sense of selfhood, both personal and social, is an increasingly elusive entity. In the hands of a Southern writer whose literary temper is akin to that of his continental contemporaries, the regional plight of the person of mixed blood can become an emblem of the situation

confronting the existential hero; and the concluding chapter of this investigation will be devoted to an analysis of the way in which the mulatto's search for Self is universalized in Faulkner's Light in August (1932) and Robert Penn Warren's Band of Angels (1955).

In this chapter I have attempted to describe the basic elements of the theme of miscegenation and to offer some tentative speculations on the particular significance it holds for the Southern writer. In the next chapter, I propose to focus on the theme as it appears in the fiction of George Washington Cable, who uses it as a tool to interpret his personal vision of the South and of the meaning of Southern history. Chapter Three will be concerned principally with Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894), and with the way in which Twain personalizes the materials he inherits from the regional tradition within which he is working. Chapter Four will center around a consideration of the sin of miscegenation as it appears in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936) and Go Down, Moses (1942), two works that represent what is unquestionably the most significant treatment to date of the theme of mixed blood and its relationship to the Southern past. In the last chapter, as noted previously, attention will be given to an analysis of the theme of identity in Light in August and Band of Angels. Special consideration will be given to two characters of mixed blood, Joe Christmas and Amantha Starr, as representative images of contemporary man struggling to define himself within his society

and the universe.

The question of sexual relations across the color-line has played so vital a role in the collective consciousness of Americans over the centuries that it is surrounded with undeniable emotional overtones of a profoundly powerful sort, particularly in the South. By studying the way in which four of the South's greatest writers approach this question in their fiction, it is possible to begin to understand not only the emotional depth of the Southerner's involvement in the issue of mixed blood, but the way in which that deep involvement translates itself into highly sophisticated literature.

## CHAPTER II

### GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE AND THE RIDDLE OF SOUTHERN EXPERIENCE

As Robert Penn Warren has pointed out, the Civil War can be regarded as a focal point in the history of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in the literary history of this nation, that struggle conveniently serves as a line of demarcation separating two great periods in American letters. A new America emerged at the end of the Civil War, and in the Northern literary centers a new literature began to reflect the radical changes that were taking place in the national life. Eventually, similar changes were to be felt in the literary life of the defeated South. "In one sense," writes Jay B. Hubbell, "the outcome of the War Between the States may be said to have emancipated not only the slaves but the Southern writers as well."<sup>2</sup> In Hubbell's view, the Southerner was no longer necessarily hemmed in by a narrow regional defensiveness when he turned to a consideration of his section's life-styles and institutions. The South's defeat made it possible for the writer to take a second look at both his region's past and present and to begin question-

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<sup>1</sup> The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Southern Life in Fiction (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1960), p. 80.



ing its heretofore-inviolable sacred cows, including the most sacrosanct of them all--the institution of slavery.

Hubbell's remark requires serious qualification.

Prior to the Civil War, Southern novelists like John Pendleton Kennedy in Swallow Barn (1832) and George Tucker in The Valley of the Shenandoah (1824) had already touched upon some of the problems arising from the "peculiar institution," although it is true that critical analysis gave way to regional apology increasingly as the "irrepressible conflict" drew near. Nor is Hubbell altogether right in suggesting that the Civil War, in and of itself, freed the Southern writer from pressures to conform to the "official" viewpoint of post-war apologists, a viewpoint that stressed the brighter side of life in the Old South and excused slavery on grounds of historical necessity. In order for the Southern writer to exercise the new literary freedom of which Hubbell writes, he was forced to pay a terrible price. The case of George Washington Cable is the prime example.

Cable was a native of New Orleans. Despite his poor physical condition, he served as a volunteer in the Confederate cavalry during the war. After the war, he returned to his native city, eventually assuming a career as a semi-professional journalist. A devoutly conscientious Presbyterian and a man of strong humanitarian instincts, Cable soon came to recognize the evils of post-war racism and, by the early 1870's, began to explore in fiction the darker side of his region's past. In Old Creole Days (published in book form

in 1879) and The Grandissimes (1880), Cable's new awareness reached fictional fruition. Cable was not content to criticize race relations in the South in fiction alone, however. Addressing students at the University of Mississippi in 1882 and the University of Louisiana (now Tulane) in 1883, Cable spoke out publicly against past slavery and present racial discrimination in Southern life. In 1885, his essay "The Freedman's Case in Equity," which appealed for full civil rights for the Negro, touched off controversy throughout the South. Cable went into voluntary exile in the North, but he continued to crusade publicly for racial tolerance. His libertarian stand on racial questions provoked the anger of both the New South advocate Henry W. Grady and the Old South apologist Thomas Nelson Page. Page's 1892 essay, "The Race Question," was designed, in part, as an explicit refutation of Cable's position.<sup>3</sup>

Three years earlier, in 1889, Cable had responded to the all-but-universal denunciation his theories had met with in the South by writing a lengthy autobiographical essay, "My Politics." Rejected by his publishers at the time as too personal,<sup>4</sup> "My Politics" remained unpublished throughout the

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<sup>3</sup> In Page's view, slavery was basically a beneficent institution, the "salvation" of the Negro race. "It found him a savage and a cannibal and in two hundred years gave seven millions of his race a civilization, the only civilization it has had since the dawn of history." See "The Race Question," in The Old South: Essays Social and Political (New York: Scribner's, 1896), p. 344.

<sup>4</sup> The Negro Question, ed. Arlin Turner (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 2.

author's lifetime. Not until Cable's biographer and editor, Arlin Turner, brought out an enlarged edition of The Negro Question in 1958 did it appear in print in its entirety for the first time. Turner's publication of the work has been a boon to those attempting to understand the relation between Cable's life and his art. "My Politics" not only relates the young Cable's inner struggle to reconcile the South's defeat with what he had earlier accepted as the unquestionable righteousness of secession and slavery, but it also reveals the intimate role his fiction played in the working out of his final position. In undertaking a work like The Grandis-simes, Cable tells us, he was involved in slowly and patiently guessing out what he calls "the riddle of our Southern question."<sup>5</sup>

As Cable's essay indicates, imaginative literature based on historical actuality became for him, as he elsewhere writes, not so much an effort to transcend nature (the facts of the past) as a way in which nature might be made to "transcend herself."<sup>6</sup> The phrase which Willian Styron applied to his The Confessions of Nat Turner, a "meditation on history," might thus be applied to a number of Cable's works set in the Southern past. In contemplating the actual events of his region's historical heritage, Cable creates some of his best writing and attempts to solve, for himself at least,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Strange True Stories of Louisiana (New York: Scribner's, 1889), p. 1.

the nagging riddles of the Southern experience.

Such a "meditation on history" occurs in "The Haunted House on Royal Street," which appears in the 1889 volume, Strange True Stories of Louisiana. The piece is based almost entirely on historical fact, but the historical fact is tempered by rumor and legend. It contains some of Cable's best local color and, quite significantly, it serves, also, as a powerful statement of many of the author's deepest feelings about the South. Furthermore, it stands as a superb example of the way in which the past yields its secrets to the imagination of a writer of Cable's sensibilities.

The essay begins in a fashion typical of Cable's writing, with the author conducting the reader on a kind of literary guided tour of the Vieux Carré. In a symbolic sense, the walk from the newer sections of New Orleans into the old Quarter constitutes a trip back into the city's past. After spending several pages establishing a firm sense of place in the reader's imagination, Cable turns his attention to the history of the haunted house itself, formerly occupied by a certain notorious Madame Lalaurie. Although now in something of a state of disrepair, the house was once a favorite showplace of Creole society. Just as Madame Lalaurie, its former owner, was ostensibly a kind and gentle lady, her luxurious house gives no overt indication of the horrors she perpetrated behind its walls. Nevertheless, in the old days, rumors of her sadistic abuse of slaves were persistent among the people of New Orleans:

"Do you see this splendid house? Do you see these attic windows? There are slaves up there confined in chains and darkness and kept at the point of starvation."

Despite the frequency of such rumors, little is done to intervene in what is clearly the private affair of a high-born Creole lady until fire breaks out. In the course of evacuating the building, the rescuers discover Madame Lalaurie's slaves--whose bodies bear the irrefutable evidence of her systematic cruelty. Shocked and outraged, a mob storms the house and Madame is lucky to escape before the assault.

For Cable, "the gloomy pile, even when restored and renovated," stands as a "ghost-ridden" symbol of the evils which the institution of slavery made possible.<sup>8</sup> While Cable is careful to point out that Madame Lalaurie was in no way a typical slaveholder, he nevertheless insists that "any public practice" is "answerable for whatever can happen easier with it than without it."<sup>9</sup> That such inhumanities as those of Madame Lalaurie were made possible by the practice of slavery is evidence enough to convict the institution as a whole.

Ironically, after the Civil War, Madame Lalaurie's house is converted into an integrated girls' school. Daughters of the white citizenry and daughters of the city's old "free colored" caste are taught under the same roof and by the same teachers until members of the White League enter the school forcibly and set about expelling those students they

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

believe to be of Negro background. Cable handles the subsequent inquisition scene with particular irony. As each of the hysterical girls is questioned by representatives of the League, a banner on one wall ironically proclaims, "The eye of God is on us." Further irony is evident in the farcical unreliability of the mob's attempt to separate the sheep from the goats. Some of the "colored" students are so white as to escape detection altogether, and one girl of obviously Negroid background avoids eviction when she claims Spanish blood and threatens that her brother will challenge her tormentors to an affair of honor.

In accordance with its broadest implications, Cable's essay is considerably more than the colorful history of an old house. It is a synoptic view of the whole Southern experience with regard to race. In relating the story of Madame Lalaurie's maltreated slaves, Cable brings in a blanket indictment of slavery by revealing the propensity for evil inherent in such an institution. And, in relating the arbitrary expulsion of the "colored" pupils (who are for all practical purposes white) from a public girls' school, he is able to demonstrate both the pathos and the ultimate absurdity of caste distinctions in general, particularly as they were to be reinforced as a result of the humiliations of Reconstruction.

When the sketch is viewed in this light, it seems particularly fitting that Cable should have built the climax of his narrative around the problems of mixed blood. It is

appropriate because the question of miscegenation, particularly with respect to the New Orleans quadroon caste, was a theme that exerted a very fruitful influence on the author's creative imagination. Cable's interest in this theme no doubt reflects his passionate awareness of the dehumanizing aspects of race relations in his region both before and after the Civil War, and it is in his handling of this and related themes that the author seems to come closest to solving that "riddle" of Southern experience noted earlier.

One of the most familiar of Cable's stories centered around the problem of miscegenation is "'Tite Poulette," which was first published in Scribner's in 1874 and appeared as part of the original edition of Old Creole Days, published in 1879. That story is clearly an outgrowth of the "tragic mulatto" tradition, and Cable's major concern in writing it was, as he himself confessed, an attempt at capitalizing on the romantic possibilities of a situation in which love surmounts the color-line.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the pronounced element of social criticism found in some of Cable's subsequent fiction is only implicitly a part of "'Tite Poulette." Nevertheless, the story has considerable interest of its own and is important because of its relation to a later work, the undisputed little masterpiece, Madame Delphine (1881).

On the surface, "'Tite Poulette" concerns itself with the ancient theme of love tested and found true. The male protagonist, a rather bungling young Dutchman by the name of

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<sup>10</sup> "My Politics," in The Negro Question, p. 10.

Kristian Koppig, is a newcomer to New Orleans. His Protestant conscience is shocked by many of the practices of that predominantly Latin city. Directly across from his window stands the house of Madame John, a quadroon. Her former beauty is "fading," but Madame John is still attractive, with "fine, rather severe features, nearly straight hair carefully kept, and that vivid black eye so peculiar to her kind."<sup>11</sup> Living with her is her daughter, 'Tite Poulette, whose complexion is so white as to excite expressions of admiration from the youthful Creoles she encounters on the street. Slowly, almost unconsciously, Koppig develops an interest in his neighbors, particularly in the lovely daughter. However, the question of the girl's mixed blood troubles him. Cable reveals the young man's ambivalent feelings toward 'Tite Poulette in a letter the youth sends home:

"In this wicked city, I see none so fair as the poor girl who lives opposite me, and who, though so fair, is one of those whom the taint of caste has cursed. She lives a lonely life in the midst of corruption, like the lillies I find here in the marshes, and I have great pity for her. . . . I know there is a natural, and I think proper, horror of mixed blood . . . and I feel it too; and yet if she were in Holland today, not one of a hundred suitors would detect the hidden blemish."<sup>12</sup>

Koppig's ambivalent emotions continue to plague him, but the pathos inherent in 'Tite Poulette's situation is felt most bitterly by the two women themselves. Through their conversations, Cable makes the full tragedy of their plight appar-

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<sup>11</sup> Old Creole Days (New York: Scribner's, 1927), p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 222-23.



ent to the reader. At one point, Madame John sums up the loneliness of the quadroon caste when she exclaims, "There is no place in this world for us poor women. I wish that we were either white or black."<sup>13</sup> The daughter at first appears reconciled to her fate and attempts to console Madame John, but she, also, knows only too well the hopelessness of her condition in New Orleans and is reduced in the end to an uncontrollable outburst of tears.

The plot thickens when economic pressures induce Madame John to accept employment as a dancer at the "ball" and her employer takes a predatory interest in her daughter. Kristian's sense of honor, spurred to recklessness by his growing interest in 'Tite Poulette, brings him into a violent confrontation with the lascivious Creole, and in a subsequent encounter Kristian is stabbed. The two women, sensing their role in the young man's misfortune, nurse him through his crisis. At one point, Kristian unknowingly reveals the extent of his feelings for 'Tite Poulette, as well as his profound aversion to Negro blood:

"Take her away," [he said,] waving his hand, "take her beauty away. She is jet white. Who could take a jet white wife?"<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, when Kristian recovers consciousness, he declares his love for the girl and expresses his wish to marry her, regardless of her race. With this admission, he passes the test secretly insisted upon by Madame John, who rewards the purity and selflessness of his love by revealing that

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 238.

her "daughter" is in fact white--the child of two Spanish immigrants stricken with yellow fever.

Thus, with one melodramatic stroke, Cable removes all legal barriers separating his young lovers, and his story ends happily. This resolution has all the facile artifice of a fairy tale. Cable's treatment of his material stops short of coming to grips with the full potential of the theme of miscegenation which was outlined in the paradigm discussed in the previous chapter. The author raises several vital issues, notably the irony of a law that forbids legitimate intimacies between the races but does nothing to prevent or discourage such intimacies on an illicit basis. Cable skirts such issues whenever they surface, however. It is little wonder that "'Tite Poulette" was favorably received in Cable's native New Orleans.<sup>15</sup> It is fundamentally a love story in which the problem of racial oppression is only a temporary frustration. The only real miscegenation in the story takes place long before the action opens. By ultimately asserting that 'Tite Poulette is white, Cable sidesteps all controversy. Later, in his first novel, he was less disposed to do so.

Arlin Turner tells us that at least two years before Old Creole Days was published in 1879, Cable had started work on a novel.<sup>16</sup> When Cable sent an outline of his intended

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<sup>15</sup> "My Politics," in The Negro Question, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> George W. Cable: A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p. 90.

work to his correspondent at Cornell, Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, the latter informed Cable that the book he was engaged in writing was a Kulturroman, a work in which an author explores the whole spectrum of a society and the historical forces behind it. The Scandinavian writer's early assessment of the work we now know as The Grandissimes proved to be both perceptive and prophetic. Cable's first novel became, in the author's own words, "a study of the fierce struggle going on around me, regarded in the light of that past history--those beginnings--which had so differentiated the Louisiana civilization from the American scheme of public society."<sup>17</sup> In a real sense, The Grandissimes represents Cable's effort to understand the problems of the post-Civil War South in light of the antebellum period. Jay Martin's remark that The Grandissimes all but surpasses the best of Faulkner seems extravagant,<sup>18</sup> but critics are in general agreement that it is Cable's most successful attempt at extended narrative. The novel represents a remarkable step forward from the stories in the first edition of Old Creole Days, both from the standpoint of literary artistry and in view of the author's willingness to investigate the full implications of race relations in his region. The note of social criticism which is implicit and subdued in "'Tite Poulette" is sounded fully in The Grandissimes.

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<sup>17</sup> "My Politics," in The Negro Question, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Harvests of Change: American Literature, 1865-1914 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 105.

Cable filters his vision of the South in The Grandissimes through the growing awareness of Frowenfeld, the young outsider who sets out to study Louisiana customs, much as one would study a book.<sup>19</sup> Of Germanic extraction, he possesses many of the characteristics of the bungling protagonist of "Tite Poulette." Like Koppig, Frowenfeld evinces a peculiarly Teutonic brand of seriousness,<sup>20</sup> and, lacking in a sense of humor himself, he is oftentimes treated humorously by the author. He is something of an introvert and surveys the "corruptions" of New Orleans with an outlander's intolerance. Naive like Koppig, Frowenfeld is hardly doltish, however. Indeed, he reminds the reader in many ways of Cable himself. Largely self-educated (as was the author), the Yankee pharmacist argues against slavery through the best of intentions, only to provoke the hostility and resentment of native Louisianians in much the same way as Cable was to incur the scorn of Southerners like Page as a result of his own well-intentioned analysis of the race question. Quite significantly, within the context of the novel, Frowenfeld, like Cable himself, is deeply involved in piecing together an answer to the "riddle" of the South.

Early in the narrative, Frowenfeld, confused by much of what he has seen and heard since arriving in New Orleans, is lulled into a kind of reverie by the voices and drums of

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<sup>19</sup> The Grandissimes (New York: Scribner's, 1924), p. 288.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

slaves congregated in the Place Congo. Meditating somnambulantly on the mysterious events that have confronted him since his arrival, he finds that all his impressions dissolve in an "atmosphere of hints, allusions, faint unspoken admissions, ill-concealed antipathies, unfinished speeches, mistaken identities and whisperings of hidden strife."<sup>21</sup>

The predicament Frowenfeld finds himself in parallels that of the reader, for an aura of ambiguity and secrecy permeates roughly the first half of The Grandissimes. In this respect, the very opening of the book is significant. It is set at a masked ball where several important characters appear in the guise of certain of their illustrious ancestors. Established, thus, at the very outset of the novel, is a sense of an intimate, albeit covert, relationship between the past and the present, and this relationship constitutes a major premise around which the entire book takes shape. While the omniscient narrator provides much of the historical background necessary to clear up the mysteries surrounding the story, it is through Frowenfeld's initiation into the truth about the South that the reader begins to understand all the historical dimensions of the Southern "riddle."

Casting its gloomy aura over every aspect of Creole life in the novel is what Frowenfeld refers to as "the shadow of the Ethiopian,"<sup>22</sup> a phrase suggesting the corrupting force generated by the institution of Negro slavery. Frowenfeld's friend, Honoré Grandissime, who is the pinnacle of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

Southern chivalrous ideal in the novel (and who has a mulatto half-brother by the same name) is only too well-acquainted with this "shadow":

'It is the Némésis w'ich, instead of coming afteh, glides along by the side of this morhal, political, commercial mistake! It drhags us a centurhy behind the rhes' of the world! It rhetahds and poisons everhy industrhy we got!--mos' of all our-h immense agrhicultu'e! It brheeds a thousan' cusses that nevva leave home but, just flutter-h up an' rhoost . . . on ow heads. . . .'<sup>23</sup>

Through these words of Honoré, Cable evokes the familiar image of slavery as "curse" which forms so important a part of the paradigmatic theme of miscegenation as discussed earlier. Throughout The Grandissimes, slavery and racial wrongs generate a thinly-veiled tension behind even the most superficially picturesque episodes in the plot. The evils resulting from the collective sins of the white community are brought forcefully forward and violently shape the course of the narrative. Indeed, stripped of all the trappings of romance, The Grandissimes becomes a dramatic study of the terrible consequences of institutionalized evil, an evil particularly pervasive due to its historical dimension--the inheritance and transmission of guilt from one generation to another.

To portray the nature and extent of this inheritance effectively and concisely, Cable includes in The Grandissimes the largely self-contained story of Bras Coupé, an African prince sold into slavery and ultimately destroyed for the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

crime of "attempting to be a free man."<sup>24</sup> Based on an actual event,<sup>25</sup> this story dates from the early 1870's, when Cable, working on a newspaper story, read the Code Noir for the first time and was outraged by its legalized inhumanity. Originally entitled "Bibi," the story was rejected by the rather squeamish editors at Scribner's because of its unpleasant implications. Integrated into the novel, however, the story undergoes certain adaptations and emerges as a continuous point of reference for much of the novel's action.

For the author himself, the tale of Bras Coupé is emblematic of "the truth that all Slavery is maiming,"<sup>26</sup> and for several of the novel's central characters, the enslaved prince is himself a symbol, as well as a connecting link that binds them together for better or for worse. Evidence of the central importance of the Bras Coupé story can be demonstrated by an examination of characters who are in one way or another influenced by his story.

For Palmyre Philosop, the voodoo queen, Bras Coupé is "the gigantic embodiment of her own dark, fierce will, the expanded realization of her lifetime longing for terrible strength."<sup>27</sup> Palmyre is a mulatto of incredible barbaric beauty whose sensual magnetism is so overt as to elude the author's attempts to conceal it behind the conventions of genteel description. She is a woman who has "stood . . . with dagger drawn . . . against what certainly was to her an

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 249.      <sup>25</sup> Turner, George W. Cable, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> The Grandissimes, p. 221.      <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

unmerciful world."<sup>28</sup> As a "monument to the shame of two races," a "final white man's accuser," a "poisonous blossom of crime growing out of crime,"<sup>29</sup> she is quite explicitly a symbol of the sin of slavery turned against itself. In relation to our paradigm of the theme of miscegenation, she is unmistakably an example of the mulatto avenger. She is also the victim of a society which, having produced her illicitly, continues to thwart her, particularly in denying her the love of the white Honoré. Bitter and filled with the hope of revenge, she hears of slave revolts in San Domingo and is prompted to visions of "fire and blood."<sup>30</sup> When, against her own inclinations and at the insistence of Agricola Fusilier, she is betrothed to Bras Coupé, she seizes upon the chance to turn his affection for her to her advantage: "The lesson she would have taught the giant was Insurrection."<sup>31</sup> Palmyre's plans are frustrated, however, by the unexpected events that lead to Bras Coupé's escape and eventual recapture. The tragedy surrounding the noble black man's end serves to intensify the mulatress' hatred and quickens her desire for revenge, particularly for vengeance against Agricola, who, as the strict upholder of the Code Noir, becomes the living symbol of all the oppression Palmyre and her people suffer. At one point Palmyre even goes so far as to initiate an abortive attempt on the old man's life. In his creation of Palmyre Philosoph, Cable has transformed the

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28. Ibid., p. 173.

29. Ibid., p. 172.

30. Ibid., p. 239.

31. Ibid.



usually passive heroine of the "tragic mulatto" tradition--more sinned against than sinning--into a terrifying physical realization of the spirit of righteous wrath. Cable is exploring new ground in choosing a woman to represent the vengeful mulatto who emerges from our fictional paradigm. Palmyre's sensual femininity, channeled into hatred and violence, serves to intensify her effectiveness as a walking indictment of the slave system.

Meanwhile, Agricola Fusilier, the uncle of the white Honoré Grandissime, repays Palmyre's hatred in kind. Indeed, Agricola has held a special aversion to her from the beginning:

He hated her . . . for her intelligence, for the high favor in which she stood with her mistress, and for her invincible spirit, which was more offensively patent to him than to others, since he was himself the chief object of her silent detestation.<sup>32</sup>

This same brand of invincible spirit in Bras Coupé leads Agricola to hate and fear the untamable giant and, when Bras Coupé is finally recaptured, Agricola lobbies unsuccessfully for his death.

Agricola, who ironically enough traces one branch of his ancestry back to an Indian princess, is especially suspicious of mixed blood when the mixture entails the taint of Africa. His hatred and suspicion in this connection is directed particularly toward a man with a skin whiter than his own,<sup>33</sup> Honoré, the free man of color. It is precisely this

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

personal antipathy that costs the elderly gentleman his life toward the novel's end. The blind racial intolerance of Agricola is evident from his remarks on one occasion to Frowenfeld. In a condescending tone, Agricola patiently explains his position to the idealistic pharmacist:

"The non-mention of color always implies pure white; and whatever is not pure white is to all intents and purposes pure black. When I say the 'whole community,' I mean the whole white portion; when I speak of the 'undivided public sentiment,' I mean the sentiment of the white population. What else could I mean? . . . Not that there is a prejudice against the negro. By no means. Whenever he can be of any service in a strictly menial capacity, we kindly and generously tolerate his presence."<sup>34</sup>

Such passages serve to identify the testy Creole with what the author sees as the "false foundations" of Southern civilization. The mulatto Honoré's view of Agricola as a sorcerer, whose demise alone will free the Negroes and mulattos from the curse of their plight, is not too far-fetched once the reader realizes to what extent Agricola is identified with ignorance and bigotry as forces in Southern life.<sup>35</sup> The connection is there, and the free man of color's prophecy, which fails to come true on the literal level, remains, nevertheless, figuratively sound.

By the conclusion of the book, the black Honoré, induced by his love for Palmyre, has come to look upon Bras Coupé as a racial hero to be emulated, while his half-brother, the white Honoré, sees Bras Coupé as a standing accusation of the white society's guilt over the slavery issue. Sig-

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-74.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

nificant as the respective views of these two are with regard to the tragic African, their relationship with one another is even more significant. They are both sons of Numa Grandissime and both, of course, bear the same name, a name that somehow suggests that the whole question of Grandissime family honor is tied to their respective destinies. The mulatto is the elder of the two, the illegitimate issue of a liaison with a quadroon woman toward whom Numa feels a genuine affection and loyalty. Pressured by his relatives to break with his mistress and marry a white woman for the sake of his posterity, Numa does so, but not without serious qualms of conscience. When the second Honoré is born, Numa entertains the hope that somehow the boy will right the wrongs "which he had not quite dared to uproot."<sup>36</sup> Numa himself must be content with conferring legitimate paternity upon his second son and the bulk of his fortune upon the first.

Numa's hope that his younger son will somehow expiate his father's sins proves to be the case. To the white Honoré, his half-brother, the "dark sharer of his name," is a "slow-stepping, silent embodiment of reproach."<sup>37</sup> The fact of the elder brother's mixed blood makes of him yet another living symbol of the white man's guilt over slavery, and the younger Honoré recognizes this fact only too well. He tells Frowenfeld that his brother's very existence stands as an "accusation" of the whole system of racial oppression

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 368.

which forms the basis of New Orleans society.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the free man of color is a constant reminder of a personal inheritance of guilt within the confines of the Grandissime family. Consequently, the younger Honoré looks for a chance to right the wrongs his father has committed and is provided with the opportunity when the cession of Louisiana to the United States endangers the solvency of Grandissime business interests and Honoré's only hope is to petition his wealthy half-brother for economic support. The mulatto agrees, on the condition that he be given public recognition of his birthright, and a new and solvent firm of Grandissime Brothers is established.<sup>39</sup> The formation of the firm of Grandissime Brothers is not the final solution of the problems raised by the novel, however. Instead, it touches off a riot and, as an ironic consequence of having saved his white relations from bankruptcy, the mulatto is forced underground to save his own life. A fatal encounter with Agricola in Frowenfeld's pharmacy ends with the mulatto's killing his half-brother's uncle and fleeing to France. He thus assumes the role of mulatto avenger that Palmyre had once sought to assume for herself.

It is clear that Cable's treatment of the theme of miscegenation in *The Grandissimes* is in keeping with various

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>39</sup> The reader should recall that there is a similar need for recognition behind the actions of Charles Bon in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! (1936). We will treat this matter in Chapter Four of this study.

aspects of the paradigm discussed in Chapter One. The issue of miscegenation in the novel is intimately associated with the concept of inherited sin in the slaveholding South, and, likewise, Cable's portrayal of mulatto characters as actual or potential avengers is in keeping with the tradition under consideration here. The Grandissimes is a remarkable achievement for a Southern novelist in the early 1880's, both in terms of its inherent fictional value and in the way in which it foreshadows the treatment of the theme of miscegenation in the works of subsequent novelists. This is perhaps what Louis Rubin had in mind when he called The Grandissimes the first truly contemporary Southern novel on the basis of its handling of the race question.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, the work is not without serious flaws as a novel. The incongruent characterization of Agricola is a case in point. While on the one hand he is the full personification of all that is inhuman in Creole society, he is, on the other hand, oftentimes treated humorously by the author and emerges as a kind of Creole Samuel Johnson whose intolerance and egotism are more laughable than threatening. This serves to mitigate the dramatic force of the work as a whole. Similarly, the presence of the Nancanou ladies in the plot, while reinforcing to some extent the sense of an inherited wrong in the Grandissime family, at times threatens to reduce Cable's Kulturroman to the stature of a typical nineteenth-century

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<sup>40</sup> George W. Cable: The Life and Times of a Southern Heretic (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 78.

sentimental love story. While it is well to remember Cable's gifts as a fictional "sociologist," as Edmund Wilson would have it,<sup>41</sup> it is also important to remember that Cable was a novelist in the genteel tradition as well; consequently, many of the faults of The Grandissimes are, as Newton Arvin has remarked, the faults of the author's age.<sup>42</sup> It is only fair to Cable, however, to note the courage he showed in defending the integrity of his novel against the suggestions of his editors, the rather prudish Robert Underwood Johnson and two Southerners, Irwin Russell (the Mississippi poet) and Mrs. Sophia Bledsoe Herrick, daughter of the slavery apologist, Albert Bledsoe. Both Arlin Turner<sup>43</sup> and Louis Rubin<sup>44</sup> treat Cable's interchange with his editors in some detail in their respective studies of his life and work.

The Scribner's editor, Richard Watson Gilder, put a damper on Cable's original plan to continue his account of the colored Honoré in a subsequent novel.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the reader can only speculate as to the course the proposed novel would have taken had the author been able to pursue the question of miscegenation to his own conclusions without such

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<sup>41</sup> Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 548-86.

<sup>42</sup> Preface to The Grandissimes (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. vi.

<sup>43</sup> Turner, George W. Cable, pp. 95-100.

<sup>44</sup> Rubin, George W. Cable: The Life and Times of a Southern Heretic, pp. 77-78.

<sup>45</sup> Turner, p. 131.

editorial interference, for The Grandissimes, even after it had been toned down, remained controversial enough at the time of its publication to provoke many Southerners to label Cable a traitor to his region. This is irrefutable evidence that the novel contained enough details about race relations in the South to touch many a sensitive nerve. It would take a later generation of Southern writers to explore fully the implications of the miscegenation theme raised by Cable in his first effort at extended fiction.

Perhaps the formal weaknesses of The Grandissimes can ultimately be accounted for by observing that Cable, like Hawthorne, with whom he has often been compared, possessed an artistic sensibility which more readily favored the romance over the novel proper.<sup>46</sup> It is the "romance," Madame Delphine (1881), originally published separately but later incorporated into Old Creole Days, that stands in this writer's estimation as Cable's most aesthetically successful handling of the complex relationships inherent in questions of mixed race and Southern society. Written at the request of a quadroon woman who, after having read "'Tite Poulette," petitioned the author to tell the whole truth about the tragedy of her caste,<sup>47</sup> Madame Delphine is, in a way, a more honest retelling of that earlier story, an artful fable of miscegena-

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<sup>46</sup> I am relying here on a distinction between the novel and the romance which Hawthorne himself pointed out, and which was later adopted by Richard Chase in his The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), pp. 12-13.

<sup>47</sup> Turner, p. 105.

tion and collective Southern sin.

On the surface Cable's story centers around the love between a beautiful octoroon, Olive, the daughter of the title character, and a reformed pirate and smuggler. While the bulk of the plot is devoted to bringing these two lovers together and reconciling the difficulties that separate them, the unifying concept behind the tale is the Old Testament notion of collective societal guilt, a favorite theme of the devoutly Presbyterian Cable, as we noted earlier in considering The Grandissimes. This theme emerges throughout the story and is repeatedly sounded by Père Jerome, a Catholic priest of recognizably Protestant sensibilities. Père Jerome puts it this way early in the work:

"We all participate in one another's sins. There is a community of responsibility attaching to every misdeed. No human since Adam--nay, nor Adam himself--ever sinned entirely to himself. And so I never contemplate a crime or a criminal but I feel my conscience pointing at me as one of the accessories."<sup>48</sup>

In a special sermon he is called upon to deliver at the St. Louis Cathedral, Père Jerome reiterates this theme, and, quite significantly, connects it with the institutional sin responsible for the very existence of the city's quadroons:

"My friends, there are thousands of people in this city of New Orleans to whom society gives the ten commandments of God with all the nots rubbed out! If God sends the poor weakling to purgatory for leaving the right path, where ought some of you go who strew it with thorns and briars."<sup>49</sup>

There is a sociological as well as a theological soundness

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<sup>48</sup> Old Creole Days, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 21.



to Père Jerome's assessment of this question when he attempts to recreate what he feels is God's attitude toward the quadroon concubine in abstract: ". . . all the rights of her womanhood trampled in the mire, sin made easy to her--almost compulsory--charge it to the account of whom it may concern!"<sup>50</sup>

But the sexual sin involved in the creation and perpetuation of the quadroon caste is only symptomatic of a greater evil, racial oppression itself, as is clear from Madame Delphine's attack upon the Code Noir that stands in the way of her daughter's marriage:

" . . . from what race do they want to keep my daughter separate? She is seven parts white! The law did not stop her from being that; and now, when she wants to be a white man's good and honest wife, shall the law stop her? . . . what a law!"<sup>51</sup>

In order to subvert the law, Madame Delphine swears that her daughter is white and paves the way for the marriage of Olive to her white suitor. In thus bearing false witness, she jeopardizes her own soul and, out of an ironic sense of guilt, goes to Père Jerome for absolution. Her subsequent fatal swoon in the confessional, melodramatic as it is, nevertheless effectively reinforces the focus of Cable's story. Père Jerome's intercessional prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to her charge!,"<sup>52</sup> is damning in its implications as to where the blame is to finally rest. Madame Delphine is, in a way, The Grandissimes writ small. That the tale

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

stops short of portraying the promised consequences of the white South's racial transgressions is hardly a fault in its overall design. Those consequences would have been only too apparent to an audience in the post-Reconstruction era.

The decade from 1871 to 1881 saw the appearance of Cable's finest fictional output, Old Creole Days, The Grandissimes, and Madame Delphine. Significantly, the same decade saw the development of the author's liberal stand on the race question. The frequency with which Cable turned to the theme of miscegenation in the works under consideration here seems to suggest how intimately that issue was related to his growing awareness of his region's racial guilt. Cable was to continue his crusade for Negro rights with books like The Silent South (1885) and The Negro Question (1890), but, for the most part, his fiction from 1895 to 1910 is remarkably free of controversial material. This relatively calm period produced the conventional historical romances The Cavalier (1901) and Bylow Hill (1902). But Cable's last three novels, Gideon's Band (1914), The Flower of the Chapdelaines (1918), and Lovers of Louisiana (1918), demonstrate that Cable could still utilize the problems of the South and its race question for fictional purposes. These books, however, lack the compelling power of The Grandissimes.

Significantly, Cable was once again to return briefly to the theme of miscegenation in Gideon's Band, a novel set microcosmically on a steamboat travelling up the Mississippi. Whereas he had daringly allowed a bi-racial marriage to take

place with seemingly full approbation in Madame Delphine, in the later work he seems to infer that such a union is wholly undesirable, that racial differences are too real to be handily reconciled in so patent a fictional fashion. Rather than lament the disparity between the younger Cable's courageous support of Negro rights and the spirit of his final statement on the question of mixed blood, the reader would do well to remember the social and historical background against which Cable worked and the price he paid for publicly defending his viewpoints. Against such a background, his efforts in the early Civil Rights struggle require no apology. Likewise, in his willingness to handle the theme of miscegenation in his fiction, he prepared the way for many of the writers who were to follow him. Cable broke the ground out of which Faulkner and Warren--among others--were to harvest strange and wondrous fruit.

### CHAPTER III

#### PUDD'NHEAD WILSON: MARK TWAIN'S EXPANSION OF THE THEME

That rebellious puritan, Mark Twain, once wrote his friend William Dean Howells concerning a mutual acquaintance, George Washington Cable:

You know that when it comes to moral honesty, limpid innocence, and utterly blemishless piety, the apostles were mere policemen to Cable; so with this in mind you must imagine him at a mid-night dinner in Boston the other night; Osgood, full, Boyle O'Reilly, full, Fairchild responsively loaded, and Aldrich and myself possessing the floor, and properly fortified. Cable told Mrs. Clemens . . . that he seemed to have been entertaining himself with horses, and had a dreamy idea that he must have gone to Boston in a cattlecar.<sup>1</sup> It was a very large time. He called it an orgy.

This passage tells us much about Cable, the shy Presbyterian whose conscience forced him into heated public controversy throughout much of his career. And by implication, it tells us much about Twain, the vigorous and fun-loving iconoclast. Different as these two writers were temperamentally and ideologically, they both shared the same sense of outrage toward sham and hypocrisy. They both identified themselves with the plight of those oppressed by human injustice. They were both Southerners who had at one time condoned slavery

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<sup>1</sup> Selected Mark Twain-Howells Letters, 1872-1910, ed. Frederick Anderson, William M. Gibson, and Henry Nash Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 204.

and were later to recant their youthful error, devoting some of their best fictional efforts to dramatizing the evils of "the peculiar institution."

Like Cable's, Twain's early religious background was essentially Calvinistic. As a boy, he knew only too well the sharp line of demarcation separating saints from sinners, as well as the awesome burden of inherited guilt and communal sin which provoked inevitable and inescapable punishment from an angry God. Twain's Autobiography furnishes ample testimony to the effect that he developed quite early a sense of personal inadequacy and guilt which was to plague him increasingly in later life.<sup>2</sup> And while he was to cultivate ostentatiously a self-ordained role as unorthodox prophet throughout his literary career, he nevertheless sought refuge late in life in a species of pessimistic determinism quite obviously akin to a kind of secularized Calvinism. In place of Original Sin, there was the innate depravity of "the damned human race." In place of predestination, there was the conspiracy of cause and effect, heredity and training, which rendered human freedom and progress purely illusory.

To what extent the author's early religious training and his experiences in growing up within a slaveholding community were responsible for his much-discussed psychic "scars" is a purely speculative problem. Direct evidence in this matter is not available, but we do know that Twain was to

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<sup>2</sup> The Autobiography of Mark Twain, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), pp. 42-43.

recall a number of disturbing episodes related to slavery in conversations with his "official" biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine. While the particular brand of slavery that young Sam Clemens knew in Hannibal and on the Quarles' farm might well have been milder than that practiced on plantations in the deep South, as Minnie T. Brashear suggests,<sup>3</sup> it was, nevertheless, not without its harsher aspects. On at least one occasion, the author's father beat a female slave for resisting her mistress,<sup>4</sup> and this same slave was later sold down the river out of financial necessity.<sup>5</sup> In his later life, Twain was to recall the pity that was felt by his mother for a Negro boy separated from his family.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he could recall how a white man once killed one of his slaves over nothing more than a trifling annoyance,<sup>7</sup> as well as remember the time the local abolitionist was almost lynched for expressing his hatred of Negro servitude.<sup>8</sup> Genial slaves like Uncle Ned were an important part of Twain's happier recollections of his childhood, but the mature Twain could also recall his boyish fear of runaways, Negroes whose very presence in the countryside surrounding Hannibal gave the lie to the myth of the happy-go-lucky slave.<sup>9</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Twain was, from his

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Twain: Son of Missouri (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain: A Biography (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1912), I, 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 41.      <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 48.      <sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17.      <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 64.

early manhood on, a confirmed opponent of the "peculiar institution." As Philip S. Foner has pointed out, there is nothing in Twain's writings either before or during the Civil War to suggest the violently anti-slavery views he was to adopt subsequently.<sup>10</sup> His early contempt for the black race in general is reflected in an 1853 letter written home during a stay in New York in which he sarcastically threatens to black his face in order to profit from what he saw as the preferential treatment accorded Negroes in the East.<sup>11</sup> His service with the Marion Rangers (however brief) at the outbreak of the war seems to belie any serious qualms of conscience he might have had regarding slavery at that time. Even after his trip to Nevada, he remained sympathetic to the Southern cause. As a newspaperman in Virginia City, he was fond of undercutting pro-Union sentiment with charges of Negrophilia. In 1864, he published a "hoax" story about a man indicted for treason for maintaining the innate superiority of the white race.<sup>12</sup> His famous near-duel with James Laird, which led to Twain's hasty removal to San Francisco, was prompted by an article in which Twain charged that the proceeds from a ladies' charitable ball were to be sent back

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Twain: Social Critic (New York: International, 1958), p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Arlin Turner in "Mark Twain and the South: An Affair of Love and Anger," Southern Review, n.s., 4 (1968), 496.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Fatout, Mark Twain in Virginia City (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1964), p. 180.

East to a "miscegenation society."<sup>13</sup> Although by 1868 Twain was ready to agree that the freedman should be extended citizenship,<sup>14</sup> his personal sympathies for the Negro seem to have remained largely unchanged. There is evidence of this in the callously cruel humor of the 1870 sketch "Riley--Newspaper Correspondent." When asked to provide a proper epitaph for an aged Negro woman who had been "roasted" to death in a fire, Twain's witty hero (whom the author obviously admires) suggests a passage from the Bible: "Well done, good and faithful servant."<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Twain's stock portrayal of two Negroes, Uncle Dan'l and his wife, in The Gilded Age (1873) is, as Louis J. Budd has said, fully worthy of Thomas Nelson Page.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1874 sketch, "A True Story," however, the author's attitude toward the Negro and slavery undergoes a radical shift. In recounting her own story, Aunt Rachel takes on considerable human dignity while, at the same time, leveling an indirect indictment against Southern antebellum slavery. It is interesting to note that this sketch belongs to that period in Twain's career when he was first discovering the literary potential of what Henry Nash Smith has called

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 196-211.

<sup>14</sup> Foner, p. 192.

<sup>15</sup> Sketches Old and New (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875), p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Twain: Social Philosopher (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1962), p. 153.



the Matter of Hannibal.<sup>17</sup> In Tom Sawyer (1876), the first of Twain's novels to draw heavily on his childhood experiences, the issue of slavery is kept carefully in the background. But beneath the "pastoral tranquillity" Smith has noted,<sup>18</sup> there are hints in Tom Sawyer of violence and squalor which manifest themselves openly in the sub-plot centering around graverobbing and murder, and these evils are personified in the figure of the dark avenger, Injun Joe. Twain does not specifically link the subterranean evil lurking beneath the surface of his children's idyll with the question of slavery. Yet, immediately after the completion of Tom Sawyer, he launched upon his seven years labor on The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), his masterpiece. Huckleberry Finn is, in many ways, the aesthetic culmination of the long tradition of anti-slavery fiction in nineteenth-century America. In that novel Twain extends the same method of indirect social criticism evidenced in "A True Story" to establish a bitterly satirical case against slavery and racial intolerance in general; and, in the person of the runaway Jim, he creates for the first time in his fiction a Negro character of heroic stature. Although Twain could still exploit, on occasion, the comic possibilities of Negro characters in his fiction, notably in The American Claimant (1892) in which Uncle Dan'l and Jinny reappear, he would never again appear

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

to be insensitive to the black man's essential humanity.

While still struggling with Huckleberry Finn, Twain met Cable for the first time in 1881. Whether or not, as Arlin Turner suggests,<sup>19</sup> Twain's novel was influenced by this fact, it is clear from Twain's admiration for The Grandissimes that he had come to share many of the New Orleanian's attitudes toward slavery and the antebellum South by the early 1880's. Indeed, he would eventually accept a notion of the interrelationship between individual guilt and collective sin arising from slavery remarkably akin to that of his friend. We are told by Howells that Twain "held himself personally responsible for the wrong the white race had done the black race in slavery."<sup>20</sup> Howells tells also that Twain sent a young black man to Yale in partial repayment of the debt he felt every white man owed every black.<sup>21</sup> Although he was never to take upon himself the activist role in the struggle for the freedman's rights assumed by Cable, Twain did follow the latter's lead in consigning "the peculiar institution" to scathing fictional scrutiny, not only in Huckleberry Finn, but in his next significant work, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889).

Set in a fanciful medieval past, A Connecticut Yankee

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<sup>19</sup> "Mark Twain and the South," Southern Review, n.s., 4 (1968), 516.

<sup>20</sup> My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

does not, properly speaking, belong to the Matter of Hannibal. Yet, as Henry Nash Smith has noted,<sup>22</sup> the dreamlike character of Arthur's England does share much in common with the author's portrayal of the South elsewhere in his writings. Louis Rubin suggests that the Yankee's attitude toward Arthur's kingdom parallels Twain's attitude toward his native region.<sup>23</sup> The Yankee is especially contemptuous of the chivalric nonsense, social abuses, and narrow religiosity of the Middle Ages, and these were some of the same characteristics Twain denounced in the South. Furthermore, the issue of slavery becomes an important concern of the novel. At one point in the narrative, the Yankee and the King are sold into slavery and experience its horrors first-hand. In A Connecticut Yankee, questions of race do not obscure the basic issues involved in the institution of human bondage, and Twain is thus able to expose it for what it is, a crime against human nature itself. Consequently, he brings in by implication an indictment of conditions as they existed in the antebellum South as well.

Twain's attack on slavery in A Connecticut Yankee is the clear product of outrage, and this same outrage, itself the product of the author's awareness of the ironies inherent in any culture in which the traditional values of Western civilization are enshrined while a race of human

<sup>22</sup> Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> The Writer in the South: Studies in a Literary Community (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 69.

beings is enslaved, reasserts itself with a vengeance in Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894), Twain's fullest exploration of the nature and effects of slavery. As Bernard DeVoto puts it, "the institution that had furnished a living background" for Huckleberry Finn comes to the forefront in Pudd'nhead Wilson.<sup>24</sup> This latter book is a bitter study of the corruptive influence of slavery upon all it touches and is Twain's most sustained condemnation of the society which, in part at least, produced him.

Significantly, the theme of miscegenation lies at the very core of Pudd'nhead Wilson and places that work squarely within the tradition of Southern fiction under consideration in this study. But the novel itself is not simply another outgrowth of the Southern writer's recurrent preoccupation with the theme of mixed blood. Twain pushes his treatment of the theme beyond the limits of its purely social and historical relevance and makes of it a sounding board for a wide range of personal concerns, investing it at the same time with universal implications. In this way, his handling of the theme anticipates the way in which later novelists like Faulkner and Warren approach the same issue. Pudd'nhead Wilson is not only an account of the torturous consequences of the sin of slavery in the Old South, it is a fictional statement of the author's own pseudo-philosophical vision of human experience itself, an elaborate narrative dramatization

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Twain's America (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin, 1932), p. 293.

of his professed determinism. In a very real sense, Dawson's Landing, the setting for most of Pudd'nhead Wilson, is the world at large and its inhabitants are the "damned human race" writ small. In the course of his novel, Twain proceeds from an analysis of the world he knew as a boy to an account of the world as he came to envision it as an old man.

The highly personal nature of Pudd'nhead Wilson is indicated by the fact that the novel seems almost to have written itself. Twain tells us that the book began as a farce and ended as a tragedy, in spite of his original intentions.<sup>25</sup> And, if we take the author at his word that much of the substance of his story came to him involuntarily, it is important to note that the appearance of the mulatto Roxana upon the scene seems to have signaled the shift in direction and tone the intended narrative was to undergo.<sup>26</sup> The problem of slavery implied by her presence quite likely triggered the release of a repressed creative energy within the novelist. As Arlin Turner says, "the question of race demanded a hearing without regard to his [Twain's] intentions."<sup>27</sup> The result is what Maxwell Geismar has called an "anti-idyll,"<sup>28</sup> a tale of institutionalized evil and racial

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<sup>25</sup> Twain's discussion of the genesis and evolution of the novel is contained in the volume Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1922). Specific reference above is found on page 208.

<sup>26</sup> Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins, p. 295.

<sup>27</sup> "Mark Twain and the South," 508.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Twain: An American Prophet (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 138.

hypocrisy acted out against a background Leslie Fiedler has described as a "dark mirror image" of the world dealt with less bitterly in Huckleberry Finn.<sup>29</sup>

Taken in the abstract, the plot of Pudd'nhead Wilson is prosaic enough. It involves the belated acceptance of the title character by the community of Dawson's Landing after years of relative ostracism. Roxana, a beautiful mulatto slave, charged with the care of both her own illegitimate child and the son of one of the town's leading citizens, changes the babies in their cradles. As a result, her son grows up as the spoiled scion of the proud Driscoll family and Percy Driscoll's real son grows up as a slave. When her master dies, Roxy is freed and spends several years working as a chambermaid on a river steamboat. When she returns to Dawson's Landing, she finds her son has accrued gambling debts and is paying them off by robbing the houses of his neighbors. Roxy reveals her son's true identity to him and cuts herself in on the profits. Despite the fact that her son has treated her shamefully in the past, Roxana's maternal affections repeatedly get the best of her, and, at one point, she even allows herself to be sold back into slavery to help him out of a tight spot. He betrays her by selling her down river, but she even comes to forgive that. Finally, in an attempted robbery, Roxy's son murders his supposed uncle, Judge Driscoll, and puts the blame on two Italian twins

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<sup>29</sup> "As Free as Any Cretur . . ." in Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Henry Nash Smith (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 131.

(residue left over from the novel's original germ, "Those Extraordinary Twins"). Pudd'nhead Wilson uses fingerprints to establish the identity of the real killer and thereby wins long-awaited acceptance from the townspeople who had previously written him off as an eccentric. The similarities between this basic plot and that of the conventional detective story are evident. But within the melodrama and conventionality of this narrative framework, Twain succeeds in raising several serious issues. First of all, there is, of course, the question of slavery itself, particularly the question of miscegenation. The presence of this theme of mixed blood in Pudd'nhead Wilson further opens the way for the author's exploration of two of his obsessive fictional concerns: the ambiguities of appearance versus reality and the related problem of identity. The themes of assumed identity and the deceptiveness of appearances play an important part in three of Twain's earlier novels, Huckleberry Finn, The Prince and the Pauper, and A Connecticut Yankee, and they become of increasing importance to the author in the years following Pudd'nhead Wilson. Finally, there is the question of behavioral determinism and its relationship to the author's pessimism and misanthropy.

At the beginning of Pudd'nhead Wilson, Twain is concerned with establishing a strong sense of place in the consciousness of his reader. Dawson's Landing is described at considerable length, and Twain even goes so far as to fix the geographical locus of the town with a precision reminis-

cent of Life on the Mississippi (1883); he locates it exactly half a day's steamboat trip south of St. Louis.<sup>30</sup> The author's description of the town serves both to particularize it and minimize its uniqueness. While detailed and convincing, it is nevertheless typical, and the reader is left with the impression that Dawson's Landing is not unlike any number of similarly situated towns in the upper South.

Most notably, the town seems distinguished by its quietness and respectability. Superficially, at least, these qualities are in evidence, but the author gently hints that the peace and contentment of Dawson's Landing rest on potentially deceptive appearances. Noting that a cat is often-times associated with a contented household, the narrator further observes that a house without a cat "may be a perfect home, perhaps, but how can it prove title?"<sup>31</sup> This is the first suggestion of the kind of society Twain will be dealing with in Pudd'nhead Wilson. It is a society in which reality is obscured by and confused with appearances, a society which subscribes blindly to a set of shared assumptions with little regard as to whether or not they reflect actuality. Significantly, at the very end of his introductory description, the narrator drops almost as an afterthought the fact that Dawson's Landing is a slaveholding town and, thereby, achieves the first of a series of ironies that run

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<sup>30</sup> Pudd'nhead Wilson (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 34.



consistently throughout the narrative. Behind the peaceful whitewashed exteriors of the cozy houses lining the streets of the village is the institutionalized violence of the slave system. The seeming respectability of the townspeople is only an empty facade superficially serving to hide the inhumanity on which the town is founded.

This same irony of appearances is personified in the character of Roxana: "From Roxy's manner of speech a stranger would have expected her to be black, but she was not. Only one sixteenth of her was black, and that sixteenth did not show."<sup>32</sup> Genetically, the fifteen parts of white blood in Roxy clearly outweigh the other fraction, as evidenced by her physical traits. She has a fair skin and fine brown hair, as well as a healthy glow on her cheeks; yet she is the victim of an arbitrary legal definition that subverts the natural laws of heredity. Her society's artificial assumptions regarding race declare her to be a Negro; and in a terrible and ironic way, she is for all practical purposes a Negro.

The awesome power of social conditioning is further demonstrated in the respective careers of Tom Driscoll and Chambers, the two children Roxy switches in their cradles. Tom, the son of Roxy's master, becomes Chambers the slave, while the real Chambers, Roxy's illegitimate son by a Virginian of "formidable calibre," grows up as the spoiled heir of the Driscoll family. In tracing the development of each boy's respective character, the author illustrates the in-

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

sidious influence of slavery upon all who are associated with it. Early in life, "Chambers" is brutalized into a role of docile and unquestioning servility. Ironically, "Tom" is himself brutalized by slavery, albeit in an entirely different direction. Given absolute sovereignty over his chattel, Chambers, Tom is free from the very beginning to exercise his innate cruelty without restraint. If slavery emasculates Chambers by depriving him of all the vestiges of human worth, it turns Tom into an egomaniacal monster, the perfect realization of Thomas Jefferson's warning that slavery undermines the character of the master as well as that of the servant.

In connection with the paradigmatic sketch of the theme of miscegenation discussed earlier in this study, it is important to note that Roxy, whom Twain refers to as the "heir of two centuries of unatoned insult and outrage,"<sup>33</sup> looks upon her son as "avenging" in part the crimes of the white race against blacks.<sup>34</sup> And, in certain respects, Tom does display many of the characteristics of the bitter and vengeful mulatto protagonist of the tradition. Upon learning the truth about his parentage, he undergoes the inevitable crisis of identity:

The tremendous catastrophe which had befallen Tom had changed his moral landscape in much the same way [as a volcanic eruption]. Some of his low places he found lifted to ideals, some of his ideals had sunk to the valleys, and lay there with the sackcloth and ashes of pumice-stone and sulphur on their ruined

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

heads.<sup>35</sup>

Tom suddenly feels uncomfortable in the company of whites and finds himself assuming the cowering servility of the slave in their presence. So radical are the changes brought on by his new self-awareness that he is even capable of a temporary regret for the lot of his fellows:

"Why were niggers and whites made? What crime did the uncreated first nigger commit that the curse of birth was decreed for him? And why this awful difference made between white and black? . . . How hard the nigger's fate seems . . . !--yet until last night such a thought never entered my head."<sup>36</sup>

Like the typical mulatto character in our paradigm, Tom expresses his desire for revenge against his white father.<sup>37</sup> Arlin Turner, in tracing the evolution of Pudd'n-head Wilson, points out that originally this theme of the animosity of the son against his father was a prominent part of the intended narrative. In one early version of the story, Twain even included a fatal confrontation between the father and son,<sup>38</sup> but in the novel as we have it, Tom's white father is dispensed with early, and it is his surrogate paternal-figure, his "uncle," Judge Driscoll, who is his victim. Although Tom's motive for the murder of his supposed uncle is robbery and not revenge, there is, nevertheless, fitting symbolism in the fact that prior to the crime Tom disguises himself by blacking his face. While the Judge is

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Turner, "Mark Twain and the South," 511.

not the mulatto's natural sire, he is a personification of the Southern gentleman, a pillar of the slaveholding community, so that there is appropriate irony in the fact that he is killed by the serpent he has nourished unknowingly in his own bosom. James M. Cox is unquestionably right in regarding Tom as the "avenging agent who carries back across the color line the repressed guilt" of slavery.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, on its most basic level, Twain's treatment of the miscegenation theme in Pudd'nhead Wilson falls conveniently within the limits suggested by Harris' "Where's Duncan?" Miscegenation is not only proof of the white man's guilt with regard to slavery, it provides the instrument by which that guilt is punished. Twain's portrayal of Tom as beset with identity problems and the desire for revenge is likewise an outgrowth of the tradition. But these elements, central as they are, constitute only the barest skeletal frame of the novel as a whole. True, the book never ceases to be an attack on slavery. Indeed, the final bitter joke on which it ends involves the fact that Tom's value as a slave saves him from punishment for his crimes. Still, as noted earlier, the author's attack on slavery is only the starting point from which he explores a whole set of broader issues. Twain sees beyond the particulars of his tale of the consequences of slavery and interracial sex in the Old South. The regional relevance of his story carries with it the possibility of

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 232.

certain broader implications, and Twain makes full use of them. In this way, Pudd'nhead Wilson is at once Twain's contribution to a recognizable tradition in post-Civil War Southern fiction and an intensely personal work which anticipates the darker pessimism of the author's later years. What begins as an exposé of the evils of slavery becomes a sardonic indictment of human folly and natural "cussedness" on the broadest scale.

The most prevalent literary device Twain relies upon in Pudd'nhead Wilson in order to reinforce his satiric point is sustained dramatic irony of an almost Sophoclean relentlessness. The recurrent irony of false appearances involving Roxy and the interchanged babies, which we have already noted, is the prime case in point. But the novel's plot abounds in similar ironies, and they all contribute to the work's final effectiveness. It is, for instance, particularly ironic that Pudd'nhead himself, in pointing out how much the infantile Tom and Chambers resemble one another, is to blame for planting the initial seeds of Roxy's deception in her imagination. Likewise, there is irony in the fact that it is Percy Driscoll's sadistic threat to sell his slaves down the river that provokes Roxy, who fears such a future fate awaits her son, to switch the boys in their cradles, thus dooming her master's child to life as a slave. Again, it is this same Percy Driscoll who canes his own son into accepting Roxy's usurper as his unquestioned master. Finally, it is ironic that Roxy's deception, aimed at saving

her child from the terrors of deep South slavery, ultimately ends with his being sold down the river following the murder of his "uncle." In taking the most extreme measures to avoid precisely that event, she unwittingly paves the way for its convoluted realization.

These selected examples are only a few of those which form a string of coincidental ironies running throughout the work, and these coincidences serve to reinforce in the reader's mind a sense of some underlying fate at work behind the events of the narrative. In this respect, it is worth noting that in switching the babies in the first place Roxy is challenging the order of things. She is, in effect, tempting fate, and she even sees herself at one point as assuming a semi-divine role.<sup>40</sup> She is thus guilty of the sin of hybris. Like Prometheus, Oedipus and Creon, she overestimates her power and oversteps her bounds, thus defeating her own purposes and bringing the final catastrophe upon herself. This is perhaps what Twain had in mind when he referred to Pudd'n-head Wilson as a tragedy. Roxy does assume something of a tragic dignity at times. She is, as DeVoto points out, a "unique and formidable" fictional creation.<sup>41</sup>

However, in the final analysis, it would be wrong to accept Covici's view that Pudd'nhead Wilson is a "successful tragedy,"<sup>42</sup> for, due to the particular perspective Twain's

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<sup>40</sup> Pudd'nhead Wilson, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> Mark Twain's America, p. 293.

<sup>42</sup> Pascal Covici, Jr., Mark Twain: The Image of a

narrative voice brings to the events as they transpire, the tone of the novel is hardly that of genuine tragedy. Rather than treat the unquestionably somber action of the novel with high seriousness, Twain's narrator chooses to view it with bitter and sarcastic humor. The result is that the potential pathos of the tale is inverted into a kind of scornful ridicule. In the world of Dawson's Landing, there are no real heroes, only fools.

The characters of Pudd'nhead Wilson are ultimately fools, in Twain's view, because, white or black, they are all the slaves of a false and hypocritical set of social assumptions and of mankind's inherent need for what the author terms self-approval.<sup>43</sup> Without any real volition, they lack both merit and blame for their actions. Even those characters with which the reader tends to sympathize are unworthy of his actual respect. They are caught up in a blind and pointless determinism which they fail to understand and are powerless to escape. In short, they are the fictional realization of the behavioral theories Twain later sets forth explicitly in the quasi-philosophical dialogue What Is Man? (1906). As surely as circumstances and societal determinants reduce the son of proud aristocrats to the level of Chambers, the slave, these same forces, along with each character's need for personal self-esteem and communal acceptance, effect

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World (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1962), p. 132.

<sup>43</sup> What Is Man? in The Complete Essays of Mark Twain, ed. Charles Neider (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), p. 342.

the enslavement of the entire community.

Not even Roxana and Pudd'nhead himself are exempt. Despite her hatred of the slave system, Roxy nevertheless is the unresisting victim of certain of the Old South's most celebrated delusions, notably the idea that affairs of honor are best settled on the duelling field and the notion that the concept of pedigree is applicable to human beings.<sup>44</sup> Roxy's excited response to the duel between one of the twins and old Judge Driscoll and her ludicrous attempt at reconstructing her own genealogy do much to undermine whatever heroic qualities the reader is willing to bestow upon her. Perhaps it should also be noted that her capacity for seemingly limitless maternal self-sacrifice is itself reducible, in accordance with the principles set forth in What Is Man?, to an expression of a basic selfishness on her part.<sup>45</sup> In any event, all her sacrifices and sufferings throughout the novel are wasted foolishly on the worthless scoundrel, Tom. Roxana is enslaved in more ways than one.

The same might be said of Pudd'nhead Wilson. Although, as Smith points out, Pudd'nhead does share certain characteristics in common with such "transcendent" figures in Twain's fiction as Colonel Sherburn, Hank Morgan and Satan, who appears in The Mysterious Stranger,<sup>46</sup> his role as perennial outsider does not exempt him from sharing the folly of

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<sup>44</sup> Pudd'nhead Wilson, p. 143.

<sup>45</sup> The Complete Essays of Mark Twain, p. 346.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, p. 136.



those around him. For example, he blindly accepts his society's bloody code of honor. He shares the Judge's sense of shame at Tom's refusal to challenge Luigi to a duel and personally acts as the Italian's second in the confrontation with the old Judge, who has been Pudd'nhead's only real friend in Dawson's Landing. Furthermore, in the final courtroom scene, when Wilson denounces Tom as a Negro and a slave, it is clear that he accepts without question his society's views on race and slavery. Far from being a truly transcendent figure, Wilson seeks untiringly to become a part of Dawson's Landing with all its narrow-mindedness and absurdity. While James M. Cox's suggestion that Pudd'nhead shares many of the author's own disillusionments about the human condition is an interesting one,<sup>47</sup> it is pertinent only with regard to Pudd'nhead as the author of the "calendar" entries at the head of each chapter. As a character in his own right, Pudd'nhead is, more often than not, merely laughable.

It is laughter, then, and not pity and fear that the novel provokes from the reader, an infectious laughter that the reader catches from the narrator, who stands outside the action of the story and views it from what is indeed a transcendent perspective. In this connection, one is reminded of what Twain's Satan tells his young friends in The Mysterious Stranger. Laughter, he tells them, is a man's mightiest weapon against the absurdity and perversity of the human

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor, p. 245.

situation.<sup>48</sup> It alone can dispel the "grotesque and absurd dream" that is everyday reality.<sup>49</sup> Twain is here anticipating a view of the redemptive value of laughter similar to that propounded by later writers like Hermann Hesse in Steppenwolf and Albert Camus in the Myth of Sisyphus. In a world of pointless inhumanity populated by absurd fools, a world like that portrayed in Pudd'nhead Wilson, one's sole hope is to rise above the meaninglessness of all that surrounds him and laugh.

The low opinion of human nature which forms the basis for the sardonic humor of Pudd'nhead Wilson was present in Twain's thinking as early as A Connecticut Yankee, a work that chronicles the failure of technological progress and democratic social idealism. The Yankee, for the most part an optimist who accepts the innate dignity of the individual, is also capable of a remark like the following: ". . . there are times when one would like to hang the whole human race and finish the farce."<sup>50</sup> For Twain himself, such "times" were to become more and more frequent in his later years (no doubt as the partial result of such economic disasters as the Paige typesetter fiasco and such personal disasters as the death of his favorite daughter, Suzy). Pudd'nhead Wilson, then, is an important work of the Twain canon because it is at once a

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<sup>48</sup> The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), p. 132.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>50</sup> A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1899), p. 278.

culmination of the author's earlier speculation about the nature of human existence and an anticipation of his final sardonic pessimism. The issues and attitudes raised by the novel persist in the last two decades of Twain's life, as Cox points out.<sup>51</sup> And significantly, in such fragments as "Indiantown" and "Which Was It?" (c. 1900), they are intimately tied to the Matter of Hannibal and the question of Negro slavery.

The deterministic philosophy of the author's old age ultimately led him to express the belief that "The skin of every human being contains a slave."<sup>52</sup> This recognition is, as we have already seen, implicit in Pudd'nhead Wilson and it serves to shed light on the radical differences between Twain's handling of slavery and the issue of miscegenation in that novel and the treatment of the same questions in a work like Cable's The Grandissimes. Whereas Cable, with all the zealous optimism of the Christian reformer, was able to regard racial evils in the South (or prison reform or the crop-lien system) as societal wrongs peculiar to a particular time and place and thus open to remedy, Twain, embittered by the vicious folly of the "damned human race," could only regard slavery and similar degradations as symptomatic of the human lot in general. Although both novels have their origins in the same fictional tradition, the tradition detailed

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<sup>51</sup> James M. Cox, "The Approved Mark Twain: The Beginning of the End," Southern Review, 4 (1968), 548.

<sup>52</sup> Mark Twain's Notebook, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 393.

in the introductory chapter of this study, their final implementation of that tradition is determined by the anti-thetical dispositions of the authors themselves. The prevailing tone of The Grandissimes is one of elegiac seriousness, despite the artificiality of its happy ending. The prevailing tone of Pudd'nhead Wilson, on the other hand, is one of cosmic farce. The presence of slavery in the Old South is only symbolic, in Twain's view, of the slavery under which all men suffer their way through life. Beginning, like Cable, with a historical and sociological perspective on slavery, Twain progresses to a metaphysical one. Pudd'nhead Wilson, a work ostensibly about the sin of slavery and centering around the paradigmatic theme of miscegenation, a work which foreshadows the pessimism and despair of its author's last years, begins in the particular and ends in the universal. Like many of the Southern writers who are to follow him, Twain uses the question of mixed blood as the starting point for the evolution of a vision of human existence peculiarly his own. It is for this reason that the novel stands as a notable achievement in the history of Southern fiction. Twain was the first to show how the basic pattern of the tale of miscegenation could be made to lend itself as the vehicle for expressing an author's personal vision of reality and the nature of man, how a set of regional problems could be made to mirror universal concerns. Faulkner and Warren, in the next century, push the potential of the theme even further.

## CHAPTER IV

### TWO VISIONS OF SOUTHERN HISTORY: ABSALOM, ABSALOM! AND GO DOWN, MOSES

Cable's The Grandissimes and Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson stand as two of the most impressive examples of the use of the theme of miscegenation by nineteenth-century Southern writers. The respective treatments the theme receives in these two novels serve to demonstrate its dual potential as the raw material for fiction. Cable uses the issue of mixed blood as a way of understanding and representing the peculiar historical and sociological problems facing his region. Twain begins by making use of the theme in a similar fashion, but he pushes it beyond its purely regional implications in order to structure his individual vision of human experience as a whole. The leading Southern novelist of this century, William Faulkner, inherits the tradition represented by both these writers, and his treatment of the question of miscegenation, notably in Light in August (1932), Absalom, Absalom! (1936), and Go Down, Moses (1942), emerges as the most ambitious and successful exploration of the miscegenation theme to date. Like Cable, Faulkner is concerned with what the question of mixed blood can tell him and his reader about the South and the significance of Southern history. Like Twain, he at times utilizes the theme in such a way that the particular is

made to mirror the universal. This is especially the case in Light in August, as we shall see in the next chapter of this study.

As early as 1930, in the stories "Dry September" and "That Evening Sun," Faulkner demonstrated his interest in the racially-oriented sexual taboos of his native region and in the resultant psychological effects of those taboos on both whites and blacks. "Dry September" recounts the lynching of an innocent Negro after a white woman, sexually frustrated and psychologically warped, claims that she has been assaulted. The depravity both of the alleged victim herself and the men who set out to avenge her honor through the murder of the black man is portrayed as an obvious outgrowth of the unhealthy nature of race relations in the South. Faulkner effectively dramatizes the mixed feelings of fascination, horror, and outrage in the minds of his white characters at the very thought of the sexual violation of a Southern lady by a Negro. In "That Evening Sun" the situation is radically different. This story is an elaborate study in the ironic potential of the child's point of view. The fear of the Negro servant, Nancy, that her husband is waiting to kill her is regarded by all the white characters except Mr. Compson as a manifestation of the black race's "childishness." That Nancy's fear is anything but childish is evidenced by the fact that the Compson children are unable to fathom it in the least. Nancy is afraid because she has repeatedly prostituted herself to white men, and her husband is mad with hatred and

jealousy. Jesus, Nancy's husband, is bitterly aware of the dehumanizing conditions that make black women easily accessible to males of the dominant race: "'I can't hang around white man's kitchen, . . . But white man can hang around mine. White man can come in my house, but I can't stop him. When white man want to come in my house, I ain't got no house.'"<sup>1</sup> One scene in particular points vividly toward the white South's hypocrisy in sexual practices. Nancy has been arrested and is being taken to jail when she encounters a "respectable" Baptist deacon, Mr. Stovall:

"When you going to pay me, white man? When you going to pay me, white man? It's been three times now since you paid me a cent--" Mr. Stovall knocked her down, but she kept on saying, "When you going to pay me, white man? It's been three times now since--" until Mr. Stovall kicked her in the mouth with his heel and the marshal caught Mr. Stovall back, and Nancy lying in the street, laughing. She turned her head and spat out some blood and teeth and said, "It's been three times now since he paid me a cent."<sup>2</sup>

"Dry September" and "That Evening Sun" demonstrate Faulkner's full awareness of the obsessive power the issue of miscegenation exercised over the imaginations of Southerners, both black and white, and of the frequency with which white Southerners, in spite of their protests to the contrary, exploited the bodies of black women. But in neither of these stories does Faulkner examine the full potential of the theme of miscegenation as set forth in the paradigm described earlier in this study. In Light in August, however,

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<sup>1</sup> "That Evening Sun," in The Collected Stories of William Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 291.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 292.

Faulkner makes extensive use of one of the most interesting aspects of that paradigm, the mulatto's struggle for identity. Light in August is, almost without exception, regarded as one of Faulkner's greatest successes, and Joe Christmas, his "mulatto" anti-hero, is one of his most powerful creations. He is not only a tragic representation of the pariah figure in Southern society, but an image of alienated contemporary man as well. For purposes of comparison, Light in August will be considered in detail in the next chapter, alongside another work, Robert Penn Warren's Band of Angels, in which another mixed-blood character sets out in search of the Self. In a very real sense, these two works are an impressive example of the way in which essentially regional materials can be made to reflect universal concerns.

In this chapter, however, our principal concern will be with two other novels, Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down, Moses, for in these works Faulkner makes full use of our original paradigm as a way of representing a vision of Southern history. In dramatizing the respective reactions of Quentin Compson and Isaac McCaslin to their awareness of that vision, Faulkner presents two radically different attempts to escape the burdensome inheritance of Southern history.

Despite the persistent critical controversy that has raged over the interpretation of certain details of Absalom, Absalom!, two basic generalizations may safely be assumed for our purposes here: (1) the novel has to do with the meaning



of the Southern past, and (2) the overall tone of the work is decidedly tragic. Indeed, few would question the appropriateness of Ilse Dusoir Lind's description of the book as "a grand tragic vision of historic dimensions."<sup>3</sup> But Absalom, Absalom! is not simply about the South and its peculiar historical heritage; it is also a dramatization of young Quentin Compson's attempt to understand himself in relation to that Southern past out of which his very existence and identity take shape. As Richard Poirier suggests, it is "a novel about the meaning of history for Quentin Compson."<sup>4</sup>

As the novel opens, Quentin has been summoned to the home of Miss Rosa Coldfield, an aged spinster who is something of a woman-of-letters, a self-proclaimed poetess of the Lost Cause who, like many Southern women of her generation, tends to over-romanticize her region's past. Miss Rosa's reason for summoning Quentin is two-fold. In the first place, she needs him to accompany her on a nocturnal quest the exact nature of which remains unclear until the conclusion of the novel. On the other hand, she wants to tell him a story she feels compelled to tell.

The parallels between the opening of Absalom, Absalom! and that of our paradigmatic story, Harris' "Where's Duncan?"

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<sup>3</sup> "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom!," in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 1960), p. 278.

<sup>4</sup> "'Strange Gods' in Jefferson, Mississippi: Analysis of Absalom, Absalom!," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Absalom, Absalom!, ed. Arnold Goldman (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 15.

are interesting. In the Harris story, the narrator feels a similar compulsion to tell his tale, a story that somehow contains a synoptic view of the antebellum Southern experience, to a writer who he feels can give it form and public utterance. Likewise, Miss Rosa's ostensible reason for telling her story to Quentin is that he is to be educated at Harvard and might "enter the literary profession as so many Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen are now doing. . . ."<sup>5</sup> She suggests that Quentin might someday want to turn her story into a magazine piece. There is irony here, for the story she tells Quentin is not the stuff of local-color; it is a Gothic nightmare. It is the story of Thomas Sutpen and his rise and fall, a tale with which Quentin is already familiar as part of the oral tradition of his community. In Miss Rosa's view, Sutpen is a "demon" and an "ogre" who brings upon the South a curse that can only be lifted by the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

Miss Rosa's account of Sutpen's career sets the tone, in part, for the rest of the novel, but her telling of the tale is only one of three versions presented to the reader. In addition to Miss Rosa's version, there is also that of Quentin's father, Mr. Compson. Finally, there is the version Quentin himself pieces together from the other two. This version is colored by his personal experience and speculations,

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<sup>5</sup> Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

as well as by the occasional speculations of Shreve, his Canadian roommate at Harvard. Quentin tells the Sutpen story in response to Shreve's question: "Tell about the South. What's it like there. [sic]"<sup>7</sup> Each of these accounts of Sutpen's story has its unique quality, as Warren Beck has pointed out,<sup>8</sup> and the reader's final understanding of its meaning is filtered through the interaction of these three distinct viewpoints. The result of all this is, as Richard P. Adams puts it, that the "epistemology" of the work becomes "extremely complex." "Information is given objectively and subjectively, directly and indirectly, sometimes in reports that seem to be publicly verifiable and agreed upon, sometimes in what are obviously pure fabrications, and sometimes in two or three different versions that seem incompatible if not downright contradictory."<sup>9</sup>

Related in its simplest terms, this is the substance of the Sutpen story: Thomas Sutpen is the son of a poor white mountaineer who relocates in the Tidewater region of Virginia. It is there that the young Sutpen is first exposed to the plantation society of the South with its affectations of aristocracy and its slave-based economy. On an errand to the big house, Sutpen is turned away by a house Negro and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> "William Faulkner's Style," in William Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> Faulkner: Myth and Motion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 198.

told to use the back entrance. This is a violent shock to Sutpen's sense of racial dignity, and he runs away from home, vowing to acquire for himself and his sense of self-respect a plantation and slaves of his own.

Sutpen's wanderings lead him to the West Indies, where by chance he is instrumental in putting down a slave revolt. He is rewarded with the hand of the daughter of a wealthy planter, and his dream seems to have come true. Sutpen has a child by this woman, but, when he learns that she has Negro blood, he repudiates her and the child. He does this not out of any personal aversion, but simply because the taint of African blood might thwart his grand "design," the founding of an aristocratic dynasty, the House of Sutpen, as it were. He bequeaths his newly-acquired fortune back to his wife in an effort to dissolve all ties with her and afterwards purchases a vast tract of land in northern Mississippi.

After an unexplained absence from Mississippi, Sutpen returns with an army of slaves and a captive French architect and proceeds to raise out of the primordial swampland itself a grandiose plantation, Sutpen's Hundred. Social respectability is an indispensable part of Sutpen's visionary plan, and he attempts to acquire that commodity by marrying Ellen Coldfield, the daughter of a Methodist elder and the sister of Miss Rosa. Sutpen has two children by Ellen: Henry and Judith. He has already had a child, Clytemnestra, by one of his slaves. In Henry, Sutpen sees the promise of the dynasty of which he dreams.

When Henry is sent to the University of Mississippi, he makes the acquaintance of the mysterious Charles Bon, Sutpen's mixed-blood son from his previous marriage. Raised in New Orleans, Bon has grown up as a Creole gentleman, and his true identity is unknown to Henry, who brings his friend home for the holidays and promotes, along with Ellen, the idea of marriage between the engaging New Orleanian and Judith. Sutpen is suspicious and takes a trip to New Orleans to confirm Bon's identity. Bon already recognizes his father, and, as Faulkner was later to suggest, he is resentful of the wrongs his mother has suffered.<sup>10</sup> The real reason that Bon goes along with Ellen's and Henry's matchmaking, however, is that he wants to force Sutpen into acknowledging him as his son. He seeks to define himself in relation to the man who is his father, and all he desires from Sutpen is a sign of recognition, however private. Instead of extending that sign to Bon, Sutpen calls Henry into his office and tells him that Bon is his half-brother, that marriage between Bon and Judith is impossible on grounds of incest. Henry believes him but, nevertheless, refuses to admit his belief and rides off with Bon, thus repudiating his heritage and leaving Sutpen without an heir.

At this point, the Civil War intervenes in the lives of all the principals. Henry and Bon volunteer and serve in

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<sup>10</sup> Faulkner at the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia, 1957-1958, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 94.

the same regiment. Sutpen assumes the rank of Colonel. Near the end of the war, Sutpen calls Henry into his tent and tells him the one thing he knows will convince him that the marriage between Bon and Judith must be prevented at all costs; Bon is not only the girl's half-brother, he also carries Negro blood. Henry, who had gradually reconciled himself to the thought of incest, balks at the threat of miscegenation, and, when Bon rides back to Sutpen's Hundred to marry Judith, Henry kills him at their father's gate.

With Henry a fugitive, what little of Sutpen's design the war has spared collapses around him, but he makes one last attempt to beget an heir. He gets the grand-daughter of his poor white retainer, Wash, pregnant, only to turn his back on her when her child turns out to be a girl. Wash, who has previously worshiped Sutpen as the personification of the Southern chivalric ideal, kills him with a scythe.

Sutpen's curse is visited upon the subsequent generation as well. Judith sends her half-sister, Clytemnestra (Clytie), to New Orleans to bring back the son of Charles Bon by an octoroon mistress. The boy, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon, grows up to be a source of grief for both his "aunts." He insists on assuming the role of Negro which society provides for him and finally marries the blackest and most "ape-like" Negro woman he can find. He has a son by her, the half-witted Jim Bond. Both Charles Etienne Bon and Judith are carried off by yellow fever, leaving only the idiot Jim Bond and Clytie (an explicit Cassandra figure) to preside over

what is left of Sutpen's heritage. When Miss Rosa and Quentin invade Sutpen's decaying house many years later, they find Henry, who has returned to Sutpen's hundred to die. Later, Miss Rosa sends an ambulance out to pick up Henry. Clytie mistakenly believes that the authorities have come to arrest her brother and sets fire to the house. Both she and Henry perish in the flames, and Jim Bond, the last surviving descendant of Sutpen, is left alone to haunt the ruins of the house and wail his senseless lament. As Shreve puts it, "there was nothing left now, nothing out there but that idiot boy to lurk around those ashes and those four gutted chimneys and howl. . . ."<sup>11</sup>

When the story of Sutpen is thus isolated and arranged in chronological sequence, it can be seen to contain all four of the basic motifs growing out of the paradigm established in Chapter One of this study. Taken as a whole, the account of Sutpen's life and his ill-fated posterity is quite clearly a progression from guilt to retribution. Sutpen's inhumane attitude toward other human beings and the consequent inhumanity of his actions bring about not only his own destruction, but the destruction of all who are intimately connected with him. Lawrence Thompson has pointed out the way in which Faulkner's tale parallels the Greek myth of the House of Atreus and the Old Testament account of the House of David.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Absalom, Absalom!, p. 376.

<sup>12</sup> William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1963), p. 65.

But clearly, Faulkner is also working with the same "myth" of Southern history that informs Harris' "Where's Duncan?." In both works, the son of mixed blood, repudiated by a ruthless father, returns to assume the role of avenging agent. In both works, miscegenation and its consequences point out the wrongs of Southern society in general, and the evils of racial caste in particular. Mysterious questions of identity are an important part of Harris' story and Faulkner's novel, and both works end with the image of a grand plantation house, the symbol of the Old South's civilization itself, consumed in a fiery holocaust.

Critics are divided as to the extent the reader is justified in identifying Sutpen with the plantation system. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, underplays the similarities between Sutpen's personal history and the realities of Southern plantation life.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Lind sees Sutpen as "the very incarnation of the Old South,"<sup>14</sup> and Joseph Gold insists that "Sutpen's rise contains all the faults of the rise of the plantation system."<sup>15</sup> Although Miss Rosa points out that Sutpen is not a "gentleman,"<sup>16</sup> and General Compson, the slave-holding grandfather of Quentin, is shown to possess

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<sup>13</sup> William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 306.

<sup>14</sup> "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom!," in Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 300.

<sup>15</sup> William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> Absalom, Absalom!, p. 14.



scruples unknown to Sutpen, who is ultimately "innocent" and unaware of the evil behind his acts,<sup>17</sup> this reader is inclined to agree with Lind and Gold. Melvin Backman has assembled convincing historical evidence to prove that many of the deep South's successful and prosperous planters were headstrong and self-made men like Sutpen, men barely removed from the backwoods and still possessing the remnants of frontier mentality.<sup>18</sup>

Whether or not Sutpen's story is in fact emblematic of the fall of the Old South is not so important as the fact that Quentin sees it as such. This is borne out by the very fact that Quentin tells the story to Shreve as a way of explaining the Southern experience to him, and Shreve understands the story in precisely that way. "'The South,' Shreve says, dropping for a second the cynical pose he has brought to the narrative as Quentin has related it, 'The South . . . No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years.'"<sup>19</sup>

It is significant to note that it is Quentin who, in a sense, "solves" the central mystery in the story of Sutpen. Both Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson are baffled as to why Sutpen forbade the marriage between Bon and his daughter, Judith, in the first place. For Miss Rosa, there is no conceivable

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>18</sup> Faulkner: The Major Years (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 90-96.

<sup>19</sup> Absalom, Absalom!, p. 377.

reason for Sutpen's stand,<sup>20</sup> except perhaps his own natural perversity. Mr. Compson speculates that Sutpen knows about Bon's octoroon mistress and the sham marriage that has united the two. This might conceivably explain his opposition to the engagement, but how does it take into account Henry's murder of Bon after so many years of loyalty? Mr. Compson admits that his theory is, in the last analysis, unsatisfactory: "'It's just incredible. It just does not explain.'"<sup>21</sup> It is Quentin who furnishes the missing piece of the puzzle when he comes to see Bon not only as Sutpen's son by his first marriage, but, technically, as a Negro as well.

How is it that Quentin learns this vital piece of information? Olga Vickery suggests that it is purely a matter of speculation on his part.<sup>22</sup> Michael Millgate, on the other hand, believes that Quentin learns it from Henry Sutpen during their fateful interview and that it comes to have a disastrous effect on Quentin's psyche: ". . . nothing for him is more appalling than the thought that the fratricidal tragedy, the monstrous end to a friendship and love which had promised to survive even the threat of incest . . . should have been provoked by the ancient curse of the South."<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, it matters little whether or not Quentin's explanation is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 18.      <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>22</sup> The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 84.

<sup>23</sup> The Achievement of William Faulkner (New York: Vintage, 1971), p. 164.

based on fact, although one is inclined to agree with Millgate's reading. What matters is that in Quentin's mind the key to the whole tragic history of Sutpen and his design revolves around the issue of miscegenation, with all its shocking and symbolic connotations. Sutpen's unnatural treatment of his eldest son, prompted by the corrupt values of the society of which he seeks to become a part, becomes by extension emblematic of the unnatural violation of the principles of human community and brotherhood at the foundation of the Old South's slave economy itself.

Quentin's "discovery" of the mystery behind the fall of the House of Sutpen leaves him, as Gold writes, "entirely on his own to reassess, if he can, his role in time."<sup>24</sup> But finally, Quentin is unable to handle his knowledge. He is a recognizable kind of character, the disillusioned romantic who can neither live with nor overcome his disillusionment. As Richard Adams puts it, Quentin suffers from an overpowering awareness of the discrepancy between the ideal and the real, "his ideal vision of what life in the South ought to be is continually undercut by his concrete knowledge of what it is and has been."<sup>25</sup> His situation at the end of Absalom, Absalom! then, closely parallels his state of mind in The Sound and the Fury (1929). In that novel, the reader learns of Quentin's suicide at Harvard, not long after he retells the story of Sutpen to Shreve. A comparative examination of Quentin's atti-

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<sup>24</sup> William Faulkner, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> Faulkner: Myth and Motion, p. 212.

tudes toward the Southern past and his ambivalent feelings toward his sister, Caddy, in The Sound and the Fury sheds significant light on his personal problems.

Quentin feels an undeniable love for both the South and his sister, although in both cases his love is torturously qualified by a sense of outrage. As we have seen, Quentin's romantic idealism is perpetually wrecking itself on the rocks of sordid actuality. The South was, at least in part, built and ruled by Sutpens, men who acquired all the trappings of Southern civilization with none of its informing spirit, and from the accounts of Frederick L. Olmsted and others who attempted to describe the institution of slavery as they observed it, it is clear that many slaveowners did deny the most intimate of blood-ties as imperturbably as they exploited their slaves. In The Sound and the Fury, Caddy is promiscuous and carrying an illegitimate child. Like Mr. Compson, whose cynical melancholy is only a pose, Quentin is unable to accept what he knows. He is a romantic anachronism in a decidedly unromantic age, wholly unsuited for a world in which courage can exist without nobility of character or moral awareness, a world in which beauty can hide weakness and enslave itself to corrupt lusts. Quentin's aesthetic efforts at turning the Henry-Bon-Judith triangle into a sentimental fable of chaste and brotherly love run up against the facts of mixed blood and the injustice of Southern race relations. Likewise, his attempt to elevate the loss of Caddy's virginity into the stuff of classical tragedy (through his false

confession of incest) reaches only the level of the pathetic. Suicide is a way of resigning from the pressures of history, and Quentin predictably avails himself of that option.

Isaac McCaslin, in Go Down, Moses, seeks to resign in yet another way, with little success as we shall see.

Part of Quentin's compulsive fascination with the story of Sutpen can be regarded as the outgrowth of a passionate need for self-definition, for a kind of certainty about the nature of the community that provides him with his particular Lebenswelt. Within the context of his retelling the Sutpen story, Quentin's plight is prefigured by that of the mulattos, Charles and Charles Etienne Bon. The former's Telemachean quest for paternal recognition is a recognizable step in the archetypal pattern Jung has called the process of individuation. But the identity crisis confronting his son is even more compelling. As Lind says, Charles Etienne "re-enacts his father's symbolic gestures with greater vehemence."<sup>26</sup> Without the slightest trace of recognizably Negro blood, the younger Bon is removed from relatively tolerant New Orleans to provincial Mississippi, where he finds himself caught up in an elaborate system of racial etiquette. On his trip north, the boy is forced by his "black" aunt, Clytie, to wear the coarse overalls of the rural Negro over his white child's outfit. His Negro blood demands it. On the other hand, his white blood serves to cut him off from the companionship of

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<sup>26</sup> "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom!," in Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, p. 296.

black children on Sutpen's Hundred. He sleeps on a cot symbolically situated above Clytie's pallet and lower than Judith's bed. His is a role of intolerable loneliness. Belonging genetically to both races, he in effect belongs to neither. The agony of his isolation and the intensity of his search for some reliable sense of identity are dramatized in the image of the boy gazing for hours into a shard of broken mirror he keeps hidden under his bed.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, out of desperation, as it were, and out of a desire to anger and humiliate Judith, the youth bitterly assumes the role of Negro to which his mixed blood, however slight, legally entitles him. He risks danger by insisting on socializing with blacks and finally returns to Sutpen's Hundred with his bride, a "black gargoyle," in Mr. Compson's phrase.<sup>28</sup> In thus deliberately choosing to embrace his Negro heritage, he parallels many of the protagonists in the "literature of 'passing'" tradition in Afro-American fiction. The potential dignity of his choice is somewhat undermined, however, by the fact that he is obviously the victim of a socially-induced neurosis and hardly capable of a free and mature choice. Even in assuming his identity as a black man, Charles Etienne Bon is acting in accordance with the role of the mulatto avenger. Significantly, his son by his half-witted Negro spouse is the almost sub-human Jim Bond, Sutpen's great-grandson and the final inarticulate accuser of his grand design.

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<sup>27</sup> Absalom, Absalom!, p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

From the standpoint of both tone and structure, Absalom, Absalom! can be regarded as Faulkner's purest tragedy. Sutpen is portrayed by all three of the major narrators as a figure who is larger than life, a character of heroic proportions whose tragic weakness is his naively legalistic approach to human relationships. In conference at the University of Virginia, Faulkner once voiced his belief that man's free will "functions against a Greek background of fate."<sup>29</sup> It is this vision, the very definition of tragic action in Hellenic-Christian terms, that underlies the whole sweep of Absalom, Absalom!. It appears clear, then, that the author, like his three narrators, conceived of the history of Sutpen's dynasty, and, by extension, the history of the South, in accordance with a traditional tragic pattern. The extent of Faulkner's personal involvement in the novel as he wrote it was considerable. At one point, frustrated and uncertain about the course the book was taking, he set it aside to write Pylon (1935).<sup>30</sup> But, as he was to indicate later, "The story still shouldn't let me alone."<sup>31</sup> In his own way, Faulkner himself was obviously obsessed with telling the story of Sutpen and the consequences of his actions, and it is tempting to speculate on how closely the dark vision of Southern history that emerges from the novel parallels the author's own feelings at the time of composition. Curiously, Absalom, Absalom! is one of the very few major works in the

<sup>29</sup> Faulkner at the University, p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 36.      <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

Faulkner canon in which the element of humor is all but absent.<sup>32</sup>

Significantly, in Go Down, Moses, which appeared six years after the publication of Absalom, Absalom! (1936), Faulkner was again to return to the paradigmatic theme of miscegenation which had played such an important role in the earlier novel; and again, he used the theme metaphorically to provide the reader with a microcosmic account of Southern history. But whereas the tone of Absalom, Absalom! was in the end one of unrelieved despair, the prevailing tone of Go Down, Moses is considerably less strident. Humor is conspicuously present. While the author's criticism of slavery and racism is no less real, it is tempered by a broader perspective. Quite obviously centered around the same concerns raised in Absalom, Absalom!, Go Down, Moses gives clear evidence that the author has moved beyond the basically tragic vision of the earlier work. As Faulkner himself was to remark at Virginia, humor "is a part of man too." One should not make too careful a distinction between "humor and tragedy," for "even tragedy is in a way walking a tightrope between the ridiculous . . . and the terrible."<sup>33</sup>

Malcolm Cowley has noted that the form of Go Down, Moses, like that of The Unvanquished (1938), is something of

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<sup>32</sup> Even a potentially humorous vignette like that in which Sutpen and Wash Jones get drunk together in the scuppernong arbor is undercut by the serious context in which it appears.

<sup>33</sup> Faulkner at the University, p. 39.



a literary hybrid.<sup>34</sup> On the surface, the book is a collection of short stories of varying length. Faulkner, however, clearly conceived of the work as a single unified whole.<sup>35</sup> Viewed in this way, the genesis of the book is unique. James Early shows that "The Bear," the structural focus of the work, was the last of the narrative units to be written.<sup>36</sup> The other stories had all appeared earlier, some in published form, and were retailored to fit the thematic issues raised in "The Bear." That story, the longest in the series, recounts the growth of young Isaac McCaslin's relations with nature, as symbolized by the Mississippi wilderness. Under the tutelage of the half-Chickasaw, half-Negro Sam Fathers, Isaac learns the ancient virtues of love, pity, humility and honor against the backdrop of the already vanishing woodlands. "The Bear" can be, and has been, published separately minus its fourth section, but it is this fourth section that links the story to Go Down, Moses as a whole. Indeed, Section IV becomes, in the words of Lawrance Thompson, the "thematic center of the entire volume."<sup>37</sup>

This fourth section consists largely of a dialogue between Isaac and his older cousin, McCaslin (Cass) Edmonds, which takes place in the commissary of the McCaslin plantation.

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<sup>34</sup> The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memoirs, 1944-1962 (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Faulkner at the University, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> The Making of Go Down, Moses (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1972), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> William Faulkner, p. 92.

Isaac has reached his majority and tells his cousin that he wishes to resign his birthright, the plantation itself. At the age of sixteen, it seems, Isaac began reading the ledgers of the plantation in which random entries served to provide him with a piecemeal history of his heritage. He learns that his grandfather, Carothers McCaslin, the plantation's founder, had an illegitimate daughter by one of his slaves. Years later, Carothers committed incest with this child, Tomey, and had a son, Turl. Eunice, Tomey's mother, learns of this and drowns herself. Carothers makes a provision in his will for his mulatto son and his heirs, leaving them the sum of one-thousand dollars. That course of action, Isaac realizes, "was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger. . . . Even if My son wasn't but just two words."<sup>38</sup> Like Thomas Sutpen, Carothers McCaslin had assumed that his paternal responsibilities toward a child of Negro blood could be discharged in a purely economic way. It is this fact, along with the incest, that horrifies Isaac.

Consequently, Isaac wants to be "free."<sup>39</sup> He wants no part of the inheritance that is his through his father, Uncle Buck McCaslin. In his view, the inheritance is cursed, and, furthermore, the sins of his grandfather figure forth the regional sins of the slave-holding South as a whole. God punished the South with the Civil War and Reconstruction,

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<sup>38</sup> Go Down, Moses (New York: Random House, 1942), pp. 269-70.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

but still the curse has not been fully expiated. Isaac knows that the sin of slavery was only symptomatic of the real transgression, man's attempt to own that which is by its very nature unpossessable, the earth itself and the people on it.<sup>40</sup>

Isaac does renounce his proprietorship of the McCaslin inheritance, placing it in the hands of his cousin, who is something of a hard-minded rationalist. Then he retires to town on a pension allotted him by Cass and takes up the carpenter's trade in emulation of Christ "because . . . the Nazarene had found carpentering good for the life and ends He had elected to serve."<sup>41</sup>

Ironically, Christ left his trade to return to the world in order to redeem it. Isaac, on the other hand, leaves the world in an effort to redeem himself. His professed task is, as John Lewis Longley, Jr., has written, "to find a way to cancel the past evil and expiate what has been done."<sup>42</sup> His chosen strategy is repudiation; but Faulkner himself has remarked, "I think a man ought to do more than repudiate."<sup>43</sup> In "Delta Autumn," the story that immediately

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<sup>40</sup> Isaac's vision of Southern history, both in its substance and origins, approximates that of Quentin Compson and, like Quentin, Isaac feels overwhelmed by a need to escape, to resign the heavy burden of history. Interestingly enough, in "Lion" (1935), the story that eventually became "The Bear," the young protagonist is Quentin, leading one to believe that the two characters, Isaac and Quentin, were at one time intimately associated in Faulkner's mind.

<sup>41</sup> Go Down, Moses, p. 309.

<sup>42</sup> The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William

follows "The Bear" in Go Down, Moses, the final inadequacy of Isaac's attempt to free himself from the burden of the past is dramatically revealed.

In "Delta Autumn," Isaac is an old man past seventy years of age. He now makes the annual trip into what is left of the wilderness with the sons and grandsons of his former friends. With him on this trip is his kinsman, Roth Edmonds, who has now inherited the birthright Isaac renounced years before. The tone of the piece is one of elegiac nostalgia for the lost wild:

There had been bear then. A man shot a doe or a fawn as quickly as he did a buck, and in the afternoons they shot wild turkey with pistols to test their stalking skill and marksmanship, feeding all but the breast to the dogs. But that time was gone now. Now they went in cars, driving faster and faster each year because the roads were better and they had farther to drive. . . .<sup>44</sup>

Everything has changed but Isaac's love for the wild and his idealistic belief in the principles Sam Fathers taught him. The basic virtues of Isaac's way of life stand in sharp contrast to the pettiness of the cynical and pessimistic Roth, whose very features are described as "a little ruthless."<sup>45</sup> In camp and bedded down for the night, Isaac thinks back over his hermit-like existence since he refused his birthright and meditates on his yearly rendezvous with the wilderness with a peaceful sense of self-satisfaction. He remembers repudiating "the land and the wrong and the

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Faulkner, 1926-1962, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 258.

<sup>44</sup> Go Down, Moses, p. 335.      <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 337.

shame even if he couldn't cure the wrong and eradicate the shame."<sup>46</sup> And he remembers how Sam Fathers initiated him into the sacred mysticism of the wilderness.

His reverie is suddenly interrupted by what he thinks is one of the Negroes adding fuel to the fire:

The shadow of the youngest negro loomed. It soared, blotting the heater's dying glow from the ceiling, the wood billets thumping into the iron maw until the glow, the flame, leaped high and bright across the canvas. But the negro's shadow still remained, by its length and breadth, standing, since it covered most of the ceiling, until after a moment he raised himself on one elbow to look. It was not the negro, it was his kinsman; when he spoke the other turned sharp against<sup>47</sup> the red firelight the sullen and ruthless profile.

This passage, in which what Isaac assumes is the shadow of the young Negro is transformed into an awesome giant only to be resolved into Roth Edmonds, is powerful and prophetic, for the McCaslin ancestral curse is about to reassert itself, and Roth is to be its agent.

Roth gives Isaac an envelope containing banknotes and instructs him to give it to a person who will be calling for him and leaves the tent. It is not long before the person in question arrives; it is a young woman with a baby. The child is Roth's, and, like Sutpen and Carothers McCaslin, Roth seeks to set everything straight with a cash outlay. Isaac is disappointed with his younger kinsman, but his disappointment soon turns to horror when he learns that the woman is the grandchild of Tennie's Jim, himself the son of Turl and the grandson of old Carothers McCaslin himself.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 351.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 352.

The old outrage, the curse of miscegenation and incest that Isaac had attempted to escape by renouncing his heritage thus returns to confront him, ironically enough, in his beloved wilderness itself. As in "The Bear," the sexual abuse involved in the miscegenation and incest prefigures in Isaac's mind the rape of nature and the curse on all the Southland:

This Delta, he thought; This Delta. This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago . . . , where white men rent farms and live like niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is planted and grows man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares. . . . No wonder the ruined woods I used to know dont cry for retribution! he thought: The people who have destroyed it will accomplish its revenge.<sup>48</sup>

Isaac has learned that his repudiation of the estate, an act that has left him childless in a world he cannot understand or accept, has failed to free him from the burden of history. The story ends in despair for him, with but a single affirmative gesture to suggest the possibility of future hope. Isaac gives the woman a gift to keep for her child. It is his prized hunting horn, a present from Isaac's old hunting friend, General Compson, and a fitting token to bequeath to the final male descendent of Carothers McCaslin.

Isaac's knowledge, like that of Quentin Compson, ends in despair. Both characters are victims of history. Faulkner,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 364.

like these two characters, also saw the South as laboring under a "curse" as the consequence of slavery and its historical aftermath.<sup>49</sup> But Faulkner's vision, dark as it is at times in Go Down, Moses, never degenerates into hopelessness. Cleanth Brooks has noted that it is characteristic of Faulkner throughout his writing "to take the long view in which the human enterprise in all its basically vital manifestations is seen from far off and with great detachment." Consequently, the author's basic attitude toward existence is "almost inevitably comic;"<sup>50</sup> although in a profoundly philosophical and cosmic sense, one should add. There is this same undeniable strain of cosmic optimism underlying Go Down, Moses, and its presence is manifested in the humor running throughout the book. In fact, even the theme of miscegenation is touched upon humorously at times.

In the opening story, "Was," the reader is confronted with a potentially sordid situation, an instance involving a white man chasing his mulatto half-brother with dogs. Turl, the son of Carothers McCaslin by his incestuous liaison with Tomey, has run away to a neighboring plantation to see his woman, Tennie. Uncle Buck, one of the twin white sons of Carothers and an inveterate fox-hunter, gives chase. Uncle Buck and his twin, Uncle Buddy, are also emancipationists by inclination who consider slavery more trouble than it is

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49. Faulkner at the University, p. 79.

50. William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, p. 72.

worth. Buck's mood as he tracks his mulatto brother to the Beauchamp plantation is one of comic exasperation more than anything else. Mr. Hubert Beauchamp, the plantation's owner, shares Buck's annoyance over the inconvenient slave romance. Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy feel that they cannot solve the problem by buying Tennie, for they have no use for another slave on their overcrowded plantation. Mr. Hubert, on the other hand, refuses to buy Turl: "he wouldn't have that damn white half-McCaslin on his place even as a free gift, not even if Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy were to pay board and keep for him."<sup>51</sup>

At times the humor is irrepressible slapstick. When Turl is cornered at one point, he runs right over Uncle Buck, saying solicitously, "'Look out of here, old Buck. Look out of here, old Buck. . . .'"<sup>52</sup> Fortunately, no one is hurt.

. . . it was only the wind knocked out of him where Tomey's Turl had thrown him down on his back. But he had been carrying the whiskey bottle in his back pocket, saving the last drink until Tomey's Turl was captured, and he refused to move until he knew<sup>53</sup> for certain if it was just whiskey and not blood.

Ironically, Uncle Buck goes to the Beauchamp plantation to hunt down his "nigger." The truth of the matter is that he is, in certain respects, a quarry himself. Tomey's Turl has entered into an alliance with Miss Sophonsiba, Mr. Hubert's sister and the future mother of Isaac McCaslin. This lady has designs on Uncle Buck, and, when he mistakenly enters her bedroom, the trap is sprung. It takes all of

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<sup>51</sup> Go Down, Moses, p. 6.    <sup>52</sup> Ibid.    <sup>53</sup> Ibid.



Uncle Buddy McCaslin's skill as a poker player to get his brother off the hook.

Even the basic sobriety of the fourth section of "The Bear" is relieved by humor. The same ledgers that tell Isaac of his family curse also record the outrageously funny story of Percival Brownlee and the exasperated efforts of the McCaslin brothers to "get shut" of him. Even after he has been freed, the slave refuses to leave the plantation. Similarly, the episode in which Miss Sophonsiba, now Isaac's mother, finds Mr. Hubert cohabiting with a mulatto girl is a sort of comic parody of Carother's misdeeds. The aged Hubert tries frantically to pass the girl off as his cook, and finally winds up arguing that Negroes are "folks" like anyone else.<sup>54</sup>

How is one to account for Faulkner's oftentimes comic handling of the issues of slavery and mixed blood in Go Down, Moses? Perhaps it is best explained in terms of a remark by Walter Brylowski to the effect that in Go Down, Moses "Faulkner has captured the psyche in its turn from the religious-ethical mode of consciousness."<sup>55</sup> Brylowski has reference here to the philosophy of Sren Kierkegaard, who wrote of three modalities of human existence--the aesthetic mode, the ethical mode, and the religious mode. George C. Bedell, in Faulkner and Kierkegaard, has noted that humor is the deter-

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

<sup>55</sup> Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), p. 166.

mining characteristic of the transitional stage between the ethical and religious categories of experience.<sup>56</sup> Neither Quentin Compson nor Isaac McCaslin ever gets beyond the ethical level of awareness of slavery and miscegenation. Consequently, they are locked into past history, a history that is for them unredeemable. Faulkner, on the other hand, is able to put these manifestations of human imperfection into a larger perspective, is able to view the South with an increased measure of philosophical detachment which allows him to escape the paralytic response of his two characters. Quentin and Isaac can take action in only the most negative sense. Faulkner's level of awareness, however, enables him to take positive action to lift the "curse" afflicting his region.

At the University of Virginia, Faulkner pointed out three varieties of ethical consciousness:

The first says, This is rotten, I'll have no part of it, I will take death first. The second says, This is rotten, I don't like it, I can't do anything about it, but at least I will not participate in it myself, I will go off into a cave or climb a pillar to sit on. The third says, This stinks and I'm going to do something about it. . . .

What we need are people who will say, This is bad and I'm going to do something about it, I'm going to change it.<sup>57</sup>

Quentin, who commits suicide, falls precisely within the primary category. Isaac and his renunciation admirably dramatize

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<sup>56</sup> (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 85.

<sup>57</sup> Faulkner at the University, pp. 245-46.

the second. Faulkner himself was to choose the third. Whereas prior to receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950, Faulkner was notoriously aloof from publicity and public controversy, he afterwards became increasingly a public figure and was particularly outspoken concerning the nation's racial problems. Charles D. Peavy, in 'Go Slow Now': Faulkner and the Race Question, gives an interesting, although rather brief, account of Faulkner's attitudes on the race issue in Southern history and his public statements on the racial controversies of the 1950's.<sup>58</sup> Clearly, Faulkner felt a personal sense of outrage at racial injustice and believed that it was incumbent upon him to speak out with moderation against such abuses and offer his suggestions toward their solution. As he remarked in the Phillipines, the writer's calling not only involves recounting a people's history, it involves providing a people with the hope of a better future.<sup>59</sup> If Faulkner's belief that the South could be counted upon to settle its own racial problems seems naive in view of the events of the 1960's, that belief, nevertheless, has a certain power as he translates it into a literary image, not only in Go Down, Moses, but in Intruder in the Dust (1949) as well. Significantly, the pivotal agent who makes possible the South's regional self-redemption in Faulkner's fiction is a person of mixed blood, Lucas Beauchamp, who is the "negro" grandson of Carothers McCaslin and, incidentally, Isaac's cousin.

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<sup>58</sup> (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1971).

<sup>59</sup> Lion in the Garden, p. 201.

Lucas first appears in Go Down, Moses in the story "The Fire and the Hearth," and he is initially treated humorously as a moonshiner intent on protecting his business from detection as the result of the competition of his daughter and his future son-in-law. He takes an ironic pride in being the oldest male descendant of old Carothers left on the McCaslin plantation and sees the repudiation of the inheritance by his white cousin, Isaac, as an act of foolish weakness. Unlike Isaac, Lucas has eagerly claimed the portion of his grandfather's estate allotted to his father, Turl. "The Fire and the Hearth" is in large part a farce involving Lucas' attempt to avoid having his own still detected while turning in his competitors', and it also involves his search for buried gold on the McCaslin place. But the piece has its serious side, and serves as a preparation for Intruder in the Dust.

Unlike the other principal mixed-blood characters in Faulkner's fiction, Lucas is not torn apart with identity problems. He knows who he is and what he is: a man. When it serves his purposes, he can play the stereotypical "nigger" in his dealings with white men, "enveloping himself in an aura of timeless and stupid impassivity almost like a smell."<sup>60</sup> But Lucas' McCaslin blood gives him something the other Negroes around him do not have, pride in himself as a person. The extent of this personal dignity is shown dramatically in a flashback in which Lucas confronts Zack Edmonds, then the

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<sup>60</sup> Go Down, Moses, p. 60.

proprietor of the McCaslin plantation. Lucas believes that his white kinsman has been having an affair with his wife, Molly, who has moved into the big house to nurse Edmonds' son. "'I'm a nigger,'" Lucas tells Edmonds, "'But I'm a man too. I'm more than just a man. The same thing made my pappy that made your grandmaw. I'm going to take her back.'"<sup>61</sup> Lucas finally struggles with Edmonds until he manages to get his hands on a gun and pull the trigger. The gun misfires, but the point of honor has been made.

Ironically, years later Lucas is once again in danger of losing Molly, this time through his own fault. He is obsessed with finding the treasure he believes is buried somewhere on the McCaslin property. Finally, believing that her husband is mad, Molly threatens to leave him. At last, Lucas comes to his senses and renounces his search for wealth. The symbolism is clear. Lucas chooses responsibility to the woman he has loved over materialistic considerations. He evidences a deeper level of humanity than that of his white ancestor, old Carothers, who likewise had been engaged in ripping wealth out of the earth.

In Intruder in the Dust, Lucas, who has earned himself the reputation of an "uppity" Negro, is falsely accused of the murder of a white man. A white youth, Charles Mallison, for whom Lucas had done a kindness years before and had then refused the customary pay, now tries to repay him by proving his innocence. When Lucas is vindicated through the efforts

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

of Mallison and a few other conscientious townspeople, the mob that has come to witness his lynching surges out of town in shame: "Lucas Beauchamp once the slave of any white man within the range of whose notice he happened to come, now tyrant over the whole county's white conscience."<sup>62</sup>

Lucas thus becomes a significant variation on the image of the mulatto avenger. Rather than the personification of the white South's sin come to exact retribution, he is a catalyst that makes it possible for the white man's conscience to punish itself. But it is significant to note that Lucas is not after compensation for past wrongs. He even refuses to allow his lawyer, Gavin Stevens, to take his case for nothing. Lucas wants only the consideration due any man, and he preserves his dignity to the end. His function in Intruder in the Dust may well be more symbolic than historically valid, however. The Lucas Beauchamps and Charles Mallisons of the region alone no doubt lack the power necessary to right the South's heritage of racial wrongs from within. Nevertheless, the humanistic optimism behind Faulkner's conclusion to the novel is profound testimony to the extent that the author, unlike the history-haunted Quentin and the guilt-ridden Isaac, escaped the "curse" of his region. In Faulkner's view, the South, and the South alone, black and white, has a chance to work out its redemption.

The chapter that follows departs in some respects from

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<sup>62</sup> Intruder in the Dust (New York: Vintage, 1972), p. 199.

the methodology and focus of the previous chapters of this study. We will limit our consideration to two novels, Faulkner's Light in August and Robert Penn Warren's Band of Angels, for these two works offer the finest examples of the handling of the mulatto character's crisis of identity by white Southern writers of this century. This vital aspect of our paradigmatic theme of miscegenation has been touched upon in several of the novels we have already considered, but in Light in August and Band of Angels it assumes a role of primary importance. Faulkner's Joe Christmas and Warren's Amantha Starr not only represent a kind of culmination in the handling of the mulatto character in Southern fiction, they also can be seen as powerful images of contemporary man, who, like the fictional mulatto, is increasingly obsessed with the question of self-definition. In these two works, the regional tradition with which we have been working branches out to ally itself with one of the most pressing concerns of contemporary literature as a whole, man's search for individuation and his place in the human community.

## CHAPTER V

### THE MULATTO'S SEARCH FOR SELF: JOE CHRISTMAS AND AMANTHA STARR

As noted in the introduction to this study, the literary quest for identity is a natural extension of the theme of miscegenation. In the novels under consideration here, the mulatto figure, the genetic product of two races, is often alienated from both and forced to lead a schizoid-like existence. Consequently, the questions "Who am I?" and "What am I?" are obstacles the character of mixed blood lives with constantly. In Cable's works, quadroons like Madame Delphine and her daughter lament the fact that they are neither white nor black. Their isolated condition is felt both socially and psychologically. Twain, in Pudd'nhead Wilson, perceptively analyzes the identity crisis Tom Driscoll undergoes when he learns of his Negro blood; and the ambiguity of appearances and identities that runs throughout that novel serves as an expression of the author's own obsessive concern with the problem of identity, a problem that became an increasingly pressing one for Twain in his later years. In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner, likewise, makes use of the question of identity in picturing both Charles Bon and his son as victims of such uncertainties. The elder Bon tries desperately to define himself in relation to Sutpen, the father he has



never known. And Bon's own son, in turn, suffers an intensified crisis of identity which finally drives him to a fruitless and spiteful attempt to embrace his negritude.

Penelope Bullock, in her essay on the mulatto character in American fiction, points out that the person of mixed race is "a cultural hybrid, . . . a stranded personality living in the margin of a fixed status."<sup>1</sup> The situation that confronts the mulatto figure is not simply a unique sociological phenomenon, however. In a very real sense, the plight of the mulatto, the man alienated from the mainstream of his society and the victim of an agonizing compulsion to find "true Self," is increasingly the plight of contemporary man as well, and the question of identity, the search for Self, is a persistent concern of much of Contemporary literature, a concern that reflects the contemporary writer's insistent awareness of a world in which the old assumptions about the nature of the human condition are no longer viable.

The identity question is an ancient one in Western culture, to be sure. "Know thyself" was an oracular imperative to the pre-Socratic Greeks, indicating that self-knowledge was the beginning of that wisdom which the Athenians viewed in an almost religious way. The story of Oedipus, Aristotle's paradigm for tragedy, is a masterful dramatic illustration of the catastrophes awaiting the man who does not know who he is. Indeed, as is generally recognized, the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Mulatto in American Fiction," Phylon, 6 (1945), 78.

tragic sin of hybris can be regarded in one respect as a manifestation of an imperfect sense of one's Self, a false self-awareness that ends in the overstepping of one's cosmic bounds. With the evolution of systematic thought in ontology and teleology and the advent and establishment of the Christian religion as the arbiter of truth, man's nature and his place in the scheme of things were given Scholastic certainty. A little lower than the angels in the Great Chain of Being and fallen from primal Grace, man was, nevertheless, created in God's image in order that he might exercise stewardship over the physical world. The entire course of history was but the unfolding of inscrutable Providence. Consequently, man and his place in time were secure. The Ptolemaic system of astronomy placed the earth, the stage upon which the human drama was played out, in the very center of the universe; the kosmos was homocentric as well as geocentric.

Through the intervening centuries, Copernicus, the "new science," and philosophical rationalism changed all of that. "Cogito ergo sum," wrote the proto-rationalist Descartes, thus putting an overpowering burden on the private Self, paving the way for the empirical scientism of the Enlightenment and its uneasy compromise with Christian orthodoxy. This was a shaky synthesis at best, as is evident in a work like Alexander Pope's Essay on Man (finished in 1734). Ironically, by putting the burden of proof for existence itself on the perceptions of the individual, Descartes not only prepared the way for Locke, but for the scepticism of Hume,

the idealism of Berkeley, and the supra-rational Vernunft-Verstand dichotomy of Kant. The new egocentrism in philosophical method found its widespread popular manifestation in the cultural revolution known in the broadest terms as romanticism, with its radical cult of the individual and its preference for the irrational over the rational as a way of coming to terms with experience.

Along with the ascendancy of the individual as the repository of truth, there was a corresponding decline of the power of the populus, or community, to establish values and "truths" shared collectively by men, so that, in our own century, the stress on individual human existence, what Heidegger calls Dasein, has at times seemed to reduce reality to almost solipsistic terms. As a result, man begins to suffer Sartrean nausée and despair. He feels isolated and alone in a universe characterized by absurdity. His sense of belonging to a community and his relationship to a viable past are interdicted. In the words of Jung, the man "whom we . . . call modern is solitary. He is so of necessity and at all times, for every step towards a fuller consciousness of the present removes him further from . . . submergence" in the "participation mystique" that formerly characterized human existence. Thus, he is "unhistorical," and "To be unhistorical is the Promethean sin . . ." <sup>2</sup>

Brief and reductive as the preceding discussion is,

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<sup>2</sup> Carl G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of His Soul, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, n.d.), p. 197.

it serves to provide a context in which to understand certain of the concerns of contemporary fiction. Ihab Hassan has pointed out, "The Hero, who once figured as Initiate, ends as Rebel or Victim."<sup>3</sup> Like contemporary man himself, the protagonist of much twentieth-century fiction is not so much integrated into society as alienated from it. The "hero," who had formerly exemplified the virtues and values of the society gives way to the "anti-hero" whose problem is "essentially one of identity."<sup>4</sup>

It is natural that the crisis of the contemporary man, with all its sociological, philosophical and literary ramifications, should be particularly reflected in the work of twentieth-century Southern writers. The native of the South has long been credited with a peculiar regional consciousness, a sense of place and of communal tradition, unique in the American national experience. As John Edward Hardy notes, "essential to the regional consciousness as a whole . . . is the Southerner's . . . sense of identity with the local neighborhood."<sup>5</sup> Given such a background, the Southern man of letters is in a position to bring an unusually sensitive and insightful perspective to bear on the cultural iconoclasm of the contemporary world. He understands, from regional experience, the effects of the loss of the individual's sense of community

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<sup>3</sup> Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Man in the Modern Novel (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 138.

and his estrangement from traditional values.

Accordingly, this chapter concerns itself with (1) the specific way in which two writers of the Southern Renaissance, William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, treat contemporary man's search for Self through the use of indigenous materials, and (2) the theme of identity as it grows out of the theme of miscegenation. In Faulkner's Light in August (1932) and Warren's Band of Angels (1955) the person of mixed blood caught between the racial polarities of Southern society becomes, by extension, an image of Modern man who is lost and seeks to find out who he is.

Rather than attempt to force these two respective images of man into one or another system of existentialist thought or psychological analysis, we shall view each of them in relative isolation, allowing them to generate significance on their own terms. In this way, we shall see how a native fictional tradition lends itself to the exploration of issues of paramount concern to Western literature as a whole.

The question of identity and of the individual's relation to society is a pervasive one in Light in August. As both Olga Vickery and Cleanth Brooks note,<sup>6</sup> each of the principal figures in the novel is, in one sense or another, estranged from the community at large. Lena Grove is simply a stranger to Jefferson. She wanders in searching for her

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<sup>6</sup> Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), p. 67.

Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 53.

faithless lover, has her baby, touches briefly the lives of those who associate with her, and wanders out again. Joanna Burden, whose death becomes the focal point for the action of the novel, is the spinster descendant of abolitionist reformers. As such, to the citizens of the town she is the enemy in their midst. She is cut off from the townspeople by historical animosity, "The old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear."<sup>7</sup> Byron Bunch, who appoints himself Lena's guardian, is as much a stranger as she is. Though he has lived and worked in Jefferson for a time, he is a shy and unassuming man whose only friend is the Reverend Gail Hightower, who is likewise alienated from the townspeople. A defrocked Presbyterian minister cursed by a local scandal and subsequent rumors, Hightower has withdrawn from the life around him and suffers from a debilitating tendency to live in his pre-natal past. He is one of Faulkner's "ghosts," a man who is enslaved by the past and, thereby, condemned to a living death. It is Joe Christmas, however, who finally dominates the book, becoming, in John Lewis Longley's view, a kind of "modern Everyman."<sup>8</sup> Interestingly enough, these latter three characters, Byron, Hightower and Christmas, all manage to define themselves in the best existential manner: through action. Byron does so when, with full volition, he

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<sup>7</sup> Light in August (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 203.

chooses to attempt the capture of Lucas Burch, Lena's errant lover: "' . . . I may not can catch him, because he's got a start on me. And I may not can whip him if I do, because he is bigger than me. But I can try it. I can try to do it.'"<sup>9</sup> Hightower, too, establishes his existential worth by assisting at the birth of Lena's baby and by desperately lying in an ill-fated attempt at saving Christmas' life, even at the risk of further humiliating himself before the townspeople. As a consequence, Hightower earns the right to self-awareness, and the scene in which he suddenly grasps the meaning of his life while sitting transfigured in a "halo" of August light is one of the great self-recognition scenes in literature, comparable to Isabel Archer's famous interior monologue in Henry James' Portrait of a Lady. But it is Christmas' personal estrangement from the community that is the most intense, and it is his efforts to define himself through action that become the most dramatic and terrible in their consequences.

Cleanth Brooks, a critic who is peculiarly sensitive to the value of a sense of history and tradition, writes that Christmas is lost because he lacks a past.<sup>10</sup> Viewed in this perspective, Christmas stands in total contrast to Hightower, who is overwhelmed by the past. Brooks' remark requires careful qualification, however. Perhaps it is better to think of Christmas as "unhistorical" (in the sense we have seen Jung use the word), for the fact is that he does have a

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<sup>9</sup> Light in August, p. 373.

<sup>10</sup> William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, p. 54.

"past," a history of personal frustration that has done much to shape his destiny. It is a communal past, a sense of history and tradition, that he lacks. Through a series of flashbacks, the author is careful to document the circumstances behind his anti-hero's personality and action.

Christmas is the illegitimate son of Milly Hines and an itinerant circus worker with whom she runs away. The fanatical Doc Hines, Milly's father, kills her lover whom he suspects of having Negro blood. The question of whether or not the man is a Negro, or, as Milly insists, a Mexican, is never really answered. Nevertheless, the very suspicion of racial mixing is enough to drive the Negrophobic Doc Hines insane. Milly dies in childbirth after her father refuses to allow her any medical help, and Doc Hines, believing that he is acting in accordance with divine instructions, places her baby in an orphanage. His religious fanaticism and intense hatred of Negroes conspire to cause Doc Hines to see the child as God's avenger, the very embodiment of sin, who will in time strike out against "abomination and bitchery." From his position as the institution's janitor, old Doc sits back to watch Providence take its course.

For a reason that seems mysterious, the other children in the orphanage call Christmas a "nigger."<sup>11</sup> Hines takes this as a confirmation of his own obsession, and the young

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<sup>11</sup> Christmas easily passes for white, but he is obviously of a swarthy complexion. Numerous references are made to his "parchment-colored skin," and the citizens of Jefferson take him for a foreigner of some kind.



child himself begins to assume that he does, in fact, possess black blood. Years later, Doc Hines, by now utterly insane, relates a telling episode to Hightower and Byron. After he has been pronounced "nigger" by the other children, it seems that the young Christmas began to harass the institution's Negro yardman,

" . . . until at last the nigger said, 'What you watching me for, boy?' and he said, 'How come you are a nigger?' and the nigger said, 'Who told you I am a nigger, you little white trash bastard?' and he says, 'I aint a nigger,' and the nigger says, 'You are worse than that. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You'll live and you'll die and you wont never know. . . . '"<sup>12</sup>

The Negro's words are prophetic, for it is the question of racial identity that haunts Christmas throughout his life. Christmas is consequently a divided personality, a man torn between the poles of white and black. Faulkner persistently associates him with images of white and black, light and shadow. In so doing, the author is able to evoke one of the oldest and most potent of symbolic dualities in Western culture, the contrast between the light and dark forces of nature at work both in the kosmos and within the individual. The association of light with goodness, purity and spirituality and of darkness with evil, corruption, and animality was an old habit of mind long before Manicheanism gave it a kind of mystical context. The German philologist and philosopher Nietzsche was later to base his theory of tragedy on the assumption that two antithetical polarities constitute a dialectic-

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<sup>12</sup> Light in August, p. 336.

tic of the human spirit; these he identified as the Apollonic, associated with light and reason, and the Dionysian, associated with the darker and irrational aspects of the psyche. Longley is quite correct in seeing this rational-irrational dichotomy suggested by the light-dark imagery Faulkner uses in his presentation of Joe Christmas.<sup>13</sup> But the real distinction Faulkner's imagery points to is essentially Freudian, and is best understood in terms of Freud's theory of the conflict between the Id and the Super-ego, the unconscious and appetitive side of man and the socially-conditioned conscience which seeks to suppress it. Peter Swiggart notes that the "Negro blood Joe imagines surging within him is associated, along with hunger and desire, with the hot, savage, and dark forces of nature."<sup>14</sup> This is natural enough, for in terms of the racial mythology of the white race, the black man is seen as untamed, irrational, violent and libidinous. On the other hand, the "white" side of Joe's nature is largely the product of his formative years spent with the repressive Calvinist, McEachern, who is ultimately responsible for what Brooks has referred to as Christmas'"latent homosexuality."<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that throughout his adult life Christmas has repeatedly and compulsively been driven into sexual relations with women, he, nevertheless, hates and fears the female and,

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<sup>13</sup> The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes, p. 200.

<sup>14</sup> The Art of Faulkner's Novels (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, p. 57.

as an adolescent, has a particular horror of menstruation, the very emblem of feminine physicality. The constant struggle between the white and black sides of his natures represents, on one level, the psychological tension generated by the frustration of natural instincts. Although there is no evidence that Faulkner was consciously utilizing the ideas set forth in Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents, which appeared in English in 1930, his portrayal of Joe Christmas parallels remarkably the account of contemporary man which emerges from that book.

In Freudian terms, it is significant that Christmas declares his independence from McEachern by taking up with the waitress-prostitute, Bobbie Allen. When she confesses that her reason for not going to bed with him on their first date was that she was in her period, he later counters with what is in his view a comparable confession: "'I got some nigger blood in me.'"<sup>16</sup> While Bobbie is incredulous at first, she later uses Christmas' admission against him, reinforcing his bitterness and hatred toward women. Bobbie's male companions beat him unmercifully.

After this episode, Christmas sets out on the "street," Faulkner's metaphor for the subsequent fifteen years of his anti-hero's nomadic life. In his early years on the "street," Christmas confesses his alleged black blood to a long succession of prostitutes, taking an implicitly masochistic pleasure in the beatings which are often the consequence. In

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<sup>16</sup> Light in August, p. 171.

this fashion, he reenacts ritualistically his final encounter with Bobbie. When he finds a white woman who fails to react with outrage to his admission of Negro blood, he enters yet another stage of his tortured quest. During this period, he tricks white men into calling him a Negro and black men into calling him white in order to fight each in turn, thus striking out at the respective sides of his own personality. In a sense, his actions are external manifestations of the psychological war raging within him.

At one point, Christmas lives the life of a Negro in a Northern city:

He now lived as man and wife with a woman who resembled an ebony carving. At night he would lie beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard. He would do it deliberately, feeling, even watching, his white chest arch deeper and deeper into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of Negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being. And all the while his nostrils . . . would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial.<sup>17</sup>

This striking passage provides a powerful image of the racial and psychological contradictions that tear Christmas apart. Even in his efforts to become fully a Negro, he is thwarted by his white conscience's sense of disgust and repression.

Finally, the "street" leads Christmas to Jefferson, where his quest for wholeness and identity culminates. Passing as white, he covertly expresses his negritude by taking "a Negro's job at the mill" and "living in a tumble-down Negro cabin on Miss Burden's place."<sup>18</sup> It is an act of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

violence, the barbaric murder of Miss Burden, that puts an end to Christmas' search for self-definition. In the view of the present reader, that act leads, paradoxically enough, to the ultimate resolution of Christmas' self-uncertainties. It enables him to find himself.

Christmas' affair with Miss Burden undergoes three stages of development. In the initial period, their sexual intercourse is more like the struggling of two men than like love-making. Faulkner's anti-hero is fully capable of handling the relations on this level. When he confesses his belief that he has Negro blood, however, a change takes place in Miss Burden, and Christmas feels himself trapped in a "sewer" of sexuality. To Miss Burden, whose compassion for the black race is noticeably tinged with a kind of half-loathing, Christmas is not simply a man with Negro blood; he becomes Negro personified. The nymphomaniacal woman arranges trysts with her lover on the grounds surrounding her decaying house:

She would be wild then, in the close, breathing half-dark without walls, with her wild hair, each strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles, and her wild hands and her breathing: "Negro!, Negro!, Negro!"<sup>19</sup>

Although Miss Burden's view of him tends to depersonalize Christmas, it is a recognition of the dark forces at work within him. He knows where he stands with the woman, although he is far from comfortable in his assigned role. The final stage in his relationship with Miss Burden, however,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.227.

leads to confusion and frustration.

The final stage arrives when Miss Burden reaches menopause and ultimately forsakes her newly-awakened sexual desires. In a spirit of penitence, she reverts to the sternly Calvinistic faith of her forebears. Whereas in the second stage of his relationship with Miss Burden, Christmas was forced to indulge the carnal and irrational side of his nature to the fullest, now he is victim of her scheme to educate, restrain, and, in effect, "castrate" him through the denial of his very physicality. The dark side of Christmas' personality asserts itself in anger, confusion, and, ultimately, in violence, when Miss Burden, like McEachern years earlier, insists that he kneel and pray with her.

Christmas' erratic behavior leading up to his murder of Miss Burden is significant, particularly those aspects of it which involve his unconscious efforts to define himself racially. On the night prior to the night of the crime, he cannot sleep. He stumbles outside the cabin he shares with Lena's faithless lover, strips himself naked, thus asserting his physicality, and stands in front of the headlights of an automobile: "From it a woman's shrill voice flew back, shrieking. 'White bastards!' he shouted. 'That's not the first of your bitches that ever saw. . . .'"<sup>20</sup> At this point, briefly at least, Christmas regards himself as a Negro, and, consequently, he vents his resentment and hatred of whites in characteristically sexual terms.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

The following night, the night of the murder, Christmas walks the streets of the town:

Nothing can look quite as lonely as a big man going along an empty street. Yet though he was not large, not tall, he contrived somehow to look more lonely than a lone telephone pole in the middle of a desert. In the wide, empty, shadow-brooded street he looked like a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, and lost.<sup>21</sup>

Faulkner is obviously concerned with stressing his anti-hero's sense of isolation, his sense of being lost and alone. This passage, then, serves to point up dramatically, by way of contrast, the simple, but emphatic, sentence which opens the following section of narrative: "Then he found himself."<sup>22</sup> Christmas has wandered into the Negro part of town, and he suddenly finds himself surrounded by Negro smells and Negro voices:

About him the cabins were shaped blackly out of blackness. . . . On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of Negro women murmured. It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless wet primogenitive Female. He began to run . . . toward the next street lamp. Beneath it a . . . lane turned and mounted, out of the black hollow.<sup>23</sup>

As Faulkner's opening sentence suggests, Christmas' plunge into the "black pit" has a decisive effect in terms of his life-long search for Self. It is not merely a symbolic kind of return to the womb, it is also strongly suggestive of the archetypal descent into Hades, one of the oldest and most profound of mythic patterns. The trip into subterranean realms can be seen as a descent into the subconscious

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

in search of identity or in search of the ultimate secrets about human reality. Conrad's Heart of Darkness, centering around Marlow's river trip into the African interior in search of Kurtz, is an important contemporary variation on this pattern. Likewise, Hesse makes use of this ancient archetype in the climactic episodes of Steppenwolf.

In Faulkner's novel, Christmas' descent into the Negro section is yet another utilization of this basic pattern. The author likens the place to "the original quarry, abyss itself."<sup>24</sup> It serves as the source of Being itself in the most primal sense. Christmas' descent has the effect of putting him in full contact with the darker side of his nature, and such an exposure to the depths of the psyche is a terrifying experience for him. When he finally emerges into a white neighborhood, he can breathe quietly once again, but when he sees a group of white people peacefully playing cards on a veranda, he remarks, "'That's all I wanted. . . .'"<sup>25</sup> I suggest that Christmas' sudden use of the past tense here is significant, for it can be argued that his plunge into the "abyss" has a decisive effect on him. He now appears to realize, unconsciously at least, that he is cut off forever from the world of white respectability. He has unwittingly taken the first major step in assuming fully the social role of Negro, a role that presents itself as the possible resolution of Christmas' crisis of self-knowledge.

One might conceivably argue that the subsequent en-

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 100.



counter between Christmas and a group of Negroes belies such an interpretation, that the belligerence of his attitude toward the blacks indicates that he resists the compulsion to think of himself as black, also. On the contrary, Christmas' behavior with respect to the Negroes may well confirm the view that he has embraced his negritude (at least unconsciously) following his experiences in the Negro neighborhood. It should be remembered that while Christmas was on the "street" and making an effort to live the life of a black man, he oftentimes baited Negroes into calling him a white man as an excuse for violence. This parallels his actions upon meeting the first Negroes he sees following his nightmarish glimpse into the depths of himself. Significantly, he is armed with a proverbially Negro weapon, a straight razor, and it is this same weapon that he uses to kill Miss Burden, an act that defines him, once and for all, as a Negro in the eyes of the community.

Longley has suggested that Christmas is totally free in his actions.<sup>26</sup> Such a generalization is not borne out entirely by the text. There is a strong suggestion of "fate" running throughout Light in August. It is manifested in the almost naturalistic way the author treats the effects of environment and conditioning on the young Christmas, and it is implicit in Faulkner's references to the "Player" who directs the action of Percy Grimm, the man who eventually kills and

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<sup>26</sup> The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes, p. 196.

castrates Christmas. It is quite clear that Christmas himself feels that his murder of Miss Burden is dictated by forces outside his control. It should also be noted that he finally commits the crime only after she attempts to kill him first. Involuntary or not, his act serves to provide him with the social definition his life up to that point has lacked. If his descent into the "black pit" of his own psyche has succeeded in allowing him to feel himself a Negro, his crime has the effect of branding him as a Negro in the eyes of society. He is now "That white nigger that did the killing up at Jefferson last week."<sup>27</sup> It is only in playing out his socially-appointed role as the victim of the white society's wrath that he is able to achieve the fulfillment of his newly-found Self and find the peace that he has so desperately sought throughout his life.

Wandering lost in the wilderness is yet another archetype for the process of searching for identity, and the week that transpires between the actual crime and Christmas' capture becomes more significant for him than all of his previous life.<sup>28</sup> In his efforts to escape into the Mississippi countryside, Christmas loses himself only to find himself. Weak as a result of forced fasting, he loses all sense of time and place. He is in a kind of limbo from which he seeks to emerge by establishing the day of the week, thus reentering chronological time. Significantly, this desire to participate once again in socially-established temporality is tied

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<sup>27</sup> Light in August, p. 302.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

to Christmas' awareness that his "identity" is recognized by the people, black and white, whom he encounters. As a result of his crime, they "know" him. He is indeed Joe Christmas, the "nigger murderer." It is true that, at this point, Christmas' exhaustion is so great that he wishes to give himself up, but he now realizes that "there is a rule to catch me by."<sup>29</sup> There are certain rules that strictly define his role with regard to the rest of the community, and these rules, in turn, serve to define him to himself. Unconsciously, he has already been acting in accordance with such rules in leaving an obscene note for the sheriff after his "purging" of the Negro church and in exchanging his shoes for the Negro woman's brogans so that the posse will be thrown off his track. But now, after realizing his place both in time and in the community, he is "like a man who knows where he is and where he wants to go."<sup>30</sup> He can now fulfill his destiny, and his grasp of his life's pattern is equivalent to a realization of his identity. The perplexing "street" he has followed during his lifetime is, in fact, a "circle,"<sup>31</sup> and Christmas watches as the Negro shoes he is wearing become a "black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves."<sup>32</sup> Only in death is there final self-definition for him.

Paradoxically, Christmas' awareness and conscious acceptance of his social definition as a Negro enable him to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

become, for the first time, a man. This explains why, when he walks into Mottstown to await capture, he does so simply as another human being. He goes to a white barber shop to make himself presentable. Because he at last knows who he is, it is no longer necessary to define himself through running and hiding. He simply is himself, like Lucas Beauchamp in Go Down, Moses. And, as was the case with Lucas, it is precisely this attitude on Christmas' part that infuriates the race-conscious citizenry most.<sup>33</sup>

The enigmatic behavior of Christmas when, back in Jefferson, he breaks from the deputy and allows himself to be hunted down and killed by Percy Grimm is a mystery to the people of the town. It becomes understandable only when one realizes that the extent to which Christmas has staked his sense of identity on his ability to fulfill his social role. Although we are not privy to his thoughts following his capture, we do know that he is confronted by his grandmother, the wife of old Doc Hines, in his cell prior to his death. Symbolically, that confrontation puts Christmas in touch with his heretofore unknown origins. We are told that he has the option of pleading guilty and taking a sentence of life imprisonment. His choice of death seems quite obviously a conscious expression of his desire to fulfill his destiny as he sees it. As we have seen, that destiny dictates his role as sacrificial victim.

Gavin Stevens' interpretation of Christmas' thoughts

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

and behavior leading up to his murder at the hands of Grimm remains pure speculation. Unlike the careful reader, Stevens has been unable to trace the evolution of the anti-hero's quest for selfhood. The "street" has at last come full circle, and this explains the curious tranquility with which Christmas faces his end:

He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness. . . . For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from . . . about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath.<sup>34</sup>

One might argue that Christmas' death is a false solution to his crisis of identity, that it, in fact, leaves the question of Christmas' selfhood unresolved. In acting out a socially-ordained racial role, one might reason, Christmas is retreating from his awesome responsibility to establish an existentially authentic identity on his own terms. Such an argument, however, is an attempt to force certain external presuppositions concerning the issue of identity on the text rather than allowing the text to generate its own implicit statements about the nature of man's overwhelming need to find himself. In Faulkner's novels, the sense of community is strong. Alone of all his characters, perhaps, Lucas Beauchamp is able to stand above social categorization, but the case of Christmas is somewhat different. His problem of self-definition has, from the beginning, been tied to the question of racial definition. In

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 407.

choosing the "nigger murderer's" role and the death and mutilation that follow, Christmas defines himself as well as allowing himself to be defined by society. His suffering and death are, paradoxically, a kind of personal victory, and this explains the "quiet, musing, steadfast," quality in Christmas' face which is, Faulkner tells us, "of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant."<sup>35</sup>

Numerous critics have noted analogies between Christmas and Christ.<sup>36</sup> The sacrificial aspect of Christmas' death and the way in which Faulkner chooses to apotheosize what is on the surface a sordid and brutal act reinforce such critics' interpretations. Hyatt Waggoner offers what is perhaps the best perspective from which to understand the nature of Faulkner's use of Christic parallels when he suggests that the reader regard the community's treatment of Christmas in accordance with Matthew 25:44-45:

" . . . Lord, when saw we thee hungering, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

Then shall he answer them, saying, "Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me."<sup>37</sup>

Christmas' tortured and isolated life stands as an awesome

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Various critics have taken note of Faulkner's use of Christ imagery with regard to Christmas. One of the most interesting evaluations of this question is that of Charles H. Nilon in Faulkner and the Negro (New York: Citadel Press, 1965), p. 90.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted by Waggoner in William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1958), p. 106.

accusation; Southern society has failed to live by the Christian principles it preaches. Faulkner's further indictment of the perversion of those principles is manifested in the hate-filled rhetoric of Doc Hines and the sadistic repression of McEachern. Light in August may well be, as Waggoner suggests, "Faulkner's most fully documented statement on what he sees as the religious errors and the racist guilt of his region."<sup>38</sup> Like Colin Wilson's Outsider, Joe Christmas presents "a case against society."<sup>39</sup> His death, the author assures us, will continue to haunt his tormentors for the rest of their lives.<sup>40</sup>

Faulkner's portrayal of Christmas is, in certain respects, an extension of the role of the mulatto avenger as we have seen it at work throughout this study. He not only brings violence to the white community, but, like Lucas Beauchamp, he forces the white conscience to torture itself. Faulkner's handling of Christmas also represents the fullest treatment of the "mulatto" character's identity crisis by a white Southern writer prior to Robert Penn Warren's Band of Angels (1955).

That Warren, in particular, should have been attracted to the literary potential of the mulatto character's quest for Self is natural enough, for the theme of identity and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> The Outsider (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Light in August, p. 407.

self-knowledge has long been a central concern of his, both in his poetry and his fiction. Eric Bentley and Alvan S. Ryan,<sup>41</sup> among others, have noted the persistence with which Warren has returned to the question of identity in his fiction, and Victor H. Strandberg identifies the search for the "undiscovered Self" as one of Warren's major interests as a poet.<sup>42</sup> William C. Havard writes that the theme of identity "does not just hover around the action of the [Warren] novels; practically every central character and many of the supporting ones raise it specifically to themselves or to others in the form of the question, 'Who or what am I?'"<sup>43</sup>

From Warren's creative output in the 1950's, it seems clear that his interest in the significance of identity and self-awareness was particularly acute during that period. In 1954, one year before the appearance of Band of Angels, the author delivered an address, "Knowledge and the Image of Man," at Columbia University, and that address remains one of his most explicit and thoughtful pronouncements on the necessity of self-knowledge. During that same year the Supreme Court handed down its historic ruling requiring the desegregation

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<sup>41</sup> Eric Bentley, "The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novels," Kenyon Review, 10 (1948), 407-24.

Alvan S. Ryan, "Robert Penn Warren's Night Rider: The Nihilism of the Isolated Temperament," in Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Lewis Longley (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> "The Burden of the Literary Mind: Some Meditations on Robert Penn Warren as Historian," in Longley, Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 182.



of public education "with all deliberate speed." This decision and the subsequent controversy it evoked throughout the nation prompted Warren to take a deeper personal interest in the race question and in its significance for Southerners of both races. As a result, he took a fact-finding trip back to his native region. As he put it later,

. . . I went back, for going back this time, like all the other times, was a necessary part of my life. I was going back to look at the landscape and streets I had known--Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana--to look at the faces, to hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my own blood. A girl from Mississippi had said to me: "I feel it's all happening inside of me, every bit of it. It's all there."

I know what she meant.<sup>44</sup>

Warren's return to the South bore fruit in Segregation (1956), a book significantly subtitled The Inner Conflict in the South. In that work, the author views the social and racial divisions within the fabric of Southern society as a mirror of the fragmented psyche of the individual Southerner. He thus implicitly incorporates his persistent concern with self-integration into what is ostensibly a personal reflection upon the impact of the Supreme Court's ruling on blacks and whites alike. Quite naturally, then, in view of Warren's interests during the period of its composition, Band of Angels represents a fictional merger of two of the author's chief concerns, race and identity.

As a novel, Band of Angels has obvious precedents in

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<sup>44</sup> Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 3.

the "tragic mulatto" tradition in American fiction and in the anti-slavery narratives of the pre-Civil War period. Warren's heroine, Amantha Starr, is a beautiful girl of mixed ancestry whose Negro blood is altogether indiscernible. She is the pampered child of a gentlemanly planter who neglects to register her free-papers. As a consequence, Amantha is forced to suffer the degradation of being sold down river to New Orleans, where she undergoes numerous vicissitudes until she is rescued at last by a chivalrous young man who falls in love with and marries her. The parallels between this sketchy account of Warren's plot and that of a work like William Wells Brown's Clotelle are obvious; and "autobiographical" slave narratives like that of Solomon Northup provide analogous tales. Girls who suffer fates similar to that of Amantha also appear in novels like Hildreth's The White Slave. Cassy, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, is such a figure.

Warren is working, therefore, within a fictional tradition that is highly sensational in nature, and this fact has led many critics to condemn Band of Angels as overly melodramatic. Even L. Hugh Moore, Jr., a basically sympathetic critic, has written that the novel is "as full of outrageous examples of stagey, unconvincing melodrama as a second-rate Victorian novel, Hollywood epic, or popular magazine story."<sup>45</sup> There is unquestionably some basis for such an attack, yet Charles L. Bohner has pointed out that much

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Penn Warren and History: 'The Big Myth We Live' (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 23.

of the "melodrama" of the plot is, in fact, historicity,<sup>46</sup> and Leonard Casper notes the thorough historical background behind Warren's writing of the work.<sup>47</sup> The author has, indeed, taken great care in providing a rich historical context within which to tell Amantha's story. Warren relates specific details of plantation slavery in Kentucky and Louisiana, shows the preparations slaves undergo prior to auction, and, through Hamish Bond's lengthy "confession," provides the reader with a terrifying account of the horrors of the African slave trade and the Middle Passage. Warren recreates the abolitionist fervor and religious orientation of student life during the early days at Oberlin, as well as the hunger and depravation of life in the camps set up for free Negroes after the Civil War. The events of Amantha's personal history are set off by references to Harper's Ferry, Shiloh, Appomattox and the assassination of Lincoln, which serve to place her life in the wider perspective of national history. Band of Angels is a superb example, as Leslie Fiedler notes, of the way in which Warren uses the conventional trappings of the historical romance for "sophisticated and serious ends."<sup>48</sup> In discussing All the King's Men (1946), Robert B. Heilman once remarked that Warren, like Shakespeare, writes about "history and politics, but the real subject is the

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Penn Warren (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 50.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), p. 188.

<sup>48</sup> "Romance in the Operatic Manner," New Republic, 133, No. 7 (1955), 28.

nature of man."<sup>49</sup> Heilman's remark is particularly appropriate to Band of Angels, for that novel, despite all its concern for the specifics of antebellum Southern life and the political machinations of Reconstruction, is primarily an account of the process through which the individual finds himself and, as a consequence, realizes the significance of the term "freedom."

F. Cudworth Flint points out that there is at work in Band of Angels an intimate "connection between one's achievement of freedom and one's recognition of one's own identity."<sup>50</sup> Amantha, as the novel's narrator, makes this clear at the very outset. Her first words to the reader are "Oh, who am I?"; and coupled with this question is an expression of desire: "If I could only be free."<sup>51</sup> These twin human needs, a sense of self-definition and the freedom that an awareness of one's self alone makes possible, are the dominant concerns of the book and the controlling concerns of each of the major characters. Quite predictably, however, the author's attention, in the last analysis, is focused upon Amantha in particular, who, as a person of mixed blood, is forced to face the problem of identity in the most pressing way.

Up until the time of her father's death, Amantha is

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<sup>49</sup> "Melpomene as Wallflower; or, The Reading of Tragedy," Sewanee Review, 55 (1947), 155.

<sup>50</sup> "Mr. Warren and the Reviewers," in Longley, Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 129.

<sup>51</sup> Band of Angels (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 3.

never forced to question who she is. She is little Manty, Little Miss Sugar-and-Spice, her father's pet, and the pampered favorite of the house servants at Starrwood. She is unaware of her black blood. At Oberlin, her conscience is torn between the dictates of her newly-acquired abolitionism and her emotional loyalty to her slave-holding father. When she is seized as a slave at her father's graveside, however, she is rudely awakened to the pressures of her true identity. In her initial shock, she protests to her new owner, ". . . it's all a mistake--it isn't right--and it can't be true, it can't happen to me . . . for I'm Amantha Starr." Her owner's response is unconsciously profound: "'Yeah, you're Amantha Starr, all right. And that's why you are here, because you are you, gal.'"<sup>52</sup> Amantha is faced with the existential predicament: I am I.

Until she is forced to face the full ramifications of her total identity, Amantha has been, as she herself realizes, the "continuous creation" of those around her.<sup>53</sup> Her sense of Self has been largely the product of the way in which others have perceived her. She has allowed herself to be defined by her father, Aunt Sukie and Shaddy at Starrwood; by Miss Idell in Cincinnati; by Seth Parton at Oberlin. In effect, she has led an existence that parallels that of her childhood doll, Bu-Bula, an object without personal significance aside from that placed upon it from outside. Paradoxically, Amantha's enslavement serves as the first step in the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

direction of her ultimate liberation as a human being. It makes her aware of the essential isolation and uniqueness of every individual. In his address at Columbia in 1954, Warren pointed out that a sense of estrangement, of one's "separateness" from the world at large, is a prerequisite for the final awareness of identity and the liberation such knowledge entails.<sup>54</sup> This primary stage in the initiation into Selfhood is, as Warren sees it, analogous to the original Fall of Man: "Man eats of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and falls." "But," Warren is quick to add, "if he takes another bite, he may get at least a sort of redemption."<sup>55</sup> Amantha's first bite of the fruit of self-knowledge proves bitter enough, and much of the subsequent action of Band of Angels is a chronicle of her reluctance to take the necessary second bite.

In keeping with the shock of initial self-revelation, certain changes take place in Amantha's view of the world around her and in her assumptions regarding that world. Finding herself legally defined as a slave, she attempts to retreat into the role of slave as it was defined for her at Oberlin. Her primary concern is for an abstraction, "freedom," but as of yet she confuses that state of being with simple escape from slavery. At one point on the river trip to New Orleans, she watches a slave fall overboard. Amantha

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<sup>54</sup> "Knowledge and the Image of Man," Sewanee Review, 62 (1955), 187.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

believes that this is an effort on the Negro's part to swim to freedom or die trying; she feels bitterly betrayed when the desperate man grabs on to a life-line. The slave is not acting in accordance with her expectations. Even slavery does not provide Amantha with the conveniently predictable universe and the basic security she wants. Likewise, her experiences in the household of Hamish Bond perplex and frustrate her because they fail to correspond with the expectations she brings with her from Oberlin. Although she is not a "slave" in the sense she expects to be, she is, nevertheless, enslaved by Bond as a consequence of her own refusal to embrace the rigors of real freedom.

It is much easier to be "poor little Manty" than Amantha Starr. It is less demanding to be a doll-like creature than a woman. Repeatedly, then, Amantha takes refuge in playing the role of little Manty in her associations with men. Her affair with Hamish Bond is the prime case in point. Bond is much older than Amantha and is, in view of his constant pampering solicitude, an obvious surrogate father to her. In the arms of Bond, Amantha can become little Manty again. Their life together at Pointe du Loup is a kind of pastoral idyll in which Amantha seeks to shut out the pressures of the outside world. As the name Pointe du Loup indicates, however, the pastoral environment Bond and Amantha seem to enjoy is not an altogether safe haven from the harsher and predatory aspects of reality. Beyond the confines of Bond's ideal plantation, the forces that are to lead to the

Civil War are already at work.

It is significant that the lash is rarely used on Bond's plantation. Instead, there is a practice whereby wrongdoing is punished by ostracism. Once the guilt is expiated, however, there is the "raise-up," a cause of profound celebration when the pariah is welcomed back into the community. "'I reckon it's just what everybody wants'" says Hamish Bond, "'the raise-up.'"<sup>56</sup> Although Amantha is unaware of it at the time, the "raise-up" is paradigmatic of the process she herself must go through in order to be truly free. She must face up to the responsibility for her life and recognize, through her isolation paradoxically enough, her basic kinship with the family of man.

Along with her tendency to escape into a childlike role, Amantha's self-pity is a major obstacle to her freedom. Warren notes that her "view of herself as victim is what stands in the way of her achieving identity."<sup>57</sup> It, too, is a way in which to sidestep the responsibilities of Selfhood. At one point in her life, Amantha seems to act and think in accordance with the following theory she has heard expounded:

You live through time, that little piece of time that is yours, but that piece of time is not only your own life, it is the summing-up of all the other lives that are simultaneous with yours. It is, in other words, History, and what you are is an ex-

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<sup>56</sup> Band of Angels, p. 121.

<sup>57</sup> "The Art of Fiction XVIII: Robert Penn Warren," in Longley, Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 38. (This is a highly interesting interview with Warren conducted by Ralph Ellison and Eugene Walter.)



pression of History, and you do not live your life, but somehow, your life lives you, and you are, therefore, only what History does to you.<sup>58</sup>

Amantha ultimately realizes that such a deterministic account of man is only partially correct. It is true that the realization of one's place in history is essential to full self-awareness in Warren's scheme of things, and a vital part of that realization is one's capacity to face his own past. As Leonard Casper insists, a Warren character "cannot be what he would without admitting what he was."<sup>59</sup> It is wrong, however, for Amantha to conceive of herself simply as the victim of events outside her control. Her very passivity makes her culpable, for she is capable of using her helplessness to her own best advantage. If Fau-Ru and Hamish Bond represent two sides of the same coin and Seth Parton complements the psychological make-up of Tobias Sears, Amantha shares, in certain respects, many of the manipulative traits of Miss Idell. In her own peculiar way, she is not so much victim as victimizer, and she must bear her share of blame for the world's wrongs.

It is significant to note that the affair between Amantha and Bond ends when Bond confesses his true identity and lays bare the facts of his life. The idyll is shattered by reality, and Amantha feels "cold and detached from everything."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Band of Angels, p. 112.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> Band of Angels, p. 302.

She is once again forced to face the fearful prospect of living with herself. When she leaves Bond's house she is legally "free," and her break with Bond puts her on the potential road to real freedom. It is not long, however, before she seeks refuge from her sense of isolation and helplessness through marriage to Tobias Sears, a young Union officer and the friend of Amantha's Oberlin classmate, Seth Parton. Amantha erroneously believes that Tobias knows the secret of her parentage; she looks upon her marriage to him as a way of canceling out the past, a rebirth. However, in Warren's scheme of things, the past is never erasable. When Amantha's past calls at the door in the form of Rau-Ru, who now calls himself Lieutenant Oliver Cromwell Jones, she makes the mistake of denying it, thus living a lie. In doing so, she is also attempting to escape her own guilt, for the presence of Rau-Ru in Union uniform, like the memory of old Shaddy at Starrwood, is itself a symbol of Amantha's own participation in a fallen world.

When Amantha realizes that Tobias does not know the truth about her race, she tells him. She also tells him about her relations with Bond, believing that the truth has at last set her free. A lesser writer than Warren might have contented himself with ending the story of Amantha's quest for Self with the scene in which she confesses her black blood and is accepted by her husband. Warren, however, is too aware of the complexities of human life to accept so patent a solution to his heroine's tribulations. Tobias, an

Emersonian Transcendentalist, is one of the so-called Higher Law men Warren chastizes at length in The Legacy of the Civil War (1961), a man whose fondness for abstractions blinds him to human realities. Far from bringing Amantha closer to Tobias in a genuinely human love, her confession of Negro blood has the effect of allowing her husband to view her as an abstraction, "a sign" in support of his personal crusade for Negro rights.

Again frustrated in her efforts at genuine self-definition, Amantha flees to Rau-Ru. Rather than becoming the escape it is intended to be, this act only serves to further involve Amantha in the world of guilt and human tragedy. In betraying her husband's plans to Rau-Ru, she is in part responsible for the New Orleans riots of 1866, and years later she will pore over a copy of the Congressional report concerning these riots in an effort to understand their meaning for her own life. In a more immediate sense, Amantha's "escape" to Rau-Ru results directly in the deaths of both Hamish Bond and Rau-Ru. To Amantha's burden of guilt over the selling of Shaddy when she was a child is added her blame for the deaths of these two men, who, after their fashion, loved her, as well as her responsibility for the suffering of the victims of the riots, one of whom is Tobias.

In Band of Angels, the marriage between Amantha and Tobias functions symbolically to figure forth the way in which two human destinies are tied together. For better or for worse, Amantha and Tobias must work out their respective prob-

lems together. Amantha's own frustrations as a result of her inability to assert her identity parallel the self-irony and bitterness of her husband as a result of the failure of his efforts on behalf of the freedman. This disappointment pushes him and Amantha westward, out of the South and away from the scene of their respective pasts. Joe Davis, in a highly perceptive article, discusses the symbolic function of the American West in Warren's fiction.<sup>61</sup> Tobias' and Amantha's flight west, like that of certain other Warren characters, is a deliberate effort to shake off the burden of the past, to start anew in the virgin land. As is inevitably the case in Warren's writings, there is no hope for them in the West, however. There is only progressive frustration.

The end of the road for Amantha and Tobias is, ironically enough, Kansas, the state where the sectional conflict that played so important a role in both their lives had its tragic rehearsal. Amantha has once again unconsciously cast herself as victim, the wife wronged by her husband's infidelities and alcoholism. Tobias' self-pity and disenchantment with the way in which his ideals have been perverted by the values of capitalistic expansionism have been intensified by a long succession of failures as lawyer and businessman. In turning their backs upon the reality of the past, Amantha and Tobias have clearly set themselves adrift in a pointless and meaningless universe. One day, however, the past catches up

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<sup>61</sup> "Robert Penn Warren and the Journey to the West," Modern Fiction Studies: Special Robert Penn Warren Number, 6 (1960), 73-82.

with Amantha in the form of an aged Negro beggar who appears on the streets of Halesburg, Kansas.

The Negro is, indeed, a nameless stranger, but, in a real sense, he is also a ghostly figure summoned up out of Amantha's unconscious, a symbol of her own spiritual poverty and personal guilt. He becomes, in her frantic fancy, Rau-Ru come back to haunt and expose her. Out of a sense of guilt and fear, Amantha extends generous alms to the beggar in a burlesque of settling accounts with the past. When she learns that the old man is dead and buried in a pauper's grave, her first feeling is one of relief. Her secret is buried with her past. The old Negro is dead, but still Amantha is not free. At his graveside, however, she has a sudden epiphany:

. . . I saw the people I had known . . . a little distance off, and they lifted their hands toward me in some humble beseeching. And then it wasn't only they, it was other people, too . . . thousands, millions, black and white, crowding the prairie beyond, people so ghostly you saw right through them, but they were looking at me, and they held out their hands.<sup>62</sup>

Suddenly, Amantha grasps the key to the questions that have pursued her all her life; she realizes that "Nobody can set you free . . . except yourself."<sup>63</sup> She has at last reached the final stage in her quest for self-awareness when she intuitively realizes that her own loneliness, guilt, and confusion are simply the shared burden of being human. In his Columbia address, Warren voiced his belief that once man "realizes that the tragic experience is universal . . . , he

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<sup>62</sup> Band of Angels, p. 302.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

may return to a communion with man and nature."<sup>64</sup> Amantha achieves this realization at the conclusion of Band of Angels, and, coincidentally, Tobias himself is freed from his crippling self-pity at approximately the same time, when he once again takes action in the cause of Negro rights, not as a condescending idealist, but as a fellow-sufferer, another human being. The merged destinies of husband and wife reach an affirmative culmination. Tobias regains his self-respect as a man, and little Manty is Amantha Starr at last.

As the concluding segment of this study, the foregoing chapter has concerned itself with the theme of the mulatto character's search for identity, the fourth aspect of our original paradigm. We have been concerned particularly with the way in which this theme has been picked up by Faulkner and Warren in their respective characterizations of Joe Christmas and Amantha Starr. In exploring the question of the mulatto's quest for Self, Faulkner and Warren are both working within the lengthy tradition outlined in Chapter One. Joe Christmas and Amantha are radically different creations, and they come to radically different ends. Nevertheless, they both have their fictional precedents in Cable's tragic quadroons and Twain's Tom Driscoll. Yet, they also share literary affinities with many of the alienated and self-divided protagonists who appear persistently throughout much of contemporary fiction. They represent, then, extraordinary

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<sup>64</sup> "Knowledge and the Image of Man," Sewanee Review, 62, (1955), 187.

examples of the way in which regional concerns of the Southern writer can lend themselves to the exploration of broader issues relevant to contemporary literature as a whole. The figure of the mulatto, cut off from both races and suffering from a divided sense of identity, a figure originally intended to demonstrate the pathetic result of the evils of racial caste, becomes, in the work of Faulkner and Warren, a representation of contemporary man himself, the individual man who must find himself and define his place in the universe. In the end, both Christmas and Amantha Starr are successful in finding out who they are. Christmas at last realizes that even the pariah and scapegoat plays his part in the community of man. Amantha learns that she is a responsible agent with a share in history and in the common experience of the fallen race of man. Unlike Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, she does not shrink from the communion of her race. Different as Christmas and Amantha are, they both function as powerful and revealing images of contemporary man and his crisis of identity. And they both testify to their respective author's faith in the liberating effect of self-knowledge, and in the necessity for man to ascertain his own relation to himself and to the world around him.

## CONCLUSION

In 1789, Jedidiah Morse, the author of American Geography, noted that it was not uncommon in the South to see a mulatto child waiting on the table of his father, the man who also happened to be his master. With considerable indignation, Morse went on to speculate on the irony of such a situation:

The white man begets his likeness, and with much indifference and dignity of soul, sees his offspring in bondage and misery, and makes not one effort to redeem his own blood. Choice food for satire! wide field for burlesque! noble game for wit! sad cause for pity to bleed, and for humanity to weep!<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in Morse's exclamation is a recognition of the immense literary possibilities of the theme of miscegenation, a subject potentially rich with ironic ramifications. Irony is a two-edged sword that lends itself to both comedy and tragedy, and the ironies, both comic and tragic, inherent in the whole question of miscegenation have constituted a staple part of American literature for nearly a century and a half. Surveying the vast extent to which the theme of mixed blood has been touched upon by American writers, Francis P. Gaines remarked in 1926 that the tradition "has yet brought forth little that is not either me-

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Louis Ruchames, ed., Racial Thought in America: From the Puritans to Abraham Lincoln (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1964), p. 198.



diocre or altogether inane."<sup>2</sup> Gaines concluded his survey with the following observation: "Whether a greatly significant work utilizing the theme of miscegenation has appeared is debatable, and whether one will ever appear is not within our limits of prophecy."<sup>3</sup>

Gaines' assessment is basically sound, although perhaps a little too guarded. Certainly Cable's The Grandis-simes, despite its occasional sentimentality and melodrama, is a significant example of the way in which a serious writer can use the theme for meaningful fictional purposes; and although Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson in no way parallels the level of literary achievement represented by a work like Huckleberry Finn, it is, nevertheless, a vital part of the Twain corpus and yet another example of the way in which the theme of miscegenation can be used successfully by a writer of exceptional gifts. In view of the powerful and persistent hold the issue of mixed blood has exercised over both the popular and the literary imaginations of this country, it is difficult to understand Gaine's reluctance to prophesy the appearance of a great work growing out of the tradition represented by the novels mentioned in his essay. Scarcely ten years after the appearance of Gaines' article, William Faulkner brought out Absalom, Absalom! in 1936, and that book, in which the theme of miscegenation acts as the inform-

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<sup>2</sup> "The Racial Bar Sinister in American Romance," South Atlantic Quarterly, 25 (1926), 396.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 402.

ing principle, is generally ranked among the greatest of American novels. In retrospect, it seems only natural that so vital and diverse a tradition should have found fruition in a work of major importance.

The present study has attempted to approach the theme of miscegenation with more seriousness than Gaines afforded it, and a particular effort has been made to understand the peculiar importance the question of mixed blood holds for the Southern literary imagination. As the introductory chapter of this consideration attempts to show, the theme of miscegenation plays a unique role in Southern letters. The basic elements of that theme are evident in Joel Chandler Harris' "Where's Duncan?" which provides us with a paradigmatic presentation of its various implications. An examination of certain of George Washington Cable's works (Chapter Two) illustrates the way in which a conscientious Southern reformer used the theme to point out the evils of racism and injustice in his region and thereby attempted to solve, in fictional terms, the historical "riddle" of Southern experience. Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson (Chapter Three) demonstrates the manner in which the regional concerns at the basis of the theme of mixed blood lend themselves to the exploration of an author's intimate personal problems. In that novel, particular social phenomena are invested with broader philosophical importance. Chapter Four, the focal point of this entire investigation, involves a careful reading of William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Go Down,

Moses, for those two novels represent the treatment the theme of miscegenation receives at the hands of the South's greatest novelist and stand as the artistic culmination of the literary tradition in question. In Chapter Five, the bulk of attention is devoted to an examination of the struggle for personal identity as manifested in the careers of Faulkner's Joe Christmas and Robert Penn Warren's Amantha Starr, two characters who illustrate forcefully the mulatto figure's traditional quest for self-definition and a definite social role. An effort is made to suggest the way in which the mulatto's search for Self can be used to figure forth the alienation and isolation which often characterize the plight of modern man. The mulatto character, whose tragic disorientation and self-uncertainties are the outgrowth of certain particularized social conditions, thus begins to represent man himself in an increasingly universal sense. In Faulkner's Light in August and Warren's Band of Angels, the literary materials evolving out of a peculiarly Southern tradition align themselves with one of the most prevalent concerns of contemporary Western literature as a whole. The result is literature which is at once regional and cosmopolitan in character.

The theme of miscegenation has continued to interest the Southern writer in recent years. Shirley Ann Grau's The Keepers of the House and Carson McCullers' Clock Without Hands demonstrate that the potential of the theme is by no means exhausted and serve notice that the tradition in ques-

tion is still a vital one. Whether or not it will continue to bear significant fictional fruit in subsequent years, however, remains purely a question of speculation. As this nation becomes increasingly homogeneous in character and the old regional distinctions begin to disappear, Southern literature will no doubt lose much of its recognizably regional quality, and certain of the peculiarly pressing concerns of Southern writers, such as the issue of mixed blood, may well be subsumed into American literature in general. However, as this study has endeavored to show, the theme of miscegenation is alive with profound implications and lends itself readily to the exploration of concerns of universal importance to mankind. There is, therefore, every reason to expect that it will continue to play a significant part in the fiction of the future.

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## VITA

William Bedford Clark was born in 1947 in Oklahoma City, where he attended public school. He graduated with a B.A. in English from the University of Oklahoma in 1969. Immediately after receiving his degree, he began graduate study in English at Louisiana State University as an NDEA fellow. He received the degree of Master of Arts in 1971. He has been awarded a post-doctoral fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities which will provide him with a year at Yale University, where he plans to continue working with the theme of miscegenation, particularly as it is treated by Afro-American writers.



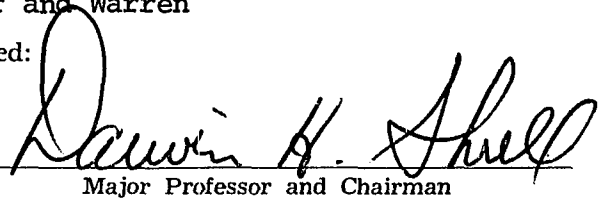
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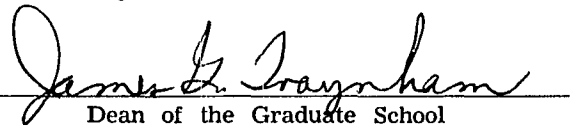
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Major Field: English

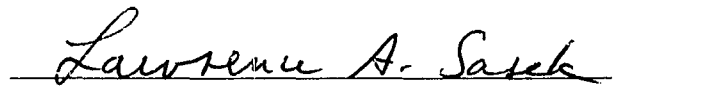
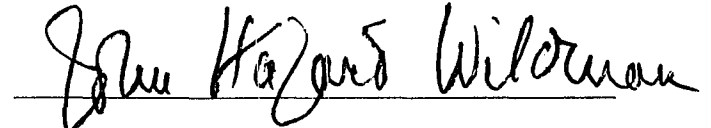
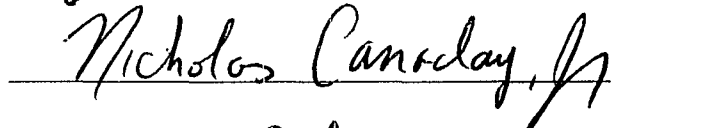
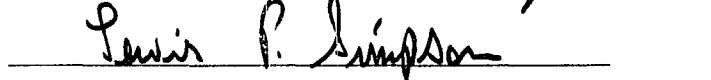
Title of Thesis: The Serpent of Lust in the Southern Garden: The Theme of  
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Approved:

  
Major Professor and Chairman

  
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Date of Examination:

July 17, 1973