

I. Introduction to William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

The research explores how William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* innovates in narrative voice in ways that produce an alternative presentation of racial issues and racial relations in fiction. His achievement lies in the creation of ambivalence through the interplay of these aspects. This ambivalence reflects the social tension and violence of their historical periods. At the same time the writer transforms literary representation of race by means of his careful deployment of "racial stereotypes" as narrative forms. The researcher here amplifies our comprehension of the artistic principles that shape narrative fiction, and of the means by which literature uses and aesthetically transforms the social context in which it is produced.

On the other hand the research also shows the effects of literary works on the writer's contemporaries are to acknowledge that history matters for literary works. This is the "worldliness" of literature. Here Edward Said's perspective is very powerful when commenting the theory of the Zaharites on the interpretation of the Koran:

But what ought to strike us forcibly about the whole theory is that it represents a considerably articulated thesis for dealing with a text as significant form, in which—and I put this as carefully as I can—worldliness, circumstantially, the text's status as an event having sensuous particularly as well as historical contingency, are considered as being incorporated in the text, an intangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning. (Said 1152)

This means that a text has a specific situation, placing restraints upon the interpreter and his interpretation not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery, but

rather because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularly as the textual object itself. The text is anchored in its times and the author's contemporary and personal concerns beyond which his artistic achievement prolongs his life. It is therefore categorically implicit in my sense of literature as at once essentially aesthetical and profoundly historical that criticism should aspire to attend to both historical contingencies and formal development equally and, if possible, simultaneously, in order to behold how art is singularly meaningful.

In participating in recent and still largely neglected calls for the necessity of a convergence between the analysis of narrative form and the study of the cultural and social context that reverts and interplays in literature, my reading attempts to offer an example of the amplification of the scope of literary criticism when these two approaches are analyzed in relation to each other. Adequacy shall be the criterion for the fulfillment of this task, since the points of intersection between the two aspects significantly multiply the possibilities in the interpretation of narrative (yet without becoming limitless) and demand greater effort by the critic. It has been guided not only by the relevance of these two components of narrative and history, but rather the fruitful effects of their combination in each novel. The project of comparing narrative voice and racial representation in literature could be expanded to other works by Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Jean Toomer, Jean Rhys, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, Albert Camus, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Toni Morrison, or J. M. Coetzee, among many others, simply because they engage abundantly with these components in ways that will be elaborated upon here. However, the decision to limit the number of cases under study might be compensated for by their eventual insertion within

a larger corpus of works that, although the researcher would not ascribe them to any particular tradition, nevertheless express a similar desire to resist the enforced choice between the formal and the historical. Several aspects have led to believe that these two elements are interesting in themselves, and that the analysis of their interaction illuminates our comprehension of the texts.

There is nothing new in the claim that narrative voice became a central concern for the writers of the late nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth, a period designated with the rough critical category of “Modernism,” if we have to refer to a literary movement. I will later return to this term as well as the expression “Modern novel.” For the moment, we could just note that the bulk of fictional works that undertake this narrative device as key in the exploration of narrative technique is impressive.

Innumerable and longstanding studies on Modernism and the Modern Novel have firmly established this technical innovation to repeat here claims that are well known in literary criticism. As a whole, the development of narrative voice discloses reoccupations with the subject, modifications of the narrative perspective, experimentation with the distance between story and narrator, or the erosion of beliefs. All this leads to the experimentation in narrative voice and the concern about the credibility of discourses and of language. Remarkable in many novels is the exploration of the problem of reliability, with Faulkner as central figures in this preoccupation. He was deeply concerned about authority in the telling, and related variations: in characters (subjectivism and intentions), in situations, in means (oral or written), as well as in time.

Indeed, William Faulkner also lived in a society shaken by extreme tension and violence resulting from the Jim Crow segregated system (1896-1964), reading in the

newspapers and hearing incessantly about lynching, violence against blacks—and whites, though undoubtedly less frequent—, and the increasingly vociferous denunciations of a discriminatory system based on racial distinctions.

The discourse of “race” in the 1930’s relied less virulently on “scientific” ideas to delineate the difference, substituting them for an idea of “race” which rested on the belief that races were culturally different without being necessarily inferior or superior to one another; nonetheless, the violence was constant and tremendously present and the cultural basis for the distinction of “races” only complementary criteria to reinforce the difference when supposedly biological aspects (phenotypic or mainly based on ancestry) were not apparent. The new concept of “race” did not prevent—and probably just reinforced—either the continuity of codified racial ideas or the persistence of a still more contradictory inequality under the stipulations of the “separate but equal” society of the Jim Crow system. Indeed, the transformation of the idea of “race” as a blend of ancestry and of cultural heritage and manners during the 1920’s and 1930’s, as Walter Benn Michaels argues, perhaps explains the endurance of the stereotypes that had been present in literature and in racial discourse in general. In fact, these stereotypes had long attributed both “biological” difference (notoriously, phenotypic) and distinct “cultural” behaviors to each “race,” producing categories that, although during those decades ostensibly signifying only “difference” rather than superiority or inferiority, in practice could be perceived not only as less definite and defined but, furthermore, as the sole operative basis in the creation of social and economic discrimination. The very question “Who is black?”—to borrow the title of F. James Davis’ book—found not only challenging and ambiguous responses in novels such as George S. Schuyler’s *Black No*

More (1931) and interestingly complex ones in the novels of “passing” such as Nella Larsen’s, but it also provoked immense difficulties in the very process of writing the States’ laws, whose confusing and arbitrary way of defining “blackness” threatened to be undermined by those cases in which racial lines were blurred.

It is precisely because the Jim Crow system depended on the preservation of racial lines that anti-miscegenation had to become the foundation of the segregated society and constituted such a challenging yet enthralling theme in William Faulkner’s discussion of the contemporary debates on racial discrimination.

One is impressed by the extent to which miscegenation was still a potent and troublesome issue during the 1930s, when Faulkner published at least two novels centered on the topic, in what might appear as a “criminal” act according to the fact that

“[i]n 1930, the state of Mississippi . . . enacted a criminal statute that made punishable the ‘publishing, printing, or circulating of any literature in favor of or urging interracial marriage or social equality. (Simply representing interracial marriage, or criticizing its criminalization, was often perceived to be the same as ‘favoring’ or ‘urging’ it.)” (Sollors 10).

As in the case of the late Victorian period, the fixed images and arguments of racial discourse strongly contradicted the dynamics of social relations, resulting in unspeakable violence and controversial viewpoints in William Faulkner’s works.

The ideas related to “race,” their consequences and functions in the societies in which the novels were produced as well as the stories represented, are also quite different. What is maintained in a number of cases are the images that the racial discourses at the height of their influence have coined, which have been repeated and

recycled through various means (in popular culture but also “scientific,” political discourses, or economic arguments, for example) and which can be traced over time in surprisingly similar forms. Furthermore, the circulation of images of the colonized and the enslaved was impressive, as Patrick Brantlinger and Douglass Lorimer show, and helped shape similar reproductions to be applied in disparate contexts. Thus, the representation of the Malays is, in fact, not far away from the representation of the “Negro” in Africa or in the United States.

This last observation supports the already established idea of the Other in criticism, launched by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and thereafter rapidly embraced by the so called “postcolonial criticism.” As defined by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *Post- Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* in the entry Other/other:

In general terms, the ‘other’ is anyone who is separate from one’s self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as ‘other’ through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. . . . The Other—with a capital ‘O’—has been called the *grande-autre* by Lacan, the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity. . . . This Other can be compared to the imperial centre, imperial discourse, or the empire itself in two ways: firstly, it provides the terms in which the colonized subject gains a sense of his or her identity as somehow ‘other,’ dependent; secondly, it becomes the ‘absolute pole of

address,' the ideological framework in which the colonized subject may come to understand the world.

These racial stereotypes are the tensions and violence that enforce the distinction of one group from another, and the very term “Other” indicates that the interchangeability of some current features of these stereotypes only points to the very fact that what is predominantly relevant here is how the shaping of this “other” is mainly a shaping of “us”. The stereotype mainly seen in the creation of difference that has historically supported the placement of certain groups of people under conditions of inferiority on every plane of life. Assuming the perspective increasingly adopted by critics when considering the representation of “race” in literature to understand in the expression of the Other the expression of the self, “whiteness” in the terms Toni Morrison, in her *Playing in the Dark*, urges critics to see in literature written by “white” authors:

What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary ‘blackness,’ the nature—even the cause—of literary ‘whiteness’. (Towner 88)

This point of view shall provide a guiding light in our interpretation of literature itself, as well as the analysis of the implications of that belief in society. Its perspective therefore engages the efforts in that direction brilliantly pioneered by Theresa Towner in relation to William Faulkner’s later novels, and implicit among others in Eric Sundquist, Philip Weinstein, Thadious Davis, and Barbara Ladd’s previous analysis of his work. Towner argues that “as I believe my discussion of Sanctuary in this chapter will indicate, Faulkner did no need specific racial issues in order to racialize his subject matter; in fact,

Toni Morrison would argue that his racialization of the white subject's imagination is even more telling than his representations of black characters might be" (11). In the adoption of this perspective, thus, lies the justification of my treatment of "white" stereotypes such as the largely unacknowledged "English gentleman" in the stereotypes of the "Anglo-Saxon gentleman" and the "poor whites" in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The analysis of racial representation in *Absalom, Absalom!* is concerned with the construction of "blackness"—and thus of "whiteness" by opposition—since there is an emphasis on the confusing establishment of the color line, which was the crucial problematic of the time.

Returning to the idea of the "Other," my perspective as outlined above has paradoxically prevented me from using the term unless absolutely unavoidable. To clarify, this tendency proceeds from my insistence on the different contexts and the very naming of the actual stereotypes. Indeed, when referring to particular stereotypes of "the Negro," such as the "passing figure," the "slave," the "half-caste," or the "Malay," the stereotypes function in a particular context and interpose themselves into—or perhaps even shape—contemporary debates. To refer to those constructions simply as stereotypes of the "Other" would have meant using the codified ideas abstractly—which literature also does however—and would have occluded how these ideas were operative historically, as well as the reasons for their endurance.

The research uses the terms "race" and "Negro" in the same vein. It intends to preserve the historical uses of these terms, so as not to fall into anachronisms. When it is omitted to enclose them in quotation marks, this is merely to avoid overloading the text with visual marks. However my detachment from the claims made by contemporaries

about “race” and the “Negro” is, needless is to say, absolute. Some further precisions on the idea of “race” shall establish my understanding of this complex category, which is still a matter of heated debate.

However much it may appear that society has abandoned the idea of a biological basis for “race,” recent and very dangerous developments in the medical field point at a revitalization of some of these ideas, for which purpose I would like to invoke Adolph Reed Jr.’s insistent argument that “race is a category that has no substantial roots in biology” (12). However, as he points out, this should not prevent us from acknowledging that “race is a social reality” (13). Thus, “race,” as understood by “scientists” in the sense of a qualitative differentiation between groups of people based on biological criteria, does not have any credibility, nor do I consider it as a valid or definitive cultural delimitation of any group of people. Ontologically, “race” is understood as a “social construction” (Reed 33). However, the discarding of “race” as a real ontological entity should not distract us from perceiving its reality, as Reed also points out. We should understand that “race” exists as a “belief.” This unessential existence is nonetheless crucial, since it is precisely its operativeness in historical contexts that explains its endurance. By this it means that we need to understand the extent to which the belief exists in order to understand how “race” “has described and inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth,” (55) which in turn have exerted their power in “naturalizing images of existing hierarchies, which validate the values, prejudices, and socioeconomic position of the relatively privileged by making them appear precisely not as the product of contested and

contestable social relations” (Reed 33). It is in that sense that we need to understand “race” as a “reality,” since, as the debates voiced in *Absalom, Absalom!* show, it had—and still has—factual prejudicial consequences for real people who were imposed or felt compelled to believe in a “racial identity,” which, like other identities such as the national, gendered, or religious, historically enforced the establishment of inequality.

The study of “race” in history as well as in literature thus relies in great part on “beliefs about race.” This has brought me to consider for my literary analysis the idea of the stereotype as the manifestation of those beliefs. A stereotype is therefore an idea that appears fixed, is repeated, and the content of which, as a result of the insistency with which it is repeated, becomes ingrained in the language and the culture to such an extent that it falsely occupies the space of knowledge (and is thus endowed with authority), and can be mobilised by simple indication once it is widely shared and operative in society. In some sense, we could even understand it as one of M. M. Bakhtin’s speech genres.

Homi Bhabha’s concept of the stereotype is a structure, the stereotype not only contains a contradiction, but that it acts as an indicator of an imposed identity that reveals social tensions, violence, and hierarchies. In the contrast between the complexities of historical circumstances and living individuals, and those fixed discursive images, which are the root of William Faulkner’s concerns, social tensions are revealed. And it is precisely here that my approach participates of the critical endeavor suggested by Kenneth Warren when he indicates that

while it remains important, intellectually and politically, to address the multiple factors that have set African Americans apart from their fellow citizens, it is equally worthwhile to attend to the pressures that challenge

cultural distinctiveness. The point is not to construct a racially integrated literary utopia but to highlight the intellectual and cultural anxieties that have made separatism and discrimination in a variety of forms seem viable solutions to the social problems of a supposedly democratic society (10).

Whereas this perspective clearly suits Faulkner's work, this study certainly tries to apprehend how social anxieties were also inscribed and transformed in the literature of the writer, for in spite of his staggering distance from the discourse of the colonizer in a less unabashedly democratic society, the latter also displays blatant and uncomfortable contradictions in the underpinnings of the system of beliefs which shaped the practices of discrimination throughout the territories of the Empire. The stereotype thus provides me with the connection, at the level of ideas shaped in discourse, with the historical context in which the novels were produced.

Beyond this, the stereotype offers the crucial relation with the formal realm, since stereotypes are forms of economy in the narrative, as Morrison notes. The stereotype is thus both a narrative and a social device. This perspective enables me to think of the stereotype not only as a mere container for a social idea in a narrative, utilized arbitrarily or to add colour, that allows the writer to introduce aspects that are ultimately unimportant, but rather as a means to directing the attention of the narrative towards the racial factor. The stereotype in these novels functions to underscore rather than to disparage the assumptions it comprises. The full implications of this statement will be clear by the end of the project.

What is important to remark here is that my approach brings to the narrative the idea of the stereotype as a codified belief that is operative in society and from which the

fiction benefits formally and thematically in the construction of the story it tells. In narrative, therefore, my idea of the racial stereotype is that it needs to be understood as a “narrative form,” as a way of narrating, of telling, which does not disregard the belief it encodes but that, conversely, pays attention to the way this fixed belief introduces into the narrative the play of the social context and historical debates it contains.

II. Racial Representation in *Absalom, Absalom!*

This chapter addresses the persistent problem of amalgamation and its consequences as a condensation of race relations in the South, as it occurred in history and it appeared in literature, which helped the Southern myth to endure. It analyzes mainly the contradictory axis of race and kinship, and the tension between racial codes and reality. Other pertinent dichotomies, such as memory and history, rural life and urban life, pre-industrial societies and industrial ones, also contribute to it and, in fact, are so imbricated. However, and apart from the fact that racial issues are so central in the Myth, the focus lies on them because they represent the essential conflict in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Arguably, the novel establishes the Myth of the South as a framework for the story of Thomas Sutpen. From the very beginning of the novel, the narrative situation in the conversation between Miss Rosa and Quentin Compson conjures the same atmosphere where storytellers retell the oral myths that shape the origins of the world that the oral community inhabits. In such a manner the representation of the ‘peculiar institution’: functions of slavery in the novel. Several tropes can be distinguished in relation to the representation of race in the novel. The appearance of which in the novel is subdued to the mythical frame in the aforementioned historical terms. These motifs shall be analyzed in relation to the correspondent racial stereotypes of the times, as well as in their modification resulting from their use in narrative fiction.

An inherent component of the Southern myth, slavery constitutes an axis of the context into which Sutpen’s story is set for many reasons that the research will explore. Slavery misleadingly appears at first sight in the novel as part of the setting, something that claims our attention more for its “invisibility” in the development of the story than

because of its actual depiction. Of course, as a novel that revisits the plantation literature, slavery is part of the social and economic system it refers. However, paying attention to the slaves themselves as characters, we might consider them as part of the background. They never appear on their own but always accompanying whites, mainly Sutpen, but also other characters such as the Coldfields or the Compsons. Many critics share Ulfried Reichardt's assertion that

the perspective of free African Americans, and, more dramatically, of the slaves (Sutpen's 'wild niggers') is almost completely left out. . . . The function of Faulkner's discourse, then, is not at all to represent the slaves' experience, but rather to show how the slaves' presence affected white people. (365)

If in this particular motif Faulkner seems to share the traditional perspective of the plantation novel and white writers on the South in general (apart from the sympathetic attempts to represent the slave point of view in white written antebellum abolitionist texts), slavery is not told by an authorial narrator but is mainly filtered by two narrators, Rosa Coldfield and Mr Compson.

Rosa's descriptions of Sutpen's slaves constrain them to the traditional stereotype of the "wild niggers." In her first recurrent description in the novel of Thomas Sutpen's entrance in Jefferson in 1833, mediated in a sort of free indirect discourse by the frame narrator, we find the connection between the demonic perspective Miss Rosa attributes to Sutpen and the wilderness of his slaves:

Out of a quiet thunder chap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a school prize water color, faint sulphur-

reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men in attitudes wild and reposed (6)

This insistence on the “bestial” aspect and character of the slaves corresponds to the town’s perception of them, which in its racial imagination animalizes them in both linking them to nature and to what were considered animal instincts such as intrinsic violence or their nakedness. Smelling bad, and the frightening perception of the slave’s eyes and teeth are features commonly highlighted by both Miss Colfield and Mr Compson in the first two chapters. Mr Compson narrates Grandfather Compson’s first sight of the slaves in the wagon brought by Sutpen when he has already purchased the land where Sutpen’s Hundred will lie:

Apparently it was only by sheer geographical hap that Sutpen passed through town at all, pausing only long enough for someone (not General Compson) to look beneath the wagon hood and into a black tunnel filled with still eyeballs and smelling like a wolfden. (28)

The terrifying impression of these “wild negroes” in contrast to the tame ones in Jefferson, will develop into “the legend of Sutpen’s wild negroes” (28) which was gradually back to town, brought by the men who would ride out to watch what was going on, who began to tell how Sutpen would take stand beside the game trail with the pistols and sent the negroes to drive the swamp like a pack of hounds; it was they who told how during that first summer and fall the negroes did not even have (or did not use) blankets to sleep in, even before the coon-hunter Akers claimed to have walked one of them out of the absolute mud like a sleeping alligator and screamed just in time. (29)

It is clear, as Davis explains in his comments on this passage, that “the view of blacks in this less emotional account is still that of primitive men close to institutional communication with animals and nature” (Faulkner’s “Negro” 192). The collective image of slaves is hardly there for the sake of representing them as individuals in the novel; yet when represented as individuals their description is also filtered through the white haunted perspective. This is the case with Rosa Coldfield’s portrait of the slave that rides her sister Ellen’s carriage to the church: “on the front seat the face and teeth of the wild negro” (18), “in his Christian clothes looking exactly like a performing tiger in a linen duster and a top hat” (19). Their animalization also supplies the linguistic ingredient in racial discourse: the language of blacks is the language of animals, not comprehensible, non-communicating:

It was the negro now, who in the act of passing another carriage spoke to that team too as well as to his own—something without words, not needing words probably, in that tongue in which they slept in the mud 305 of that swamp and brought here out of whatever dark swamp he had found them in and brought them here. (19)

Yet Mr Compson’s distancing from the black tongue’s stereotype works as the first counterpoint that reveals the misjudging that lies at the basis of any racial code. Indeed, he observes that Sutpen spoke to his slave “in that tongue which even now a good part of the country did not know was a civilized language” (46).

Amongst the multiple motifs that construct fear of slave revolt in the novel—splendidly traced by Richard Godden—in the detailed description of this just mentioned

slave character we find the first insinuation of the violence against masters inherent in slavery. Seeing that Ellen Coldfield and Thomas Sutpen's marriage ceremony is strongly rejected by Jefferson's white population, which does not attend but gathers outside the church in order to witness the spectacle of a failure, Mr Compson tells how the tension rises owing to the threatening gesture of Ellen's aforementioned slave: "Perhaps the changing light itself as she turned and saw one of the negroes, his torch raised and in the act of springing toward the crowd, the faces, when Sutpen spoke to him" (46). In Mr Compson's reflection that "there were doubtless pistols in the crowd; certainly knives: the negro would not have lived ten seconds if he had sprung" (47), the issue of slave revolt works as a "proleptic gesture" in the narrative, not only of the "negro revolt" that Sutpen put down in the West Indies, but also of the Haitian revolution itself and of the threats and violence between slaves and masters, a division maintained yet transformed in the New South by the color line.

However, the confrontation of slaves and masters, of black and white people, has its outcome, in the fact that both counterparts might resemble each other. The opposition of white and black images is accompanied by images that virtually foreshadow racial contact as performed through scenes of touch and the offspring of miscegenation. This foreshadowing is embedded in the presentation of slavery in the novel.

A couple of examples would suffice to illuminate this. Rosa Colfield explains that when the slave rides Ellen's carriage to the wedding she has the feeling that Sutpen's face is "exactly like the negro's save for the teeth (because of his beard, doubtless)" (19). Sutpen's association with the slaves' animality reaches its peak in Sutpen's fights with his slaves. Miss Rosa tells that in the centre of an improvised ring "two of his wild

negroes [were] fighting, naked, fighting not like white men fight, with rules and weapons, but like negroes fight to hurt one another quick and bad,” and then suddenly Ellen seeing not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another’s eyes as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too. . . .Yes. That is what Ellen saw: her husband and the father of her children standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at his feet and bloody too save that on the negro it merely looked like grease or sweat. (23) Sutpen’s resemblance to his slaves here accounts for both his sin of not respecting racial boundaries and conventions, and unveils the underlying and apparently contradictory fact that the merging of racial boundaries, even in procreation, is a reality.

On the other hand, there is one relevant distinction pointed out here which constitutes one of the ways the South had tried historically to distinguish its own slaves, bred in the paternalistic atmosphere of the “peculiar institution,” from those more extreme forms of slavery down in the Caribbean. When the town sees Sutpen’s slaves they deduce that “he [Sutpen] was no younger son sent out from some old quiet country like Virginia or Carolina with the surplus negroes to take up new land, because anyone could look at those negroes to take up new land, because anyone could look at those negroes of his and tell that they may have come (and probably did) from a much older country than Virginia or Carolina but wasn’t a quiet one” (13). The contrast to Southern slaves is made clear when they are described as “tame.” This appears, for instance, when Ellen decides to substitute the “wild man” who rides the carriage for a “tame tableboy” (21).

This contrast underlies the argument used by slaveholders in the South in order to maintain slavery, thus exposing a flaw, seen through Southern eyes, in the model of plantation of Sutpen's Hundred. It is therefore not strange that all the slaves on his plantation will join the Union Army and flee from the house instead of remaining loyal and grateful to their masters. By opposing Sutpen's slaves to the Southern ones, the real threat and the myth of Haiti as the symbol of slave revolt are set in contrast to a more peaceful South that relies on the nobleness of the dearest slave, recalling the long-lasting debate in racist discourse on the inner character of the "negro," brilliantly represented in Herman Melville's novella *Benito Cereno*, contemporaneous with the events of Sutpen's life. Along with this most clear example of the debate over these two kinds of slaves, as they were considered at the time, the depiction of Virginian Southern slaves appears later in the narrative, when Quentin describes Sutpen's childhood marked by class and racial stigma, and the social burden he suffered when he was banned from entering the planter's mansion through the main door. Quentin's description reports grandfather's telling of the fact and the utilization of stereotypes cannot be attributed to any of the narrators in particular. However, the portrayal of the Virginian planter's slaves perfectly fits the racial codes. Sutpen first encounters a slave when his poor father is thrown out from a doggerly "by a huge bull of a nigger, the first black man, slave, they had ever seen who emerged with the old man over his shoulder like a sack of meal and his—the nigger's— mouth loud with the laughing and full of teeth like tombstones" (186).

The conflict between poor whites and the Virginian planter's slaves will be analyzed more extensively below, but it is interesting to note here the issue of these slaves' depiction in its meeting of the stereotypes. Slaves are individually addressed yet

through the stereotypical images of the “monkey nigger” (192), their laughter, and the “balloon face” (192). These Virginian slaves represent the idea of the Southern slaves in contrast to Sutpen’s “wild niggers” since, as Philip Weinstein reminds us. These blacks are dressed according to white code, seen acting in white-imposed roles (butlers, drivers, plantation laborers). They register as factota representing the will of the silent and invisible white master. From that angle they seem protected, guaranteed, ratified.

Their laughter echoes as the indecipherable sign of their superior insertion in the social fabric, and it drives Sutpen and his kind mad. Details like these, placed normally as background for the story, allow Darwin Turner to assert that in the context of Yoknapatawpha “conspicuously missing from Faulkner’s depiction of slavery is any picture of physical brutality. . . . Faulkner’s refusal to depict brutality or to identify his region as violent” significantly contributes to his argument that “in Faulkner’s myth of slavery, the evil does not lie in the white men’s practice—with the noteworthy exception that I will discuss. The American practice in the South, he would have us believe, was paternalistic and kindly.” The exceptional white practices that constitute the evil of slavery are, for the critic, “the moral horrors of sexual exploitation of Black women and the psychological repression of male mulattoes” (84). In a duality that can be regarded as the contradictory forces in the Southern myth, Turner concludes that “Faulkner’s presentation of slavery suffers from this duality of consciousness, which caused him to perceive the injustices of slavery but venerate the society which practiced it” (65).

Returning to our point of interest, from the textual evidence and relations established above we can distinguish some of the narrative functions slavery accomplishes in *Absalom, Absalom!* First, Miss Rosa and Mr Compson’s narrations of

the slave society as a context for the story of Thomas Sutpen place the story in History, and locate the role of slaves on a secondary level of importance and yet as an integral part of Southern society. The mythical frame they are narrated in, Miss Rosa's demonization of Sutpen and all that belongs to him, and the racial discourse rooted in the white Southern mind of Jefferson combine with all their force to produce a highly stereotyped image of slaves, seen not only as slaves but mainly as "negroes." As Reichard's complex argument would have it, The story that is reconstructed in the course of the novel is centered around the concepts of racial difference held by its protagonists, but is also refracted through the 'racial categories' that characterize the views of the reconstructing narrators. Thus, the reconstruction of Southern history in the novel, comprising slavery as a crucial factor, is represented as the intersection of two forms of alterity—between the present and the past and between white and black.

Indeed, in their insistence on referring to the slaves as "negroes," Miss Rosa and Mr Compson help establish the color line that binds both the history of the Old South and the New South, and which allows the perpetuation of the myth. The fact that the time of the narrative (1936, when there is segregation and racism, though not slavery) is different from the time of the story (both during and after slavery) is a significant use of a narrative strategy to develop a line of continuity on a racial basis between the characters and the narrators who partake in the story and the storytelling of Sutpen's life. It is thanks to this racial point of view in the matter of slavery that Thadious Davis can state that Rosa's creation of the "wild niggers" is related to the larger implications of the novel. . . . Because of its intensity and obstinacy, Rosa's distorted vision of the slaves pervades the entire novel and operates as a psychological backdrop for Sutpen's rejection of Bon and

his black blood. The struggle between father and son can take on colossal proportions with far-reaching historical and cultural consequences in part because Rosa has so effectively created a forceful, larger-than-life, demonic landscape for the action.

(Faulkner 194)

Hence, the obstinate demonic racial landscape that historically pertains more to the imagery of racial discourse than to reality itself prepares the reader for the interpretation of the conflict in the narrative (Henry Sutpen's killing of Charles Bon) as a racial one. Throughout their lateral and their narrative descriptions, perceptions and references to slavery illuminate an invisible presence that will grow in importance as the novel develops to become the only possible explanation for Bon's murder and the downfall of Sutpen's Hundred. Rosa Coldfield's discourse is as much distorted by her individual experiences as the town's stereotypical racial perceptions are by their collective ones.

Collective perspectives, therefore, are not likely to be any less biased than individual ones, as we have seen. Moreover, slavery works in a proleptic sense. It anticipates the debate between the brutal system of slavery in the Caribbean in opposition to the paternalistic Southern model, and thus prepares the ground for the appearance of the West Indies in the story. The model of slavery adopted by Haiti makes its appearance as "the central emblem of insurrectionary terror in the slaveholding South" (55).

This terror proves to be prophetic when we discover that Sutpen arrived in Jefferson the year slavery was abolished in the British Empire, since the premonition of the destruction of the slaveholding system with the advent of the Civil War is embodied by the ghosts of Haitian slaves in the Southern town. The terror brought with Sutpen's

“wild negroes” will find its next generation correspondent in the figure of Charles Bon, as we will see. As a clear counterpart to Bon’s revolt against his white father’s injustice, the tame and invisible Southern slaves mirror Clytie’s attitude in the novel, loyal to the family, though as ambiguous as any of Faulkner’s complex characters. The contraposition of the Southern slave and the slave from the West Indies already brings into the narrative the most common forms of the “Negro” stereotypes: that of the “noble savage” and that of the “wild beast.” The other speculated underlying motive for the murder, miscegenation, is also already contained within the representation of slavery, as well as other forms of racial contact such as the touch. The merging of Sutpen and his slaves, along with the haunted atmosphere created by Rosa, thus, shapes the “gothic” character implicit in the Southern myth, as understood by Eric Sundquist: “The essence of the gothic is the eruption from below of rebellious or unconscious forces and the consequent violation of boundaries, whether racial, sexual, or abstractly moral” (18). Yet the shock, cruelty, and ultimate rejection by Henry, Rosa and the town, of Sutpen’s fight and merging with his “wild negroes” suggests Shreve’s last warning cry against the dangers of miscegenation for the “purity of the white race” as well as for “white supremacy.” Consequently, the town’s view of the racial encounter is significant since it shall influence Shreve’s most defined telling of the story when he adopts the same codified discourse, albeit from an ironic and uncomprehending perspective.

By way of conclusion, slavery functions as a background that activates in the reader all the subsequent conflicts in the novel by prefiguring and condensing in mirrored images the issues that are going to intersect and clash both in the story of Sutpen, and in the narrators’ telling of it. The issue of miscegenation is mainly embodied in two of the

principal characters and as a likely and threatening possibility that might result from a marriage. In the common crossing of kinship and race under slavery, miscegenation condenses the heart of the racial conflict and the narrative enigma drawn in Faulkner's novel. Miscegenation is an axis not only of *Absalom, Absalom!* But of other novels such as *Light in August*, and *Go Down Moses*, which together portray the complexity of this issue that Faulkner certainly approached much more deeply than the already analyzed issue of slavery.

A distinction between miscegenation and amalgamation is claimed here to ground the terminology of the analysis. In his attribution of a central role to miscegenation, Eric Sundquist feels the need for precise distinctions in his vocabulary, which I assume here.

As the author says:

and the issue *Absalom, Absalom!* is so outrageously about: amalgamation—or rather, miscegenation. It is worth making this distinction, for miscegenation first came into being as a term in 1863, almost on the heels of the Emancipation Proclamation. Amalgamation meant simply a mixing, but miscegenation quite clearly meant interracial sexual mixing, and the term therefore quickly acquired a contagious and derisive force, one that expressed the nation's most visceral fears, paradoxical or not, about emancipation. (381)

Meanwhile miscegenation as a topic will be considered below; our discussion here will deal with the mulatto character in particular. Judith Berzon provides us with a definition, which I also adopt: The term “mulatto” refers literally to one whose biological parents are

drawn from both the Caucasian caste and the Negro caste. Both parents are full bloods, and the offspring of such a union is therefore half white and half black. However, the term is rarely used with such precision, either in the fiction or in the literature about the real mixedblood person or his fictional counterpart. The term “mulatto” is used here to refer to all mixed bloods—quadroons, octoroons, and indistinguishable mixtures. But the key elements in distinguishing the mulatto from the full-blood black are sociological and psychological rather than biological.

Thus, and since we are studying racial representation in the South of the United States and by a white writer, we will take the white Southern perspective of using the terms “blacks” or “African- Americans” to refer to those upon whom racial blackness has been historically imposed; that is, all those supposed to have a single drop of “black blood” were considered to be “Negros,” just as much as when in slavery the offspring of a female slave was automatically born slave (mainly in the Upper South, though in the South in general).

Obviously, this is a way of stating that I do not share any of these classifications, which today have for the most part—at least formally—fallen in disuse. My references to “race,” to “African American characters”—or to “Negro characters” as Davis chooses to refer to them in order to illuminate that she is talking about a social construct, never a biological one—are historical, and should not be understood anachronically.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* miscegenation is incarnated in the mulatto characters of Charles Bon and Clytemnestra (Clytie), mainly, and less developed yet present at the center of the narrative, Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon, Jim Bond, the octoroon, and Charles Bon’s mother, Eulalia.

Charles Bon Charles Bon is a complex character for several reasons. Mainly, this is because he breaks the mould in many senses, since the report of his feelings and thoughts as well as the detail in which his story is developed stand in opposition to the flatness of the stereotype. However, two narrative effects complicate this interpretation. The first is that the development of Bon's character is not based on knowledge but comes out of a concerted effort of imagination. Mr Compson and above all Shreve's McCannon's gradual construction of the Bon into a round character that would justify him as the first focus of attention, suspends the attachment of his character to the historical grounds for the story. That means, at least, that his relationship with historical times is complex, for he is made to appear as a product of the narrator's imagination to the suspicious reader. Along with the problem of his doubtful status in relation to the 'truth' of the story, some racial stereotypes in his character are combined in a way that both deny his mono-faceted personality at the same time that they evince his struggle to break racial codes. Furthermore, it seems that its meeting of a diverse range of racial stereotypes acts very similarly to those activated by Melville's Captain Delano in Benito Cereno, yet in a more ambivalent way. Indeed, Bon's unveiling activates the contemporary suspicions of a character that aims to perform a "passing," as we are going to see, and so his racial identity is confusing and enigmatic. What is clear, anyway, is that my analysis faces a challenge here with such a controversial character.

To avoid any imprecision, let us turn to the characters themselves. Charles Bon seems to be Thomas Sutpen's first son by a half-French woman supposedly with "black blood" in her veins. He meets Henry Sutpen at the University and goes to Jefferson on three occasions. As it is made clear, neither of the narrators or any of the people closest to

them had known him. His first appearances come from the town and are described by Mr Compson: Charles Bon of New Orleans, Henry's friend who was not only some few years older than Henry but actually a little old to be still in college and certainly a little out of place in that one where he was—a small new college in the Mississippi hinterland and even wilderness, three hundred miles from that worldly and even foreign city which was his home—a young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy and with for background the shadowy figure of a legal guardian rather than any parents—a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, full-sprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere—a man with an ease of manner and a swaggering gallant air in comparison with which Sutpen's pompous arrogance was clumsy bluff and Henry actually a hobble-de-hoy. Miss Rosa never saw him; this was a picture, an image. (61)

Charles Bon's good looks, elegance and distinct way of life comes from the still present French environment he has been surrounded with in New Orleans, and from the French West Indies and his not only seek to locate Bon within the traditional representation of mulattoes, in contrast to the interpretations that see in his lauded almost white virtues the source of Faulkner's benevolence; but also aims at emphasizing the coherence of his origin in the development of the conflict with his would-be father, Thomas Sutpen.

The aforementioned discrepancies in the rights for mixed blood individuals in Louisiana before the Purchase in 1803 lead to a conflictive situation for the creoles in the New World Nation. Barbara Ladd explains that

In the Deep South, however, traditions were different. Until the Louisiana Purchase, racial classifications were in some ways based upon the status of the father. Children of white fathers were more easily manumitted in the Deep South, and fathers acknowledged those children more frequently than in the Upper South. Children could inherit from the white father's estate more frequently than in the Upper South. . . . Throughout the Caribbean (and in New Orleans), these children of European colonists and African women constituted a separate caste. They were recognized by law as well as by sentiment as bearing some legitimacy as carriers of European 'blood' or 'culture', although one would not want to overstate this point.

(21)

The purchase of Louisiana was part of a nationalist project of the expansion of the United States, which, as Ladd says, "had never been particularly hospitable to assimilation." As a matter of fact, initially, Creoles of color seem to have had some hopes that the new U.S. government in Louisiana would augment their status, but the segregationist ideology of the United States not only prevented any such thing from happening but also tended to eradicate the distinctions of caste already in existence. (23) As a consequence of this, Creoles of color were considered "free man/women of color" and by 1820 began to be persecuted, as the issue of white purity was growing into an obsession. Creoles of color (and whites as well) were progressively associated with "the colonist site of slavery, miscegenation, and political and cultural degeneration" (25). These connections reinforced and maintained the idea that Creoles were a threat because they represented the connection between the slave revolutions in the West Indies and the South. Even

though I am introducing here the issue of Haiti in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which should be considered later, this historical reference is unavoidable when dealing with Charles Bon as a character.

Several factors, among which the Haitian Revolution is crucial, explain the increasing condition of mulattoes as slaves. As James Kinney explains, “[w]hile the old slave states, especially in the upper South, contained many free mulattoes, in the new slave states almost all mulattoes were slaves. This circumstance developed because the importing of African slaves ended in 1807 and the domestic slave trade burgeoned after the 1820’s. . . . In the South, especially after the Slave Act of 1807 increased the need to breed domestic slaves, and after 1830 when extensive use of the cotton gin, Nat Turner’s Rebellion, and other factors increased proslavery pressures, the laws became more restrictive” (9). Consequently, Charles Bon is one of the Creoles of color that had a privileged status in the Caribbean and which carried over into antebellum New Orleans. In his life and his personality he carries both the ideal of the bourgeois mulatto, and the threat he poses when he crosses the boundary of the old Louisiana port towards the Deep South. Yet the narrators’ point of view still complicates the issue.

Since they are living the Mississippi of 1910, their perspective, as Reichard observed, is like a refractor: it reads the representation of race through present time eyes. In this sense, it is not strange that Bon’s intentions when showing the octoroon to Henry are remarkably provocative, as told by Mr Compson. Even though it is true that Mr Compson’s tale is not racial since he does not know that Bon might be black, he disapproves of Bon’s relationship with her mistress and therefore projects upon the scene

a negative light dealing both with interracial relations and eventual bigamy. Mr Compson's depicting of Bon starts a process of evolution of the character in which the activation of stereotypes will reconstruct Bon from apparently white to black. As Ladd states "William Faulkner's Charles Bon is a white Creole for a long time before he is revealed (or 'reconstructed') as black" (Nationalism 20). When the process starts, the audience's schemata revitalize the connections with the character and get prepared for the last revelation that Bon is black.

Mr Compson's voice of persuasion in Chapter IV prepares the ground for Shreve's unreliable one when describing Bon. Mr Compson's movement of perspective from the common knowledge of the town towards the inner motivations that lead to the killing deeply affects the representation of Bon. If in the previous chapters Mr Compson has insisted on the town's ignorance of Bon, who is for many, including Rosa, an "invisible" character; here Mr Compson dares to delve deep into the Creole's intentions yet told in an indirect mode. The main focus is Henry's thoughts, though in his relationship with Bon, the latter character demands some elaboration. Mr Compson, therefore, starts the process of constructing Bon as a character. He emphasizes the difference in the conceptions of interracial love relationships in New Orleans and Mississippi. As Mr Compson speculates: He [Bon] must have known that Sutpen now knew his secret— if Bon, until he saw Sutpen's reaction to it, ever looked upon it as a cause for secrecy, certainly not as a valid objection to marriage with a white woman—a situation in which probably all his contemporaries who could afford it were likewise involved and which it would no more have occurred to him to mention to his bride or wife or to her family than he would have told them the secrets of a fraternal organization

which he had joined before he married. In fact, the manner in which his intended bride's family reacted to the discovery of it was doubtless the first and last time when the Sutpen family ever surprised him (77).

As the narrator explicitly mentions later, Bon's morganatic ceremony is "a situation which was as much a part of a wealthy young New Orleansian's social and fashionable equipment as his dancing sleepers" (83). Besides his peculiar origin, which allows his perception to be, like that of Sutpen, "apparently complete, without background or past or childhood" (77), Bon's seducing of the white Sutpen brother and sister "without any effort or particular desire to do so" (77) had turned him into "a mere spectator, passive, a little sardonic, and completely enigmatic" (77). The little knowledge Mr Compson's has of Charles Bon affects his point of view on the character that he judges:

He seems to hover, shadowy, almost substanceless, a little behind and above all the other straightforward and logical even though (to him) incomprehensible ultimatums and affirmations and defiances and challenges and repudiations, with an air of sardonic and indolent detachment like that of a youthful Roman consul making the Grand Tour of his day among the barbarian hordes which his grandfather conquered, benighted in a brawling and childish and quite deadly mud-castle household in a miasmatic and spirit-ridden forest. (77)

Bon's "impenetrable imperturbability" due to that "barrier of sophistication in comparison with which Henry and Sutpen were troglodytes" (77) detaches him from the

moral context of the story set by Mr Compson: that of the debate around marriage and interracial relationships. Bon does not appear worried by his new context.

Sophistication is the source of indifference and it is in direct relationship with his “Latin” or “French” cultural origins, which are also emphasized, for instance, in the quoted passage. Furthermore, his distinct origins upon entering the deep Southern society shape his place in the story in Mr Compson’s eyes as “the marginal men” mulattos are often named for. It is interesting to note here how in the novel as a whole, but especially when talking about Bon and the Sutpen’s children, Mr. Compson’s discourse foreshadows the racial issue as the seed of the conflict by the use of his vocabulary. When dealing with Bon’s “prowess among women” and his indifferent courtship of Judith, Mr Compson refers to Henry and Judith’s close relationship saying that

that report not like the conventional delusion of that between twins but rather such as might exist between two people who, regardless of sex or age or heritage of race or tongue, had been marooned at birth on a desert island: the island here Sutpen’s Hundred; the solitude, the shadow of that father with whom not only the town but their mother’s family as well had merely assumed armistice rather than accepting and assimilating. (82)

This passage mirrors the racial tragedy in many senses: Mr Compson uses words related to race in their reference to darkness such as “race,” “maroon” (echoed in its paronomasia with “marooned”), “shadow,” or “assimilating,” the meaning of which is not related to race in the passage, though its polysemy uncovers the racial connotation on a second reading. Furthermore, Bon’s situation as a supposed black son of Thomas Sutpen does not become an issue until the moment he goes to Sutpen’s Hundred, a place, a family, and

a town that are literally against “accepting and assimilating,” but rather predisposed to direct confrontation and ultimate segregation. Mr Compson does not know Bon is black but his vocabulary creates an atmosphere for the reader that, once again, prepares him to race the suggested argument of race at the centre of the conflict.

As it has been mentioned in the analysis of narrative voice, right next to his greatest deepening into the character of Bon, Mr Compson refers to the fragility of his telling, where “something is missing” (83). This feeling is translated later, when Mr Compson says that

Bon with that sardonic and surprised distaste with seems to have been the ordinary manifestation of the impenetrable and shadowy character. Yes shadowy: a myth, a phantom: something which they engendered and created whole themselves; some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all. (86)

Finally, Bon’s mean calculation of the events much further developed by Shreve is pointed out here by Mr Compson while he imagines the scene when Bon brings Henry to meet his octoroon mistress and child:

I can imagine how he did it—the calculation, the surgeon’s alertness and cold detachment, the exposures brief, so brief as to be cryptic, almost staccato, the plate unaware of what the complete picture would show, scarce-seen yet ineradicable. (92)

Mr Compson’s last extended reference to Bon is his only preserved letter to Judith, written the same year the Civil War finished, after four years during which Henry and Bon had been enlisted in the Confederate army. Bon’s words and intentions in the letter

are extraordinarily ambiguous, so ambiguous that the only thing we can distinctly appreciate is his concern with words and his own struggle to materialize the complexity of life in language, which makes him the author of an impressive enigma. Bon's letter works as a narrative mirror of the other narrators' discourse, and justifies the interest this central character gathers in his unbearable hollowness, very similar to that of Jim in Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Shreve decides to rouse the character out of this enigmatic narration that still does not explain. Shreve will place Bon at the centre of his narrative, thus pushing the telling to develop him as a main character.

Whereas this construction involves Bon's thoughts and intentions which especially reveal Shreve as an unreliable narrator; they also picture him as a tragic sentimental character, "inseparable from his exoticism" as Philip Weinstein puts it, very much in contrast to Mr Compson's Bon. However distant in elaboration and personality these two Bons are, Shreve initially takes up the strand of Mr Compson's Charles Bon as sarcastic, indifferent and detached in his relationship with Henry and Judith, but moves his deepest emotional hurt towards Thomas Sutpen's acknowledgment of him as his son. By this shift in his interests (Bon as a character, and the issue of acknowledgment as the emotional focus), the flattest Bon emerges from a marginal threat towards an ambivalent figure that blends menace with tragedy.

A couple of examples shall suffice to illuminate Shreve's construction of the tragic character. Bon's tragic fate is arranged from the beginning of the narrative in Shreve's invention of Bon's childhood and, principally, of his mother's mental distress in telling her hatred for having been abandoned. Shreve tells how Jesus, you can almost see him:

a little boy already come to learn, to expect, before he could remember having earned his own name or the name of the town where he lived or how to say either of them, that every so often he would be snatched up from playing and held gripped between the two hands fierce with (what passed at least with him for it) love, against the two fierce rigid knees, the face that he remembered since before remembering began as supervising all the animal joys of palate and stomach and entrails, of warmth and pleasure and security, swooping down at him in a kind of blazing immobility. . . . the face filled with furious and almost unbearable unforgiving almost like fever (not bitterness and despair: just implacable will for revenge) as just another manifestation of mammalian love (245)

While his doomed life is already perceived before he was even born, Bon's tragedy reaches its height from the moment Henry and Bon go to Sutpen's Hundred, and afterwards when they participate in the Civil War and come across Sutpen's regiment. After the first visits to Sutpen's Hundred, Shreve's idea that Bon's concern was being acknowledged has already become an obsession, as a result of which Shreve's discourse achieves the highest pathos at precisely this point. He makes Bon say and think

It will be Henry who will get the letter, the letter saying it is inconvenient for me to come that time; so apparently he does not intend to acknowledge me as his son, but at last I shall have forced him to admit that I am. . . .
 Yes. Yes. I will renounce her; I will renounce love and all; that will be cheap, cheap, even though he say to me 'never look upon my face again; take my love and my acknowledgment in secret, and go' I will do that; I

will not even demand to know of him what it was my mother did that justified his action toward her and me. (268)

And when the boys come across Sutpen's regiment, Bon's mulatto crisis keeps intensifying, But to Bon it was not the space between them and defeat but the space between him and the other regiment, between him and the hour, the moment:

'He will not even have to ask me; I will just touch flesh with him and I will say it myself. You will not need to worry; she shall never see me again. . . . Maybe that first time Sutpen actually did not see him, maybe that first time he could tell himself, 'That was why; he didn't see me', so that he had to put himself in Sutpen's way, make his chance and situation. Then for the second time he looked at the expressionless and rocklike face, at the pale boring eyes in which there was not flicker, nothing, the face in which he saw his own features, in which he saw recognition, and that was all. (287)

This passage shapes Bon's tragedy of not being acknowledged, and represents what in mulatto studies has been labelled the "crisis experience," to which both Berzon and Faulkner's contemporary Evett V. Stonequist dedicate chapters in their books. The latter critic is particularly interesting since he reveals a widely acknowledged awareness of the mulattos and "marginal men" in general at the very moment Faulkner is writing about them. He explains the crisis experience and its outcomes: Experiencing the conflict of cultures constitutes the turning point in the career of the individual. This is the period when the characteristic personality traits first appear. The experience itself is a shock. The individual finds his social world disorganized. Personal relations and cultural forms

which he had previously taken for granted suddenly become problematic. He does not know quite how to act. There is a feeling of confusion, of loss of direction, of being overwhelmed. His crisis experience places the marginal man, the mulatto in this case, in an alienated position between the two cultures that she or he comes from, since “having participated in each he is now able to look at himself from the two viewpoints: the marginal Jew sees himself from the Jewish standpoint and from the Gentile standpoint; the marginal Negro from that of the white man as well as the black man” (Stonequist 145).

It is this peculiar position of an insider as well as an outsider that provides the figure of the mixed-blood with its two functions in society: the intermediary and the looming threat. While characters such as Clytie primarily function as intermediary characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*, that of Charles Bon activates the function of the threat. This function comes from the fact observed by Stonequist that

[b]ecause of his in-between situation, the marginal man may become an acute and able critic of the dominant group and its culture. . . . His analysis is not necessarily objective—there is too much emotional tension underneath to make such an attitude easy of achievement. But he is skilful in noting the contradictions and the ‘hypocrisies’ in the dominant culture. (155)

Nonetheless, the threat represented by the mulattos is due to the difficulty of classifying them in a biracial society, which would challenge the color line and ultimately destroy the basis for white privileges. The practices that fundamentally imperil this unequal social, economic, and political system are continuous miscegenation and the “passing” for white

of many very light-skinned mulattos like Charles Bon, Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon, or Joe Christmas. Just for the purpose of clarification, Joe Williamson explains that “invisible blackness also produced another phenomenon called ‘passing.’ Passing meant crossing the race line and winning acceptance as white in the white world. Now and again, light mulattoes would simply drop out of sight, move to an area where they were not known, usually north or west, and allow their new neighbors to take them as white” (New People 100). “Passing” was not only regarded by whites as a provocation but it mainly performed the scorning of the established segregated order and, worse than that, secretly opened the gate to clandestine interracial relations and miscegenation with ‘pure whites’ or, as Shreve concludes, “bleaching out” and secretly contaminating white purity. On the other hand, as Grace Elizabeth Hale points out,

[p]assing and mimicking and masking—the creation with more or less self-consciousness of a ‘miscegenated’ style—became by the late 1920s the ultimate resistance to the racial polarities whites set at the center of the modern American life. For segregation, as metaphor and as law, depended upon a myth of absolute racial difference, a translation of the body into collective meaning, into culture. Any public staging by African Americans of a space between black and white subverted the fantasies of absolute division that founded an expansive whiteness. Black activists and artists would continually reconfigure the mix of their miscegenated appropriations. (35)

If, coming from the quills of African American writers “passing” entails a form of resistance, in the case of white writers it usually, yet ambiguously, serves as an embodiment of threat. On the other hand, mulattos defined as “Negro” likewise bear the attribution of the danger of ultimate racial violence, which fed the stereotype of the “Negro as beast.” Although this stereotype of the “wild nigger” had been already shaped in the antebellum period, as Melville’s *Benito Cereno* accounts for, the postbellum South intensified its presence, as Sundquist remarks:

Like Faulkner in the characterization of Joe Christmas, however, Twain fused the antebellum and modern worlds by dramatizing the essential reversal in meaning miscegenation underwent after emancipation, whereby the fact of slaveholding miscegenation by white masters and the feared potential for slave rebellion were together transformed into the new specter of black crime and contamination—the Negro as ‘beast’

(9)

The emphasis on the “Negro as beast” stereotype continues the underlying contradiction of slavery in the South, and it has a great influence on the definition of the mulatto as a threat. The reasons for emphasizing the cruel aspect of the mulatto arise from the fact that “the mulatto is the only-too-obvious badge of white abuse of the Negro, of the hidden anguish of the system of slavery, of the continuing hypocrisy in racial attitudes. He is a familiar mystery to the Southerner, the bar sinister of his family, his servant and his brother, a man of his own race whose whole life is alien and enigmatic to the white man” (Berzon 53).

Indeed, from the mystery that surrounds the figure of the mulatto, Faulkner elaborates in Charles Bon a complex character which dramatizes both the emotional struggle of the mulattoes—though from an external point of view—and the menace inherent in their claiming for a recognition of the sin of miscegenation which has ruined Sutpen's dynasty and dream. The function of menace is enriched by Faulkner's narrative construction of the character. It is first introduced not through miscegenation but through incest. Incest works as a parallel motif that first appears as the real menace, and that allows the transference from the threat of endogamy to the threat of miscegenation, thus drawing the reader into a single sinful perspective of Bon: he is initially a threat because of incest, and afterwards because of the effects of miscegenation on the eventual offspring. This convergence of the two main taboos in Yoknapatawpha, though it is by no means an exceptional combination in Southern literature, as Werner Sollors explains, renders Bon's presentation in the narrative much richer. Regardless of how the narrators understand the character, Bon's threatening function is clear in Sutpen's forbidding of Judith and Bon's marriage, which in any case precipitates the family's downfall.

The threat of incest will function, in fact, as the foreshadowing motif of the actual murder of Bon, and Henry's consequent flight from home, suggesting "that the power of the fear of miscegenation could exceed by far that of the incest taboo," and thus revising Thomas Dixon's *Sins of the Father* (1912), as Sollors explains (329-30). Whereas for the reader the dreaded focus of the threat for the moment is incest, the process of the construction of Bon as a mulatto character has already been developed as a subtle characterization in accordance with racial stereotypes. It is precisely this process of activating the racial codes present in the social environment of the South in 1936 which

'naturally' leads to the discovery that Bon is, in fact, black. Consequently, the reader first learns of the menace, and is afterwards only asked to substitute the sin that generates it for another which has been historically connected to the former.

Thadious Davis defines Charles Bon's characterization in the novel when she states that Quentin and Shreve's "fabrications create an illusion of reality; their construct is quite believable. All rational investigations lead to a basic reality: Charles Bon as 'nigger'" (Faulkner's "Negro" 218). In fact, Charles Bon fits many of the stereotypes of the Negro' that racial discourse in the South filtered. Shreve is responsible for most of this portrait, when he explains that Bon discovers "breathing, pleasure, darkness; and without money there could be no pleasure, and without pleasure it would not even be breathing" (247). Pleasure and obscurity are, as we have seen in Lord Jim, associated with the "Dark Continent," with barbarism and "uncivilized races." Here the stereotype meets Bhabha's fetishistic dynamics. Added to this there is Bon's wasting of his mother's money, as Shreve's lawyer is reported to be thinking: "and subtract the money that Bon was spending on his whores and his champagne from what his mother had, and figure up how much would be left of it tomorrow" (248), "thinking about the good hard cash that Bon was throwing away on his horses and clothes and the champagne and gambling and women" (249). This way of life fits the image of mulatto or black bourgeois' life in cities like New Orleans, as depicted in literature. Berzon notes that "in the twentieth century novels, more than in those of a century before, we see an emphasis on status symbols: clothes, expensive homes and cares, academic degrees, servants. There is an obvious emphasis on conspicuous consumption. There is a clear emphasis on them too in *Absalom, Absalom!*, especially on clothes and a relaxed French style of life, as seen

before and repeated in the following quote: “in the fine figure he—’ neither of them said Bon ‘—cut the fine pants that fit his leg and the fine coats that fit his shoulders nor in the fact that he had more watches and cuff buttons and finer linen and horses and yellow wheeled buggies (not to mention the gals) than most others did” (251).

Yet drinking, gambling and whoring also meet the stereotypes of the black man’s vicious nature, and are defined against the virtues of the Anglo-Saxons whom mulattoes were trying to resemble. While among the mulatto bourgeoisie there is an aim to embrace white virtues which should spare them from the common accusations against blacks, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the exaggeration of Bon’s fluid status in fact reveals his “Negro blood.” Indeed, whereas chastity was “the best proof of respectability in the eyes of the white man, who had constantly argued that the Negro’s ‘savage instincts’ prevented him from conforming to Puritanical standards of sex behavior” (Berzon 168), Charles Bon relapses into these ‘savage instincts’ again when spending his good money on prostitutes. In following Mr Compson’s concern about his octoroon mistress, Shreve insistently elaborates Bon’s promiscuity and experience with women.

Shreve’s emphasis not only endorses the stereotype of the heightened sexuality of blacks as codified in racial discourses throughout the nineteenth-century, but it also contributes to Bon’s menacing function. Indeed, in the white racist mind there is a direct relationship between sexual behavior and racial purity, as he himself is made to say when revealing to Henry that “I am the nigger that is going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry” (294). Certain types of sexual behavior constituted a menace to the U.S. national identity, as Davenport observes in analyzing Dixon’s statements: this passage suggests the white man’s fear of the Negro’s sexuality. The image of the towering Negro

is phallic, throwing its blight over future generations. The bestial miscegenation which surely must come with Negro liberation and equality will corrupt the white race. This projected sexual threat to racial purity was Dixon's primary link with the national imagination. The Negro is viewed not only as a threat to the South but also to the nation. . . . Yet the Abolitionists were seen as having blindly tried to destroy this "racial integrity," not realizing, according to Dixon that one drop of Negro blood makes a negro. It kinks the hair, flatters the nose, thickens the lip, puts out the light of intellect, and lights the fires of brutal passions. The beginning of Negro equality as a vital fact is the beginning of the end of this nation's life. There is enough negro blood here to make mulatto the whole Republic . . . Can you build in a Democracy, a nation inside a nation of two hostile races? (LS 242)." (28)

It is clear then that Bon fits many of the stereotypes that are a source of threat in the story: he is a mulatto, sexually powerful, and he was born in Haiti. In this process of constructing a "Negro character" Bon is progressively revealed as the marginal man. The mulatto position of an outsider is further disclosed in what becomes Shreve's leitmotif of the smile, which develops and incarnates Mr Compson's characterization of Bon's indifference. Shreve mentions it, for example, to show Bon's contempt towards his mistress when telling her mother: he looking at her from behind the smiling that wasn't smiling but was just something you were not supposed to see beyond, saying admitting it: 'Why not? All young men do it. The ceremony too. I didn't set out to get the child, but now that I have . . . It's not a bad child either' . . . 'Why not? Men seem to have to marry some day, sooner or later. And this is one whom I know, who makes me no trouble. And

with the ceremony, that bother, already done. And as for a little matter like a spot of negro blood—' (254)

Bon's enigmatic meanness or indifference is present also in the way he says farewell to the octoroon: "'All right' he said, not goodbye'; he didn't care; maybe not even goodbye to the octoroon, to those tears and lamentations and maybe even the clinging, the soft despairing magnolia-colored arms about his knees, and (say) there and a half feet above those boneless steel gives that expression of his which was not smiling but just something not to be seen through" (257). His cynical perspective is the distance represented by the mulattoes whose marginality allows them a critical perspective on what is going on around them, and whose ambivalent attitude disturbs and disorients both whites and blacks. Shreve even distances Bon from his love for Judith, and therefore continues that strand of Mr Compson's telling, and builds up a relationship between Judith and Bon that does not please Quentin because he thinks that "it's not love" (266). Thereby, Shreve often sees Bon as encouraging and even manipulating the siblings' love for him as a way to achieving Sutpen's acknowledgment.

Along with the personality and attitude attributed to Bon, his Haitian origins provide the reader with the most compelling clue to understanding the vicious "Negro" inside him. The issue of Haiti in the novel shall be further discussed. Two other signs draw the reader's attention to a possible secret in Bon's blood. First, Shreve's subtle insinuations about "something foreign or alien in the blood of Bon's mother and himself" and, secondly, the textual use of words associated with darkness, mystery, and curse. Shreve makes Bon think and say in his conversation with his mother about the octoroon that "not needing to say I seem to have been born into this world with so few fathers that

I have too many brothers to outrage and shame while alive and hence too many descendants to bequeath my little portion of hurt and harm to, dead; not that, just ‘a little spot of negro blood’” (254). These kinds of allusions alert the reader’s consciousness and activate the racial stereotypes that have not been mentioned so far, yet that will appear in many guises until the very last moment when Bon’s supposed real racial identity is unveiled.

In this sense, we can observe a long elaboration in the narrative of the stereotype of the mulatto in its many forms, which is not explicitly named, but indicated by the codified traits of personality already present in the “Negro” and “mulatto” stereotypes of the times. All the notions of the mulatto as “passer,” the mulatto as struggling with his inner tragic conflict of identity, and the mulatto threat also shared with the “Negro beasts” which mirror Sutpen’s “wild niggers,” are perfectly drawn in the novel and more specifically in Shreve’s discourse. In what could be read as a misleading sign, Bon’s enlistment in the Confederate army is, apart from being a logical choice given his aim of “passing,” a common attitude among mulattoes in the Lower South, and most especially among those with Bon’s social status. As John G. Mencke reminds us, during the Civil War, in New Orleans and Mobile, for instance, mulattoes of French and Spanish ancestry rushed to support the Confederate cause at the outbreak of hostilities, and in both cities were for a time accepted as a part of the armed forces of their respective states. There is no question that many of these light-skinned mulattoes saw their interests as linked to those of their white neighbours. They volunteered their services to protect their property and privileged position in Southern society.

Regardless of the extent to which the racial stereotype of the mulatto is drawn in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and however important it is to provide precise historical, ideological and literary information to anchor the figure of Bon in his context, I consider it a primary goal to distinguish what his narrative functions are in the novel and how the stereotype has been transformed in its narrativization. To begin with, the extent to which this stereotype is active in the novel is quite impressive. From the moment Charles Bon appears, there are remarkable features of his personality that link him to fixed traits of the personality of the mulatto, such as indifference and a tragic destiny. The stereotype is elaborated gradually, although its elaboration is interrupted frequently by other episodes, or shifts in focus away from Charles Bon. By placing him at the centre of the narrative, Shreve emphasizes his importance and sets the starting point of the fictional construction of a character. The thoughts and words of an unknown person in the real story are provided in the tale to render Charles Bon a round character. So his development runs practically against the fixed flat form of the stereotype, although he actually fits the profile of the mulatto. Paradoxes of literature: it is certainly fiction which gives flesh and blood to the character (blood, specifically). However, the construction of this figure is so much based upon the racial codes incorporated by the Southern Myth that the stereotype does not require naming in order to be identified. Such an extended development intensifies the roles and significance that the racial discourse (not only racist, but also abolitionist) had attributed to the figure of the mulatto: tragedy, "passing," and threat. If Bon is a mixed-blood, the story invites the reader to think that he is trying to "pass." Bon would thus be misleading his contemporaries in order to appropriate Sutpen's white privileges.

There is a correspondent function in the story and the narrative by which Bon's deceiving of his society is paralleled by his deceiving of the reader. He is both the core of the narrative enigma and the historical enigma of the story. This is because in the historical setting of the story, nobody knows Bon's racial identity. For long stretches in the novel Charles Bon has been constructed as a 'nigger' through the activation of racial stereotypes, yet by the end nobody knows whether he is white or only "passing" for white. Or, in fact, was he performing a 'passing,' that should be kept secret, and is therefore converted by Faulkner into the narrative enigma of *Absalom, Absalom!* The mystery is maintained until the very end of the novel, and even then it is not fully resolved, as we have seen. Furthermore, it is likely that it is not Bon who might be misleading his contemporaries—and the reader—with a fake identity, but rather Shreve that might have accused Bon of attempting to perform a "passing" by constructing him as a mulatto without the sufficient information. In this latter possibility, Shreve would have assumed the fact of Bon's "tainted blood" no less than Jeffersonians assume Joe Christmas'. Both scenes would contribute, as Weinstein remarks, to creating an identity that "in Jefferson is lodged deeper than thought, producing a community that—at its worst—assumes everything and interrogates nothing." Racially mysterious hearts here are just assumed to be black, and "passing" becomes the social engine of a narrative enigma.

Tragedy and threat provide the very tone of the novel, beyond the racial meaning in the mulatto stereotype. They create an extremely intense atmosphere, inherent in the story because of its inevitably tragic outcome. Fatalism in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is depicted both in terms of a tragedy and in terms of an everlasting menace.

Correspondingly, the atmosphere created in *Absalom, Absalom!* is shaped throughout many characters and situations, among which we find the mulatto character as a central device. As it results from this perspective, we need to see this overwhelming atmosphere of tragedy and menace—by no means contradictory forces—as strongly shaped in the narrative by the codified functions of the stereotype of the mulatto. I am not saying here that the whole force of Sutpen's story derives from this stereotype. Rather, Faulkner benefits here from the condensation of these two functions, historically and artistically mixed in his contemporary world in the figure of the mulatto as representative of these roles in society. In any case, what I want to remark here is that the racial stereotype of the mulatto discloses these two tones that will increasingly shape the very narrative tone of the novel. Hence, this becomes one of the narrative functions of the mulatto stereotype, and one of the effects of having such a sustained and lengthy development of this stereotype.

Apart from the general effect of creating tension in the atmosphere and foreshadowing the catastrophic downfall of the Sutpen dynasty, through Charles Bon the issue of miscegenation is woven as an underlying strand of the story in two directions: his black stereotyping, and his own interracial marriage and breeding. Miscegenation will become increasingly present in the narrative when it replaces incest and familial relationships as the central conflict. While his mistress' family is an explicit mirror that will accompany the reader even after Charles Bon's death, the latter's gradual emergence as the centre of consciousness in Shreve's discourse performs the movement that also foregrounds the issue of miscegenation. In addition to this, he activates the fears that the Haitian Revolution aroused, and that had been already suggested by Sutpen's "wild

negroes.” In his mirroring of their menace in a very sophisticated way, he establishes a parallelism that would link the Old South with the New South: the Haitian “wild negroes” are to slavery what the mulatto sons of southern aristocrats are to the Post-Emancipation period. Thus, Bon’s menace suggests the eventual turning of the freed slave son against his family in a moment when all African Americans are known to be emancipated and where legal prohibitions of intermarriage are likely to be withdrawn—and they will be indeed for a short period of time. Aware of the racial conflict of this story, Henry will definitely eradicate his father’s sin of miscegenation at the expense of precipitating the downfall of Sutpen’s Hundred. Thereby, and by the contrast of this figure with his half-sister Clytie, the debate over segregation is launched.

III. Conclusion

The presentation of the stereotypes has a crucial function in the advancement of the plot and in the unfolding of the racial character of the enigma. The stereotypes of the slaves, and the references to Haiti foreshadow not only the importance of “race” in the story of Thomas Sutpen, but specifically the issue of miscegenation and the merging of “races” which look the same while constructed as different. Their exposition contributes to anticipate a racial mystery that the plot does not disclose until the end of the novel, thus preparing the reader to understand and accept the enigma as a racial mystery. All the issues at stake in the debates around the mulattoes and the problem of miscegenation are present in one form or another in the stereotype of the former, or in the codified arguments about the latter. Their appearance in the narrative in the form of characters who actually are, or are supposed to be, mulattoes first, and later in the form of the codified arguments of the Southern Myth on the subject of miscegenation, is clearly foreshadowed by the descriptions of scenes that portray merging and revolt through the stereotype of the slaves, and the complex stereotype of the mulatto in the characters of the octoroon, Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon, and Clytie. The function of threat embodied by Charles Bon is reinforced by the proleptic gestures performed by the reference to Sutpen’s bestial slaves and the invocation of the Haitian Revolution. All these stereotypes support the construction of Charles Bon as a light mulatto character who might aim at “passing,” and who in turn condenses the whole debate on miscegenation, that is to say the debate on segregation/integration.

The activation in Charles Bon of the stereotype of the bourgeois mulatto works in a very similar way in terms of duration, allusion and centrality to that of the English

gentleman in Lord Jim. While the contribution to the advancement of the plot runs parallel in these two works, *Absalom, Absalom!* introduces the flexibility of the stereotype described by Bhabha in a more effective way than Conrad does. Indeed, we find in the portrait of the Malay the image of the noble savage and that of the nasty sultan combined, but we hardly find a combination of stereotypes that simultaneously suggest different readings. Jewel can be thought of as a tragic character, as a bridge between the colonizers and the colonized, and as a menace if we take into account her suspicions about Jim. This is probably the only stereotype constructed upon a blending of contradictory forms. It is not surprising, however, in light of the representation of mulattoes in literature, that the stereotype of the half-caste is one of the most complex ones in racial discourse. Nevertheless, Faulkner uses much more effectively the coexistence of multiple contradictory forms of the stereotypes. Indeed, *Absalom, Absalom!* combines multiple forms of a single stereotype condensed in a single character or one episode in a way that they suggest that the fiction could be read from different and contradictory points of view. We have seen outstanding examples of the creation of this ambivalence in the presentation of Charles Bon as both a tragic mulatto and the greatest threat to the Sutpen's family, as both the victim of a society founded upon labor and racial discrimination, and its principal menace. Likewise, Clytie is a very ambivalent character whose conjunction of stereotypes makes her appear as both a slave and a free mulatto who deserves a better place in the family. Her deed of burning Sutpen's Hundred also allows for contradictory readings.

The issue of miscegenation appears in itself contradictory, since there are episodes in which touch functions as a clear challenge to the separation of races, and towards the

end there is the equally contrastive idea that miscegenation is the phenomenon that leads to the degeneration of the races and the destruction of the plantation family—the destruction of the South by extension. In this manner, the presentation of the multiplicity of forms invites us to see what Bhabha calls the “circularity” of the stereotype, its inherent ambivalence. The tentative nature of racial discourse in adjusting to a complex reality through the codification of contradictory images suggests that reality is far more complex than the abstract codes which try to condense it. Faulkner introduces the complexity of people and situations by combining several forms of the stereotype within a single character or episode. He thus manages to expose the fragility of racial discourse from within the very level of discourse. Furthermore, Faulkner sources to the assumption of the very broadest discourse of their times—which includes racial discourse—to criticize the lack of actual adjustment between racial discourse and historical circumstance.

The challenge to the simplification and fixity of the racial stereotypes that are contained in this discourse comes from the presentation of the complexities of reality by a disrupting combination of the several forms in which the stereotypes are coined. Thus, *Absalom, Absalom!* presents a series of dynamic stereotypes in flux, in contrast to their usual flatness. The stereotype becomes as unstable as it really is when observed from a distanced, general perspective, and it conforms to the great ambivalence without which it cannot function or endure. *Absalom, Absalom!*'s growing presence of racial stereotypes and their function of foreshadowing, gradually unfold the relevance of the racial issues as the novel approaches the narrative enigma, and even later, when there is a bold attempt to resolve it precisely upon a single racial basis, the novel closes with Shreve's final racial

prophecy, which Quentin however ambiguously refuses to admit. As complex as the presentation of the racial issues has been through the narratives, both novels steadily lead the discussion back to the reductive dichotomist view embraced by the Adventure novel and the Southern myth. At the end, the novels assume clear distinctions: white colonizers-Malay colonized; white Americans and African Americans. Both novels, therefore, enforce an evident racialization of the narrative enigma that leads to the virtual assumption of the flattest racial stereotypes. Moreover, this endorsing can only be seen as ambivalent when the novels are considered as a whole, in the effects of their exposition of a more complex perspective of racial issues and their challenging of the stereotypes they, nevertheless, assume.

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