Literary Narratives of the Antebellum South: Conceptualizations or Polarizations?

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Abstract:

The focal point of the present essay is examining the representations of the Old South in Southern American literature. The South as a region (and the pre-war epoch) occupied the American imagination for so long, and still does. Not only it gave birth to some of the greatest writers worldwide, but it produced songs, movies, much cotton and also myths. Thus, it is important to investigate the portrayal of the Antebellum South in southern literary works. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* are one of the novels that marked the southern renaissance (1930s) like no other two did. However, their representations of the Civil War and the southern way of life cannot be more dissimilar. In what way(s) are these narratives different? And what is the impact, if any, of such difference on their reception? These are the main questions that the present research aims to answer.

Keywords: Old South, American Southern Literature, William Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, Reception, Collective Memory.

Introduction

Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Wolfe, and Flannery O'Connor, along with many others, contributed in the creation and maintenance of prominent fictional images of the Old South. Some of these images achieved through time the stature of myths. The Southern Frontier, the Old South, the Solid South, the Sun Belt, the Benighted South etc. are but a few of the many 'souths' that Americans believe(d) in. In this study, particular attention is given to the myth of the Old South (also called the Plantation Legend) and the pertinence or subversion of its characteristics in two major southern narratives. Accordingly, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* by William Faulkner and Margaret Mitchell, respectively, are studied as reflections of larger literary, cultural and historical aspects.

The importance of the present research stems primarily from the significance of the two novels and their relevance to the questions we raise. On the one hand, the resonant effect which *Gone with the Wind* left and still leaves in readers' minds though it was published several decades ago (1936) and speaks of a distant event back in history (1860s) only proves its enduring impact. In a

span of a few years "the Scarlett fever" became a phenomenon sweeping the whole world (John Wiley 2011). So, it is quite impossible to neglect such a work in our scope of study. On the other hand, one hardly needs to argue Faulkner's importance as a subject of research in American Southern literature. He is one of the most discussed authors and his works have been subject to diverse analyses and critiques. *Absalom, Absalom!* is no exception; it, in fact, is one of the most challenging works in modern times. Thereby, the present study is an endeavor that aims at providing useful insights into the two narratives and their due reception.

The pre-war South banked on cotton plantations and so the aftermath generations were - more or less - brought up with a sense of cherishing to all that was related to the plantation: the architecture, the dialect, the lifestyle and sometimes even the war itself. They were nurtured on the myth of the Lost Cause which looked beyond the defeat to "the ol' good days" with a keen nostalgia. Thomas Nelson Page, John Pendleton Kennedy, William A. Caruthers, William Gilmore Simms, and others are the ones who "created an idyllic picture of the old plantation South and laid the foundation for a southern version of the legend about it" (Suponitskaya 1992, 878). Eliza Andrews' book *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865* provides a synoptic overview of the myth of the Old South. The image, more or less, corresponds to the following: in a beautiful white mansion, on the skirts of a beautiful bygone time, there lived an unfailingly graceful gentleman under the noble shelter of whom swayed a delicate wife in her fragranced hoofs softly tending kids and watching over happy darkies who joyfully work the blooming cotton fields. Life in the south seems to resemble an idyllic sanctuary into which nothing intrudes but grand balls, moonlight and magnolia. Honor, loyalty, and truth are the moral guidelines that the Old South lived by, guidelines that "Yankees" were unable to understand, future generations unable to picture and Southerners unable to let go of. The "extravaganza" of such tradition was reached in Mitchell's one-thousand-page novel.

In examining the two narratives and their portrayal of the southern society and history, before and after the war, the study bases its analyses almost entirely on the novels themselves. In other words, the issue in question (i.e literary representations of the antebellum south) could be approached from several angles that are indicative of the subject's social, cultural and historical intricacies. As these are beyond the scope of the present paper, it initially avoids all reference to judgment or analyses made by critics, journalists, researchers or readers, until a later stage, in order to focus on the two texts and the significance of their portrayal of the South. Therefore, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* will be closely analyzed in terms of their rendering of some key aspects recurrently found throughout the southern literature, namely: the Southern ladyhood, the Southern manhood, the institution of slavery and the Civil War.

1. *Gone With the Wind's* Romanticized Past

After reading the last line of *Gone With the Wind* and turning the back-cover, the novel does not close to an end. The still-raw memory refuses to shut Melanie's departure scene out, Rhett's

final words or Scarlett's desperate 'tomorrow is another day' either. It prolongs its existence outside the covers. An uneasiness that sweeps over by the end of Mitchell's thick and heavy tome triggers one to view in a play-back motion the falling-by-inches South. For a few seconds, one would even lose sight of the fact that it is just a fictional work. What is of peculiar interest is that the events of the novel start only two days before the war erupts, yet it does not fail to provide a vivaciously detailed picture of the Old South all along the narration.

1.1 The Southern Ladyhood: Belles

The main female figures in the novel are Scarlett, her mother Ellen and Melanie. Between the three of them, they draw a clear portrait of the Southern ladyhood which encompasses the so-called "Southern belle", "plantation mistress" and "angel in the house" types. Scarlett O'Hara, being the protagonist of the novel, stands out as a unique Southern girl who shifts from the state of a sweet-looking belle to a life-beaten unladylike – much to her neighbors' dismay – businesswoman. The coquettish sixteen-year-old girl who is overly proud of her magnolia-white skin and seventeen-inch waist gives a good imitation of a typical Southern belle at the beginning of the novel. Yet, as her mathematical tactfulness emerges to the surface, parts of her early image fall down to give way to a greedy opportunistic woman whose "gumption" is the only means for the family's survival in the aftermath of the war. Essentially, Scarlett is exactly what her mother – a Coast aristocrat of French descent – taught her not to be. She "learned only the outward signs of gentility. The inner grace from which these signs should spring, she never learned nor did she see any reason for learning it." (Mitchell 1999, 48) Since a tender age, she dreams of being like her mother "a lady in the true Southern manner (...) and then, everyone would love her (...) and they would say how unselfish she was and call her "Lady Bountiful". (568) Yet she cannot bring herself or bend her will to follow her mother's teachings. She is "a girl of rare spirit (...) with a passion for living." (99) This particular quality though it allows her to pull through all the impoverishments and hardships of the war, it brings much disdain and contempt upon her head. Her unscrupulous willfulness is considered as a deviant conduct and an outlandish trait that is not fit for a Georgia-born woman. Her folks' disapproval of her running a mill annoys her so much that she once stormily questions Rhett Butler, her male counterpart, for an explanation. He answers:

> All you've done is to be different from other women and you've made a little success at it (...) that is the one unforgivable sin in any society. Be different and be damned! (...) Remember, a well-bred female's place is in the home and she should know nothing about this busy, brutal world (...) the inference is that you should have starved genteelly and with pride. (570)

The standards of perfect ladyhood in the novel – ones against which all other worthy (or unworthy) women are measured – are embodied by Ellen. She possesses all the Southern virtues of ideal femininity; "she had been reared in the tradition of great ladies, which had taught her how to carry her burden and still retain her charm" (47). She teaches her daughters the basics that make for

the Southern ladyhood, which is the only means to support their standing in a male-dominated society. Those creeds are the following: "The man owned the property, and the woman managed it. The man took the credit for the management, and the woman praised his cleverness." (47) Ellen is the breathing incarnation of those creeds. That is why she is seen as resolutely unwavering as any of Tara's antique pillars. When she passes away – a side effect of her too kind soul – Gerald, who used to roar like thunder, loses his mind and resigns to a semi-invalid existence. "There was something breath-taking about Ellen O'Hara, a miracle that lived in the house (...) awed and charmed and soothed" others black and white alike (32). Though the whole image hints at some implicit matriarchy it is undermined by the author's insistence to show Ellen as "a great lady" because of her prideful graciousness and austere placidity which every Southerner is bred to prize since infancy. Consequently, Mitchell places the epitome of ladyhood in the person of a Southern plantation mistress asserting that Southern ladies are "a legend – the gentle, self-effacing but steel-spined women on whom the South had builded its house" (872).

Another variation of Southern ladyhood is represented by Mrs. Melanie Wilkes. A mousy little Melly who appears at the opening chapters as the subject of Scarlett's despise and jealousy takes over the narration to become a major character that walks out of the pages to exist in millions of minds. She seems to have cast a spell on everyone around her – short of Scarlett – and enchanted them with her unparalleled unselfishness and generosity of heart. Because she has "the face of a sheltered child who had never known anything but simplicity and kindness, truth and love, a child who had never looked upon harshness or evil and would not recognize them if she saw them" (126), she stands out as an almost heavenly figure of a lady, "an angel in the house". However, this quality sometimes makes her look excessively. This slightly demeaning characteristic – though not to Southern eyes that see no harm in a woman's silliness – is overshadowed by her unshakable strength which never fails her in times of distress. "Beneath the gentle voice and the dove-like eyes of Melanie, there was a thin flashing blade of unbreakable steel (...) there were banners and bugles of courage in Melanie's quiet blood." (366). And it is that courage which allows her to stand shoulder to shoulder with Scarlett when the latter kills a Yankee soldier. Yet, Scarlett's selfish-to-the-bone nature prevents her from fully appreciating Melanie's worth until she stood by her at her last moments when "the truth surged in, down to the deepest recesses of her soul" (857). So, "small plain Melanie" with her serene demeanor and poised little self is "a tower of strength" (862), another great lady from the South. Mitchell suggests that because women were part of:

> [a] happy feminine conspiracy which made Southern society so pleasant. Women knew that a land where men were contented, uncontradicted and safe in possession of unpunctured vanity was likely to be a very pleasant place for women to live. So, from the cradle to the grave, women strove to make men pleased with themselves, and the satisfied men repaid lavishly with gallantry and adoration. (126)

Southern ladies, even if they had little to say and were confined by some restraints of ladyhood, possessed a subtle strength with which they were bestowed yet mostly unaware of or unwilling to reveal.

1.2 The Southern Manhood: Knights in Casual Disguise

The ideal of the "Southern chivalry" is part and parcel of the Plantation Legend. Chivalry, in broad terms, may be defined as the possession of medieval knightly qualities such as courage, honor, and courtesy (Concise Oxford Dictionary 11th ed). Presumably, Southerners are chivalrous gentlemen at large. In *Gone With the Wind,* some male characters fully embody the notions attributed to the Southern gentleman just as some female characters appear to personify the traits of Southern ladyhood. Since the vitality of the Southern system lies in the plantation, the planter or "plantation owner" belongs to upper-class aristocracy and so a gentleman by rights. The novel provides numerous examples of Aristocrat planters – being set in a County – yet it places Gerald O'Hara under the limelight. He is Ellen's husband, Scarlett's father and Tara's devoted owner. His Irish roots combined to his acquired Georgian manners render him a truly typical "Southern gentleman". "There was something vital and earthy and coarse about him" that appeals to Scarlett and Southerners as well (25). "He adopted its ideas and customs (...) poker and horse racing, red-hot politics and the code duello, States' Rights and damnation to all Yankees, slavery and King Cotton, contempt for white trash and exaggerated courtesy to women." (36). His being a self-made man with "nothing of family and wealth to recommend him" (34) brings him no shame since he is "smart" in "raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies with elegance and carrying one's liquor like a gentleman" and these "were the things that mattered" (2). As a master, he is portrayed as having the "tenderest of hearts" (24). He cannot bear seeing a slave suffering nor a child crying that is why he buys Prissy to keep her mother Dilcey from grieving. So, Gerald, though not Georgian by birth, stands for the celebrated attributes of Southern gentlemanliness.

Besides portraying the older agents of chivalry, Mitchell describes the juvenile ones. Not surprisingly, in a society where girls are "belles", young men are idly "beaux". With his "drowsy gray eyes," his "blond hair" and "drawling, resonant, musical" voice Ashley Wilkes bewitches Scarlett unwittingly (2). He is portrayed as a romantic youth who is ideally Aristocratic in manners and Cavalier at heart: in other words well-bred, elegant, proud, noble and unfailingly gallant. Clearly, the "Southern Beau" in Scarlett's (may be Mitchell's) conception is a charming hero no less. Yet, by the end of the novel, much of these qualities are belittled next to his sheepish and feeble personality. Scarlett realizes in an epiphanic moment that she "loved something [she] made up... made a pretty suit of clothes and fell in love with it" (866).

However, one of Mitchell's despicable - and thus believable - characters is a "no gentleman" at all (99). Rhett Butler seems to negate all of the ideals of chivalry with his outright contempt and criticism of the Southern society. He repudiates the "gentlemanly" attitudes asserting that they are

"hypocrisies". Unlike gentlemen who "always obeyed the rules and said the correct things and made life easier for a lady", Rhett takes pleasure in enraging others, females included (148). Yet for all his pouring scorn over the Southern code of living, he is jailed for killing a "nigger" who "was uppity to a lady, and what else could a Southern gentleman do?" (524). In such incident, the adherence of Rhett – the non-conformist – to the exigencies of Southern gentlemanliness indicates, in the author's opinion, that the quintessence of chivalry is the protectiveness of Southern ladies and courteousness towards them. So, "how could disaster ever come to women such as they" protected by stalwart gentlemen, "had there ever been such men as these since the first dawn of the world, so heroic, so reckless, so gallant, so tender?" (137). The overall image of the Southern gentleman in *Gone With the Wind* – despite variation and difference – remains one of gracefulness, gallantry, and bravery that shines over sunburned features.

1.3 The Institution of Slavery: A Simple Loyalty-and-Innocence Bond

The institution of slavery was the cornerstone of the Southern community. Essentially, "Negros"[1] belonged to the lowest stratum in the Antebellum South, yet they were an indispensable part of the economic and social system. *Gone With the Wind* depicts the master-slave relationship creating a vivid presence of black characters in a literary work. To begin with, as Mitchell explains, slaves have a hierarchy of their own: the house servants on the top, and field-hands at a lower level. Mammy belongs to the former one, along with Uncle Peter, Pork and Dilcey. They are loyal servants, devoted to their masters and, interestingly enough, look down upon field-hands and even "White trash (...) and small farmers" (23).

Mammy is "devoted to her last drop of blood to the O'Haras (...) black, but her code of conduct and her sense of pride were as high as or higher than those of her owners" (18). In her desperation and bewilderment, Scarlett – time and again – seeks Mammy's "black hands" because they are "dear and comforting (...) unerringly they knew how to soothe, to pat, to fondle" (564). Just as Mammy is the mainstay of the O'Haras, Uncle Peter is "the smartest old darky" who owns the Hamiltons "body and soul" (116). This "highest caste in the slave population (...) remained with their white folks, doing manual labor which had been beneath them in the old days" and "suffering as severely as their white masters" (550). That is why they are deemed as worth their "weight in gold" (379).

However, the field-hands who "in the opinion of the negroes, they had lost their claim to any social standing at all" (47) because they are the "least willing or able to learn, the least energetic, the least honest and trustworthy, the most vicious and brutish" (550), have a different relationship with their masters. Notwithstanding that some of them remain loyal refusing "to avail themselves of the new freedom" (550) because they are satisfied with their lives under the shelter of the Whites, the majority run away as the war erupts. And it is these hordes of "trashy free issue niggers" that is "making life a misery for the South" (550). So, the novel casts the slaves into different categories,

according to their conduct towards their masters. Loyal, worthy ones are just as furious against "abolitionists" as whites are, whereas the disloyal troublesome ones are on "the enemy's camp".

Basically, this is the image of "Negros" in *Gone With the Wind*. Mitchell, through her narrative, asserts that the master-slave relationship in the Antebellum South is certainly one that cannot be deciphered due to its intricacy and entanglement through many long years. A claim demonstrated in her skepticism towards the "Yankees" understanding and appreciation of slaves though it is the Northerners "who freed them" (564).

1.4 The Civil War: A Lost Cause

It was the Civil War (1861-1865) that cut Southerners' lives into two. It most probably ruptured the whole nation into two poles, yet the south seems to have undergone a deeper rupture. That is why its presence in southern literature is more dominant. Accordingly, different opinions and feelings about the war are exposed in Mitchell's narrative. In the latter, the war, however, is not cast within any particular category: neither devilish nor saintly.

At the beginning of the novel, the day of the Wilkes barbecue, many voices rise in shouts to go for the war: "Of course we'll fight", "We could lick them in a month", "Why, one Southerner can lick twenty Yankees", "Teach them a lesson they won't soon forget", "They want war; we'll make them sick of war" (87). In the midst of the uproar raise, Ashley Wilkes's drowsy voice talking wisdom and Rhett Butler's arrogant accent talking sense about the war. These three mainstreams are essentially the fundamental views the novel explores. The first, which is largely shared by the crowd, is that of going for war, fighting the Yankees and bringing glory upon the South. "The South was intoxicated with enthusiasm and excitement (...) wild with excitement and shouting as though en route to a picnic" (107). When Scarlett moves to Atlanta, she witnesses the privation, hardships, death, and sickness of her fellow-people and she wonders how they can be so devoted to their troops and cherishing unshakable faith in their victory.

> How could anything but overwhelming victory come to a Cause as just and right as theirs? A Cause they loved as much as they loved their men... a Cause to which they would sacrifice these men if need be, and bear their loss as proudly as the men bore their battle flags. It was high tide of devotion and pride in their hearts, high tide of the Confederacy. (137)

No one talks about losing the war; the mere thought is considered as a sinful betrayal if not blasphemy. The overwhelming majority of Southerners share this fanatic view and, to some, that is the reason behind their defeat.

Rhett is one of those non-conformist cynics who believe that all they "have is cotton and slaves and arrogance" they'd be "licked in a month." (91) Yet no one pays heed to the words of an outcast even if he argues logically: "There's good money in empire building. But, there's more in empire wrecking. This empire we're living in – the South – the Confederacy – the Cotton Kingdom – it's breaking up right under our feet. Only most fools won't see it" (157), "all wars are sacred to

those who have to fight them. If the people who started wars didn't make them sacred, who would be foolish enough to fight? (...) All wars are in reality money squabbles." (189). This view is held by a tiny minority that is not even "received" by the Southern respectable society. Rhett opposes the war because he does not want to "fight to uphold the system that cast [him] out (...) [he] shall take pleasure in seeing it smashed." (196). He keeps poking fun at "the noble Cause" and "the heroes in gray" during the war, and that makes of him a dashing figure of a "rascal" among his people. Yet, when the Confederate troops retreat leaving Atlanta to its burns, he joins the thinning ranks in an already lost war. He avows that "the betraying sentimentality lurks in all of Southerners... so much quixoticism still lingers in [him]" (321).

The "betraying sentimentality" catches many Southerners in between the two aforementioned standpoints; some are against the war but they go for it just the same. They stand for the third category. A good case in point is that of Ashley, who goes to the war, fights, and suffers in prison for a cause he does not believe in. Though he knows from the early beginning that the war is unwise because "most of the misery of the world has been caused by wars and when the wars were over, no one ever knew what they were all about", he goes for it just the same (90). His introspective meditations bring him the knowledge that they 'have been betrayed, betrayed by [their] arrogant Southern selves, believing that one of [them] could whip a dozen Yankees, believing that King Cotton could rule the world. Betrayed, too, by words and catchphrases, prejudices and hatreds" (173). He sees the whole war as a matter of foolishness that would only rob Southerners of their peace and tranquility:

> I am fighting for the old days, the old ways I love so much but which, I fear, are now gone forever, no matter how the die may fall. For, win or lose, we lose just the same (...) they are fighting for a Cause that was lost the minute the first shot was fired, for our Cause is really our own way of living and that is gone already (174).

Ashley's meditations are considered as wise and deep yet not exactly practical because he lacks "gumption" to move on after the war that reduces his old beautiful world into ashes. He is one of the incurable romantics whose "accursed shrinking from realities" makes it impossible for them to come through (441). To make a long story short, war in *Gone With the Wind* is seen in hazy blurred outlines: a zealous irrational romantic battle that is fought and lost. Nothing is made certain except that the antebellum world is gone with the wind.

2. *Absalom, Absalom!'s* Demonized History

William Faulkner's fiction appointed him a devoted prodigy who took on himself the responsibility of telling the story of the Old South, telling it whole. Most of his works are set in Yoknapatawpha County: a fictional region that he creates to portray the Antebellum South in miniature. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, he explores the interweaving perspectives of several narrators. Beneath the ostensibly domestic tale, lays a genuine attempt to disclose the underlying

infrastructures upon which the Old South was constructed. Its attempt to detect truth and morality in history is an arduous task given the fact that it tries to glue together fragmented pieces of an "elapsed and yet-elapsing" way of life. By the turn-of-the-last-page it remains as puzzling a case for detection as any of Hercule Poirot's or Holmes', for the narrative does not lend itself to easy deciphering and comprehension.

2.1 The Southern Ladyhood: Flowers in a Shrub's Pot

Rosa Coldfield's gothic voice which "would not cease, it would just vanish" is the most prominent female voice "heard" in the novel (Faulkner 2005, 8). She is portrayed as a ghostlike hysteric old maid, who is repressed in her family and marginalized by her society. Wearing her "eternal black" and confined to a "vampiric" existence, she spends her haunted life "in the little grim house's impregnable solitude" (44). Since she is "born too late" into her parents' lives, she is deprived of all warmth and support and so she falls prey to obsession (21). She is obsessed with revenging Thomas Sutpen, who presumably destroys her family and ruins her life. "The lonely thwarted old female flesh embattled for forty-three years" (14) is doomed since childhood "to contemplate all human behavior through the complex and needless follies of adults (...) a child who had never been young" (21), yet who is seen as an elfish figure that is unable to get out of elders' custodianship; she resembles "a crucified child" (8). Not surprisingly, she is taken for granted; "to them, Miss Rosa must not have been anything at all" (34). Though she witnesses her family's downfall inertly and wordlessly, she is the one who brings it back to life. After forty three years of silence, she decides to disclose the unrevealed because "she wants it told" (11) to others, so that they will "know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth" (11). While she relates her tale, she muses over the South and its demise demonstrating an acute awareness of social and historical dynamics. Her being the only narrator who provides first-hand information gives her account more credibility. That is why Quentin Compson is moved to credulity by her tale. So, "from a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon" (7), he sits "listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times" (9). However, for all her importance as a narrator, Rosa does not rise above the ghostly presence as a character. As Mr. Compson notes, "years ago we in the South made our women into ladies then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts" (12). Miss Rosa is one "Southern gentlewoman" whose voice is the closer a female character would come to self-expression; other females were silent (or yet silenced).

Ellen, her older sister, whom she considers as "a blind romantic fool" (14) is the mistress of Sutpen's Hundred. Entrapped in a Beauty-and-the-Beast sort of a marriage, she "had vanished not only out of the family and the house but out of life too, into an edifice like Bluebeard's and there transmogrified into a mask looking back with passive and hopeless grief upon the irrevocable world, held there not in durance but in a kind of jeering suspension by a man" (60). This "occurred before

it became fashionable to repair your mistakes by turning your back on them and running" (27). Hence, she tries to understand and even reconcile to his deeds. Albeit her endeavors, she cannot endure it anymore when she sees that her husband himself takes part in fighting with negros; a scene that is unfit for lady's eyes. When she realizes that she is completely unable to protect her children or save herself, she retires to a semi-invalid existence: "a butterfly" escaping "reality into a bland region peopled by dolls" (70). After few years of "bewildered and uncomprehending amazement", the moth "caught in a gale and blown against a wall and clinging there beating feebly" dies (85). She dies as a "substanceless shell (...) no body to be buried: just the shape, the recollection, translated on some peaceful afternoon without bell or catafalque into that cedar grove" (126). And thus ends the weightless life of a plantation mistress.

The daughter Judith offers an enigmatic exemplar of a Southern young lady. She sees "her marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse" (18), yet she does not lift a finger to change the course of matters. She submits unquestionably; waiting "in that abeyance, that durance, waiting, hoping" (119) "not knowing for what (...) not even knowing for why" (126). Throughout the narrative, she is frequently referred to as "doomed to be a widow before she had even been a bride" (22). As though her very being as female places her under an inescapable fatality to which she has to yield willingly. Faulkner's characterization of Judith seems to cast her as an archaic motionless object in an attic; "just being, just existing and breathing" (329). The war, her brother's murdering her "not-husband", and her mother's death are all faced with "a ruthless will" (78). Her character is created "by circumstance (...) a hundred years of careful nurturing (...) then ten generations of iron prohibition" and so she passes through "insulated and unscathed cocoon stages: bud, served prolific queen, then potent and soft-handed matriarch" (156). Judith's life closes to an end with no joy uplifting her spirits, no juvenile whim stirring her conduct, and no grief casting a shadow over her features as if deprived of all emotions. Her gaunt face, "which had long since forgotten how to be young and yet absolutely impenetrable, absolutely serene", retains its vigor at the fall of a curtain upon her deathlike life (127). The continuous metamorphosing of female characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* suggests that the feminine presence in the Antebellum South, though it took many shapes, it could not defy the "soulless rich surrender anywhere between sun and earth" (196). This, of course, is the conception of women "in the skirts of the time when ladies did not walk but floated" (31).

2.2 The Southern Maleness: Gentlemen Rotten at the Roots

The masculine figures in Faulkner's fiction seem to be surrounded with a mystic aura and so are the three main male characters: Thomas Sutpen, Henry Sutpen, and Charles Bon. "The long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust" that is how "the man-horse-demon" appears to "a scene peaceful and decorous" (Faulkner 2005, 8). He - Thomas Sutpen – "dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp, and plowed and

planted his land" (Faulkner 2005, 40), in addition to "the shield of a virtuous woman, to make his position impregnable" (15), he seems to be in possession of everything. However, after attaining all what he seeks, his "design" fails. Born in West Virginia mountains, away from the Deep South, he is blissfully ignorant and "innocent". Ironically, "innocence" is "his impediment" (233). So aghast he is to see that "this world where niggers, that the Bible said had been created and cursed by God to be brute and vassal to all men of white skin, were better found and housed and even clothed"; in his bitter deprivation surges a desire to grow rich and powerful (282). The last of which, he discovers in the social codes of the Old South. The slave-owning principle grants the whites social and economic supremacy over other races; so, he rushes wildly to achieve his design of establishing a dynasty. Midway, he departs to the war embodying the condensed notions of the Old South, he fights and then falls as the system which holds him up falls apart. So, "this Faustus, this demon, this Beelzebub" (178), is "the light blinded batlike image of his own torment cast" (171). He is blinded – his innocence corrupted – by "the fierce demoniac lantern"; in pursuit of his design, he is "descending (...) ellipsis, clinging, trying to cling with vain unsubstantial hands to what he hoped would hold him, save him" (171). Essentially, the Southern plantation-owner in *Absalom, Absalom!* is represented as an "ogre, some beast out of a tale to frighten children with" (158). Moreover, "retribution and fatality which (...) Sutpen had started and had doomed all his blood too, black and white both" destroys his own line (269).

Sutpen's legitimate heir is Henry. He is reared in the monotonous traditions of the Southern society that is why his first encounter with Charles Bon "corrupts" him to ape "his clothing and manner and (...) his very manner of living" (96). Henry "the countryman, the bewildered" faces a moral dilemma; in fact, he personifies the way some Southern creeds torment the conscience (114). Because he – of all others – has "cluttering of morality and rules of right and wrong" (120), he has either to "betray himself and his entire upbringing and thinking" or "deny the friend for whom he had already repudiated home and kin and all" (114). At an age where young men are likely to spend their time in leisure and idleness without much ado about morality and righteousness, "the country boy with his simple and erstwhile untroubled code" finds himself in a place where "all of morality was upside down and all of honor perished" (114). He is caught up in between the teachings of the Old South which he repudiates "in order to champion his defiance" and what "all his heredity and training had to rebel against on principle" (173). After a long breathless struggle, Henry returns to "practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown" (18). So, he proves Charles Bon's prophecy and words by murdering him. "It's the miscegenation, not the incest" which the South taught him not to bear (356). The son, like the father, also suffers a tattered morality as if the author alludes to the fact that men in the South were made into gentlemen and then corrupted in turn.

Charles Bon, the "handsome and wealthy New Orleansian" is Sutpen's deserted son (78). Though he is "a young man of a worldy elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy and in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-

like" (74), he is doomed by the drops of black blood which run in his veins. His portrayal, "as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights" (96), casts him very close to the image of "the Southern Beau", if not for his fatalism. Throughout the whole of Henry's struggle to find a way out to their dilemma, he remains a "mere spectator, passive, a little sardonic, and completely enigmatic" (93). Notwithstanding that his ironic appearance in Sutpen's life is the beginning of the family's downfall, "he seems to hover, shadowy, almost substanceless, a little behind and above all the other (...) ultimatums and affirmations and defiances and challenges and repudiations" (93). His "half negro" blood, in a society excessively obsessed with racial discrimination, reduces him to mere shadowy existence. Furthermore, he loses all interest in the happenings around him though he is the centre of attention because he becomes like "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" (104). His gentlemanly aura is clouded "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" (93). Consequently, his portrayal engraves even further the representation of male Southern characters as doomed to an irrevocably-deviant gentlemanliness.

2.3 The Institution of Slavery: A Beastly Estate

All through the narration of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the term "nigger" is associated with "wild". Thomas Sutpen first appears in Jefferson, "grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half-tamed to walk upright like men" (8). His niggers are different from "any tame ones" (72); that is why he relies on them in tracking the fleeing architect. Employed instead of "dogs", the niggers believe that the architect "had voluntarily surrendered his status as interdict meat (...) and that now they would be allowed to cook and eat him" (256). They are portrayed as savage "black beasts" that are a means in Sutpen's design; in "a bloodless paradox" they are seen as "the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest" (8). Besides the total silence of black characters in the novel, they do not seem to have any consequential emotional or social life. There is not even a black character who is named. This seems to reflect the concept of "looking at niggers, not with fear or dread but with a kind of speculative antagonism, not because of any known fact or reason but inherited, by both white and black, the sense, effluvium..." (230). Though Sutpen's Hundred is a dream-made-true thanks to the restless efforts of niggers, they are scarcely seen as creatures much above the status of animals. Sutpen allows – and even encourages – them to engage in ruleless fights where they "fight to hurt one another quick and bad" (29). Faulkner's narrative rests at a stone's throw from totally dehumanizing the blacks. Its constant allusion to their "whooping and hollering" (257) leaves no room for a moderate picturing of their standing in the Southern community. To engrave the idea even further, "as a grand finale", Sutpen enters "the ring with one of the Negroes himself" (29). In doing so, these two antagonist races "should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too" (29). However, for Sutpen – and maybe spectators too – it is "matter of sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy, domination" (29).

Faulkner offers no apology or justification nor even attempts to apply some anesthesia before blurting out all the afore-mentioned. With concepts such as these, the Old South "was drifting closer and closer to a doomed and fatal war (…) it was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage'" (260). Faulkner's portrayal of the master-slave relationship suggests a condemnation to the whole South for having allowed such an opportunistic beastly segregation of blacks to last so long. And it eventually fell bringing down vile and virtue.

2.4 The Civil War: The Fever that Cured the Sickness

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Civil War (1861-1865) takes three main conceptions. The first and prominent one is closely associated with Thomas Sutpen. In spite of his villainous conducts before the war which make him – in Rosa's estimation – an ogre no less, he possesses "the stature and shape of a hero" by mere association with other heroes because he too "fought for four honorable years for the soil and traditions of the land where she had been born" (Faulkner 2005,19). Watching "the gallant mimic marching and countermarching", that draw all of them "rich and poor, aristocrat and redneck" (122) to fight carrying "the flags" and die "not for honor's empty sake, nor pride nor even peace, but for that love and faith they left behind" (150), one can efface all the wrongdoings of a person once he "rode away beneath a flag and (demon or no) courageously suffered" (167). Rosa is unable to gainsay that he was brave in defending their cause. However, she regrets that the Southern "very life and future hopes and past pride, should have been thrown into the balance with men like that to buttress it – men with valor and strength but without pity or honor" (20).

The second conception is that of Mr. Coldfield. Though he "had never been an irascible man (…) and his speeches of protest had been not only calm but logical and quite sensible", he drifts to extremities in his opposition to the war (81). He is "a man with a name for absolute and undeviating and even Puritan uprightness in a country and time of lawless opportunity, who neither drank nor gambled nor even hunted" and so he is among the very few Southerners who are against the war (43). His opposition springs from a deep moral consciousness of the evils of such war; this makes him even hate his "country so much that (…) he would have joined the Yankee army" (260). There are other individuals – a minority in the communal scramble-to-the-war – who "embalmed the War and its heritage of suffering and injustice and sorrow" because it blots "from the breathable air the poisonous secret effluvium of lusting and hating and killing" (126).

The third conception is the one that is shared by Henry and Charles Bon. They both join the war not out of patriotism and devotion to the Old South but as a means of escape. They hope "that the War would settle the matter, leave free one of the two irreconcilables since it would not be the first time that youth has taken catastrophe as a direct act of Providence for the sole purpose of solving a personal problem which youth itself could not solve." (120). Because they are incapable – or unwilling – to make decisions they leave it for the war to settle matters. Yet this is seen as a mere

"attenuation and prolongation of a conclusion already ripe to happen"; they foolishly try to solve personal matters "by a stupid and bloody aberration in the high (and impossible) destiny of the United States" (118). The different views towards the war vary greatly but they meet at one end: the aftermath is the same. "Men who had risked and lost everything, suffered beyond endurance and had returned now to a ruined land, not the same men who had marched away but transformed" (157); Southerners emerge "from a holocaust (8) to go through "that natural period during which bitter though unmaimed defeat might have exhausted itself to something like peace" (161).

The suffering, the memory and the impacts of that "holocaust" linger even further in the following generations. Quentin Compson who is "a barracks filled with stubborn back looking ghosts still recovering" is one Southern descendant whose childhood "was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth" (12). Because of living "among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (...) and bullets in the dining-room table and such" they are always reminded of the past (361). The past which dominates their present and haunts their future becomes "a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago" (361). In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner suggests – using a compelling allegory – a profound anatomy of the Civil War:

> even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence. (12)

These surgical words analyze the Antebellum South in exceptional detail: the disease of wish southerners are unaware – and maybe at the time the novel was written did not yet spring to awareness – is slavery. The war, despicable furious and bloody as it is, is no more than a fever which is a symptom of cure. Yet, southerners yearn back to the sickness ungrateful and unaware of the healing.

3. Conceptualizations or Polarizations?

So far, it takes no expert to point out the glaring difference between *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!* The stark contrast between the two narratives is no more apparent than in their visions of the Old South. Mitchell, as no exception to the plantation tradition, portrays the American south as it was already stereotyped in the popular mind by ninetieth century novels (Suponitskaya 1992, 878). Faulkner, on the other hand, seems intent upon questioning and negating all that is familiar about the south: the plantation system, its code of conduct and its social mores. He simply "challenges the plantation legend by creating a different sort of planter archetype" (Mitchell D 2008,140). So, it is no surprise at all that Michell's novel was selling in millions when

Faulkner's was barely selling over a few thousand copies. Yet, their conceptualizations are reflective of further differences other than commercial success. Their critical receptions were different for a number of reasons.

In "The Civil War of 1936: *Gone with the Wind* and *Absalom! Absalom!*", James W. Mathews comments on the most important reviews that were written about the two novels. He notes that "romances treating the Old South- especially the legendary South-have always been popular. *Gone With the Wind* merely continued a formula that could hardly fail, but added enough sound history and narrative originality to set itself above its peers" (Mathews 1967, 467). William Faulkner's aim, however, was different. He wanted "to bring us in the end to a deeper and a fuller truth about his people than we could get otherwise," (DeVoto 1936, 14). Though, as author Tony Horwitz puts it, Mitchell's novel has "done more to keep the Civil War alive, and to mould its memory, than any history book or event since Appomattox", its popularity could not bring it to serious critical studies where it received slight attention (Horwitz 1999, 296). In contrast, Faulkner's novel received far larger, despite not always favourable, criticism. With its intensity, terror and obscurity, it—as *The Atlanta Journal* reviewer puts it—is "a ringing pulpit-call destined to enrage the old brand of southerner and frighten the new "(as cited in Mathews 1967, 467). The ramifications of such distinct, even contradictory, conceptualizations of the Old South is mostly seen through the devision that the two narratives created. Each novel seems to occupy an exclusive sphere of influence. Mitchell's work is more affiliated with all that is popular, ahistorical and somehow 'conventional'. Faulkner, however, allinates himself – perhaps unintendedly – with a group of historians and literatti, whose version of the south is provoking and equivocal, to say the least.

The split in attitude and response towards the two novels – or the two literary stances at large – is but reflective of a broader social phenomenon. Collective memory (a sociological concept developed through the works of Emile Durkheim, Carl Jung and Maurice Halbwachs) encompasses the shared beliefs and experiences that a group of people or community goes through. This sense of collectiveness – whether conscious or unconscious – accumulates through historical events, crises, traditions, memories, popular songs, and movies etc. Though they are preserved in the brain or "in some nook of mind", they are recalled externally through a community or a group that—even if only momentarily—conditions one's reconstruction of those memories in accordance with the group's. Halbwachs explains:

> It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection (Halbwachs 1992, 38)

Hence, when facing a judgment-making situation, individuals—willingly or unwillingly—resort to a kind of systemic response that is already prefigured by a collective consciousness. *A Tough Little Patch of History: Gone With the Wind and the Politics of Memory* is a book by De Jennifer W.

Dickey which she devotes to the "unsurpassed cultural phenomenon" called *Gone With the Wind.* She writes:

> Its popularity ebbs and flows, nut its characters and settings are so ingrained in our national consciousness, such a part of our collective memory, that, love it or hate, gone with the wind is part of our national story that seems likely to carry forwards well into the twenty-first century, whether or not people read the book or see the film (Dickey 2014, 4)

Absalom, Absalom! , on the other hand, touched upon a sensitive nerve in southerner's collective consciousness. It was a "bold accusation against the South for its sins of greed and pride, a charge hard to bear in the depression-ridden, dust bowl days of 1936" (Mathews 1967, 468). However, any literary historian can see that the reception of Faulkner's work changed over time. Decades after its publication, not only its sales improved but its recognition as a literary masterpiece was more apparent. Authors like Richard H. King (1980) and Wilbur. J. Cash (1956) have notably demonstrated the resentment and denial with which writers such as Faulkner were greeted due to the image of the South presented in their fiction.

This explains one of the reasons behind one novel striking a chord with readers while the other was looked at with skepticism. Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive community" may demystify another aspect their particular reception. He argues that interpretation is 'a communal affair' and no response happens in a vacuum. In his *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980), he contends that shared assumptions, cultural attitudes, concepts prevailing through schools, churches, and media etc. institutionalize the way a group of people deals with and reacts to texts. Since the content of the two novels is predominantly a cultural and historical one, it can be regarded as the focal point which marked the distinction in the two novels' reception. It was not the style, the structure or even themes as much as it was the consistency of the narrative with what is collectively 'remembered' as a past. Even memory—and a literary judgment that is bound to it—being "our most personal, immediate, mental operation, has no substance outside its social context" (Gedi and Elam 1996, 36). Therefore, *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, through their conceptualizations of the Old South, they invoked the distinct 'poles' in American southern society. Their subsequent responses, in effect, stand for two distinguished stances which are a popular romanticized belief in a mythical era and an intellectual revisionist stance which by the 1936 was yet in a premature stage.

Conclusion

In short, set against the background of a long and almost unshaken tradition in Southern literature, Margret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* do not deviate from the norm in their preoccupation with the Antebellum South. Yet, while Mitchell's account is more romantic and rife with pleasant images of beauty, struggle, a love of the land and a cherishing of ancestral heritage, Faulkner's scrutiny almost refutes such images, condemns their

falsehood and unflinchingly seeks to expose their appalling reality. The reception of the two novels, which depended heavily on their conceptualizations of the Old South, indicates the polarizing impact of such literary narratives. They highlight an already existing rupture between readers and critics, intellectuals and laymen, father, and sons.

Endnotes:

1. The word "nigger" is consistent with the lexis of *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom, Absalom!* which is in turn consistent with the historical period they portray. So, it carries only the original meaning (from Latin "negro") denoting individuals of black appearance. (Concise Oxford Dictionary 11th ed)

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