

GABRIELLA VARRÓ

MASKS AND MASKING IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S  
*ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

William Faulkner's intricate usage of the ancient device of the mask is relatively little recognized in the otherwise extensive criticism that America's fifth Noble Prize winner for literature has elicited. Yet, the subtle awareness of masking techniques is interspersed throughout Faulkner's oeuvre. They are detectable in the multiple narrations of his long fictions where each narratorial voice aspires to be and masks itself as the authoritative and true version of the "original" story; see instances for this in *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, or *Absalom, Absalom!*, the shifting identifications (masks) his characters attain in the face of the all-important, abstract yet idolized Community in stories such as "A Rose for Emily," "Dry September", and also in the presentation of Southern history that wavers between the masks of legend or romance versus documentary and history, most beautifully presented in "Delta Autumn," "The Bear" and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In the present essay I will detail three areas of Faulkner's manifold applications of the mask in what I regard as a central piece of his fictional universe, *Absalom, Absalom!*. These three realms of masking are: (1) the masks of narration; (2) the masks of gender; and finally (3) racial masks.

**(1) The masks of narration**

*Absalom, Absalom!* is narrated by four characters, Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson's father, Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon, only the first of whom is an actual—although even at that quite marginal—participant and actor in

the happenings reported. Similarly to other stories of multiple narration of Faulkner's the main players in the tale are not given separate narrative voices,<sup>1</sup> and thus are, figuratively, numbed. They are denied the right to give their version of the "Truth," or, for that matter, to wear their own unmasked faces before the public. Instead, the four protagonists, i.e., Thomas Sutpen, his first-born son, Charles Bon, as well as Judith and Henry Sutpen, Bon's half-sister and brother, are all shrouded behind narrative voices. Their characters, actions, speech, and entire presence in the novel are dependent upon and appear via the filter of the respective narrators, thus the main players in the tragedy exist as masked subjects. Yet, even these narratives, whose function it is then partly to author the lives of Thomas Sutpen and his offspring, are not always readily separable from one another, neither do they claim to have access to the full story of the past. Thus the authoring and authentication processes remain fragmentary and the unmasking never reaches completion. The hero and his original tale remain masked and shrouded in the retellings, which in their repetitions-variation-digression pattern deny the very possibility of unearthing the "original," "the real," "the true" and complete version of hero/past. The novel thus evolves both for reader and the narrators as an infinite quest, and even when the last pieces of the puzzle are made to fit in their proper position, we cannot be sure that we know it all, and not just one out of the many yet possible versions. The quest engaged in through the parallel narrations involves epistemological questions: what is there to learn, what is it that we know, and how do we know these things. Moreover the reader always has to keep in mind that the knowledge gradually gained is contaminated by tellers' subjectivities.

This horizontal division of the narrative as well as character, life-story, and past—into voices—denies total access to the (non-existent) "Pure," "Real" or "Actual," which is represented. Nevertheless, the past (along with the larger concepts of time, character and story) surfaces in these narrative reenactments not so much as a fixed or static entity to be completely recovered, but much more as an ever-

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<sup>1</sup> See a similar instance in *The Sound and the Fury*, in which, according to some critics, all four sections recount Caddy Compson's story without ever allocating a separate section to her.

changing fluid continuum. Past in Faulkner's sense never ceases to exist, instead it is constantly in the process of being constructed. As Irving Howe states, this concept of time contributes to the "illusion of timeless present" (225) in the novel. Through this sectioning of the narrative, Faulkner restates the age-old wisdom that the past (or for that matter the life of another person) can never be fully comprehended by the succeeding generations, yet it is the task of the present to be eternally approximating the essence of the bygone.

Beyond this horizontal sectioning,—serving as guises for the hero/truth/past trio—, Faulkner has also devised a vertical structuring. The narrative's vertical layers are those story-telling modes and patterns behind which one might detect the original or "authentic" narrative per se. As various narrative traditions are piled on top of each other in each respective telling, Faulkner disguises (or else masks) his own distinct "story." This layered quality of the narrative employs: (a) elements of fabulation (the oral tradition), (b) allusions to the Biblical tradition, and (c) ancient Greek patterns to cover traces of the (d) submerged narrative.

### **(a) The fabular**

The fabular predominantly appears in Miss Rosa Coldfield's narrative, clearly because at the time of her involvement in the happenings she is only a young girl in her teens. Sutpen accordingly often surfaces in her version as an "ogre," frightening, larger than life, yet, somehow also divine.

There was an ogre of my childhood which before my birth removed my only sister to its grim ogre-bourne and produced two half phantom children whom I was not encouraged, and did not desire, to associate with as if my late-born solitude had taught me presentiment of that fateful intertwining, [...]—and I forgave it; there was a shape which rode away beneath a flag and (demon or no) courageously suffered—and I did more than just forgive. (137)

Miss Rosa's exaggeration of Sutpen's character is typically childlike, her rewriting (authoring) of Sutpen's life carries varied fairy-tale-like elements, in which she poses as an innocent onlooker, an outsider to the horrors her imagination magnifies. As she states at one point in her narrative there "must have been some seed he [Sutpen] left, to cause a

child's vacant fairy-tale to come alive in that garden" (121). Her simultaneous fascination and fear of Sutpen, (also expressed in the quote's "demon or no"), reflects a child's sentiments, who is bound to dread and love power under the same breath. Her sister Ella's world is also closer to a tale-like objectification than to the real, although the latter consciously escapes into a manufactured fantasy life, whereas the former's fabulating tendency is due to innocence and inexperience, as well as a deep-seated attraction to the monster of her childhood fancy. Ellen's dream world is described in Chapter III by Mr. Compson as a "world of pure illusion in which, safe from any harm, she moved, lived, from attitude to attitude against her background of chatelaine to the largest, wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortunate" (56).

The ogres, dragons, phantoms and other fairy tale creatures inhabiting Miss Rosa's universe and Ellen Coldfield's make-believe existence as the chatelaine in Bluebeard's castle are only two versions of fabulation. Yet, *Absalom, Absalom!*'s fabular patterns, are not exhausted in these two women fabricating tales about themselves and the characters around them. The entire setting and the characters inhabiting this space are also imbued with fabulous dimensions. Sutpen's Hundred evolves in the story as indeed a magnificent castle, with Sutpen, king-monster-landlord, and Bon, the young pretender as well as prodigal son, entering the scene to claim it all: princess, castle, estate, and name. All the narrative voices return to this layer of the story as fable, and they emphasize the element of the oral, unfixed and indefinite aspect within both the tradition evoked and the tale told.

The fabular features of the narrative, the characters' view of their own lives and others as fabulous are supplemented by the fact that, as Shreve says, the very reality of the characters in these fairy stories might also be in doubt. They are, as he puts it, "people who perhaps never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (...) shades too (...)" (250). This is a clear hint that the epistemological dimension is further complicated by the ontological in the novel. Let us not forget, though, that besides these shadows of shades (i.e., the four protagonists) being fabled into existence, the four tellers are also in the process of being created by the author himself.

Thereby all but the ultimate teller (the writer) and the (the writer's, the narrators') process of telling maintain their realities.

### **(b) The Biblical**

Faulkner's profound knowledge of both the Old and New Testaments is a well known fact, and the detection of Biblical parallels in his tales and novels has been a popular enterprise among critics ever since the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> The very title of *Absalom, Absalom!* has prompted critics to meditate at length upon Faulkner's motivations for turning to the story of David and Absalom from the Old Testament. In the original Biblical story Absalom "rebels against his father, after having killed Amnon" (Björk 200), his own brother, for the latter had committed incest with their sister, Tamar. In Faulkner's "redoing" Henry-Absalom murders his half-brother Bon-Amnon for aiming to marry his half-sister, Judith-Tamar. Critics were often puzzled by the fact that David's tragic exclamation in the Bible "My son Absalom, Absalom my son: would to God that I might die for thee, Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!" (Internet 1) was taken for the novel's title, especially because Sutpen's heartless, almost indifferent attitude to his sons renders such outburst of emotions from him almost completely unthinkable. In my reading the Sutpen-David analogy is more complex than to restrict it to the single and infamous Biblical outcry cited. Sutpen is King David inasmuch as he is obsessed with creating his own dynasty by fathering sons who would secure his position as king, tyrant, ruler of a "nation." His creation of Sutpen's Hundred, the literal house and estate, figuratively equates with the creation of family, name, heritage, descent, similar to the complex meanings inferred by David's house. Faulkner's primary interest in the old story is with the motif of the curse, which overtakes the house of David just as it does the house of Sutpen. Abraham's cynical remark in the Bible cited by Shreve: "Praise the Lord, I have raised about me sons to bear the burden of mine iniquities and persecutions; yea perhaps even to restore my flocks and herds from the hand of the ravisher [...]" (268), recovers the knowledge that the curse will come home to roost. In other words, sins will not be left unpunished, and the sinner bringing

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<sup>2</sup> See references to Lennart Björk and Walton Litz in the Works Cited section.

about the curse knows this the best. This curse that is bound to come full circle in the family certainly originates from the mythic stories of the Bible, but they might as easily be seen as elements from Greek tragedy as well.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from the David-Absalom cycle of the Bible the novel also recovers the best known stories of the Old Testament, the creation of the universe, and the most popular myths related to the figures of God and Jesus. Since these Biblical allusions have been widely analyzed elsewhere I will only briefly dwell on this issue here. *Absalom, Absalom!* can be read as patterned after the Biblical creation story in its entirety, with Sutpen figuring as God in the tale. No other character, claims Irving Howe “rules a book so completely as does Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*” (228), and this domination of the narrative assumes mythical relevance. Thomas Sutpen’s creation of Sutpen’s Hundred out of nothing, in the middle of nowhere is an easily perceptible parallel. He, as the narrative reveals “so far as anyone [...] knew either had no past at all or did not dare reveal it—a man who rode into town out of nowhere with a horse and two pistols and a herd of wild beasts [...]” (12). His grand dream of re-authoring himself by re-naming and creating the world after his image, pursued first in Haiti—by marrying the daughter of a plantation owner—, and later on in Jefferson, Mississippi—through the marriage to Ellen Coldfield—, echoes the Biblical grand design of calling the universe into being. Sutpen’s equation with God is dispersed throughout the four narratives, and despite (and also along with) the demonic qualities (which are also innate to his persona) his position as Creator-Originator is ever-present. His double role as villain and victim is also a conscious choice from Faulkner’s part. Quentin, evoking the memory of his own father’s retelling of Sutpen’s story notes at one place: “Father said, how the book said that all men were created in the image of God and so all men were the same in God’s eyes anyway, looked the same to God at least, and so he would look at Sutpen and

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brylowski’s, Duso Lind’s and Lennart Björk’s critical works are especially useful in pointing out parallels between the myths of the Bible and Greek legends and tragedies. See references to these works in the Works Cited section.

think *A fine proud man. If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that's what He would aim to look like*" (232).

Charles Bon's likeness to the figure of Christ is even more striking, and references to this are scattered throughout the text. Quite early in the story, in part III Mr. Compson compares Bon to a phoenix "fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere" (61). The entrance to the scene in the shape of a phoenix, having no father or mother, and disappearing without a trace are readily decodable Christian parallels. Bon carries his cross (his betrayal by his father and mother; his doomed relationship to his own kin) with resignation, willingly offering himself as sacrifice. He also dies as a sacrifice, both to deliver the house from even greater tragedies and to take the sins of the house upon himself. From among the whole cast of the novel he is the clearest and purest one, who nonetheless is dragged down by forces he is incapable of controlling.

The force of Biblical allusions brings the narratives within the novel closer to the mythic paradigms, extending the breath and cultural relevance of Faulkner's text. The pretence (the masking) of the novel as a modern rewriting of one of the most ancient written stories of human kind, however is just another guise for the underlying story Faulkner is about to tell.

### **(c) The Greek**

From among the many layers Faulkner uses to disguise his original narrative the Greek patterns figure as the most emphasized ones through character, plot and theme. According to Lennart Björk "we are called upon to conceive of Sutpen—and the other characters—in terms of Greek culture, and its dramatization in Greek tragedy" (197), and he refers the reader to Aeschylus for the possible model Faulkner had in mind. Sutpen as Agamemnon, his daughter from a Negro slave, Clytemnestra, Miss Rosa's Cassandra-like figure are but the most frequently served up figures from the ancient Greek mythology, but the Oedipus and Eteocles myth-cycles also carry evident analogies. Besides these myth-cycles, whose parallels in character and action are readily available in Faulkner's tale, the concepts of tragic fate, sense

of doom, the already mentioned returning curse, and the notion of fate weave an entangling web around the novel's characters.

These ancient concepts rhyme perfectly with Sutpen-Agamemnon's tragic stature, whose singular character, actions and fate set to motion a series of happenings, which can neither be stopped, nor can they be prevented. Faulkner's characters all patiently and passively await and submit to their destiny, without ever questioning what fate (or the Gods above) has wrought for them. Sutpen, for instance, is well aware of the fact that his son's (Henry's) college friend, regularly brought home for the holidays, is his own son as well, yet, the all-knowing father remains silent about this for a long time. Instead of hindering the fatal collapse that ultimately means the fall of his own carefully planned design as well, he keeps leaving home to avoid confrontations with Bon, and even when the time of the confession about the actual identity of Charles Bon arrives, it is not to Bon, the person most concerned, but to Henry. Bon accepts his destiny passively, his knowledge of the relationship between himself and Judith is not contested, rather it is born with humility.

The novel abounds in references to Greek tragedies through numerous allusions to the theatricality of action, set, the masked quality of the players involved. Expressions like "the tragic burlesque of the sons of Ham" (162), that "the plantation was just a blind to his [Sutpen's] actual dark avocation" (59), allusions to the fact that all the characters are playing to some unseen audience, reveal the constructed quality of the drama. In section III the narrator states of Sutpen that "he was unaware that his flowering was a forced blooming too and that while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony—the stage manager, call him what you will—was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one" (60).

In the best tradition of ancient Greek tragedies (and heroic epics) each character is linked to a recurring phrase or quality by which he or she is identified. Although this "epic attribute" is sustained with only slight modifications from narrative to narrative, the characters they reference move from being faces (masks), real people, to theatrical and/or social roles. At one place Miss Rosa is depicted as staring at Sutpen "from behind the face the same woman who had been that child now watched him with that same grim and cold intensity" (56).

The division into “face” “woman” and “child,” i.e., mask, social role, private self, displays not only the various and shifting identifications other players of the drama also assume, the roles and functions envisioned imply the presence of dramatic “personae” inherent in the role playing in everyday life. It is no surprise that this masquerade of life is often witnessed passively and with awe even by the actors involved, like in Miss Rosa’s following statement:

Turned twenty true enough yet still a child, still living in that womb-like corridor where the world came not even as living echo but as dead incomprehensible shadow, where with the quiet and unalarmed amazement of a child I watched the miragy antics of men and women—my father, my sister, Thomas Sutpen, Judith, Henry, Charles Bon—called honor, principle, marriage, love, bereavement, death. (133)

If the characters are masks playing out or at times sitting back and watching their own life-drama in the audience, the entire stage of their tragedy is the approximation of the Greek amphitheatre. This elevated and exaggerated stage design, with actors and actresses wearing magnified masks to delineate eternal and ever-recurring rituals is grasped in the section where the characters are represented as enlarged portraits hanging suspended in air. “[T]he (now) five faces looked with a sort of lifeless and perennial bloom like painted portraits hung in vacuum, each taken at its forewarned peak and smoothed of all thought and experience” (62), says Faulkner’s narrator. The scene inevitably recalls associations with Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where again the ancient doom of the family is played out on the scene against the family portraits predicting and determining the players’ unavoidable destiny.

#### **(d) The submerged narrative**

Through the filters of the fabular, the Biblical and Greek patterns, the shape and directions of Faulkner’s original narrative are visible. The tale that veils itself in traditions of the oral, the mythic and the ancient tragic ultimately unfolds as the story of the collapse of the South. The assumed story-telling traditions and guises all supply thematic, characterological, scenic, narratological underpinnings to the main and submerged narrative. Neither is it accidental that the

novel ends with the curious exchange between Quentin and Shreve discussing the South and what it means for Quentin. To the prompting question of Shreve's as to why Quentin hates the South the latter replies:

'I don't hate it,' Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; 'I don't hate it,' he said. I  
*I don't hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; *I don't. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!* (311)

In effect the words uttered do acknowledge Quentin's simultaneous hatred and love for the South despite all of its moral corruptness, history, its social ills, of which the entire preceding novel is a record. Thomas Sutpen, the king-ogre of fairy dreams, the all-powerful Creator of the Bible and the almighty and tragic Agamemnon, is also the upstart Southern aristocrat, who brings about his own and his kin's decline by accepting and practicing the racism held as the foremost ill responsible for the defeat of the family and the region.

## **2. The masks of gender**

The novel enumerates a line a characters who are neither female nor entirely male but rather neutral with respect to gender. This curious position of standing on the borders (regarding sexual identity) has already been commented on with respect to Miss Rosa's figure, whose sexlessness is a recurring motif of the narrative. She says of herself in section "Five" "I became all polymaths love's androgynous advocate" (121). Her want of love haunts her from her childhood and follows her into the depravations of adulthood. Yet, her loveless life does not entirely explain her unique gender identity of the in-between. She sees her femininity as "hollow" (120), and at times she even meditates upon turning into or being reborn "weaponed and panoplied as a man" (120). The feminine side of her self misses and grieves for love, and accordingly she constantly imagines infatuation with idols she hardly knows (Sutpen) or has not ever met (Bon). Her fancied masculinity, not elaborated in the novel, is restricted to a passing imagining, which at best is a substitute for her femininity she and the outside world consider dead. The members of the trio of Miss Rosa-Judith-Clytie are all versions of the same loveless, sexless life that Miss Rosa's narrative confesses about. Not even Judith's

“relationship” with Bon, which almost results in marriage, involves any form of physicality. She is repeatedly mentioned in the novel as “the same as a widow without ever having been a bride” (12).

Similarly, Bon and his son (Charles Etienne) are without a clear gender identity. Charles Etienne, the only child of Bon and his octoroon mistress is described in the novel as a “child with a face of not old but without age, as if he had had no childhood, [...] as if he had not been human born but instead created without the agency of man or agony of woman and orphaned by no human being” (161). Bon’s conception on earth is likewise unhuman, “as far as he knew [he] had never had any father but had been created somehow between that woman who wouldn’t let him play with other children, and that lawyer [...]—two people neither of whom had taken pleasure or found passion in getting him or suffered pain and travail in birthing him” (280). The passionless, painless conceptions and mysterious origins emphasized regarding the son and the father (Bon), underpin their unearthliness. Just as they appear to be not human born, they are neither exclusively masculine, nor exclusively feminine, but both. Henry and Judith are both in love with Bon; in fact as stated in the novel Henry and Judith were a “single personality with two bodies both of which had been seduced almost simultaneously by a man” (75). Bon, however, clearly takes interest in Henry, his attraction to or love for Judith is at best marginal. Whether Bon and Henry’s attachment is anything else but a brotherly love is not detailed in the novel, but given that Judith and Henry are two versions of the same self, the love that the different-sexed siblings share exists between the brothers as well. Bon slices himself up between the people drawn to him (the octoroon, Judith, Henry), just as Jesus is willing to embrace them all. His androgyny then is not a mask of homosexuality but rather a metaphor for his larger, more relevant position of the in-between (human and holy, man and woman, later: black and white).

Whether it is the outside world that projects this vacuous gender identity (Miss Rosa, Clytie, Judith), or some mythic function (social role) that metamorphoses as one’s dual gender position (Bon, Henry, Charles Etienne), the hesitation between clear-cut gender roles is abundantly present throughout the novel. Just why did Faulkner cover up the original gender traces of his characters? Why did he choose to disguise gender with its lack or multiplication? The answers partly lie

with Faulkner's core narrative of the decline of the South. The extended and repeated presence of sexlessness (the masking of proper gender identities) ultimately results in the denial of the notions of rejuvenation and renewal. It is not by chance that the potential couples of the coming generations: Bon and Judith, Miss Rosa and Sutpen fail long before having even started. These relationships are tainted and cursed by impeding incest, greed for power, obligations of dynastic schemes unmotivated by love. Even when whites do reproduce (as in the singular case of Ellen Coldfield and Thomas Sutpen), their offsprings turn out to be enervated, empty receptacles of their father's doom. The rest of the children who come to life are either put to death as soon as they are born (Wash Jones' granddaughter), meet their death caused by fatal diseases (like Charles Etienne), or wander around the cursed "castle" howling idiotically.

### 3. Racial masks

As the characters of the novel are virtually hidden behind the guises of the narratives, as Faulkner's original tale masks as fable-myth-drama, and as the main actors hesitate between clear-cut gender roles, so are racial identities contested and kept secret. The question of "race," the controversial and even paradoxical paradigms it was bound to bring about had been reflected prior to Faulkner. The double taboo, as well as the most extreme case scenario that could evolve in the context of white-black interaction was obviously the co-occurrence of miscegenation and incest. *Absalom, Absalom!* in fact continues and crowns a long line of narratives, whose major focus is the complex "interracial incest" theme. Examples for similar preoccupations in subject matter range from James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), through Pauline Hopkins's "Of One Blood" (1902–1903), Thomas Dixon's *The Sins of the Fathers* (1912), all the way to the oft-quoted Trueblood-episode of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Although Werner Sollors in his *neither black nor white yet both* (1999) devotes an entire chapter to the incest-miscegenation theme, he does not consider the related issue of masking as an equally relevant component. Yet, masks do play a central role in race relations, so much so that without them the very essence of the social, historical, political, cultural and surely personal

conflicts of the American South in the 19th century is likely to be missed. That “interracial incest” can even occur (as a cultural phenomenon or as a fictional theme) is largely due to two interrelated factors, namely (a) the historical curse of color, which had to be masked or denied to avoid the shame and abasement it involves, and (b) the secrecy of parenthood covering/masking the reality of miscegenation.

### **(a) The curse of color**

The notion that blackness was viewed by society as a curse upon the individual is interspersed throughout Faulkner’s story. The wife whom Thomas Sutpen marries in Haiti hides her racial identity, and is consequently denied and rejected by her husband. Charles Bon, the only son born out of that wedding likewise remains unacknowledged by his father because of his tainted bloodline. Both Eulalia Bon Sutpen and her son are in a way pressured to disguise their true racial identities and pass for whites (whether out of premeditated design or unconsciously) by a white society which does not tolerate discoloration, i.e., the violation of racial purity. The curse of race runs especially deep in the consciousness of the American South, and Faulkner knows both the myths and the realities of this awareness of race. It is not by chance that the four narratives reach this ultimate point of interest only by gradation. The entire novel, as Sollors argues, can be read as a tale told twice, for the first time (by Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson) entirely without the incest and miscegenation motifs, and secondly by the Shreve-Quentin pair, who re-read the whole story with this filter included. As Sollors phrases it: “The novel gives the readers a tale and then asks, almost clinically, what would change in it if the elements of first incest and then miscegenation were added to it” (331).

Faulkner’s underlying story then concerns not simply the decline of the South, but ultimately race relations in the South, which to a great extent account for this decline. In tracing the causes of Henry’s fratricidal murder of Charles Bon, the first two narratives offer clues like bigamy, liason and marriage with an octoroon, which somehow seem invalid. The second two narratives of Shreve and Quentin make “sense out of many details that would otherwise remain unexplained”

(330) says Sollors. The fact that the college friends do not only tell but also invent as well as relive the possible events that led up to Charles Bon's murder adds a great deal to the heretofore benumbed tale. The contradictory, even paradoxical patterns of race that were bred in the South can only be highlighted by and through the fantasies and approximations of the two young men, possibly homosexual. In the Canadian Shreve and the Southern Quentin the Charles Bon-Henry pair finds intelligible echoes. The ice-cold college room serves as a backdrop as well as a symbolical mirror of emotions and moods to sift through and retrospectively make sense of the past. Although outsiders to the happenings both, and also removed from the past actions in time and space, they are curiously most entitled to decode and interpret the relevance of former events (for themselves and the reader). Their deep and mutual understanding of social taboos, the implications of social exclusion, a shared notion of curse, and knowledge of paradoxes that historical, social, personal conditions might bring about, make of them interpreters and impersonators of the past.

The entangling paradigms that the curse of color elicits are many and they find curious echoes in the attraction-aversion patterns of sex (Shreve-Charles & Quentin-Henry), nation (North vs. South), history (the Civil War) related in the novel. Although the ideal of the racially pure is constantly set in contrast with the racially tainted or contaminated, Thomas Sutpen himself violates the taboo of racial boundaries (both in fathering Bon, and when fathering Clytie with one of his own slaves). Bon enters the war on the southern side, and thus is figuratively—and ironically—fighting for the maintenance of his subservient social position. Racial masquerades are asserted and refused by Bon and Charles Etienne as the situation might require. As Faulkner's narrator puts it: he (Charles Etienne) was

hunting out situations in order to flaunt and fling the ape-like body of his charcoal companion in the faces of all and any who would retaliate: the Negro stevedores and deckhands of steamboats or in city honky-tonks who thought he was a white man and believed it only the more strongly when he denied it; the white man who, when he said he was a Negro, believed that he lied in order to save his skin, or worse: from sheer besotment of sexual perversion; in either

case the result was the same: the man with body and limbs almost as light and delicate as a girl's giving the first blow... (170)

The curse of color is nowhere more agitating than in the figure of the mulatto, whose liminality creates double alliances and retributions in both the white and the black society (exemplified through the figures of Bon, Charles Etienne, Bon's octoroon mistress as well as Clytie). It is not by chance that both Bon and later his son marry or choose octoroon or full-blooded black partners so as to give recognition to their otherwise hidden blood-lines, and thus possibly make good for their inadvertent strategies of passing.

### **(b) The secrecy of parenthood**

The taboo of miscegenation, a consequence of the taboo of race is both the ultimate wrong and the ultimate fact of Southern existence which the novel seeks to explore in its full complexity. As white fathers (primarily Sutpen) have a tendency to refuse their ill-gotten black offspring, so it is the greatest desire of their sons (e.g. Bon) to be acknowledged by the secretive fathers. Characteristically, Charles Bon is willing even to go as far as incest to be as much as reacted to by his father. The novel as well as history, however, denies such open confrontation between the Father and the Son, when justice could be done, or sins could be admitted. The taboo of racial intermixing remains the deepest secret (though a commonly occurring reality) in the South. This fact and the traces of it are covered up both by the narrative patterns (Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson mask the reality of sexual intermixing between the races by dropping interracial connections from their respective stories), the assertions of the characters (Bon's insistence on his and Henry's shared racial origins, i.e., whiteness), and the actions of the protagonists (Sutpen's resistance to as much as confront the mulatto son and reveal him the truth). Yet, as the novel ultimately suggests miscegenation is the final trump card for Sutpen as well as for Henry in resisting Charles Bon's seductive lure. It beats all, and eventually is of greater relevance than incest would be. "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear" (294), cries Bon in the climactic scene before his death.

The masks of narration, and the masks of gender culminate and reveal the masks of race, which hide the troubled relationship of white

society to the Negro. For it is not only racial intermixing or the realities of passing that are laid bare by Faulkner but the very complexities of the black presence (whether historical, social, cultural or personal) in the south. As the masks are gradually torn away (from narrative, gender and race), Faulkner's inquest of white responsibility regarding the social and historical situation of blacks, his interrogation of the accomplices in the crime (of murder, of slavery as a system, of intermixing), and his unveiling of "the fantasies of 'race' (...) [functioning] as the screen for all sort of repressed desires" (Sollors 331) become evident.

If, as J. Hillis Miller argues, incest is "much sameness" (qtd. in Sollors 324) taken to an extreme, whose narrative analogue is the "constative" (rather than the performative as Miller states), and if miscegenation's—defined as "too much difference" (cited in Sollors 324)—analogue is the performative, the novel delves into the latter at the apropos of the former. Irving Howe is absolutely right in stating that "of all Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* most nearly approaches structural perfection [since] (...) the novel creates sudden eddies of confusion" (224) both to model and to mirror the "eddies of confusion" in the Southern paradigms of race, culture, society, history. Faulkner's ingenious narrative technique then does not only mask but also unmask those psychological, social and historical conflicts that lie at the heart of interracial realities in the South.

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