

A Study of the Myth of the American South and its Womanhood

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the construction and cultural significance of the myth of Southern womanhood in American Southern literature. It argues that after the Civil War, the defeated South transformed its historical loss into the myth of the Lost Cause, creating an idealized image of the Old South as a world of honor, grace, and social order. Within this mythology, the white upper-class Southern woman was elevated as a symbol of purity, virtue, and civilization, while simultaneously being deprived of agency through patriarchal and racial ideologies. Drawing on theories of Michel Foucault's power relations, the paper reveals how the idealization of Southern womanhood functioned as a cultural mechanism that reinforced male authority and justified the plantation system. It further explores how this myth shaped representations of gender, race, and social hierarchy, and argues that writers both inherited and challenged this tradition by exposing the contradictions behind the sacred image of Southern womanhood.*

KEYWORDS *Southern womanhood, Civil War, myth, plantation ideology, gender*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Civil War represented not only a military and political rupture in American history but also the beginning of a cultural reconstruction of the postwar South. In the aftermath of defeat, Southern society transformed historical loss into a collective narrative of memory known as the Lost Cause myth. Through this mythology, the antebellum South was retrospectively imagined as a refined and honorable social order, while the realities of slavery and racial domination were minimized or obscured. Central to this reconstruction was the idealization of Southern womanhood. The white upper-class Southern woman was elevated as a symbol of purity, virtue, and cultural legitimacy, serving simultaneously as the embodiment of Southern identity and as a justification for the patriarchal and racial hierarchies that sustained the Southern social order.

This paper argues that the myth of Southern womanhood functioned not merely as a literary or cultural representation, but as a discursive formation through which gender, race, and power relations were organized and sustained. By examining the historical construction of the Southern lady and its representation in literary discourse, this study reveals how the idealization of femininity simultaneously glorified and constrained women, transforming them into symbolic guardians of a lost social order while denying their individual agency.

II. THE MYTHICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SOUTHERN LADY

The Civil War had inflicted a heavy blow upon the South. But it had also glorified the South, because the South had gained a myth. Arising from the ashes of military failure, a vision of order and grace emerged to communicate a myth of the lost cause, turning a defeated institution into a sustained legend. Southerners imagined an Old South of moonlight and magnolias, delicate belles and handsome cavalry, faithful old family servants, cotton fields, and elegant mansions. All had been lost, but notably lost, in the war for Southern independence. The Old South had gone with the wind, but its values of soul and spirit remained and rose.

The myth of the Old South was, in essence, the legend of the past, fraught with a historical sense of honor and courage, and the Southern society at large supported itself through difficult times by cherishing the memory of Southern glories in the War, and the dream of what might have been if the War had not been lost. And the people there, the Southerners, are “a mythological people, created half out of dream and half out of slander, who live in a still legendary land.” (Rubin 169)

W. J. Cash affirms in *The Mind of the South* that the cult of Southern womanhood was mythically associated with “the very notion” of the region. In effect, it was central to the region’s conception of itself. The cult depended on a clear division of roles. Black women, poor women, and new immigrants were never included within the ‘cult of domesticity’ that theoretically assigned white women of the middle and upper classes to a ‘pedestal.’ Women of color and women of the working class were always expected to toil in the fields, bear and rear children in the houses. Beyond that huge exception, white women from the respectable classes also departed substantially from what the dominant culture defined as their proper role: creatures of angelic perfection, stainless expression of the ideal. Thus, the white women, as Cash suggests, became “the pitiful Mother of God.” (Cash 89)

In this way, the white upper-class Southern women were estranged from their own physicality, divorced from the ‘low’ by class norms, and empedestaled like the statue. They were prohibited from speaking a vernacular of bodily functions, from sex to birth to menstruation to defecation, because they were innocent and ignorant of such things, a silent endorsement of the patriarchal representation as the designated work of the act of Southern culture.

That is to say, the white Southern culture attempted to efface white women’s sexual desire by establishing a simple and untroubled code in which females were either ladies or whores or slaves. The point has been testified in the cases of Horace Benbow in *Sanctuary* (1931), Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (1932) and Quentin Compson who all feel suffocated by their discovery of the fact or possibility of sexuality in women, and as a result, struggle protect their notion of white woman as a figure of stainless virgin: dressed in white, it might be, a temple or sanctuary for icons. Quentin is again the classic instance who is morbidly sensitive with the purity of his white sister as a white lady when he scolds her: “Why must you [Caddy] do like *nigger women* (my emphasis) do in the pasture the ditches the dark woods hot hidden furious in the dork woods.” (Faulkner 114) Just as in *Sanctuary* and *Light in August*, female sexuality is linked with *black* (my emphasis), the unclean. Since Quentin clings to the Southern myth of sacred womanhood, he desperately defends women’s honor to the last minute of his life (as is shown by his fight with Gerald Bland a few hours before his suicide).

III. THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF SOUTHERN WOMANHOOD

To better explore the myth of Southern womanhood, we are required to fall back upon the hypotheses of the plantation fiction, in which slavery was benign, the plantation was the earthly Eden, and the plantation lady was the unfallen Eve, ruling genius of the garden that contrasted exquisitely with the cruel workshops of the mechanized North. To understand the importance of the representation of the white upper-class Southern women in the plantation novels, we need to clarify the concept of the lady: “A lady was not a woman who happened to be more affluent than others. She was a white woman whose privileged position was essential to her identity and social role.” (Fox-Genovese 202)

As a consequence, the Southern lady became “the South’s Palladium, ... a central symbol in the South’s idea of itself,” the goddess Diana, and the Virgin Mary. (Cash 89) On her pure body was inscribed the ideology of the plantation South, which consciously or unconsciously, most white women had internalized as their own inherent norms.

It was from *Swallow Barn* by John Kennedy, the first plantation novel, that the first representation of the Southern lady. Although the heroine, Bel Tracy, an athletic horsewoman and falconer with a bad complexion, does not behave or look like a postbellum fictional lady, she is presented as a paradigm of earthly virtues. After the Civil War, the region's

full hopelessness materialized. Its defensiveness as well as defiance emerged in the exaggerated cavalier romances of writers such as Thomas Nelson Page, whose sentimental attitude helped solidify the mythmaking of the plantation women.

As the highest product of the antebellum system, Southern women were to a large extent its justification of the Southern myth, and they were expected to be the incarnation of personal beauty, chastity, and social grace. As Ann Firor Scott writes, “if talking could make it so, the antebellum Southern women of the upper class would have been the most perfect examples of womankind yet seen on earth.” (Baym 193) The matter does not stop there. The mythologization of Southern womanhood placed her in the center of proslavery conflict. It was clearly proclaimed that slavery raised white women from an inferior state of domestic drudgery and allowed her the leisure to be a lady, and thus to hold the refinements of civilization in trust for her man and children. That is, the idealization of the Southern womanhood supported the belief that it was achieved by the system under which the Southern women lived, their privileged situation in the antebellum South having allowed for the utmost development of womanly nature.

In the sustaining stories of plantation myth, womanhood and nationalism were inextricable: the South was the Mother, the Bride, the Queen, a female entity. The Southern lady was thus empedestaled like a statue, which Lillian Smith decried as the legacy of the Old South: “They listened to the round words of men’s tribute to Sacred Womanhood and believed, thinking no doubt that if they were not sacred then what under God’s heaven *was* (original emphasis) the matter with them! Once hoisted up by the old colonels’ oratory, they stayed on lonely pedestals and rigidly played ‘statue’ while their men went about more important affairs elsewhere.” (Smith 137)

The lady as represented in plantation ideology was powerless, though seemingly significant. As a matter of fact, she was excluded from power through her highly articulated roles or ‘stories,’ either as an angel in the house or a punished fallen woman, so that she couldn’t escape the rule of the patriarchy.

IV. THE IDEALIZATION OF SOUTHERN FEMINITY

As the emblem of the South, the most representational metaphor for the Southern woman was the exotic flower in the Garden of the South. Such imagery more than ornamental, because beneath the metaphor was the strong implication that the slave system had existed to produce its flower, Southern womanhood. Furthermore, in his role as the gardener (and of course, the protector as well), the Southern man came across a subordinate to his product—and devoted to it. The perfection of the flower vindicated them. And the real point underlying the myth of Southern womanhood was that Southern women owed Southern men who had sacrificed so much for them. (Baym 193)

The myth of Southern womanhood was actually a myth of Southern manhood. In the aftermath of the Civil War (the ultimate defense of the system by arms), the Southern writers withdrew into the never-never land of the Lost Cause, out of which they created a romantic vision of a grand, tragically doomed civilization that they were determined to make live in historical memory. The mythologization of the white woman as a holy and pure goddess functioned as a symbol of the pinnacle, the crown, the apex, of the mythic South. In essence, it was a defense of the imagined antebellum Southern system. More specifically, it was a defense and praise of the Southern men, who instituted, protected, and sacrificed for such a system and thus supported and protected these women. In sum, the myth of the Southern womanhood was a hypocritical folktale in a fantastic guise, constructed as an object of man’s gaze and desire to *silence* the feminine.

To demythologize the Southern womanhood, we must recognize “the mutual interdependence of sexuality, economies, and politics without underestimating the full significance of each in human society.” (Rubin 210)

In this sense, it is very helpful to recall Michel Foucault’s theory of power relations. Through his explicit discussions of discourse, subjectivity, and body technology in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1971) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975) in the 1970s, Foucault then defines ‘power’ as meaning structural “relations, a more-or-less organized, hierarchical, coordinating cluster of relations.” (Foucault 198) To put it simply, power is both locatable and real in all kinds of social relations and institutions. No event stems from a single, coherent cause, but is the product of a vast network of power.

By delineating the technologies of production, of sign systems, of sexuality, of subjectivity, and of the self, Foucault contends that the deployment and appropriation of power in a society is through the hegemonic constitution of prevailing discourses. Put it in another way, what we are (or, more precisely, our understanding and conception of ourselves and our position in the society) has been shaped and deployed by discourses that precede us, that were here before we were

born. By elaborating how the ‘rules’ of a particular discourse impose a form of order, Foucault points out the historical fact that a dominant discourse works to create a hegemonic economy which has the effect of *silencing* (my emphasis) alternative economies to be subordinate.

Moreover, Foucault asserts that discourses are not to be studied and appreciated for their capacity to represent reality of a particular people at a particular moment in history. The official explanation and documents a society offers for itself are by no means indicative of what is really happening in the society; the reality might well be the opposite of what is proclaimed officially. As a result, Foucault abandons the traditional historical approaches and instead takes his methodology, the archaeological strategy. His purpose is to bring out divergencies, inconsistencies, and irregularities of history, which he calls the *buried knowledges*, in the sorts of histories and subjects that are usually excluded from official documents of a culture, such as insanity, penal methods and institutions, and sexuality.

The past is mute. So it appears perfectly justified that the historian is to recover and discover the languages of the mute past. As a result, the historical records restored by the historian are well reasoned to serve as the historical truths, exerting powerful impacts on people’s understandings of history. However, in the light of Foucault’s thought, we need to see through the extremely complex system of power relations to unveil what the historical records have so often tried to suppress—the injustices of the past, the acts of violence, by which the distinctions and discriminations that the historian himself has accepted as the condition of civilization and progress. Traditionally in the service of power, the historical texts by the historian are usually a history that both the rulers and masters of the régime have, in conspiracy, tried to admit and accept. In so doing, that is, by making the past speak in accordance with the ruling class, the rulers of the society could ward off the potentially destructive conflicts produced by repression and exclusion, ground the social and political order, and demonstrate that the antagonisms and ruptures that seem to threaten their legitimacy are beyond all possibility.

Understandably, it is in the similar circumstances that the historical imagination of the American South has been drawn to what was remote, hidden, or inaccessible: to beginnings and ends, to the archive, the tomb, the womb, the so-called mute people, such as the lowly, the alien, the female, the black, the oppressed and the repressed in general, whose languages and histories have remained an enigma, exactly as what Jules Michelet calls ‘les silences de l’histoire.’

According to Foucault, the effects of power are omniscient in all kinds of social relations and institutional settings, while sexuality is “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power.” (Foucault 103) So power and sexuality are closely entwined with each other because power produces sexuality and gives it meaning. Power relations in sexuality are manifested in the relations between males and females.

Men’s control over the complex system of social powers, including mechanisms, discourses, distribution and adjustments, has imposed a secondary position on women, the ‘Second Sex’. According to Simone de Beauvoir, as her opinion is clearly stated in the title of her book *The Second Sex* (1949), the terms man/woman, and masculine/feminine are not used symmetrically (they are binaries, as have been analyzed in “Introduction”): the term man is always positive, standing for the norm, for humanity in general; on the contrary, woman is the secondary term, what is ‘other’ to the norm, and so does not have a positive meaning in its own right, but is defined in relation to man—as what man is not. Hence, in the social life which is a complex structure of power relations, and at each stage (production, circulation, consumption and reproduction), the society is imprinted by institutional male dominance over female. Men’s sexual hegemony has excluded women from the legitimate history. As a consequence, men have, on one hand, silenced women by ignoring and denying their languages and presences; and on the other hand, propagandized the dominant masculine exemplar of perfect manhood: an ideal summed up as ‘M’, representing muscles, morals, and mind. The whole of written history reflects the male hegemony which commands it. It is a history of the rule of patriarchy, in which women are presented as mere materials, supports, and negative examples for the accomplishment of man’s designs. It is man’s history in which woman is silent or even absent. This line of thought, I should readily admit, is part of the theoretical basis for my further discussion of the representations of the Southern womanhood in the historical context of the South.

In regard to gender roles in the Old South, the order established was exceedingly clear. Women should be pious and pure, domestic and submissive. Men should be their protectors, like knights. In so doing, the plantation ideology excluded women from power through highly articulated roles or stories. Eventually the Southern lady became “a personification, effective only as she works in others’ imaginations. Efforts to join person and personification must fail because the idea of Southern womanhood specifically denies the self.” (Jones 4)

V. CONCLUSION

The myth of the South as well as its womanhood was a desperate voicing of the Southerners' collective imagination, not of factual history; it was a dramatic projection of a hopeless desire upon the mind of the people. The mythic persistence in Southern literature reveals the enduring tension between historical memory and historical reality. Writers such as William Faulkner inherited the cultural legacy of Southern womanhood but also interrogated its contradictions, exposing the instability beneath its seemingly timeless ideals.

By demystifying the image of the sacred Southern woman, Southern fiction participates in a broader reassessment of the South's past and challenges the ideological structures that produced such representations. Ultimately, the study of Southern womanhood illuminates not only the gendered foundations of Southern identity but also how literature engages with the processes of remembering, revising, and contesting history.

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