ABSTRACT

COURTNEY THOMAS
The Antisocial Escape of William Faulkner’s Tragic Mulattoes
(Under the Direction of DR. JAMES KIBLER)

With the characters of Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (1932), William Faulkner constructs two masculine versions of the traditionally female tragic mulatto narrative concerning the plight of a mixed-race individual. Ostensibly, the philandering Charles Bon and the violent Joe Christmas exemplify the “strong and silent” ultra-masculine stereotype and thus have no connection with the vulnerable and sensitive tragic mulatto female. However, Bon and Christmas are connected to this usually female archetype because both men are troubled by the internal conflict of identity that is central to the tragic mulatto myth. The men likewise fear the tragic mulatto’s fates of societal isolation and loneliness. Yet unlike the passive female who exercises little to no agency in preventing her tragic fate, Bon and Joe actively resist their prescribed fates through the manifestation of qualities indicative of antisocial personality disorder. In this thesis, I will explore the factors that lead to the development of antisocial qualities in these two characters, how the men utilize these qualities as methods of combating the confinements of the tragic mulatto myth, and how the two characters’ attempts to escape their stereotypical fates ultimately prove to be futile.

INDEX WORDS: William Faulkner, Tragic mulatto, Miscegenation, Absalom, Absalom!, Light in August, Antisocial personality disorder, Thesis, Honors Program, The University of Georgia, Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities
THE ANTISOCIAL ESCAPE OF WILLIAM FAULKNER’S TRAGIC MULATTOES

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to everyone who has helped to me achieve my dream of earning a college degree and who have always believed in me: my mother, Linda Thomas; my father, Tensley Thomas, Sr.; my brother, Tensley Thomas, Jr.; and Melinda DeMaria and Patrick Winter in the University of Georgia Office of Undergraduate Admissions.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The tragic mulatto narrative, of which an early example is Lydia Marie Child’s short 1842 short story “The Quadroons,” traditionally involves a young mixed-race woman, who because of her light complexion and beauty, “passes”, or lives, as a white woman, is rejected by white society once her black lineage is revealed, and is condemned to a sorrowful life of low social standing among black society. The typical tragic mulatto is most importantly consumed by an inner conflict of identity and a sense of displacement within both the white race and the black race. White society shuns her because she physically represents the immoral act of miscegenation; black society expresses contempt towards her because of her supposed arrogance and sense of superiority due to her ability to pass for white. In addition, the tragic mulatto is vulnerable and naïve and particularly susceptible to succumbing to the life of a “fallen woman.”

With the characters of Charles Bon in Absalom, Absalom! (1936) and Joe Christmas in Light in August (1932), William Faulkner constructs two masculine versions of the tragic mulatto narrative. Ostensibly, the philandering Charles Bon and the violent Joe Christmas exemplify the “strong and silent” ultra-masculine stereotype and thus have no connection with the vulnerable and sensitive tragic mulatto female. However, Bon and Christmas are connected to this usually female archetype because both men are troubled by the internal conflict of identity that is central to the tragic mulatto myth. The men likewise fear the tragic mulatto’s fates of societal isolation and loneliness. Yet unlike the passive female who exercises little to no agency in preventing her
tragic fate, Bon and Joe actively resist their prescribed fates through the manifestation of qualities indicative of antisocial personality disorder.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, the following traits are diagnostic criteria of antisocial personality disorder:

1. Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest
2. Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeatedly lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure
3. Impulsivity or failure to plan ahead
4. Irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults
5. Reckless disregard for safety of self or others
6. Consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations
7. Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having, hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another (645)

Overall, the “central characteristic of antisocial [personality disorder] is a long-standing pattern of socially irresponsible behaviors that reflects a disregard of the rights of others” (Emmelkamp 166). Bon’s selfishness, Christmas’s irascibility, and the detached attitudes of both men render the men as exemplars of this disorder. In this thesis, I will explore the factors that lead to the development of antisocial qualities in Charles Bon and Joe Christmas, how the men utilize these qualities as methods of combating the confinements of the tragic mulatto myth, and how the two characters’ attempts to escape their stereotypical fates ultimately prove to be futile.
CHAPTER 2
THE ABANDONED

Charles Bon and Joe Christmas represent two of William Faulkner’s most fascinating and complex characters because Faulkner at first compels his audience to despise the characters’ selfish and hurtful actions, but then convinces the audience to pity the two men by revealing their tragic backgrounds. Both Bon and Christmas emerge from childhoods plagued by abandonment and the absence of love. The early experiences of these men serve as the basis for understanding the anti-social attitudes they develop as adults.

The Elusive Father

Charles Bon’s story is a story of revenge—the story of a selfish young man who involves his white half-siblings, Henry and Judith Sutpen, in his plan of retaliation against the white father who abandoned him, Thomas Sutpen. Sutpen originally abandoned Bon and Bon’s mother, Eulalia, upon discovering Eulalia’s black ancestry; Sutpen felt that his first wife and child tainted his “grand design” of attaining the wealth and social status of the plantation owners whom he admired. Almost three decades after this abandonment, Bon concocts a plan of the emotional and physical seduction of Henry and Judith, the children from Sutpen’s second marriage with a respectable white woman who perfectly completed his “grand design”, in order to taint and destroy Sutpen’s desired legacy (Absalom, Absalom! 209). However, Bon’s calculating and detached demeanor conceals the pain and vulnerability that remains from his childhood in which “he took it for granted that all kids didn’t have fathers too” (Absalom 246). Therefore, Bon’s
quest to find Sutpen represents more than a story of revenge. Bon’s journey to his father’s home of Sutpen’s Hundred also is “a narrative of unrequited love” (Weinstein 145) of a man who yearns to finally find validation for his life through acknowledgment by his father. In Bon’s lonely world, his insecure mother, whose abandonment by her white husband renders her an example of the female tragic mulatto and who draws her son into her life of sorrow and resentment, is his closest acquaintance. In Bon’s plan to escape this isolated world of misery and to create his own identity, Sutpen represents the pinnacle of the white male-dominated society that rejects mixed-race individuals like Bon and his mother. For Bon, acceptance and inclusion in the microcosm of the white Sutpen family symbolize acceptance and inclusion in the macrocosm of white society in general.

The core of Bon’s antisocial behavior lies in the description of the young man as “that mental and spiritual orphan whose fate it apparently was to exist in some limbo halfway between where his corporeality was and his mentality and moral equipment desired to be” (Absalom 102). Yet the cause of Bon’s emotional flaws cannot solely be attributed to Sutpen’s absence. The infecting presence of his mother, Eulalia, serves as the other primary source. Bon never inherited the proper “moral equipment” (Absalom 102) from Eulalia and instead inherited her desire for revenge against Sutpen. As a single parent, Eulalia would have been expected to compensate for her son’s absent father by bestowing him with a surplus of affection. In contrast, she gives Bon a “childhood” that “wasn’t a childhood” (Absalom 252) by embedding into her young son’s mind her own “busted water pipe of incomprehensible fury and fierce yearning and jealous rage” (Absalom 246) towards his father. Bon did not have a normal childhood because Eulalia deliberately intended to not raise a child. With the assistance of her greedy lawyer who plots how they will receive Sutpen’s newly acquired wealth, she acted not as a mother but rather
as a conniving instructor “planning and grooming” (*Absalom* 252) her child to be the “man that hadn’t arrived yet” (*Absalom* 252), the man who would serve as the instrument to avenge Sutpen’s repudiation of her. Similar to how Sutpen symbolizes the white patriarchal society for Bon, Sutpen symbolizes for Eulalia the racist and unsympathetic white society that scorns and rejects her. Since society’s prejudice has subjugated her to the status of an outcast who cannot overcome her lowly status because of the oppression of blacks and of women, Eulalia believes that Bon possesses a greater opportunity to successfully retaliate against this racist society because of his gender. Through her son, Eulalia hopes to vicariously reverse her tragic situation and inflict pain on the people responsible for this tragedy. Bon lacks emotions for others because he was not taught to feel. He was taught to function as the inhuman “dynamite which destroys the house and the family and maybe even the whole community” (*Absalom* 252) of Sutpen’s new life.

Although Bon begins his journey to Sutpen’s Hundred with the obvious motive to enact his mother’s plan for revenge, another motive drives his search for Sutpen: the desire to remove the pain that still remains from his fatherless childhood. Bon can only find true fulfillment for his life if Sutpen will claim him as his son and thus secure Bon’s entrance into Sutpen’s white world. In his fantasy of his first visit to Sutpen’s Hundred, Bon imagines how “he would walk into the house and see the man who made him and then he would know; there would be that flash, that instant of indisputable recognition between them and he would know for sure and forever” (*Absalom* 263). Yet Bon’s first interaction with Sutpen fails to fulfill his fantasy, because “nothing happened—no shock, no hot communicated flesh that speech would have been too slow even to impede—nothing” (*Absalom* 264). Bon plans to visit the Sutpen family disguised as a friend of Henry, whom he meets at college, and as a potential suitor for Judith. However, Bon
knows that Sutpen is aware of this masquerade and realizes that Bon is the son he abandoned decades earlier. Although Sutpen knows that Bon is aware that his father knows the truth, Sutpen nonetheless refuses to correct his past wrongs and finally offer Bon the long-awaited love and acknowledgment that he owes his first child. Sutpen heartlessly inflicts a second dose of pain in Bon’s life. As a child, Bon “had even learned to live without” Sutpen because he “was bred up never to expect to see” his father, so Sutpen’s absence may not have had the most drastic emotional effect on his childhood. Yet this second infliction of pain by Sutpen shatters Bon because it is more physical and personal; Sutpen denies Bon to his face.

Bon refuses to erase the possibility of the fulfillment of his fantasy upon Sutpen’s initial rejection. Bon attempts to convince himself that maybe Sutpen did not see him the first time and thus plans to “put himself in Sutpen’s way” (Absalom 287). The second look that the two men exchange finally extinguishes Bon’s fantasy, for once Bon looks at Sutpen’s “expressionless and rocklike face, at the pale boring eyes in which there was no flicker,” he knows that “it was all finished now, that was all of it now and at last” (Absalom 287). The magnitude of Bon’s yearning for Sutpen’s love is evident in the young man’s wish to possess anything related to his father, even a “lock of his hair or a paring from his finger nail” (Absalom 269), which signifies that Bon’s desire for Sutpen resembles an obsession. This obsession for Sutpen ties Bon to Eulalia, especially since they both now suffer from the pain of unrequited love for the same man. This occurrence of a white man’s refusal to offer love causes Bon’s life to echo the failed romance of a tragic mulatto archetype such as Eulalia. Yet Bon’s experience of unreturned affection from his father leads to a more drastic consequence than Eulalia’s experience of unreturned affection from a lover. Eulalia’s tale of unrequited love causes her to become
emotionally hardened and to lead a stagnant life, and thus causes a figurative death; Bon’s tale of
unrequited love eventually ends with his literal death.

*A Life Without Connection*

While Charles Bon’s story is a story of revenge upon one man and his family, Joe
Christmas’ story is a story of revenge upon society in general. Although Bon’s sense of
emptiness in his life stems from his father’s absence and his mother’s inability to compensate for
his emotional loss, Bon nonetheless had a better childhood than Joe, whose “confused attempt to
create personal identity” (Jenkins 67) begins in an orphanage where “the other children [call]
him Nigger” (*Light in August* 493) and he is made a pariah at an early age. Joe fails to establish
normal relationships with others in his adulthood and cannot establish stable emotional bonds
that are not scarred by his ruthlessness and selfishness, because his early close relations with
other people involve him as the victim of physical and emotional pain. D. Stringer claims that
Joe was “brought up…in a naturalistic litany of violence and kinship, of violence as kinship”
(116). Thus, to the adult Joe, pain and suffering are what he considers “normal.”

Similar to how Eulalia represents the defective maternal figure in Bon’s childhood, the
dietician at the orphanage, who stands as one of the limited options for a maternal figure for
young Joe, represents the woman who negatively affects his life. At the age of five, Joe hides in
the dietician’s room to eat toothpaste. While in hiding, he hears the dietician having sex with one
of the orphanage’s doctors. Joe’s consumption of the toothpaste along with his fear of being
discovered during the unfamiliar actions occurring between the dietician and the doctor causes
him to vomit, alerting the two young people to his presence in the room. The dietician, who
wrongly believes that Joe will tell the head of the orphanage about her sexual misconduct,
becomes determined to have Joe sent to the orphanage for black children, where he will
undoubtedly live in worse conditions. She imagines this place as the perfect punishment for Joe’s “spying”, for he “will look just like a pea in a pan full of coffee beans” and will be more of an outcast than he currently is in the white orphanage (Light 489, 495). Because of the dietician’s “natural female infallibility for the spontaneous comprehension of evil” (Light 492), she assumes that the child’s capacity for ruthlessness equals her own capacity for ruthlessness. She thus partners with Doc Hines—Joe’s white grandfather who disguises himself as the orphanage’s janitor simply to watch the unfortunate life of the child he considers to be a “‘walking pollution in God’s own face’” (Light 493)—to kidnap Joe and have him secretly taken to the black orphanage. Doc Hines, despite the disgust he feels toward Joe, can not bear to have his own flesh and blood endure such horrible conditions. He runs away with Joe, but the two are found and the child is returned to the orphanage. Upon Joe’s return to the orphanage, he is adopted by the McEachern family, an event that leads to the solidification of Joe’s understanding of “violence as kinship” (Stringer 116). Since the dietician symbolically stands as Joe’s first “mother,” her negative affect on Joe’s life parallels Eulalia’s negative affect on Bon’s life. Just as Eulalia’s insatiable desire for revenge causes her son’s abnormal childhood and his consequently unfulfilling life, the dietician’s anger and need for vengeance function as the major catalysts of Joe’s difficult childhood and his ultimately tragic life.

McEachern’s first words to Joe foreshadow the abuse the child will endure due to no fault of his own: “‘Christmas. A heathenish name. Sacrilege. I will change that’” (Light 505). McEachern, who is a cold and stoic Calvinist, obviously desires to adopt a child because he wishes to have his own young disciple whom he can mold and in whom he can instill the virtues of “‘work and the fear of God’” (Light 505). However, Joe’s surname, which was arbitrarily given to him when he was found at the orphanage on Christmas, offers McEachern further
justification in his rightfulness and obligation to raise Joe in ascetic circumstances, since the child’s name signifies his internal unholliness. This first meeting between McEachern and Joe is also significant because it foreshadows the continual battle that will occur between them throughout Joe’s childhood and early adulthood. Joe’s thought to himself that “My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas” represents the beginning spark of his resistance to McEachern (Light 506).

Although Joe is adopted, he remains an emotional orphan due to McEachern’s cold, impersonal methods of raising him. McEachern only cares whether Joe learns his assigned Bible verses or completes his chores; what he desires is someone he can shape into a diligent and pious worker, not a son. He is judgmental and unforgiving and will tolerate no impurities or deviances. Faulkner utilizes McEachern as an extreme symbol of the white society that punishes Joe because he is an impure product of the deviant act of miscegenation. McEachern likewise represents the white world that abstains from any relationship with a “tainted” mixed-race individual. The closest McEachern comes to having physical contact with Joe are the beatings with a strap on Joe’s bare buttocks. The only connection between McEachern and Joe is their mutual hatred for each other. Their hostility towards each other is evident in their physical actions, as illustrated in the description of their “two backs in their rigid abnegation of all compromise more alike than actual blood could have made them” (Light 508). Lee Jenkins confirms this connection of hatred between the pair with his assertion that “because McEachern is incapable of interpersonal relations, his example probably serves to reinforce Joe’s own psychological rigidity” (76).

This emotional hardening of Joe by McEachern renders Joe incapable of accepting the only chance he has been given for an emotional connection: the chance to be loved, and thus
saved, by Mrs. McEachern. When Mrs. McEachern comes to Joe’s room to offer him comfort after a day of abuse by McEachern or to give him food after McEachern refuses to allow the boy to eat, Joe does not know how to react. Such displays of sympathy and compassion “had never happened to him before” (*Light* 522). Joe’s bewilderment at Mrs. McEachern’s attempt at “personal communication” and an “appeal to Joe’s humanity” (Jenkins 76) leads him to believe that she is simply “trying to make [him] cry” (*Light* 523) and wishes to hurt him by revealing his inner weakness and insecurities. He thus resents and mistrusts her kindness. Love is a foreign concept to Joe. Detachment from others and contempt have become ingrained features in his life; the only emotion that he is capable of responding to other people with is hate.

The chapter of *Light of August* that contains Joe’s disastrous encounter with the dietician opens with these cryptic lines: “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders” (*Light* 487). However, these lines contain much insight and importance in understanding how the dietician’s ruthless plan for revenge begins the cycle of Joe’s inability to have normal relationships with others. His upbringing in the orphanage and in the McEachern household fails to provide him with a happy childhood, and thus sets the foundation for an unhappy adulthood. As Philip Weinstein notes, “the grown-up Joe Christmas will have no clue that he witnessed this earlier scene [with the dietician and the doctor] as a child, which only makes his bondage to it the more inescapable” (169). Thus, a memory that Joe does not even realize he possesses causes him to lead a life void of love and dominated by hate.
CHAPTER 3
THE TRANSFERRAL OF HURT

After experiencing childhoods riddled with pain and disappointment, both Charles Bon and Joe Christmas proceed to have even more unsatisfactory lives as adults. As children, these two characters were victims of rejection and loneliness due to their status in society as mixed-race outcasts. As adults, these men strive to abandon their former status as victims by deliberately hurting others. The tragic mulatto archetype is a weak, sensitive woman whose status as an outcast renders her highly susceptible to abuse by others. In Faulkner’s rendition of the tragic mulatto plot, Bon and Joe refuse to forever live as the scapegoats of society and believe that their masculinity will allow them to transcend society’s boundaries for the mulatto. Bon and Joe realize that in order to protect themselves emotionally, they must hurt other people before other people have the opportunity to hurt them. Both men fulfill their goals of inflicting pain through their friendships and amorous relationships.

The Seduction of the Sutpens

For Bon, who is the eldest legitimate child of Thomas Sutpen, “the denial of birthright” (Peters 114) as a rightful inheritor of the wealth and property that his father has accumulated could present one source of Bon’s contempt towards his half-siblings, Henry and Judith. Bon most likely envies Henry and Judith because they had Sutpen in their lives and because they never experienced the pain of growing up without a father. Although Bon desires Sutpen’s love, he still cannot erase the anger he feels toward his father for abandoning him and Eulalia. Thus, in
addition to Bon’s objective to fulfill his mother’s plan for revenge against Sutpen, he is also determined to truly hurt Sutpen’s pride by hurting the people most important to the completion of Sutpen’s plan to create a successful legacy. In a similar manner in which Sutpen makes Bon yearn for his acknowledgment, Bon makes Henry and Judith yearn for his love.

Upon meeting Bon, Henry forms an immediate attachment to the “young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years” and “an ease of manner and a swaggering gallant air” (*Absalom* 61). Henry mails a picture of his new friend to his home. After seeing Bon’s elegant image, Henry’s mother, Ellen, decides that Bon will be the future husband for Judith. Ellen is captured by Bon’s seductive power without even meeting him. She creates such an obsession with Bon that she objectifies him:

She spoke of Bon as if he were three inanimate objects in or perhaps one inanimate object for which she and her family would find three concordant uses: a garment which Judith might wear as she would a riding habit or a ball gown, a piece of furniture which would complement and complete the furnishing of her house and position, and a mentor and example to correct Henry’s provincial manners and speech and clothing. (*Absalom* 61)

Despite Ellen’s objectification of Bon, the young man continues to retain the power in his relationships with the Sutpen children. Henry is so enthralled with Bon because Bon represents the man that Henry wishes to be. According to Peters, “Henry needs Bon as an image of identification beyond and in contradiction to the harsh ruthless image provided by his father” (120). But the naïve Henry, who “looked upon Bon as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights” (*Absalom* 79), neglects to recognize that Bon possesses the same selfishness as Sutpen. Bon, who “permitted” Henry “to become intimate with him”, feels no need to acknowledge, much less return, Henry’s adoration (*Absalom* 79). Henry cannot reach Bon emotionally due to the emotional barrier Bon creates around himself. Bon exhibits an “air of
sardonic and indolent detachment like that of a young Roman consul making the Grand Tour of his day” (Absalom 77). This simile is fitting for Bon because his air of detachment serves as his emotional armor against the possibility of being hurt by others. This armor protects Bon and harms those who love him.

Like her mother, Judith too is seduced by Bon’s picture. She also adopts Ellen’s illusion that Bon, a man that she never has met, will be her “first and last sweetheart” (Absalom 78). Judith likewise shares Henry’s obsession with Bon and views him “with exactly the same eyes that Henry saw him with” (Absalom 78). Bon successfully completes his mission to make both Henry and Judith fall in love with him, a result that has the potential to destroy Sutpen’s legacy, because it awakens Henry’s homosexual desires and presents the possibility of incest. Sutpen removes Bon from his life because he believes a child with black ancestry will stain his legacy. With his attempts to provoke his half-siblings (who do not know until after they have fallen in love with Bon that he is their half-brother) to perform immoral acts, Bon realizes that he can truly ruin Sutpen’s legacy. Bon knows that his plan for revenge will yield far more drastic consequences than his mother’s plan to take Sutpen’s riches. Bon has created the perfect plan to victimize the Sutpen family. Bon’s plan to attain superiority and self-satisfaction through sexual manipulation proves him to be no better than the insensitive and oppressive culture (exemplified by Sutpen, who is selfish and who considers the completion of his “grand design” as justification for his mistreatment of other people) against which he retaliates; he uses physical force to subjugate other people. He has grown as heartless and immoral as the people who reject him. His rejection by white society severely desensitizes him.
The Two Joes

Just as Bon has Henry as his male admirer, Joe Christmas has Lucas Burch (who is hiding from the woman he impregnated under the alias Joe Brown) as his admirer and self-appointed protégé. Burch wishes to emulate Joe’s air of superiority over other men. Burch mistakenly views Joe’s carriage as an admirable trait instead of as a flawed “ruthless, lonely, and almost proud” quality that signifies Joe’s emotional detachment from his environment (Light 421). Joe takes the utmost advantage of Burch’s admiration and simplicity in order to make money; Burch serves as Joe’s accomplice in the business of illegally selling alcohol. Similar to Bon and Henry’s relationship, Burch fails to recognize that his friendship with Joe is one-sided. Joe never experienced a legitimate friendship as a child, so as a jaded adult, he has no desire to build a friendship.

As mentioned earlier, violence seems to be a natural aspect of any relationship for Joe. And because Burch aspires to be like Joe, he also adopts the attitude that violence is a normal part of their friendship. Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman highlights one significant episode which exemplifies the “master-disciple” relationship between the two men. In this instance, Burch teases Joe about his sexual relations with Joanna Burden while the two men are lying in bed in their cabin. An infuriated Joe goes over to Burch’s bed and mercilessly beats him; Burch willingly takes Joe’s punches and makes no attempt to defend himself. Rahman emphasizes that Burch has even adopted Joe’s “sadomasochistic” quality because both men “willingly participate in a relationship of practiced physical domination and submission” (185). The magnitude of Joe’s influence on Burch is evidenced by Burch’s warped interpretation of what constitutes a normal friendship.
Male Revenge

Joe’s childhood interactions with the dietician at the orphanage and with Mrs. McEachern bred his lifelong mistrust of women. His inability to trust women represents an interesting reversal of the traditional tragic mulatto plot in which romantic relationships with men pose the greatest danger to a mixed-race woman. “It was the woman” who presents the greatest threat to Joe; it is a woman’s “soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of and which he hated worse than he did the hard and ruthless justice of men” (Light 523). In his twenties, Joe fulfills his sadomasochistic needs with other men: he “tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten” and he also “fought the negro who called him white” (Light 564). However, Joe exerts more devotion to compensating for his position as the victim during his childhood by becoming the victimizer as an adult in his relationships with women.

Joe’s first potential sexual encounter with the black girl in the barn at age fourteen represents his first instance of physically hurting a female. The description of Joe’s interaction with the girl chillingly exemplifies the extent of Joe’s compulsion for violence and the depth of his inability to normally interact with other people:

His turn came. He entered the shed. It was dark. At once he was overcome by a terrible haste. There was something in him trying to get out, like when he had used to think of toothpaste. But he could not move at once, standing there, smelling the woman smelling the negro all at once; enclosed by the woman
shenegro and the haste, driven, having to wait until she spoke: a guiding sound that was no particular word and completely unaware. then it seemed to him that he could see her—something, prone, abject; her eyes perhaps. Leaning, he seemed to look down into a black well and at the bottom saw two glints like reflections of dead stars. He was moving, because his foot touched her. Then it touched her again because he kicked her. He kicked her hard, kicking into and through a
choked wail of surprise and fear. She began to scream, he jerking her up, clutching her by the arm, hitting at her with wide, wild blows, striking at the voice perhaps, feeling her flesh anyway, enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste. (Light 514)

Joe most likely behaves so violently because the encounter immediately causes him to “think of toothpaste” and triggers the primal scene involving the dietician in the orphanage that consequently tragically transforms his life. Jenkins claims that because “the girl makes no personal appeal to” Joe, she “elicits a very personal, though distorted, reaction from him” (81). However, I would argue that it is not so much Joe’s “revulsion of the impersonality of the act” (Jenkins 81) that provokes Joe’s violent reaction, but rather the fact that the girl is a realistic manifestation of two of Joe’s greatest fears. This “womanshenegro” evokes Joe’s resistance to connect with anyone who bears the dark skin which he has been taught that white society despises and who shares the black blood of which he has been taught to feel ashamed; and she evokes his fear of physical intimacy with a woman, because he fears a disappointing sexual performance will further affirm the sense of weakness and inferiority which women cause him to feel. In other words, Joe resents how his interactions with women conjure such emotions and ultimately feminize him. By endowing Joe with the latter fear, Faulkner aligns him with the female tragic mulatto figure.

Joe overcomes his fear of intimacy with women in his relationship with his first sexual partner, Bobbie. But this relationship only amplifies Joe’s hatred for women because he is responsible for causing the consequent pain he suffers from this relationship. Because of his youth, naivete, and inability to understand what love really is, he mistakenly falls in love with Bobbie, who is a prostitute and who views him only as a silly young customer rather than her actual lover.
Joe initially decides to approach Bobbie because he believes that he can overpower her. He realizes that “it was because of her smallness that he ever attempted her” (Light 527). Likewise, he hopes that maybe Bobbie can alter his hostility towards women and teach him how to love, because he senses in her “that already there is something for love to feed upon” (Light 529). Interestingly, in addition to Bobbie’s feminine signs of weakness that attract Joe, he is also drawn to her masculine qualities; he focuses on “her big hands” and how her eyes “were like the button eyes of a toy animal” and have “a quality beyond even hardness” (Light 526). Joe’s recognition of these hard features suggests that perhaps he subconsciously always knew that Bobbie had the capacity to hurt him. Joe’s attraction to Bobbie’s masculine features and to the possibility that she could both physically and emotionally hurt him serves as evidence of his affinity for self-destruction despite his desire to avoid playing the role of the victim. This insight into the contradictory qualities of Joe’s character reveals the magnitude of his inner turmoil.

Regardless of the knowledge that Bobbie may victimize him, Joe still feels that he possesses the power to inflict pain in their relationship. During one particular instance following intercourse with Bobbie, Joe reveals to her that he may have “‘nigger blood’” (Light 543). Joe takes satisfaction in the “different stillness” (Light 543) he feels from Bobbie after this statement, for he knows that he has caused her to feel shame and horror upon the knowledge that she is sleeping with a non-white man. This example shows how Joe wishes to make Bobbie feel like a fool, but ultimately, Bobbie makes Joe into her fool. The most irrational act that Joe’s love for Bobbie drives him to commit is to kill McEachern. McEachern, who is infuriated by Joe’s relationship with this impure woman, goes to a dancehall where Joe and Bobbie are to compel Joe to end this relationship. In this encounter, Joe finally releases the fury he has had toward McEachern for almost two decades. His fury manifests itself into the action of beating
McEachern with a chair. Joe swings at McEachern’s head and “into nothingness” until he eventually kills the older man (Light 549). After this act, Bobbie views Joe as insane and ends the relationship herself. Not only does she emotionally hurt Joe, but her pimps beat him and take his money. These events are significant because they represent the first instances of the futility of Joe’s attempts to escape the fate of the tragic mulatto. Joe believes that he has overcome the oppression of white society by killing his main oppressor, McEachern. After symbolically attacking white society by physically attacking a white man, Joe is then physically abused by white men. Joe’s figurative victory is nullified by a subsequent defeat: he is forced to resume the subjugated role of an inferior black man through the physical force of white men.

After Bobbie and the men who beat Joe leave him lying on the floor of Bobbie’s home, Joe remains there “not thinking at all, not suffering” (Light 561). A new Joe emerges from the disaster of this relationship with Bobbie. This Joe begins a journey on a “street which was to run for fifteen years”, which will be “savage and lonely” and which will solidify his emotional coldness and his ruthlessness (Light 563, 561). This Joe is now more determined than ever to enact his revenge for his tragic life upon society and especially upon women.
CHAPTER 4
THE FEAR OF THE FATHER

Bon and Joe are both wanderers: the rootlessness they feel in terms of personal and racial identity leads to their physical rootlessness and refusal to establish a stationary home. Their wanderlust represents an attempt to escape from their internal conflicts and to ignore their pain and insecurities (Jenkins 66). What these men hope that their itinerant journeys will ultimately lead them to avoid is the responsibility of having a family. Having a family means that both Bon and Joe would have people who have to depend on them. These men do not possess the emotional strength to have this responsibility. Starting a family entails that these men secure an identity, but their lifelong identity crises cannot be easily solved. Bon and Joe both possess an innate sense of deracination; the creation of a stable environment for themselves and for a family represents too great of a challenge for them to accomplish. Traditionally, a family represents people who love each other unconditionally and who are more understanding and tolerant of each other’s flaws and shortcomings in comparison to people outside of the family. Bon, who was denied by his father, and Joe, who was given up for adoption, cannot grasp this traditional concept of family because they are outsiders amongst their own relatives. Since their families have refused to offer them unconditional love in the past, how can they be guaranteed to finally receive unconditional love from a future family? Feelings of inferiority and failure have plagued Bon and Joe for the majority of their lives. Both men resist the undertaking of familial
responsibilities because they cannot bear to accept the possibilities of additionally failing as husbands and fathers.

The Sutpen Curse

As a child, Bon thought his mother’s “fierce yearning and vindictiveness and jealous rage” were traits that “all mothers of children had received in turn from their mothers and from their mothers in turn” (Absalom 246). Since the young Bon thought that he “would have to pass [this rage] on too,” he decides that “it was too much trouble and bother and that he would not have any children or at least hoped he would not” (Absalom 246). But as an adult, Bon goes against this childhood decision. He has a son, Charles Etienne De Saint Valery Bon, with a mixed-race mistress. And despite the lifelong pain that Bon suffers because of Sutpen’s denial and abandonment, Bon commits the same transgression against his own son. Hence, Bon continues the Sutpen legacy of an absent father.

Since Bon dies before Charles Etienne meets him, Peters claims that the story of the son is “all the more inescapably tragic” than his father’s (122). Bon at least had the chance to meet his father; Charles Etienne never knows what Bon looks like and thus “seems not to know where to search nor whom to look to for his birthright” (Peters 122). Charles Etienne truly follows the path of the fate of the tragic mulatto. As a confused young man who is caught between both the black and white worlds, he makes an extreme statement that he has chosen the black world by marrying a dark-skinned woman whom he knows will draw the ire and the fear of the prejudiced white community. Charles Etienne decides to embrace his status as an outcast and thus amplifies his pariahhood by frequently defying the law. He also has a son, Jim Bond, who is mentally challenged and described as “inescapably negro” (Absalom 172). Charles Etienne dies from yellow fever and Jim Bond disappears from Sutpen’s Hundred and is never found. The
inheritance of the tragic life of the mulatto, which originates with Eulalia, continues through three generations of men. However, it is important to remember that Sutpen’s rejection of Eulalia represents the initial cause of the rage and sorrow which consumes her and amplifies the tragedy of her life. Thus, Sutpen’s ruthless and selfish “grand design” (Absalom 209) stands at the crux of the continuation of the tragic mulatto archetype. This pattern of how Sutpen’s ambition and desire for domination essentially curses his descendants who possess black ancestry reflects the larger historical pattern of the suppression of the black race in order to secure the superiority of the patriarchal white society.

*The Fear of Family*

At the age of thirty-three, Joe’s wandering along the long “savage and lonely” street finally ends when “one afternoon the street had become a Mississippi country road” (Light 561, 565). Joe settles in Yoknapatawpha County, and makes his home on the property of Joanna Burden, a middle-aged white woman who is the main outcast of the community due to her philanthropy and sympathy for blacks. Joe begins a relationship with Joanna and becomes “the lover of her spinster’s bed” (Light 570). Joanna is unlike any woman with whom Joe has had sexual intercourse; with her “there was no feminine vacillation, no coyness of obvious desire and intention to succumb at last” (Light 572). Joe, who feels that he wields great power over women because of his strength and violent tendencies, must even admit to himself that it seems as if Joanna is the man and he is the woman in their sexual relationship.

Angered by the inferiority and insecurity which Joanna causes him to feel, Joe resorts to insulting Joanna by complaining about her weight gain and accusing her of no longer being any good as a woman after her menopause. Despite Joe’s complaints, he deliberately chooses to be involved with an older woman who is in a menopausal state and for whom he does not have an
intense physical attraction. He realizes that these choices lessen the likelihood of being with a woman whom he can impregnate and with whom he will fall in love. At thirty-three, Joe still has not forgotten the mistake and the subsequent emotional and physical pain of falling in love with the prostitute Bobbie. Joe likewise chooses Joanna because she is the opposite of Bobbie: Joanna is a middle-aged spinster who releases her pent-up lust on Joe, while Bobbie had much sexual experience and viewed Joe as no more than a simple county boy.

Despite choosing a woman whom he believes will not hurt him, Joe greatly errs in starting a relationship with Joanna because he has found a woman who desires what he fears the most: a permanent attachment and a nuclear family. Unlike the prostitutes whom Joe “bedded” (Light 564) during his fifteen years of wandering, Joanna wants to end his “arc of directionless motion” (Green 106). Joe fears Joanna’s vision of a nuclear family because the McEacherns represent his only model of such a family. There can only be a nightmarish continuation of the McEachern family with Joanna. Because of her coldness and ritualistic behavior and her complex that she must serve as the savior of the black race, she will be Mr. McEachern while Joe will be Mrs. McEachern. Joanna doubly subjugates Joe by ordering him to perform as her black lover and fulfill her sexual fantasies, while also serving as a personal model of a black “pet” whom she attempts to educate and improve. Joanna especially frightens Joe when they begin to meet “in the bedroom as though they were married” and she begins “to talk about a child, as though instinct had warned her that now was the time when she must either justify or expiate” (Light 593). Joanna’s frequent mentioning of a child, which Joe refers to as the talk of “a third stranger,” most likely scares Joe because of his own horrible childhood (Light 593). Joe may actually possess a small capacity of sympathy which causes him to not want to produce a being who must endure the isolation and pain that society places upon a mixed-race child. Furthermore,
being a father represents Joe’s greatest fear because he does not know how to love, especially how to love a child. Joe has perfected a cold, impersonal, and detached character that shields him from emotional pain, therefore the “entry of another into his emotional economy threatens him altogether” (Weinstein 171).

At one point, Joe contemplates whether a permanent situation with Joanna would not be an undesired situation since “it would mean ease, security for the rest of [his] life” (Light 594). However, Joe’s growing hatred and resentment towards Joanna peaks when she attempts to force him to pray with her, recalling his childhood memories of McEachern’s forcing of religion upon him. In the same manner in which Joe’s hatred toward McEachern finally manifests itself into the act of murder, Joe releases his years of hatred toward Joanna in the moment in which she dares to pray over him and he kills her. Joe reenacts the murder of McEachern: he is once again eliminating the white oppressor who constantly reinforces the belief that Joe is inferior and impure. For Joe, killing Joanna resolves the frightening possibility of starting a family. While Joe may view this murder as a solution, this murder actually amplifies the primary destructive feature of his life: the perpetuation of the cycle of violence. Joe’s self-destructive behavior sabotages his attempts to surmount the tragic circumstances of the mulatto that society imposes upon him. Joe is as equally responsible as society for the tragedy of his life.
CHAPTER 5
WALKING INTO DEATH

The Failure to Escape the Myth

Both Charles Bon and Joe Christmas spend their adult lives striving to resist the stereotypical sorrow and isolation associated with the tragic mulatto. Yet through their attempts to make themselves unsusceptible to emotion and pain to the point where the men almost become inhuman, they only further isolate themselves from the world around them. The last events of both Bon and Joe’s lives prove that no matter how much they harden their souls and strive to victimize others, they will always be the victims of society’s prejudices and will never attain a sense of belonging. Faulkner portrays the two men as perpetual victims in order to demonstrate that gender does not alter the sorrowful circumstances of the life of a mixed-race individual. The narrative of the male tragic mulatto follows the same path as the narrative of the female tragic mulatto. From Lydia Marie Child’s short story in the 1840s to Faulkner’s novels of the first half of the twentieth century, “the natural world of the literary mulatto becomes one in which he [or she] is unfulfilled as a human being and burdened with a sense of doom” (Peters 115).

Towards the end of Bon and Henry’s journey to Sutpen’s Hundred and the impending marriage between Bon and Judith, Henry learns from his father that not only is Bon his half-brother, but that Bon also has black lineage. Henry confronts Bon with this information and demands that Bon end his plan to marry Judith. Yet once Bon understands that “‘it’s the
miscegenation, not the incest” (Absalom 294) that Henry cannot bear, he decides that he will proceed with his relationship with Judith despite Henry’s threat that he will stop Bon by any means. Actually, it is more accurate to note that it is because of Henry’s threat that Bon will proceed with the marriage. Not only has Bon been denied twice by his father, but now he has been denied by his brother because of his race. Bon knows that Henry will kill him when he tries to enter the Sutpen home. Bon wants this to occur because he can no longer endure a life of being denied. Thus, he goes to enter Sutpen’s Hundred and is shot by Henry.

Joe Christmas knows that by murdering a white woman, he has caused his own death. After killing Joanna, he sets her home on fire and flees town. After a manhunt, he is eventually caught and brutally murdered and castrated by the sadistic and racist leader of the town’s National Guard, Percy Grimm. The white man’s castration of Joe is significant because the act symbolizes how society dominates and feminizes Joe and further confirms his confinement to the role of the weak and powerless female tragic mulatto. The description of Joe’s death conveys that Joe has finally achieved the peace and comfort he has always chased and that he has finally escaped his lifelong tragedy:

He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. (Light 743)

The description of Joe’s body as collapsing and falling in upon itself is an allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Faulkner’s inclusion of this allusion
signifies that the grotesqueness, abnormality, and pain of Joe’s life will never cease and that a tragic end is inevitable.

Near the end of their lives, both men reach saddening conclusions about the harshness of the societies in which they live. In his final encounter with Henry, Bon realizes that to Henry he only represents “‘the nigger that’s going to sleep with [Henry’s] sister’” (Absalom 294). Similarly, Joe realizes that “he is a ‘Nigger’ first, murderer second, and Christmas last, if at all” (Green 110). Ultimately, Bon and Joe acknowledge the futility of their attempts to combat the myth of the tragic mulatto because society will not allow them to escape the confinements of their tragic situations. The societal force of racism overpowers any of Bon and Joe’s attempts to avoid the tragic fates that society prescribes for mixed-race individuals. Bon and Joe cannot change the direction of their lives because they cannot change the prejudices of society. Bon and Joe’s acknowledgments of their irreversible situations show that the tragedy of the mulatto “is not simply that of the victim but also that of those who create the conditions and circumstances for it” (Peters 113). Most importantly, this realization illuminates Faulkner’s major objective in his version of the tragic mulatto narrative. The narratives of Bon and Joe ultimately allegorize the larger tragedy of American society: the tragedy that we live in a culture that appears to be eternally plagued by the negative forces of racism and narrow-mindedness.
WORKS CITED


