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The Lost Cause Narrative in Three Southern Novels Published between 1880 and 1936.

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## Abstract

In a period of time where matters of race, Confederate memorials and debates around neo-confederate thinking is increasingly important to politics and the media reporting of all political issues within the US, questions of how these views came to prominence within certain groups in society is increasingly important. This project aims to explore how ideas introduced by Edward Pollard immediately after the Civil War found expression through literary fiction between the end of the war and the 1930's. It looks at selected writing by Mary Chesnut, Thomas Nelson Page and William Faulkner and through close reading attempts to trace some of the roots of these views. It also explores some aspects of the historical setting of the texts in an attempt to illustrate the constructed nature of the South presented by these writers.

While finding much that fits with Confederate and Neo-Confederate ideas in general and Pollard's assumptions in particular around the representation of soldiers and the social values of the White elites, this project also presents a number of striking challenges in terms of representations of race and the impact of the end of slavery on the different writers. In combination, these texts are suggested to highlight both the insidious influence of these alternative interpretations of the South and also the wide variation found in the attitudes of different authors even within this narrow geographical and chronological focus.

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## Introduction.

This dissertation will consider how, in three specific historical moments after the conflict, individual Southern writers represented the American South before and during the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, it will look at this issue in terms of the birth of the “Lost Cause” narrative as established by Edward Pollard during the aftermath of the conflict in 1866 in *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War Between the States*. This project will consider three key issues identified by Pollard and that can be traced through the texts of the period, these being the representation of Slavery including incidents of sexual abuse against slaves; the idealised image of Southern masculinity, especially in terms of conduct at war; and the construction of a more commercial, industrial North juxtaposed with a more traditional, agricultural South to establish that the North was only able to win the conflict through sheer weight of numbers rather than any superiority of character. By so doing, I hope to find some insight in to how the South used these positions argued by Pollard as it reinvented itself in fiction following military defeat.

It is first important to understand why study of the South’s response to the Civil War in line with a text produced over a hundred and fifty years ago is worthy of consideration today. For that, I would turn to *A Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader* (2007) by Loewen and Sebesta who argue that “Questions about why the South seceded, what the Confederacy was about, and the nature and later use of its symbols and ideology often give rise to flatly untrue ‘answers’” even when put to academically trained professionals, including teachers

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<sup>1</sup> Even this seemingly accepted term is not without controversy in this regard. Edward Pollard argues the correct title for the war would be “The War Between the States” to avoid the connotations of rebellion inherent in a “Civil War”. This work will use the term “Civil War” exclusively however since historians have now almost universally rejected Pollard’s alternate title.

of History at the high school level within the US (Loewen and Sebesta, 2007: p14). These answers include assumptions and basic misunderstandings as the concept that secession had nothing to do with slavery or that the war was the result of Northern economic greed and these ideas were therefor being passed on unchallenged in American classrooms as late as the early 2000's. They go on to argue, convincingly in my view, that in the period between 1886 and 1940 the "Neo-Confederates", a term they use to refer to anyone who holds the Southern ideals, won the battle for control of the narrative. They suggest that modern confusion and misunderstanding as to why the South seceded, especially amongst historians and educators, is the principal lasting evidence of this narrative victory.

It must be acknowledged that a great deal of recent work has been done around how the South presents itself ideologically and how it attempts to frame the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War to maintain positive images in the popular memory of many Southerners. Scholarly investigation in to the "Southern flag culture" by both Bonner individually and Webster and Leib together have sought to explore how the diagonal cross battle flag of the Confederacy has been linked to nationalism, religion and even, tragically, mass murder in an attempt to start a "race war"(Bonner: P2002.P7. and Webster and Leib: 2016. P30). Others such as O'Connell have explored how Confederate Statuary has been maintained and frequently defended by supports as celebrations of "Heritage, not hate" despite also being associated with "white supremacist perspectives" (O'Connell: 2018. P400). Even music has been subject to such consideration with Hutchenson and Richardson paying critical attention to Confederate songs, particularly Dixie which they define as the Confederacy's "De-facto national anthem" and exploring how shifts in the musicality and the lyrics call in

to question many assumptions about the idea of a uniform South (Hutchenson and Richardson:2012. P145). However, whichever aspect of Confederate memory, memorial or even glorification was studied, a pattern emerges that shows political and deliberate alterations in the meaning and value of the symbols, many of which actually only emerge after the conflict had ended during the Jim Crow period in the Southern States. As a result of this, the general pattern is of racially divisive connotations to any Confederate symbol and a strong suggestion that memorial groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the United Confederate Veterans (which later evolved to become Sons of Confederate Veterans) consciously crafted many of these symbols for their own political ends.

However, it is essential to understand that the root of the idea that the American Civil War was a clash of ideologies rather than solely a military conflict can be found much earlier than the 2000's. Less than a year after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Edward Pollard published what would go on to be a greatly influential text entitled *A Lost Cause, a New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* in which he coined the phrase "The Lost Cause" to represent a biased Southern interpretation of the conflict and also effectively shifted the cultural discussion of the war for the next century. Perhaps because it claimed to offer a complete "record of the facts, the accounts of public opinion existing within them and the lessons their context should convey or inspire" or simply because it came out so soon following the conflict, this text became in many ways the keystone for interpreting the Southern position on the conflict until the middle of the next century (Pollard, 1886: PIII). While some change has occurred in the detail of the wider Southern narrative over the decades since the end of the conflict it is still fair to say that the influence of Pollard's text is

broadly accepted.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, much historical scholarship has been dedicated to proving or challenging the ideas contained within Pollard's text in terms of historical accuracy as a way to challenge the wider Southern narrative on the war.<sup>3</sup>

However, more crucial to this project is Pollard's assertion in the conclusion to that volume that "It is not untimely or unreasonable to tell the South to cultivate her superiority as a people, to maintain her old schools of literature and scholarship" or that "The danger is that they [the people of the South ] will lose their literature, their former habits of thought, their intellectual self-assertion..." (Pollard, 1886: p752). What Pollard is suggesting here is that while the South may have lost the physical war by 1866, they need not and indeed should not accept the fact that they were defeated in terms of the ideological clash. This larger battle for survival could still be won by the South if the dominant powers in Southern Society could maintain control of the narrative through the period of reconstruction. It is this idea that resurfaces in Loewen and Sebesta's concept of the long Civil War. Indeed, Loewen and Sebesta suggest strongly that the impact of Pollard's call to action and the victory of the narrative he proposed were being felt right through to 2007, despite the considerable volume of historical scholarship dedicated to undermining the accuracy and thus validity of Pollard's interpretation. They state:

Once we grasp that Confederates seceded to preserve slavery and maintain white supremacy— which this book proves— then we can understand why Neo-

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<sup>2</sup> Most strikingly of these usually fairly minor differences, Pollard does not suggest the later accepted view that the South always knew it couldn't win the war, but suggests that in fact they could have been victorious if not for poor military and political leadership.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of this sort of scholarship, the essays in 1994's *Why the Confederacy Lost*, edited by Gabor Boritt and James McPherson's "Lost Cause Revisited" chapter in his book *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War* were particularly striking.

Confederates still fight what might be called “the long Civil War.” Neo-Confederates fight to maintain their ancestors’ honor, which they do by obfuscating why their ancestors fought. They also fight to save “our belief system and our way of life,” in Frank Conner’s words - in short, to perpetuate the South’s racial hierarchy (Loewen and Sebesta, 2007: p289).<sup>4</sup>

While these ideas clearly apply to historical studies and discussions of the political beliefs and ideas embedded through debates, arguments and essays, there is inevitably a role for fiction in this ideological battle identified by Pollard. This dissertation intends to explore how Southern fiction in the period played a role in constructing and popularising the ideas suggested by Pollard in *The Lost Cause* in the years after the war. Of course, if a project on the small scale of this thesis is to be of any value in exploring such a large ideological and historical issue, it is important that the selection of texts for close analysis is carefully considered to allow some tentative but hopefully enlightening threads to be identified. In this the work of Gaines Foster in his book *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause and the Emergence of the New South* has proven especially helpful. What Foster argues is that there were distinct social groups of people who served as the leaders behind the constructed Southern narrative at different historical moments. These ideas can then be used to suggest the kind of people who are considered to have been responsible for the construction of the narrative in each of the periods of time identified by Loewen and Sebesta as important in the development of the ideology explored in the *Confederate and*

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Conner is an author whose 2002 book *The South Under Siege* presented controversial Neo-Confederate ideas around race and particularly the Jewish Community to very divisive critical response. An essay of his is presented in Loewen and Sebesta’s *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader* as an example of modern Neo-Confederate thought and that is what is quoted here.



*Neo-Confederate Reader*. By looking for appropriate criteria in both of these historical works and applying their conclusions to literature a group of three authors who both fit the social groups suggested by Foster and also worked in each critical historical moment suggested by Loewen and Sebasta have been selected.

Foster suggests that immediately after the war a group of people emerged who “came from the pre-war Southern elite and from among the leaders of the Confederacy. These people wrote much history that influenced the South's interpretation of the war” (Foster, 1988: p6). This group would necessarily be constructing their narratives during and immediately after the war and so overlap neatly with the first historical moment suggested by Loewen and Sebasta, that being the period immediately after the civil war when the South first established the narrative that would influence all future visions of what the Confederacy had stood for. According to Foster, this group was then followed by people who “came not from the ranks of the planter elite or even from the leaders of the Confederacy but from the urban and town middle class” (Foster, 1988:p6). They wrote during and immediately after Reconstruction, or in other words during the second of the historical moments identified by Loewen and Sebasta, that period of time in which the narrative was used to fight the implementation of Reconstruction including attempts to remove the franchise and other rights from black citizens in the former confederate states. Foster also argues that there is a fundamental difference in how each of the first two groups presented the war. The former group, the elite who had actually lead the Confederacy “Brooded over defeat, railed against the North and offered the Confederacy as an antidote to post-war change.” By contrast, the latter group, the urban middle-class, instead sought “relief from the lingering fear that

defeat had somehow dishonored them” and so were more enthusiastic in their embrace of Confederate activities (Foster, 1988: p6).

The third historical moment suggested by Loewen and Sebesta, the Nadir of Race Relations is the period of time where white supremacist narratives and Jim Crow laws took hold and reduced the rights of black citizens a great deal in the aftermath of reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> This also covers the time when, according to Foster, the Confederate memory was maintained by later generations rather than those who had fought in the war or at least lived through it as children. These groups are represented through memorial organisations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Although this period discussed by Loewen and Sebesta is slightly outside the main focus of their work and so gets less of a detailed analysis by them than the earlier two time periods, Foster does focus more on this later period and suggests “in the 1920’s and 1930’s many Southerners still remembered and talked about the war although probably intellectuals and artists did so more than businessmen and workers” (Foster, 1988: p196). The racial aspect of this phase is evidenced politically by the rise of Jim Crow laws and a removal of certain rights granted to black citizens under reconstruction.

In line with these ideas, the first chapter of this project will be based around a text that represents the immediate aftermath of the civil war and was produced by a member of the confederate elite during or immediately after the war, exploring the birth of the Lost Cause

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<sup>5</sup> Within the article, this is defined as the period of time between 1890 when Mississippi adopted Article XII of a new state constitution “that in practice would effectively disenfranchise black voters” (Winkle, 1993) given the franchise by the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment after the War on one side and 1940 when Nazi Germany’s policies meant “racism began to get a bad name” on the other. (Loewen and Sebesta 2007).

narrative. For that, Mary Chesnut Boykin's *Diary* is an excellent example. The text was originally written during the war and then revised following the conflict for publication after her death. As the wife of a United States and then Confederate Senator from North Carolina, she was a member of the antebellum social elite and a part of the Confederate leadership. Further, her work provides an interesting insight into Southern ideas of race and identity from those who experienced the war first-hand and crafted the very earliest representation of the Lost Cause narrative in literature.

The second chapter will consider a text from Thomas Nelson Page, who wrote during the later end of Reconstruction and who belonged to the middle class, urbanite social orders who were constructing the narrative in that period. His collection of short stories, *In Ole Virginia* (1887) fits that description neatly. Nelson Page was a Lawyer and the scion of two prominent plantation owning families. These short stories exemplify many of the most blatant reinventions of the antebellum South and, in combination with his essays (1904 and 1911) shows how fully popular literature of the South was influenced by the wider Lost Cause ideology as presented by Pollard.

Finally, the third chapter will provide a window into the work of Southern artists and intellectuals thinking back on the war during the Nadir of Race Relations period in the 1930's. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1926) will provide an interesting example of that period. This work, while unquestionably dealing with the issues that arise from Southern defeat in the conflict and reflecting the influence of Pollard's narrative, is written at a greater remove and so, I will argue, shows how the reinvention of the narrative of

Southern defeat remains evident in work even by authors who would not have spoken directly in favour of them in the same way as Chesnut and Nelson Page.

While a close, critical reading of the texts will underpin all the work within the project, the thematic focus of the work will come from scholarship around the Lost Cause narrative in general and Pollard's original text in particular. By looking at the elements that are seen to be the foundation of the confederate narrative, the dissertation can focus on the core principles held as significant and so hopefully shed meaningful new light on the role of these three texts in contribution of the ideological clash of the "long Civil War" and hopefully make some tentative conjectures of the role played by fiction in the wider sense. The question becomes what are the crucial factors that delineate the Lost Cause narrative since these will be the primary focus of my textual studies.

The first and most crucial aspect of the Lost Cause narrative revolves around the role slavery played in the succession of the Confederate states. Pollard does not deny that slavery was a contributing factor to the Civil War but frames the question in a very unusual way. He argues:

The slavery question is not to be taken as an independent controversy in American politics. It was not a moral dispute. It was the mere incident of a sectional animosity, the causes of which lay far beyond the domain of morals. Slavery furnished a convenient line of battle between the disputants; it was the most prominent ground of distinction between the two sections; it was,

therefore naturally seized upon as a subject of controversy, became the dominant theatre of hostilities and was at last so conspicuous and violent, that occasion was mistaken for cause and what was merely an incident came to be regarded as the main subject of controversy (Pollard, 1866: p47).

In other words, slavery was merely a convenient difference for the North to seize upon to push for a war that they wanted for entirely different reasons. Of course, this idea that slavery was not a “moral” issue seems unthinkable to a modern reader of the text and so it is worthwhile exploring the grounds Pollard presents for making that declaration. He characterises Southern slavery as:

“that system of servitude in the South that was really the mildest in the world” and that the unique form of Southern Slavery “did not rest on acts of debasement and disenfranchisement but elevated the African, and was in the interest of human improvement; and which, by the law of the land, protected the negro in life and limb and in many personal rights and, by the practice of the system, bestowed upon him a sum of individual intelligences, which made him altogether the most striking type in the world in cheerfulness and contentment” (Pollard, 1866. p49).

Again, to summarise, Pollard argued that slavery was a boon to the slaves, making them happier and more intelligent and better protected legally than anywhere else in the world. Given the unquestioned acceptance of white supremacy in the South in the period, these views are hardly surprising. As Senator Toombs of Georgia put it in a speech quoted and praised in Pollard’s own footnotes “The white is the superior race and the black the inferior.” (Pollard, 1866. P49) This perception underpins much of both Pollard’s and later

Southern political thinkers' logic and so this view of slavery as a moral virtue, as unthinkable as it is to a modern mind, is crucial to the Southern narrative of the war.

This understanding of Pollard is far from original of course. Most recently, Gallagher and Nolan highlight this aspect of the narrative claiming two crucial aspects of Pollard's view of the South are how it "celebrated antebellum Southern slaveholding society" and "denied the importance of slavery in triggering secession" (Gallagher and Nolan, 2000: p4). The wider implication of this position in later years is echoed in Loewen and Sebesta's view that Neo-Confederate narratives built out of the Lost Cause exist to "maintain white supremacy" (Loewen and Sebesta, 2007: p289).

So, if the cause of the Civil War was not slavery according to Pollard, what did he claim was the actual cause? The answer to that question is more subtle than the direct address of the slavery question, but none the less evident within the text. Pollard postulates that the real cause of the war was Northern jealousy towards Southern society. This jealousy extended to many aspects of the Southern states including "her [the South's] climates and productions" (Pollard, 1866: p46). Pollard argues that the states south of the Mason-Dixon possess superior ground for planting and with the support of slave labour could produce "a single product [cotton] whose annual value was two hundred millions of dollars" and since the Northern society "was coarse and materialistic" and "smelt of the trade" they wished to remove that asset from the South. (Pollard, 1866: p51).<sup>6</sup> With the election of Lincoln in

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<sup>6</sup> The idea that commerce left a stench on a man is also telling of Pollard's attitude towards capital endeavours throughout the work, seeing it as demeaning compared to land holding aristocratic values.

1860, Pollard argues the North showed it was “prepared so to act and carry out a sectional design” and remove the South’s wealth by any means necessary, including war if need be. (Pollard, 1866: p80). Thus, the goal of the war was to cripple the financial strength of the South rather than to free the slaves, an attack on the cotton money that the North so envied rather than a moral struggle to aid a population in bondage.

Finally, Pollard argues there is a cultural difference between the people of the North and the South. He argues that Northerners felt they had an “inferiority in comparison with the aristocracy and chivalry of the South”, an area with a ruling class who were “highly refined and sentimental” (Pollard, 1866: p51). This difference is reflected not just in Pollard’s discussion of why the Civil War occurred, but also generally in the depictions of confederate soldiers throughout the work, especially confederate heroes like Robert E Lee who is always described as exceptionally capable but modest, self-effacing and noble.<sup>7</sup> This compares to Northern soldiers and especially their generals who are shown to be ambitious men immune to any human feeling regarding their acts, of which General Sherman provides perhaps the best example.<sup>8</sup> Even where particular Southern politicians or generals are presented as incompetent in Pollard, as Jefferson Davis almost always is and numerous officers who fought in the Western campaign frequently are, they are never presented as unfeeling in the same way as Northern generals. This difference between Southern sentimentality and unfeeling Northern efficiency is a key technique by which the Confederacy claims a moral virtue in their defeat. This image of gallant and gentile manhood fighting honourably for the

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<sup>7</sup> See his acceptance of Commission in the confederate army (Pollard, 1866. P117-119) or the presentation of a letter from Lee to a General Early who he had to strip of command on Page 601.

<sup>8</sup> See his ordering the destruction of Columbia on P668 which Pollard chooses to show from the point of view of a burning convent which “had educated Gen. Sherman’s daughter”.

cause at great personal risk is also explored in depth by Nolan's essay 'The Anatomy of the Myth'. He claims "...cavaliers were, of course, the ancestors of the Southerners according to this theory. It was written that the cavaliers were "descended from the Norman Barons of William the Conqueror, a race distinguished in earliest history for its warlike and fearless character, a race in all times since renowned for its gallantry, chivalry, honor, gentleness, and intellect" (Gallagher and Nolan, 2000: p160). This provides a hereditary or genetic explanation for the conduct of Southern soldiers and further serves to link this trait to the racist degradation of black slaves in the South who obviously lack that same pedigree. Primarily though, it serves as explanation for the "gallantry of confederate soldiers" in the Southern army compared to their Unionist opponents.

So, from this understanding of Pollard, we can identify the key themes that will be traced through the texts in question. By asking how slaves and slavery is represented, how Southern nobility and soldiery appear in comparison to their Northern equivalents and how the economic implications of the conflict are reflected in the texts selected as representative of the groups and time periods in which this narrative first occurred, we can study how these texts may have helped shape, form or propagate the Lost Cause narrative that would come to, perhaps, win the clash of ideology of the long Civil War.

Yet before jumping into analysis of the texts, it is important to note how many forms these ideas would take as they were disseminated amongst Southern society moving forward. Pollard's text unquestionably formed much of the core argument and was widely read in the post-bellum period however, other texts, particularly those that would become impactful



through the medium of motion pictures became crucial in maintaining and distributing those ideas. For instance, Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, a 1905 novel that was later adapted in 1915 into the infamous film *The Birth of a Nation* is frequently cited as a key text in building the Lost Cause narrative and it is worth taking a moment to address how this text echoes the ideas found in Pollard nearly twenty years later since Dixon's novel clearly reflects much of Pollard's position.

Most striking is how the text uses President Lincoln in Book I, Chapter IV as a way to introduce the Lost Cause concepts of Southern society as both gallant and also morally unsullied by slavery. We see Lincoln declare "I'll trust the honour of Lee and his people" and even that he personally "Loves the South" along with a range of similar sentiments in a debate with Stonewall (Dixon:1905. P55). These comments obviously show that idea of the South being gallant and noble accepted even by those in the North and when we see Lincoln also state rhetorically "Is not the North equally responsible for slavery?" and even "we can never attain the ideal Union our fathers dreamed, with millions of an alien, inferior race among us..." we see Dixon choose to extend the moral stain of slavery and racism to the North every bit as much as the South, a clear echo of Pollard's attempts to remove the Union's moral justification for War (Dixon: 1905. P48.). Of course, by using the device of placing Southern ideas and narratives in a presentation of that most respected icon of the Union Lincoln, the text attempts to suggest they were accepted on both sides of the conflict. This is historically questionable at best, since even allowing for the fact that Lincoln's views

on how best to address the position of freed slaves is complex, Dixon's work clearly goes to the limit of plausibility in his comments and for many readers well beyond it.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the most famous section of the novel is that which formed the basis of what in my view are many of the more disturbing sequences in *A Birth of A Nation*. The final two books of the novel deal with the impact of free black citizens and, to use Dixon's own term, the "Africanisation" of the South in Book III and the rise of the Klan to drive them back in book IV. Aside from the obvious discomfort for many modern readers found in presenting the Klan as a group of heroes facing down "overwhelming odds, daring exile, imprisonment and a felon's death" to "save the life of the people" the depictions here fit so closely with the ideas presented by Thomas Nelson Page in his writing both fictional and political that it is hard not to see his work published during the previous decade as an influence on Dixon rather than the other way around.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, at the time of writing there has been a great deal of debate around the movie adaptation of Margret Mitchell's novel "Gone with the Wind" which was removed from a popular movie streaming service during the writing of this thesis to much media debate.<sup>11</sup> While again it is impossible to argue that the text was not important in the

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<sup>9</sup> This acknowledgement mostly concerns the historical fact that early during the War Lincoln was at least considering colonising freed back slaves. His infamous 1862 contract with Bernard Kock to send five thousand former slaves to Haiti is frequently cited as evidence of this.

<sup>10</sup> The quotes in this paragraph are taken from the preface to the 1905 first edition of "The Clansman" but were written in 1904 ahead of its publication.

<sup>11</sup> I include articles from the BBC and independent Newspaper in Britain and Forbes and Wired in the US in the bibliography as examples of this debate, but I acknowledge here that many more articles exist on this topic across the spectrum of opinions.

popularity of the Lost Cause narrative, it was first published just four months before the most recent text under consideration within this project, *Absalom, Absalom*.<sup>12</sup> As such, it is obviously not feasible that Mitchell's work was an influence on any of the texts studied here. That is not to underestimate the influence that this text and particularly the representation of slavery found within it, had on the popular perception of the Lost Cause because it clearly was influential, or at the very least its cinematic adaptation was. However, the chronology should highlight why it is not a particularly useful text for the scope of this project.

Having so outlined the scope and aims of the project, it is worthwhile considering what may be expected to be revealed by this study. In short, it is hoped that these texts will reveal both some areas in which Pollard's ideas are reflected in the fiction and become accepted parts of Southern narratives, particularly in terms of how Southern gentile and upper class society is presented and how Southern fighting men are presented as brave and self-sacrificing in defence of their land and culture. The industrial nature and ruthless military strategy of the North will appear in similar lights in many of the texts as well, the damage done to a prosperous if rural way of life by an industrial war machine evident in the texts. However, they will not all fall in line with Pollard's views, especially in terms of the more socially complex and nuanced issue of the impact of the end of slavery and emancipation of black citizens following the war. In this issue we will see a wider range of attitudes and

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<sup>12</sup> According to James W. Mathews essay "The War of 1936: Gone with the Wind and Absalom, Absalom" Mitchell's work came out in June and Faulkner's in October.

interpretations based on the experience, moral stance and political agendas of the individual writers.

Literature at the time of the Birth of a Lost Cause: Mary Chesnut Boykin's Diary.

*Mary Chesnut's Diary* offers both a unique challenge and an opportunity to explore how the early battles of the long Civil War were represented in Southern literature since it both reflects the concepts also evident in Pollard's "Lost Cause" narrative that was produced at a similar time as the original diary entries were written. However, it also challenges some of the concepts Pollard bases his argument upon. The text purports to be the diary written by Mary Chesnut Boykin over the roughly five years from November 1860 to May 1865, published as it was written at the time. However, we must keep in mind that that original diary was revisited by Chesnut during the late 1870's until her death in 1886, a process by which she "rewrote, recalled and recast events", it becomes obvious how the text is perhaps as much a fictional work as it is a historical record (Clinton, 2001: pXIII).

This process of editing and revision also makes it necessary to offer a note on the text used within this chapter since different version of the diary have been published based on the various revisions Chesnut made to her original entries. Since this thesis is concerned with the development of the Lost Cause narrative, this chapter is based on the version of the text first published in 1905, under the title "A Diary from Dixie" and based on her revisions of the 1880's until her death in 1886. That text was then edited for publication by Isabella Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary. It was also the only version of the text available until the 1980's and it was the text chosen for reprint in 2011, the latest edition. All this means that while perhaps not the most accurate version of her diary as it was during the war, it is the version

most useful in exploring the themes of this thesis.<sup>13</sup> The fictional elements and re-imaginings added in the 1880's are likely to be at least influenced by - if not outright shaped to reflect - the wider Southern narrative that arose following Appomattox. Curiously, this process of editing and redrafting also resulted in a complex collection of contradictions and paradoxes within the text that allow it to provide uniquely fertile ground for the kind of exploration of the Lost Cause as a constructed narrative that will form the focus of this project.

In order to comprehend how this "conscious work of literary art"<sup>14</sup> works as a reinvention, it is first essential to both place the work into its historical context and understand something about the political and personal status of the woman who wrote it (Couser, 1989: p159).<sup>15</sup>

Mary Chestnut Boykin was the daughter of Stephen Boykin, a politician who served both as state governor of South Carolina (1828-1830) and later as a United States senator for that same state between 1830 and 1833 when he resigned office to practice law. In 1835 he sold the family holdings and moved to Mississippi where he had purchased three plantations and hundreds of slaves. While Mary would remain in Charleston until the fall of 1836 attending school, she too would move to Mississippi and live on the plantation with her family. In April of 1840, Mary was married at the age of 17 to James Chesnut, the brother of one of her

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<sup>13</sup> The version of the text edited by C. Vann Woodward and based on the original documents Chesnut produced is supposedly closest to her war time journal and so is often the preferred version for historical research purposes but the literary basis of this project means that accuracy is less important.

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this description was first used to discredit the work as a historical primary text on life in the Confederacy during the Civil War rather than to praise its literary value.

<sup>15</sup> The following biographical information is summarised from a number of sources, including Isabella Martin's introduction to the 1906 *Diary from Dixie* version of the text, Catherine Clinton's introduction to the 2011 printing of the text under the title *Mary Chesnut's Diary*, Elizabeth Muhlenfield's entry on Boykin Chestnut from *A New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 9, Literature* and the entry on Boykin Chestnut in Judith Harper's *Women during the Civil War*. There is no meaningful variation in the dates or detail presented in any of these sources.

friends from Charleston. He was the son of Colonel James Chesnut, a man Mary described as “a lordly planter” and she moved to live with her husband and the Colonel on the traditional Chesnut estate of Mulberry, just outside of Camden, South Carolina.<sup>16</sup> While there, Mary reported to be sickened by the “brood of colored children” she believed the old Colonel had fathered. This unusual combination of viewing her father-in-law as both “lordly” and yet being sickened by his assumed sexual relations with slaves is also a striking hint at her cognitive dissonance around Southern elite slaveholding society that is evident in the wider text.

From 1845 to 1848 when she and James moved off the plantation and to their own home, Mary regularly spent time visiting with relatives in the Northern states and took trips to New York and even England as a way to maintain her health and also to alleviate the long spells of low mood she suffered at Mulberry that may have been depression. During this time, Mary’s husband was successful in his political career, becoming a district representative to the state legislature, then a state senator and finally President of the South Carolina Senate in 1856. In 1858, James won a seat in the United States Senate and the pair moved to Washington, where they remained until May 10th, 1860 when James resigned his senate seat and returned home to help draft the Ordinance of Succession for South Carolina.

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<sup>16</sup> This and the following “brood of colored children” quote is taken from Chesnut’s diary dated Nov. 30<sup>th</sup> 1861 however the entry is not present in most published versions of the Diary including the 1905 original. Presumably this is due to the highly charged connotations of the comments. However, Vann Woodward uses the quotes in his 1981 edition of the text on P35, published under the title *Mary Chestnut’s Civil War* and it is from that source that these quotes are included here.

During the war, James Chesnut was by turn a member of the Confederate Senate, in charge of military affairs for the state of South Carolina, a personal aide to President Jefferson Davies and finally a Brigadier-General in his home state. All of this served to keep Mary close to the heart of decision making and public opinion within the South, as reflected in her diary with her location moving as the capital of the Confederacy did. Following the war, James and Mary lost their property at Camden and returned to find the family seat at Mulberry had been pillaged and all the stores of cotton burned. This left the family in financial hardship and Mary Chesnut Boykin lived out her remaining days in much reduced circumstances.

All of this historical detail serves to highlight two essential aspects of the production of this text in terms of the wider project. Firstly, the author is the daughter of a senior politician in antebellum society and later the wife of a similarly positioned politician during the Conflict. She always sat amongst the social group who held power at both state and national levels, whether that nation be the United States or the Confederacy. Equally, she both came from and married into families that owned large plantations, placing her firmly amongst the highest echelon of Southern Society. Secondly, these facts highlight what was a definite motivation for her revision of her diary. Since her husband was considered a representative of moderate Southern politics, he found he had no meaningful support base following the conflict and so was unable to secure office. During the years after 1874 that Mary started the first revision of her diary, she hoped to produce a manuscript that she could sell to improve the family finances. However, that task was unfinished when her husband died in 1885, at which point she started on a second revision of the document as an attempt to



produce a suitable memorial for him but died in 1886 before that process was complete.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, these two stated motivations give reason to expect the narrative to conform to the established Southern narrative on the war. Since Chesnut wanted to produce a populist text to secure finance from sales, she had every reason to echo the accepted narratives of the time. Equally, she clearly had a later wish to present the Confederate leadership in a sympathetic light as a tribute to her husband.

A third factor influenced her drafting of the diary however and is important in why the text may not entirely support the Southern narrative. Chesnut's own political leanings, especially around slavery were privately very much at odds with the wider Southern position. While there can be no doubt that she publicly supported her husband's pro-slavery position while interacting in the highest circles of powerful confederate society, there are many questions about her private views expressed only to her more trusted social circle. As raised by Vann Woodward (1981), Chesnut often "called herself an abolitionist", "rejoiced at the collapse of slavery" and supposedly stated that if there was one factor that could potentially result in her coming to understand the actions of the North it was "Lincoln's proclamation freeing the Negroes" (Woodward, 1981:p1 and 6).<sup>18</sup> Yet, while this makes it tempting to view her as a Southern abolitionist, the matter is not as simple as that. James Chesnut Jr, her husband, was considered a moderate by Southern standards but still "defended slavery before the war") and was the first Southern senator to resign from the United States Congress after the

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<sup>17</sup> Letters between Mary Boykin Chesnut and Varina Davis, held in the Williams-Manning-Chestnut collection, show evidence of this as discovered in research by C Vann Woodward.

<sup>18</sup> This position has been reasserted in biographical research by both Elizabeth Muhlenfeld (1981) and Julia Sterne (2010).

election of Abraham Lincoln (Koivusalo: 2018: p41).<sup>19</sup> Mary Chesnut never publicly spoke out against his position, though this may say nothing of her own views since such a position would be expected from a politician's wife in the period. She also admitted to the fact she "relished the attentions of skilled servants who anticipated her every wish" and believed the enslaved black population were "dirty, slatternly, idle, ill smelling" and "a little lazy but that is no crime" (Vann Woodward, 1981: p4). To reconcile this supposed contradiction, it is possible Chesnut believed slavery under 'good' masters (which would include her own husband of course) was a positive benefit to slaves whereas slavery under 'bad' (By which we can assume those masters who inflicted cruel or brutal treatment on slaves) was necessarily harmful.

Based on these biographical considerations, this chapter will now turn to textual analysis to examine three factors in the Diary in terms of its relationship to the Lost Cause. Firstly, it will examine how Chesnut supports the view of the Civil War as an economic assault on the noble South by the industrial North, in line with Pollards argument. Then, it will spend considerable time considering how issues of race and slavery are handled within the text, an area in which the adoption of the Lost Cause position is uncertain at best. Finally, the chapter will explore the skilful way Chesnut works to hide the contradictions in the diary introduced during the editing process. This final section is important since I believe it explains why this text was so frequently considered a simple record of fact for fifty years after first publication. That acceptance led to it being studied more often as a work of

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<sup>19</sup> He was also one of the last to be pardoned after the war, his re-enfranchisement not agreed until an act of Congress on 13<sup>th</sup> December, 1878.

history rather than subject to the literary analysis it more appropriately deserves and as a historical work, it was seen as more factual than it truly is and thus the diary became a more powerful tool in what Pollard describes as the long Civil War.

There can be little doubt that Chesnut echoes the idea that the North won the war not through skill at arms so much as a simple overwhelming weight of numbers. Unfailingly, her reports of military matters and battles match with the post-war conceit that the North won not because of skill or the righteousness of their cause, but because they had greater numbers and a cold economic efficiency that the Confederacy could never hope to overcome. Chesnut also suggests that this was a known fact in the South almost from the very start of the war and therefore lends a gloss of glorious heroism to a doomed nation that fought on in spite of impossible odds. Not only does this view fit with Pollard's assertion that it was Northern numbers that won the war; it also provides a fitting tribute to her husband who was part of that noble leadership class. It is therefore unsurprising that Chesnut's diary appears to reflect this theme closely.

Perhaps the main way this is achieved is through the reports of casualties from battle in the diary, which always report Confederate casualties accurately enough but vastly increase the number of Federal losses over the actual figures. For instance, we see a report of the fall of Fort Donelson that lists "They [The Union] lost six thousand, we two " where, according to The American Battlefields Trust website's official figures, the actual numbers were under three thousand Federal casualties to around one and a half thousand Confederate (Chesnut, 2011: p115). Chesnut says the Battle of Gaines's Mill yielded the South "twelve thousand

prisoners” when the actual total Union losses, included killed and wounded, were around half that number (Chesnut, 2011: p171). This overestimation has two effects. First, it presents the Northern forces as impossibly large. This makes the heroically small forces of the Confederacy seem more effective as the ratio of combatants lost in each battle makes their impact seem greater and the odds of them achieving victory more improbable.

Curiously, although there is no historical proof that Chesnut had actually read a copy of Pollard’s work in her impoverished state after the war, the numbers she gives are far closer to, though still slightly in excess of, those offered by him than the actual historical totals. Of course, this may be because Pollard based his figures on Southern journalism and those same reports would have been read by Chesnut during the war alongside the official information she could well have been aware of through her husband.

More importantly, this exaggeration of figures obscures the skill of the Northern commanders. With figures consistently pushed to such extremes, it makes it possible for Chesnut to plausibly argue that Grant (the Union general) can succeed in battle with Robert E. Lee only because when he has “ten thousand slain, he can order another ten” to be sent to the front (Chesnut, 2011: p283). This concept is reinforced by the repeated use of commercial language to describe the Northern view of war. They can simply “order” more troops, at another point Chesnut calls the Union army “Grant’s unlimited allowance” and “resources” (Chesnut, 2011: p236). These are all commercial terms that serve to further dehumanise the Northern forces. Confederate forces are always called “men” or “soldiers” and frequently Chesnut reports how they are “weakened” by wounds, or “brave” or “fiery” (Chesnut, 2011: p184 and P186). Of course, it must be acknowledged that this pattern in the

language may reflect the fact that Chesnut's work tending to wounded Confederate soldiers in Columbia meant she had seen individual soldiers from the South but had no direct personal experience of Union forces beyond their numbers in official and newspaper reports and so potentially was not the result of a conscious effort during editing. Still, whatever the reason for the linguistic choice, the difference between the humanised Southern forces and the seemingly unfeeling Northern army is striking in the journal and reinforces the narrative that came to be accepted in the Post-war South.

However, when we consider the representation of slavery, the text is far more complex and at times contradictory as we would perhaps expect from Chesnut's background. Certainly, there can be no doubt that the presentation of relationships between slaves and slavers, between black and white people is complex. There are incidents within the text that seem to highlight both the idealised relationship suggested by the Lost Cause and others that seem to outright contradict it, perhaps an understandable complexity for a woman who lived with the uncomfortable reality of slavery as well as the fictional intellectual idea of it present in Southern political thought. In terms of the former, there are occasions when Chesnut certainly plays into the idea of certain slave holders having a parental regard for their slaves and acting in their best interest and loyal slaves returning such treatment with loyalty even when facing personal risk.

A prime example of the parental regard shown by Slaveholders lies the incident that leads Chesnut to call her husband a "Soft-hearted slave-owner" for an incident in which he shows clemency to two presumably free black men he had arrested for selling whisky to his slaves

in return for corn they had stolen from the Chesnut family who owned them (Chesnut, 2011: p19). She goes on to imply how common that type of behaviour from her husband was by simply moving on to discussing a potential marriage match within her social circle in the next paragraph suggesting it was a routine occurrence. The kindness between slaves and slavers is also evident in one of the rare moments in the diary in which Union troops are directly presented within the narrative. Towards the end of the diary, we see Chesnut relate an incident where her friend (and so presumably another of the 'good' slaveholders) Mary Kirkland is having her house looted by Federal soldiers. At this point, the property is in Union hands and so the slaves are freed to act as they please and side with the Federal troops if they so wish.<sup>20</sup> However, while the house is raided for any valuables, the key risk to the "most beautiful woman this side of the Atlantic" is implied to be a sexual one by the focus given by Chesnut to Kirkland's beauty and the actions of her "loyal negro manservant" and two female slaves, the latter of which Chesnut insists "Press as close against her knees as they could ", risking personal harm to protect their mistress (Chesnut, 2011: p336-337). The implication here is clearly that these actions, coordinated by Monroe (the black manservant) are in order to protect her from the soldiers' sexual desires and that these now free black people choose the familiar bonds they have developed with their kindly Southern masters during slavery over freedom under the brutish rule of the Union troops.

However, that is far from the only way that this incident serves to support the Lost Cause narrative in regard to slavery. Chesnut also goes out of her way to show how Northern

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<sup>20</sup> After Lincoln delivered the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863, any slaves in territory controlled by Union soldiers were instantly freed. This incident occurs in summer of 1865.

troops are every bit as racist as Southerners. We are told one of the Union soldiers expresses surprise that Kirkland would choose to cling close to black people and tells the group that he is not there “to fight for negroes” and relates an incident where he observed “A beautiful white woman driving...with a coal-black negro man” and how if he had known the woman he would have “shot her” for the transgression (Chesnut, 2011: p337). The implication here is that the relationship between Southern white society and the black population in those states is closer than in the North because the white Northern soldier can recall a time he saw a black man and a white woman together as an exceptional moment along with the rage that sight had inspired. By undercutting the idea that the North is more welcoming to black citizens by highlighting the racist view of the Northern soldier, the moral high ground of the Union is undermined. It should also be noted this is a rare instance where Chesnut reports direct speech for an incident she was not personally present to record, lending more credence to the idea that this was fabricated in order to make a political point since such statements are rather rare within the diary. The heartless cruelty of the Union soldiers is further reinforced when the occupation of plantation house only ends after four “mortal hours” when the elderly mother of Kirkland faints due to “pure fright and exhaustion”, showing how careless the troops were for the plight of Southern women who were impacted by their presence (Chesnut, 2011: p337).

Yet this incident also introduces the key aspect of the text in which it becomes difficult to defend the idea that Chesnut entirely redrafted the diary to fit with the larger narrative of the Lost Cause. The vision of the white lady and free black man riding alone together in a coach raises the spectre of sexual relations between the two groups and in this regard

Chesnut does not hold with the idyllic image of antebellum Southern relationships between the races. Rather than deny that such a thing occurred in the South, Chesnut accepts and unquestionably condemns the concept of married, male white masters using slaves to enact their own sexual desires. The sexual exploitation and rape of slaves by their owners is entirely ignored within the Lost Cause narrative since to discuss it would be to destroy the gallant benevolent characterisation required to argue that the South was morally superior to the hated North and that slavery, as a boon to the slaves, was worth fighting to protect. However, Chesnut, with her view that the institution is at best problematic, does not hesitate to address the issue within the diary, so much so it is even evident in the original published version that deliberately eliminated many of the more overt references found in later historical research into the original document Chesnut produced during the war.<sup>21</sup> What is worthy of note for the argument here however seems to be the precise reason for that condemnation. Her concern is not about what such abuse says about the slave-owning men or even the trauma such abuse would have on the slaves, but rather the impact on white women in the household of men who would commit such a taboo act.

Chestnut explains how a man involved in such activities would fail in his duty to be “the model of all human virtue to these poor women” (Chesnut, 2011; p100). By these poor women, she distinctly means the wife and daughters he may have on the plantation not the slaves. This is because his actions force them to act dishonestly in pretending to “never dream of what is plain before their eyes”, an emotional challenge that she clearly has empathy towards, perhaps a result of her experiences with her father-in-law. (Chesnut,

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<sup>21</sup> Again, C Vann Woodward is the key researcher in this aspect.



2011: p100). The idea of a wife or daughter challenging the actions of a male in this time period is difficult because of the legal, social and financial difficulties associated with divorce so the sexual abuse of slaves by the man would have to be ignored within the household, putting great emotional and psychological strain on the females. Her logic for condemning the acts of such men is therefore not built so much on empathy for the black victims of the slave-holders lust but rather the suffering of the white women who must passively observe it.

In this Chesnut cannot escape the cognitive dislocation caused by trying to condemn the actions of slave holders without outright condemnation of the system of slavery within the text. The case of a man who remains nameless in the text is discussed in the same passage and it is acknowledge that this man was “the kindest creature to his slaves” because “the unfortunate results of his bad ways were not sold” (Chesnut, 2011: p100). This man is also given the pseudonym Legree, a reference to the extremely abusive slaveholder character in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* leaving little doubt about Chesnut’s condemnation of the sexual encounters between the owner and slave. Beyond the obvious irony in calling a man who engaged in such extreme abuses “the kindest creature,” here we see a direct contradiction. The best outcome for a slave is apparently to be allowed to keep her mixed-race child, however, that provides further pressure on the white females to ignore the evidence which due to the presence of the child on the plantation, remains before them. So, the kindest act for the slave victims of such acts is to not sell the children but that same act is, by extension of the previous point, the cruellest for the white female residents of the plantation according to Chesnut’s own logic. These contradictions are impossible for her to avoid and

suggest the difficulty she has in supporting in writing a position on slavery that she didn't necessarily hold personally.

This difficulty in understanding what Chesnut is trying to suggest about the sexual abuse of slaves is perhaps inevitable. Chesnut is trying to defend slavery while also condemning slave holders who, at least according to the law of the time, are committing no crime in mistreating and even raping their female slaves. This is especially evident in perhaps the most complex and studied passage within the text. In a diary entry for March 4th, 1861, Chesnut recalls a young, female slave on the auction block. Chesnut takes care to outline the "pleasant face", her "coy and modest" look and the way she "seemed delighted" at the auction. All of this immediately seems to place the incident into the openly problematic trope of Southern authors describing slaves as content within the institution of slavery, including their own sale to the highest bidder. Further, Chesnut takes pains to point out that the girl is dressed in "satin" and "silks" and is "ogling the bidders" as if she "knows who would buy her" (Chesnut, 2011: p12). From the rich dress to the sexual implications of the word "ogling", we cannot ignore the appearance of a sexualised undertone to the representation of this female slave. The actions allocated to her seem to be assigning a passive victim a degree of enjoyment in her sale and perhaps thereby implying she is, to some degree, an active participant in her own abuse. This would certainly seem to fit well with the wider Lost Cause narrative of slaves accepting slavery, even in this most extreme of examples. Yet Chesnut is so shaken by witnessing this auction she must sit for a while to regain her composure, so there is clearly something more than an untroubled

representation of an anti-abolitionist trope in this incident. A consideration of the historical accuracy of this moment is helpful in exploring the full meaning of this incident.

While absolutely fitting with some aspects of contemporary accounts, elements of this auction seem wildly out of place when considering the practice of slave auctions in the period. The most striking of these is the dress of the slave girl. As Clayton Jewett points out there was a standard uniform for any slave being sold in the state of Alabama consisting of “One lindsey-woolsey cloak and cape, one lindsey-woolsey dress, two cotton dresses, three sets of underwear, three pairs of cotton stockings, one pair of shoes and one hat” (Clayton Jewett:2004. P5). All female slaves sold in the state had to be provided with precisely that combination of items and none of them remotely matches the satins and silks described by Chesnut.<sup>22</sup> At first, this would seem to suggest that the auction was a fiction invented when editing the diary for dramatic effect rather than a genuine recording of a historical moment, perhaps even crafted specifically to allow Chesnut to use a traditional Southern trope of slaves happy in slavery to hide her own personal views and better support her Husband’s political position in a text intended as a tribute. Yet, this does nothing to resolve the issue of her shocked and shaken need for rest and emotional recovery after the incident. If this is merely a fictional representation to reinforce a pro-slavery view, why would Chesnut have included that detail?

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<sup>22</sup> Schafer’s 1981 essay does identify that New Orleans had a “Fancy Girl” market where women were sold explicitly for sexual service and were occasionally dressed for sale as Chesnut describes here. While most texts suggest the practice seems to have been limited to that city and seen as an unworthy and disreputable practice elsewhere within the South, the concept that it was more widely spread and accepted has been presented convincingly in Andrea Livesey’s 2018 work *Race, slavery and the expression of sexual violence in Louisa Picquet, The Octoroon*. Even assuming such auctions did occur in other states however, the idea that such a disreputable auction would openly occur in a busy public marketplace in Alabama as presented by Chesnut seems unlikely to me.

More detailed research revealed that there was another kind of auction beyond the standard ones that occurred in these states at the time although less commonly explored by historians. Any free black who could not afford to pay a “modest \$2 annual tax” would be sold by the state “for a long enough term to pay the tax” and these auctions took place on “Sale Day... the first Monday of each month” (Russell:1993. p1246 and p1247). The diary entry is dated March 4th, 1861, which happened to be the first Monday of that month. These ‘new’ slaves would be sold in their own possessions without the usual standard provisions, and that would therefore explain the unusual outfit of the female on the block. This at least suggests the possibility that what so shakes Chesnut is the fact this is a freed woman being returned to slavery.

The date also happens to coincide with Lincoln’s inauguration in Washington, a powerful symbol of the threat of approaching emancipation in the South, adding irony to the discomfort felt in this woman’s returning to bondage and furthering its overwhelming emotional impact on the narrator of the diary. Remembering Chesnut’s private claims that “Lincoln’s proclamation freeing the Negroes” was the one thing that could allow her to reconcile with the North after the war, this coincidence does not seem accidental. By showing the South returning people to slavery and back to the implied sexual abuse by ‘bad’ masters that occurred within that institution alongside Chesnut’s own personal shock at such treatment of slaves, she allows her own views to be present. Of course, such sentiments could not be directly stated since the book hoped to sell well to a Southern audience, so it makes sense that the incident is edited in such a way to at least partially

obfuscate the meaning. If this is indeed Chesnut's goal, and I strongly suspect it is, this aspect of the text is not just outside the traditional narrative of Southern slavery found in the Lost Cause but a direct challenge to it and one coming from within the heart of Confederate power.

The final aspect of relations between slaves and slavers within the diary is the threat of violence from the black population that while rarely outright stated in the text, is an unavoidable undertone. In fact, the only time such violence is outright stated, when a black footman "mad with drink" threatens to use a "carving knife" to kill anyone who enters the basement, he is easily talked down by his mistress and the whole scene seems to be presented as a comic interlude (Chesnut, 2011: p147). Still, the hints of an actual threat, while little more than details like the slaves being described using animalistic references are present. In fact, such subtle implications are evident even when Chesnut writes in praise of acts or actions slaves may have performed. For example, her trusted maid Molly is described as "an enraged lioness" letting out "howling cries" when she discovers her child has been dropped by a nurse, who is also described as "like an animal trying to hide" (Chesnut, 2011: p284). In this instance, Chesnut clearly understands the concerns of a mother when her child is at risk, but still reduces the black slaves she professes such love for as possessing a "naked, savage animal nature that they only hold back behind a façade of being utterly apathetic" to the events of the war, an apathy that Chesnut states she fears would be different "if they suspected the Confederacy was winning" (Chesnut, 2011: p284). This implies that the only reason the enslaved population, even those who seem happy and are treated well such as her own maid, are not more directly violent against the

slaveholders is because they believe liberation is at hand. After all, when the North win the war they will be freed without consequence and so are content to wait out the conflict and avoid any consequences such violence against their captors may provoke.

However, the biggest impact the threat of slave violence has on the text is an absence not a presence. There are no diary entries in the published record or known to scholars between September 1861 and February 1862, suggesting either Chesnut stopped writing (which is seen as the most likely explanation by scholars like Woodward and Sterne who have studied the original diaries) or that she destroyed the entries she wrote during this period.

Curiously, the start of this period coincides with the death of Chesnut's cousin Betty Witherspoon, who was murdered by her slaves who smothered her with a pillow as she slept.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, whether she stopped writing following this or simply felt what she had produced was too raw and unworthy for inclusion and so destroyed it is less important than the fact that the lacuna in the text directly reflects the potential impact violence from the slaves could produce.

Having discussed the issues within the text around race and race relations, it is evident that the diary as published shows evident contradictions that could lead to a reader questioning its historical accuracy. In this light, it is worth considering how Chesnut attempts to maintain verisimilitude within the diary when she is aware that her revisions are introducing such problems since the text was studied as a historical record for several decades in the South

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<sup>23</sup> Once again, C Van Woodward's biographical research in to Mary Boykin Chesnut is to thank for this being known.

despite these moments that seem like obvious inaccuracies and contradictions to a modern reader. The fact that for much of the past 100 years texts like Chesnut's diary has been studied as a historical document as much as a work of literature is part of how the Lost Cause narrative developed such a strong hold in many Southern states and so considering how Chesnut deals with contradictions and inaccuracies introduced in to the work during the editing process is important to understand why it was an influential text in terms of Southern interpretations of the conflict. It is also a sign of how skilful Chesnut was as a writer as she uses several techniques to smooth over these difficulties and present her later edits and reimaginings as a plausible contemporary account.

One of the most striking examples of potential anachronistic comment occurs in an entry dated April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1865 in which she claims to have first heard word of the assassination of Lincoln in Washington, which had occurred seven days prior. That word of such a momentous event could have taken a week to reach Chester, South Carolina, an isolated town of less than 2000 people recovering from the chaos of a lost war seems probable at first. However, the town had a functioning telegraph system right through 1865 and when you consider the number of high-ranking Confederate families seeking refuge there, it loses some of that plausibility.<sup>24</sup> Even less plausible is that Mary Chesnut claims to be unsure of any details when word arrives in the town, even using unusually short and vague questions such as "why" and "By whom?" in her diary entry that clearly do not fit with the eloquence and complex language she normally adopts in her writing (Chesnut, 2011: p330). It is very

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<sup>24</sup> There are examples of telegraphs sent from the town in April, 1865 reprinted in Confederate General Hood's 1880 autobiography *Advance and Retreat* for example.

evident that she is shaping her language to suggest her confusion at the news and reinforce the idea that what news had arrived in town was unclear and passed by word of mouth. Yet, in that same entry, she writes “The death of Lincoln I call a warning to all tyrants” (Chesnut, 2011: p331). Here we see an inescapable echo of “Sic Temper Tyrannis!”, the Virginia state motto that was shouted by Booth immediately after the assassination according to eyewitnesses. Since the odds of Chesnut quoting the phrase are so unlikely, it suggests either Chesnut was better informed when she wrote the diary entry than she purports to be, or more likely, she edited the entry in the final manuscript to better fit the narrative that the assassination was an outpouring of common sentiment in the South or some form of fated justice for Lincoln’s personal and the North’s general conduct during the succession crisis. The delay of a week from the event also serves to deny the idea that the confederate leadership had in some way been involved in the plot to kill the President since they appear to learn of it later than almost anyone else on the Eastern seaboard. In this, it is clear her revision of the text has been skilfully considered to achieve distinct political goals.

Another, subtler example of this is found in a diary entry dated the 27th April, 1862, in which Chesnut writes “New Orleans gone and with it the Confederacy” (Chesnut, 2011: p139). This is an obvious reference to the surrender of New Orleans to Union forces on that date. Since at the time Chesnut was in Columbia alongside her husband with his good connections to military authority, the idea that news of the fall of the city could reach her in less than a few hours is possible. However, the fact that she concedes that the single defeat means the loss of the Confederacy over three years before the war ended seems unlikely, despite the fact that looking back over the conflict this is often suggested to be the case.



This is especially apparent in light of the optimistic next entry dated two days later when Chesnut records that South Carolina is sending “thirteen thousand men” in a new regiment and the politicians of the state could “hold up [their] head” in pride (Chesnut, 2011: p137). At first, this combination of admitting defeat in a fit of depression and then feeling optimism at the sending of new troops forward in April 1862 could be written off as an emotional response to the loss of an important city, followed by two days passing to allow a more practical realisation that the war was not yet lost to dawn and this does present a perfectly plausible explanation. Yet, when considered in the light of the narrative the South attempted to portray in the 1870’s and 1880’s when the diary was redrafted of an inevitable Southern defeat to the superior numbers of the North, we see a more deliberate presentation become evident. We can clearly see Chesnut shaping her reaction to genuine historical events (The loss of New Orleans and the founding of 1st through 4th Regiment, South Carolina Infantry) to support the later Lost Cause narrative and the image of the Southern social elite to which she claimed membership that that narrative produced.

These examples are just incidents of a wider trend and there is also ample evidence that Chesnut herself was aware of the inconsistency that the editing process had introduced into the diary. She includes a number of entries that introduce justifications for why those inconsistencies may be. Firstly, in a diary entry dated April 10th, 1863, Chesnut explains “I burned a part of my journal” but that nothing was lost because she could rewrite it “from memory” since she would “forget none of the things” however she was “weak with dates” (Chesnut, 2011: p208). She claims to have burned the journal along with a number of other personal papers while fleeing from a raid by General George Stoneman. This is perfectly

possible, but the explanation that some of the earlier diary was rewritten in 1863 conveniently explains some of the contradictions in dates without acknowledging the over ten-year gap to when the substantial rewrites were undertaken. Chesnut also explains that the war left her tired and emotionally fragile. In February of 1865 she claims “my ideas of those last days are confused” (Chesnut, 2011: p300). Here again the text builds a justification to excuse its own inaccuracies that may cause a reader to question the historical value of the diary. By openly admitting to confusion, inaccuracies caused by the redrafting of the work can be minimised as the result of genuine error at the time rather than later attempts to shape the narrative to the particular end of broadly supporting the Lost Cause narrative. So, the historical inconsistency is tacitly acknowledged within the text to try and redeem a sense of authority over the ‘facts’ the diary puts forward.

There is one final aspect of the text in terms of claims of authenticity that is rarely mentioned in scholarship. On numerous occasions Chesnut claims to have allowed other people open and unrestricted access to her diary. For instance, in an entry for October 28th 1864, Chesnut suggests her journal “lies open” and “Everybody reads it who chooses” (Chesnut, 2011: p292). These comments then serve two purposes, though they are both linked to claiming historical authority. The first is that they allow Chesnut to show that her opinions as expressed within the diary are either shared or challenged by her peers and highlight the fact that the diary was never an entirely private text. Her views in defence of particular people or on wider issues can so be debated or reinforced by the reaction of those who read the diary, allowing the text to occasionally branch out from just one

person's perspective to a wider consensus since her friends agree with her observations on their own society and the progression of the war.

More importantly, it allows Chesnut to draw a mythic comparison. She claims that others in her circle, after reading the diary, take to calling her "Cassandra", echoing a reference she makes herself about her journal writing at other points in the text. The reference to the prophetess of Greek Myth who was cursed to issue true predictions but be ignored is evidently a powerful tool in Chesnut's self-presentation. It allows her both to explain the almost uncanny ability to predict future outcomes in a journal edited in hindsight and the fact that her awareness is never acted on by those around her and so the tragic outcomes cannot be avoided. The reader both finds a verification of her predictive power and also an explanation for why things transpired as they did despite Chesnut clearly knowing better than those around her.

Still, try as she might, Boykin Chesnut cannot hide the negative impact the war has had on her personally within the diary and, like many in the former Confederate leadership after the war as suggested by Foster, seems to "brood over defeat". She speaks of being a member of a "crushed people" suffering "poverty with no future and no hope" (Chesnut, 201: p332 and 335). The negative impact of the war on her is evident no matter how she tries to hide it. The ultimate final irony of the distance between Chesnut's actual mental state and that presented in the edited form of her diary lies in her husband's remark on her punishment for her role in the war. For the whole journal, Chesnut has tried to offer a positive vision of the antebellum South, often with happy slaves and fulfilling labour on the

plantation of 'good' owners such as her own family. Life in this imaged past in places such as the Chesnut family home of Camden was apparently worth suffering and even dying for, propagating a Southern ideal that she desperately wants the reader to feel as a sad loss following the conflict. Yet all of that is undercut by the sentence James Chesnut declares awaits her after the Southern defeat; "Camden for life" (Chesnut, 2011: p333). At the very end, the price she must pay for the South losing the conflict is an enforced return to that pastoral ideal Pollard and the Lost Cause presents as such a great loss.

## The Lost Cause Ideology Presented Through Fiction: Thomas Nelson Page's "In Ole Virginia".

Thomas Nelson Page's early work has long been seen as an influence on the developing Lost Cause narrative during the period around and immediately after Reconstruction. While he is obviously not personally responsible for the reinvented self-image of the antebellum slaveholding South that flourished in the period, with Pollard's *Lost Cause* predating his fiction and essays by over a decade, there is little doubt that his work was important for how those ideas were propagated across the South. Of all the texts included in this project, this collection of short stories is the most commonly accepted as serving to both reflect and help shape the ideology of the former Confederate society repositioning itself in light of defeat in the Civil War. However perhaps due to what can be most charitably considered a challenging portrayal of race, little critical literary scholarship has been devoted to these short stories in the last hundred years beyond acknowledging they were popular in the ex-confederate states and some linguistic study of Page's use of dialectal forms for his black characters. In that light, this exploration of the methods by which the text promotes the Lost Cause narrative as well as exploration of the limitations of the work as an example of that metanarrative adds to the existing scholarship in the area.

Nelson Page was born on the Oakland Plantation in Hanover County, Virginia, the son of the wealthy Page and Nelson families in 1853 and was afforded "a pampered childhood" prior to the war (Bailey, 1997: p110). However, unlike most other Southern families, the Nelson Page family "retained its affluence and social connections" after the war which allowed Page to attend Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, which is notable for placing Nelson

Page's scholarship during the period when Robert E. Lee, as president of the institution "provided innovative educational leadership".<sup>25</sup> Although Page did not attain a degree at that time, it is clear in terms of both his representation of Southern masculinity in his fiction and most obviously his later biography of Lee entitled *The Man, the Soldier (1911)* that this exposure to the great Confederate war hero was influential.<sup>26</sup> Curiously, while not a graduate, Thomas Nelson Page appears twice on the list of honorary degrees given out by Washington and Lee University. In 1887 (the year *In Ole Virginia* was published) he received a Doctor of Letters and in 1906 a Doctor of Laws. He is still the only man with two honorary doctorates from that institution. I would argue this fact alone stands as proof that Page was an intelligent man who chose to turn his abilities to propagating the Lost Cause narrative and saw reward from the educated elite in return.

Nelson Page did return to education after his unsuccessful time studying at Washington College and he attained a law degree from the University of Virginia in 1876. He then found work alongside his uncle with a law firm in Richmond, the former capital of the Confederacy. It was while working there that his short story 'Marse Chan' was published in 1884 and later included in his first collection *In Ole Virginia* in 1887 which was met with much acclaim amongst "the South's upper-classes" (Bailey, 1997: p111). While he later wrote many more

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<sup>25</sup> This quote is taken from the college's history page on its own website. This college is now called the Washington and Lee College in honour of the confederate general. The site also includes claims that Lee suggested the university start offering "Press Scholarships" and so introduced the subject of Journalism for the first time at any "college in the world" and marks the exact day Lee rode in to town to take the job on the University's timeline. His influence on the institution during the period Page attended is therefore evident in the institutions own materials even to this day.

<sup>26</sup> There is a wonderfully written review of this book in *The American History Review* for April 1912 P851-852 that while praising Nelson Page's writing style calls out both a number of historical inaccuracies within the work and the author's clear bias throughout. The lack of historical accuracy and attempts at idolising Lee are extremely evident with even the slightest scrutiny.

short stories and the somewhat successful novel *Red Rock*, this chapter will focus on that original collection of short fiction since it established Page's reputation as a writer.

Alongside fiction, he also published essays on political and social topics, which allow a direct insight into his expressed views. Crucially, some of these essays profess ideas that fit quite closely with the Lost Cause narrative and thus help provide an insight into the stories and how Page himself saw the issues this project explores.

Of those political essays, two are of particular influence in shaping my readings of the stories in the collection and so form the bases of much of my argument in this chapter. The first, his 1892 essay "A Southerner on the Negro Question" explores Page's views on race relations in the South following the civil war. In this essay, Page uses examples from history and the world of his time to suggest "The negro does not possess the elements of character, the essential qualifications to conduct a government even for himself" (Page, 1892: p406).<sup>27</sup> From this assertion, he then postulates that the South needs to "get the negro out of politics", or in other words disenfranchise many black citizens in the South because they are racially incapable of governing effectively (Page, 1892: p406, P412).<sup>28</sup> The essay also suggests that "barbarism", "Savagery" and even cannibalism are associated with black governance (Page, 1892: p405). From that basis, the essay asserts that "Slavery, whatever its demerits, was not in its time the unmitigated evil...to the negro it was salvation" (Page,

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<sup>27</sup> He cites Rome and Egypt as examples for the former, Liberia and Haiti (which he spells Hayti) as the latter though the detail and historical inaccuracy of the examples he forwards are problematic for his argument.

<sup>28</sup> Page's position is slightly more nuanced than this quote makes it seem. He has no problem with what he calls educated Negroes having the vote, but he suggests such individuals are rare indeed and equally suggests uneducated white voters may need to have their votes suppressed in some cases but that those would also be relatively rare. While unashamedly racist, Nelson Page does work hard to create convincing arguments to those who would not necessarily share his prejudice.

1892: p413) This statement fits neatly with Pollard's assertion in *The Lost Cause* "that system of servitude in the South; which was really the mildest in the world and did not rest on acts of debasement or disenfranchisement ; but *elevated the African* and was in the interest of human improvement and which, by the law of the land, protected the negro in life and limb and in many personal rights [...]" (Pollard, 1865. p49, emphasis mine).<sup>29</sup> While this argument is distasteful to modern readers, it does show how Nelson Page's political view of slavery raising the Black community beyond the role it could hope to attain without the support of white masters fits closely with Pollard's influential work and so inherently reflects the Lost Cause narrative. This chapter will assert that these views held by the author also echo in the representation of black and white relationships found in the stories in the collection. As a starting point, this understanding of Nelson Page's argument and particularly the different connotations of the one specific word "Salvation" is enlightening in terms of the story "Ole 'Stracted".

It is important to first note that "Ole 'Stracted" is an unusual story within the collection both for being set after the war and for featuring no appearances by white characters. Three white people are mentioned within the story; the first an unnamed Northerner who now owns the plantation the former slaves live on and is threatening to "turn out" all the former slaves on his land due to unpaid rent (Nelson Page: 1887: p86). The other two are former Masters who the slaves hope will return because in the case of Ephraim's master, they "wouln' let (The Northern land owner) turn we all out" and the title character's master who

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note Pollard means legal enfranchisement, not political here. His argument is that slavery gave Black citizens a legal place in society in the south and so enfranchised them under the protection of the law, albeit only as property.



Ole 'Stracted hopes will "come for him" and so return him to the plantation he once called home before he can be evicted by the new Northern owners (Nelson Page, 1887: p86). In both cases, the black slaves believe that their former owner can support them in the face of the harsh reality of a form of freedom where the necessary payment of rents to Northern businessmen makes their existence on plantations untenable. In this case, we see the white slaveholder offering salvation for the black slave in the sense of protection from calamity, specifically the calamity of being homeless and facing an uncertain future away from their home.<sup>30</sup>

However, this story embodies the arguments of '...On the Negro Question' in more interesting ways than the plot function of former owners of freed slaves. By crafting a picture of a world where the Black community is left to fend alone, removed from both what Nelson Page felt to be the beneficial institution of slavery and, more importantly, the leadership of white masters, he can show the society many ex-confederates feared would occur and that he himself predicted would result if Black citizens retained the right to vote. The tale shows an imagined world where reconstruction does not return formerly powerful white families, such as his own, to their antebellum place within society, the exact opposite of the outcome Nelson Page advocates in his essay. With this fact in mind, it becomes obvious why the home of Ephraim's family is described as "A log cabin" in an "old field grown up in sassafras" and populated by "half-grown chickens" and a "runty pig" (Nelson Page, 1887: p81). Further, Ole 'Stracted lives in "a ruinous little hut" "surrounded by dense pines and covered with vines" (Nelson Page, 1887: p88-89). The buildings are all described

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<sup>30</sup> OED Definition 2.

as run down, battered and uncared for, indicative of Page's stated belief that ex-slaves would be unable to successfully govern themselves effectively if given the chance. In short, the description of place here presents a nightmarish image of a plantation gone to ruin without a white master to govern it. We see a vivid depiction of what Nelson Page suggests would happen if white rule, offering the slave a route to "working towards salvation" in the sense of working towards one's own goal, were removed.<sup>31</sup> The interpretation seems problematic because it ignores the requirement that such salvation be self-directed inherent in the definition, but since Page states that such self-determination is impossible for black people, slavery becomes beneficial precisely because it fills that gap he suggests exists in the mental characteristics of former slaves required for their own self-improvement.

Perhaps radically, I believe the religious and particularly Christian connotations of the word salvation are also fully intended by Page and that deeper consideration of the character of Ole 'Stracted provides ample evidence to support that view.<sup>32</sup> The character Ole 'Stracted is an ex-slave that claims to have been "sold by someone other than his master" and so separated from his wife and child (Nelson Page, 1887: p89). His arrival on the plantation is described as "mysterious" and at first Page seems to use him to further ascribe superstitious beliefs to the black community (Nelson Page, 1887: p89). We are told his hut is a "temple where he practiced his unholy rites" surrounded by "pizonous" plants, and that he "sees sperrits in dat hainty-lookin' place" (Nelson Page, 1887: p89,90). The movement of a lizard on the outside walls of his hut is said to be "an ill omen" and when looking at its open door

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<sup>31</sup> OED Definition 1e.

<sup>32</sup> OED Definition 1a.

both Ephraim and Polly “expected to see something supernatural spring from it”. (Nelson Page, 1887: p91). Here we see the “Savagery” of black belief given a specific locus amongst the ruined plantation and focused around an unknown black presence that has been introduced seemingly outside of the control or plan of white masters (Nelson Page, 1892: p405). These details also present the black dominated world of the story as laced with superstition and thus connects governance with a lack of progress and outright savagery.

Yet this seemingly threatening portrayal of Ole ‘Stracted is juxtaposed with his hopeful refrain that his old master was “gwine come an’ buy me back” (Nelson Page, 1887: p91). Despite the rundown circumstances of his home, his old age and his poverty, he remains certain in his faith that his Master will return for him. Page further presents this faith in terms that clearly invoke religious imagery. For instance, when called “Ole ‘Stracted” by Polly, he claims “Dat ain’ my name” but he cannot tell Polly what to call him instead because he “don’t know” but “*He* know it- got it set down in de book” (Nelson Page, 1887: p93). Beyond the italic “*He*”, which invokes biblical references to God, we also see an echo of the Book of Life referenced repeatedly in the bible.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the fact that his Master will “know me ‘doubt any name” and give the former slave a new name seems to directly echo Revelation 2:17 (Nelson Page, 1887: p92). Together, these details suggest that to this former slave at least, the difference between slave owner and the Christian concept of God has been lost.

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<sup>33</sup> Revelation 3:5, Phillipians 4:3 and John 5:4 for instance, there are others.

It could be argued that these religious elements in the tale are limited to one character and represent nothing more than Nelson Page presenting the fading grasp on reality of an older slave whose life experience and spiritual instruction have become intertwined in his failing mind. In turn, that would suggest no deeper significance is intended in these references and my assertion that Nelson Page does mean “Salvation” in the religious sense would be largely unsubstantiated in his fiction. Yet that position is undermined by an earlier instance when Ephraim and Polly realize that there is no way they can raise enough money to avoid being thrown out of their home. When all hope is lost Polly thinks of “Marse Johnny” as the final hope for salvation from eviction (Nelson Page, 1887: p86). Thus, in one short story we see repeated calls by the black characters to their old masters in times of great need. This source of hope is only extinguished and their unfortunate fate accepted when Ephraim points out that the old master “ain’ got nothin’” after the war (Nelson Page, 1887: p86). Although admittedly lacking the overtly religious connotations of the end of the tale, it is still striking that hope is sought in the same place, their old white masters, by all the ex-slaves in the story when every power they possess has failed. Perhaps this moment is not literally a prayer, but the role it plays in the mind of the characters is not far removed from one.

By positioning white masters as the single source of intervention to which the ex-slaves can petition when all practical means of hope have been extinguished, Nelson Page places them at least in the role of saints if not God in this imagining of the post reconstruction South, further supporting the idea that the religious connotation of salvation is part of Nelson Page’s view of the antebellum relationship between slave and master. Of course, this idea

also conveniently fits to explain the negative impact of leaving the slaves free but without the capital means to support themselves without white money and resources and so allows the former Confederates to feel justified in their racial prejudices since the outcome they suggested has indeed seemed to occur.

'Ole 'Stracted' also provides an interesting window through which we can see the presentation of greed from the victorious North undermining their moral argument for removing slavery. If, rather than emancipation for the good of the freed slaves, the Union freed the slaves solely for a financial or political goal, even if the objective was merely to more effectively ruin the wartime economy of the Southern states, Nelson Page can shift the moral dimension of the conflict in the mind of his reader. This concept of an end of slavery driven by industrial ends is common in Lost Cause narratives and was first raised by Pollard himself when he stated "slavery was not a moral dispute" but a political one (Pollard, 1865: p47). Three concepts work together to suggest this interpretation also holds in the imagined South Nelson Page has created. Two of these concepts have already been explore in this chapter, specifically the fact that Northern land owner in "Ole 'Stracted" is more than happy to evict the slaves if they do not meet his rent demands, suggesting that he is interested only in the wealth he can get from Southern soil and not the welfare of people, including the former slaves. The fact that all of the white characters remain distant, clearly removed from the everyday life of the former slaves who form the protagonists of the story also implies Northern disinterest in the future of the South in general and the plight of the freed slaves in particular as a second instance. Finally, and most subtly, Page chooses to call the ex-master of Ephriam and Polly "Johnny". The name Johnny was

particularly charged during the period as Union soldiers had used the term “Johnny Rebels” or “Johnnies” as a term to refer to the common soldier in the Confederate army. The use of the name by Nelson Page is thus a potential indication of what happened to the owner of this plantation. Ephraim makes it clear he is still alive yet that the slaves he had treated so well prior to the conflict can expect no help from him. If the reason for this lack of support is that the owner had been dispossessed and impoverished by fighting in the war, it could be read as yet another example of the North causing suffering for the black community by removing their source of support and guidance. In this light, ‘Ole ‘Stracted’ functions not only as a nightmarish dystopia brought on by black rule of the South but more importantly as a microcosm of the ideological position that the end of slavery was not a moral act from the North but a targeted financial strike on the Southern States.

The second of Nelson Page’s essays that help shine light on his connection to the Lost Cause narrative is his 1904 work ‘The Lynching of Negroes, its Cause and its Prevention’. This work argues that the reason so many black people were lynched in the South was not due to racism but due to the necessity of responding to the very high rate of “ravishing and murdering women” (Nelson Page, 1904: p44). He goes on to argue that this is an increasing problem since slavery ended because of the “teaching of equality” following emancipation (Nelson Page, 1904: p45). The unlikely logical basis for this odd statement rests on Page’s claim that the black male “does not generally believe in the virtue of women” (Nelson Page, 1904: p45). From this, it follows that since black men do not have the capacity to understand female virtue and equality teaches black slaves that they are the equal to white people, they will naturally try to take what they want sexually from white females by force

since there is no moral reason in their world view to prevent them from doing so if they are not taught that that have an inherent inferiority to white people.

It then follows that since white men are respecters of women and through slavery taught black men both that they were inferior to their white owners and to hold the same respect of women which they did , the institution helped the slaves live virtuous lives and also protected white women from sexual violence. Postbellum, without that guidance from slave owners, sexual crimes from black males become unavoidable as that close relationship between the two male populations is broken and the key teachings lost. He also uses this as an argument for lynching as a deterrent and postulates that such extra-legal violence against blacks was understandable but somewhat morally dubious. While this essay clearly ignores the number of black female slaves who were repeatedly raped by their owners, a fact acknowledged in the work of both Chesnut and Faulkner, and also goes directly against the arguments made by many historians that lynching was a political weapon, it is still of value to this project in one specific context.<sup>34</sup> Nelson Page's essay serves to further reassert the Lost Cause concept that slavery was a beneficial institution to the slaves, in this instance because it allowed males of both races to grow together and thus allowed slaveowners to teach male slaves a range of values, not least how to respect women. However appalling or tenuous this logic may seem to a modern audience, the idea that black citizens would be more violent, particularly against women since they had no white masters to teach them respect became part of the Lost Cause narrative. However, this essay is far from the first

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<sup>34</sup> Michael J. Pfeifer's 2011 work *The Roots of Rough Justice, Origins of American Lynching* Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 "The Un-American Negro" of Heather Cox Richardson's 2001 work *Race, Labour and Politics in the Post Civil War North* both provide excellent examples of work that concludes that lynching was a political act, not one related to punishment of crime, from historians on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

time such a position occurred to Nelson Page and we need only look to *In Ole Virginia* to see him providing literary examples of this political idea of slavery providing white role models for black male slaves in terms of relationships that he would go on to advance openly over two decades later.

One technique used in both 'Marse Chan', the most acclaimed story in the collection, and in 'Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin', the story Nelson Page personally "believed his best", is the presentation of a pair of characters as the main protagonists of the story (Wilson, 1991: pXII). The first is a black slave who narrates the tale and the second a white master that is presented as an idealised representation of Southern masculinity for the slave to look up to and emulate. These two characters' paths then go on to echo each other in striking ways through the plot of the tale and through their relationships we can see Nelson Page present models of this close bond between the races that he argues so benefitted the black male slaves in his essay on lynching.

The most obvious of these mirroring devices is the close connection between the two from childhood. In Marse Chan, Sam, the black servant is born "Plantin' corn time, de spring" and Master Channing (the "Marse Chan" of the title) "wan' born tell mos' to de harves' allowing the two boys to grow up together on the plantation (Nelson Page, 1887: p3). In 'Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin', the title character, a black coachman, is born "On a Sat'day in de Christmas" while Master George "was born in de new year on a Chusday" their birth dates so close that Unc' Edinburg's mother "nussed bofe at one breast" (Nelson Page, 1887: p24). These seemingly minor details immediately draw a parallel in the life experience of slave



and master. They grow together on the same plantation having the same experiences. This serves the purpose of implying a shared start in life between the two groups, suggesting an equality of experience between slaves and slavers. Immediately, the idealised close ties between servant and master referenced in Page's essay becomes evident in the tales, presented as a seemingly natural offshoot of plantation life. It is also striking that Nelson Page elects to draw attention to the fact that the son of a white plantation owner would be wet nursed by a black slave. This was a practice that occurred relatively commonly in the antebellum South but is here used to suggest a narrower view of the gap between races than I believe it actually implied.<sup>35</sup>

The parallel experience of slave and master does not stop with their early childhood. Both stories then have the pair of young males spend time off the plantation in early adulthood as the master works to get an education. In 'Marse Chan', Sam accompanies Chan to school to "tote he books an' we all's snacks" and Unc' Edinburgh goes to college with Master George to "help meck him a gent'man" (Nelson Page, 1887: p6, p24). Firstly, it is important to note that Nelson Page is certainly not suggesting that the slave characters had access to the same educational opportunities as their masters. Virginia is one of seven Southern States that passed laws that explicitly made teaching slaves to read illegal and those laws

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<sup>35</sup> It must be acknowledged that the social implications of the use of slaves for wet nursing is a complex issue amongst historians and not one that can be resolved simply. While some historians argue the practice actually bound women of different races together in shared experience, others argue that it was a harmful practice in terms of relations between the groups. For the purpose of this response, Emily West's "Mothers Milk, Wet Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South" published in issue 83 of the *Journal of Southern History*, Pages 37-68 was central to my personal position on the practice. That essay, with its logical defence of the conclusion that wet nursing "adds an extra dimension to our understanding of enslaved women's psychological and physical exploitation" (Page 67) resonated strongly with me and is why I believe the practice is not a sign of close relations between races but a further echo of the commodification of black women under the institution of slavery though this is admittedly a personal position on a largely unresolved debate and there are historians who would argue against this position.

were still very much in force during the period the tales are set but the fact that Nelson Page has the slaves accompany their masters as they access education is significant because of the passive implication that the black slaves were at least given limited access to some books and places of learning under slavery.<sup>36</sup> This is striking also because it is reminiscent of a comment in “A Southerner on The Negro Question” that “slavery alone has not repressed intelligence” and that “[The Negro] does not possess the faculties to raise himself beyond slavery” (Nelson Page, 1892: p403). The essay makes clear that Nelson Page believed black people were incapable of properly benefitting from education, even during reconstruction when it was widely offered to them by state funded schools when the anti-literacy laws were repealed. The only exceptions he allowed were for those who “have a considerable infusion of white blood in their veins” who may go on to become doctors or lawyers, the latter’s success coming “in inverse ratio to their principles” (Nelson Page, 1892: p410). In that light, it is at least curious that he would choose to give his fictional slaves time around educational facilities they were legally prohibited from attending except to perform servile duties such as carrying books and maintaining the master’s rooms. These limits are never mentioned in the tales, leading a reader to imply a degree of closeness that was not actually present.

This closeness between slaver and slave appears in another form when the Masters in both stories meet the female characters who will be their love interests. In both cases, the slaves are present and pass comment on the first interactions, showing an ability to read the

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<sup>36</sup> Those states and the year they passed Anti-literacy laws. South Carolina (1740), Georgia (1759), Missouri (1819), North Carolina (1830) Alabama (1832), Virginia (1832), Mississippi (1841). Punishments for white citizens who educated blacks varied by state from fines to floggings. All these laws were repealed by the federal government after the Civil War.

romantic attentions of their masters more easily than any other character. Sam is the first to notice that Miss Anne and Master Channing “‘peered to tek a gre’t fancy to each urr” and “sut’n’y wuz sot on each urr” and Unc’ Edinburg comments “Yes, Lord! Edinburg dyah you mistis” after only observing how George and Miss Charlotte bow when they meet for the first time at a formal dance (Nelson Page, 1887: p4, p6). The implication that there is a mutual emotional understanding between the two groups, slaves and masters, is evident in this detail, suggesting that by exposure to the actions of white masters these particular black men have learned how to read social cues and so understand male and female relationships in a romantic way, something that in his essay on lynching, Nelson Page suggests would be completely impossible for black men without that instructional example. Here we see Nelson Page directly presenting his idea that black men are capable of social understanding and respect but only when given strong examples by white men to whom they have been taught inferiority.

Equally interesting in terms of the representation of desire from black male slaves is the secondary relationships the narrators are allowed to form alongside their masters’ romantic courtships. In both stories, the black characters quickly arrange to marry a slave in the ownership of the family of the woman the Master hopes to marry into, a further clear parallel between the two males. Yet the process of courtship is very different between the two groups. There are none of the long, romantic overtures explored in the master’s attempts to form matches to be found in the slaves’ courtships. Instead, they are quickly partnered off based on simple convenience. Unc’ Edinburg’s wife-to-be responds to his initial proposal by stating that “Her mistis gwine own me [Unc’ Edinburg]... she reckon she

ain' niver gwine to be able to git shet o' me" by way of acceptance of an offer of marriage (Nelson Page, 1887: p32). In a similar vein, Sam's wife lives on the same plantation as Miss Anne, and if the two slave owners got married it would "mek it one plantation" so it simply makes logical sense for them to wed (Nelson Page, 1887: p4). In both cases, while we get elaborate courtship over years between the pairs of white lovers, the slaves form partnerships rapidly and seemingly on the grounds that the union of their owners make it convenient for them to do so. What at first glance appears in the narrative as a romantic doubling (both slaves appear happy at their matches and the relationships between the pairs of black slaves and white masters seem to echo each other) is undermined by the way the two groups select partners.

It should also be remembered that slave marriages were not legally recognised in any Confederate state so while some pairs of slaves were allowed ceremonies, usually presided over by their owner rather than a priest, no such formally recognised bond actually existed. This literary construction both raises the courtship of the wealthy whites to more idealistic circumstances and while allowing marriage between black slaves to exist, reduced it to economic convenience, a subtle way to dehumanise the range of emotions displayed by the slaves compared to their masters and further hint at Nelson Page's view that the male slaves have little concern for selecting sexual partners beyond geographic availability.

Both of the stories are tragic in their endings, and here again the role of the two black slaves echo between the tales. In both cases, the final purpose of the character is to record the heroic nature of their masters who sacrifice themselves for love and honour. 'Marse Chan'

sees Master Channing rush headlong in a cavalry charge while gasping the Confederate flag and riding “four good lengths ahead o’ ev’y urr hoss” (Nelson Page, 1887: p18). His bravery in battle here is an effort to return to his beloved “wid a star on [his] collar” (Nelson Page, 1887: p18). Unlike earlier battles in the story when he believed Miss Anne would never return his love, Channing is, thanks to an approving letter, now sure of her affection when he returns home after the war. As a result, he is not fighting out of a suicidal desire to get killed to end the grief for his lost love at this point, but instead out of a new found desire to prove himself worthy of the admiration of Miss Anne. The slave Sam, present at the battle and a witness to his master’s death, dutifully returns the body, still wrapped in the very Confederate flag he bore to battle, home to be mourned by Miss Anne. The image of the idealised slaveholding Southern male as a cavalryman committed bravely to battle for personal honour and to secure the love of a woman only to tragically lose his life in that pursuit certainly fits with the Cavalier image so central to the concept of Southern masculinity. The noble death in battle, the desire to win success to prove worthy of the love of an idealised woman and even the tragic scene of mourning all fit with those traditional courtly ideals as found in Romance tales.

Equally, George in *Unc’ Edinburg* dies a noble death attempting to do right by the woman he loves. In this case, he perishes as a result of his attempt to cross a swollen river on his way home having left the safety of a Miss Charlotte’s Christmas party to avoid her having any difficult social encounters because they are in the same house after their potential marriage match failed. His chivalry is such that he would rather risk death in the ice-cold water than inconvenience his love in the smallest way. The crossing does not kill him outright however,

and he only allows himself to die from the exposure after Miss Charlotte is brought to see him one final time and whispers his name. This ending is described as him getting “cross” the metaphorical river between life and death that the real crossing has shifted to become in his dying mind (Nelson Page, 1887: p45). Unc’ Edinburg and Miss Charlotte can only look on sadly as he passes away. Here again, the slave watches his Master die and shares his grief with the woman who had inadvertently set in motion the actions that would cause that death.

Curiously, in both incidents, the slave is not just present but exposed to the very same risks that kill their masters. Sam is saved by “providence” when knocked behind a bank in the charge that killed his master and Unc’ Edinburg can only “pray to god” to survive the swollen river until George saves him with one of his last acts (Nelson Page, 188: p20, p45). In both cases, Nelson Page has the slave and slaver risk the same harms and, in each case, fate works to reward the noble, loyal slave while having the white master die heroically. This repeated tragic form could be seen as an echo of the war as perceived by Nelson Page, where the society of white slave holders gallantly destroyed itself, leaving only slaves to tell the authentic story of their heroic sacrifice. Of course, the fact that the son of a prominent slaveholder elects to create fictional slaves to tell the story, putting his narrative in to their mouths, is certainly a problematic aspect of that concept within his fiction.

In all of these incidents, we see the slave as a poor echo of their idealised white master. They attend school together but only the master benefits, they find love but while the masters experience ill-fated romance, the black slaves get convenient matches that succeed

with little difficulty. They both expose themselves to risk but fate and kindly white masters save the slaves while dying themselves. In each instance, the black slave's tale is a lesser form of that of their master. As Nelson Page has Uncle Edinburg state, "jes' like he shadow", the slave can copy and follow the actions of their master, but never experience the full value, be that tragic or noble, available to their social superiors, a view very much in keeping with Nelson Page's political writings (Nelson Page, 1887: p24).

However, Nelson Page reflects his general view of slavery as a beneficial institution for the slaves in more ways than simply echoing views openly stated in his political essays. Indeed, while he is most famous for the fictional antebellum world he fills with dutiful slaves and devoted masters, Page does present one short story in the anthology that is set exclusively during the war and the immediate aftermath of the conflict rather than ranging further back to his more usual fictional pasts or futures. Uniquely within the collection, 'Meh Lady: A Story of the War' allows a reader to see how Nelson Page wants the conflict itself to be remembered rather than the world before or after the fighting and through that, how the war forced a shift in the idealised relationships between dutiful black slave and benevolent white slaver that is present in all of his antebellum stories.

Billy, or Uncle, the slave who narrates the action in 'Meh Lady', is repeatedly presented as holding the role of a father figure to the children of the white family, an impression which increases in clarity as the story progresses. At the very beginning of the tale, we are told of Master Phil that Billy "larn him to ride" and we see him "gittin fishing poles" to go fishing with Master Phil's nephews (Nelson Page, 1887: p46, p48.). These duties are carefully

selected by Nelson Page because while they certainly could be assigned to a slave, they are also ones we would associate with a father and grandfather respectively. With this in mind, it is clear that from the opening scenes of the story we get the first subtle hints of this blurring of the line between property and person, with Billy appearing more like a relative than chattel property of the family, a change we see play out stage by stage as he retells the tale of the war from his experience.

While this blurring of the line appears as little more than foreshadowing at first, we see the reason for this shift in the relationship become more overt and clear as we move through the tale. The key moment in this transition from valued slave to beloved family member comes from Billy's response to the presence of Union soldiers on the plantation. Upon first seeing "De Yankees" arrive near the house in such numbers that "de whole top o' de hill wuz black wid 'em" Billy returns to his house to arm himself and then proceeds to warn his Mistress (Nelson Page, 1887: p52). This seemingly minor incident is politically loaded on two levels. Firstly, since Marse Phil had been "done shoot in de breast" in battle two years prior, the white women live alone and now face an advancing hostile army (Nelson Page, 1887: p49). We see the slave willingly accept the duty of defending them from the invasion, stepping into the role formally held by the slaveholder's son when he enlisted in the Confederate army. Page takes care to show us that this is no symbolic action on the slave's part either. Billy, on more than one occasion during the Union occupation of the house claims he is willing to use violence against Union troops, even stating of one that he planned to "split him [a union soldier] wide open" despite knowing that doing so will see him shot by the remaining members of the occupying unit (Nelson Page, 1887: p54). Undaunted by that



threat, he accepts the risk and elects to “catch a grip on my axe” in preparation for delivering a blow on any Union soldier who attempts to touch his mistress, knowing full well that doing so will see him killed in turn, willing to sacrifice his own life to save his mistress from the slightest harm (Nelson Page, 1887: p54).

What makes this particularly powerful as political propaganda is that it directly inverts a key image of the war. Crucially, Nelson Page takes pain to point out this is at least “two years ‘til most the summer” after the death of Master Phil in battle and Phil served in the Confederate army for “mor’n a year” prior to that battle (Nelson Page, 1887: p42, p52). That means the incident takes place, at the earliest, in the Summer of 1864 since the first Confederate Militia were raised in February of 1861, so that is the earliest Phil could possibly have enlisted. This is important because it ensures the incident has to occur after the Emancipation Proclamation of January, 1863. This means that, by law, wherever the Union army went after that date, “all persons held as slaves within any State...in rebellion against the United States, shall be...free” (Lincoln, 1863). So, all Billy had to do was walk over to the Union troops and he would no longer be a slave, something that in reality many slaves did. Instead, he returns to the house and accepts the role traditionally reserved for the master in protecting the female members of the family in the full knowledge that doing so could cost him his life. This moment also echoes the image of two domestic slaves protecting the chastity of a Southern woman from an occupying unit of union army troops in Chesnut’s diary entry as discussed in the previous chapter, highlighting this choice of slaves as a common trope in Confederate fiction of the period .

Of course, if these were the only examples of Billy, who is also called “Uncle”<sup>37</sup> by the family stepping in to the role usually reserved for the white head of the family, it would be possible to see that interpretation as a stretch. However, it is not. These early examples are merely the subtlest of many such portrayals. A much clearer example occurs at the end of the tale when we see the post-war marriage ceremony of the daughter of the plantation owner. With her entire family dead, when the preacher “ax who give dis woman” it is the slave who steps forward and replies “Ole Billy” (Nelson Page, 1887: p79). Obviously, Nelson Page once again has Billy step into the role of father, quite literally this time as he gives the Mistress of the house away at her wedding. Remembering that it was illegal for slaves to get married themselves and considering that I could find no recorded instances of a slave or freed slave giving away a mistress at her marriage, this is likely a fictional construct to show the value of slaves as family members that could not possibly have actually taken place anywhere in the South even in the immediate aftermath of the War, another example of Nelson Page’s skilled use of fiction to advance his political agenda.

The other interesting detail about ‘Meh Lady’ is that it is the only story within the collection to show a positive representation of a Northerner. Captain Wilson, a Union officer who becomes the main romantic interest in Meh Lady is shown at his very introduction to display proper respect to Southern ladies, stating he “kinnot ‘pologize nough, for dese out’ages” when ending the union invasion of the plantation and going so far as to suggest the Northern officers who tolerate such rude behaviour against Southern ladies from their men

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<sup>37</sup> While this may be another example of Nelson Page presenting the slave as a respected family member by his owners, it should be noted that “Uncle” was a common nickname for older slaves in the South and so it may not be intended as anything other than a reflection of that actual historical practice.

should be “shot” (Nelson Page, 1887: p55). He later returns to the plantation after being wounded in battle to be nursed back to health by Meh Lady, during which time he happily accepts the social order of masters and slaves on the plantation, despite his fighting to end slavery. However, it must be pointed out that while Wilson is a union officer and from “New York or somewhar” Nelson Page chooses to make him “Half Virginian” and the “husband’s cousin” of the slaveholding family in the tale (Nelson Page, 1887: p55). This presentation suggests that while Meh Lady cannot acknowledge him as a Virginian due to his fighting against the Confederacy and perhaps more crucially his own home state, he is still of Southern sensibilities in terms of manners and approach. It is this attitude that means he can be accepted into the family by the end of the tale because he understands how the South should be run and can claim the heritage needed to integrate in to the former slave holding elite. Indeed, that marriage makes Uncle suggest “de ole times done come back ag’in” as he sits and pictures the idyllic future of the plantation following the marriage that will almost exactly resemble the one that existed antebellum despite the supposed end of slavery and new opportunities for freed slaves after the Union victory (Nelson Page, 1887: p55). Clearly, the best outcome for the war in Page’s story was a return, as close as possible, to antebellum society, the slaves may then be free in name but as they elect to return to their old roles and accept beneficent white masters again, no real change would result from the defeat of the Confederacy.

Overall, the idea perpetuated by Nelson Page in the collection of stories that prior to the war that slavery was a benevolent force in a way that Northern industrial views of the world could not recognise, let alone allow to continue, can perhaps go some way to explaining the

popularity of Nelson Page's stories in the South during the 1880's. They certainly work to remove the moral dimension from the Northern victory which was an essential component to winning the ideological battle of the long Civil War since this position is frequently found amongst Neo-Confederate ideas today. In this lies the very heart of why his work was so important to groups like the Daughters of the Confederacy and their ilk since it served to offer reinforcement of the Lost Cause narrative during and immediately after the reconstruction period.

There is no doubt that on issues of enfranchisement, the benefit of slavery, the sentimentality and bravery of Southern gentlemen and the economic destruction that the North inflicted on the South during the war, *In Ole Virginia* serves to neatly advance the same positions as Pollard's "Lost Cause". Thomas Nelson Page's skill as a writer allowed him to take the views found in his essays and repackage them in a fictional format that would be read across the Southern states by men and women alike. In that at least, his value and influence on the ideological battle of the long Civil War is unquestionable.

*Absalom, Absalom!*: Reflecting on the Lost Cause in the 1930's.

When William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm on December 10th, 1950, he said an aspiring writer could prevail by “leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice” (Faulkner, 1950). Much has been made about the importance of this speech as “ameliorating atomic anxiety” (to use the title of the 2014 essay by Mark LaVoie) in the face of rising nuclear tension between the US and USSR. The idea that Faulkner’s work reflects the concerns and anxieties of both the time he was writing and looks forward to the concerns of the cold war period is certainly well mapped territory. However, I strongly believe his work, particularly his novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, also reflects the specific history of the American South, reaching back to the end of the Civil War every bit as much as it expresses the contemporary and future concerns of the whole of the American nation. Those same concepts of “love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice” Faulkner called upon in his speech reflect the idealised self-image of the South that echoes through other Southern fiction explored in this project such as the work of Chesnut and Nelson Page. Specifically, it calls to mind the honour, pity and sacrifice of the imagined Confederate soldier and the pride and compassion of the idealistic recreation of the slave holder first outlined in Pollard’s *Lost Cause* and later presented in both political and fictional work by writers including Thomas Nelson Page, examples from both of which can be found earlier in this project. However, unlike the other writers in this project, Faulkner displays a skilful, subtle critique of the flaws in such views that make it more difficult to establish

whether he is supportive or critical of that narrative or simply working to express his own ambiguous feelings about his homeland through fiction.

Still, before looking closely at the text itself, it is essential to look at the position Faulkner himself held in terms of the South and its history, a question that is still open to debate. Faulkner's biographical details make clear that he is a Southern writer who was educated in a society under the system of Jim Crow laws. He was born in New Albany, Mississippi in 1897 as the son of a lawyer and despite time spent in New York, Hollywood, Latin America and Japan (the latter two as part of his Ambassadorial duties), he spent the majority of his life living in the South (Blotner, 2005: p3). He was formally educated entirely within the state of Mississippi, attending high school in Oxford, Mississippi before the First World War and spending time at the University of Mississippi after it, although he failed to graduate at that time. With this in mind, it seems clear that he can be considered a Southern writer educated in the South after the Civil War writing a novel about the impact of the conflict.

However, it is also important to remember that Faulkner was not convinced by segregation and so does not embody Confederate and Neo-Confederate political ideas in the same way the previous author explored in this project, Thomas Nelson Page, explicitly did. For instance, Faulkner was publicly outspoken against segregation under Jim Crow laws in Mississippi during his life, even during his time as a cultural ambassador for the US, a role in which he would be expected to defend the American political system.<sup>38</sup> In an interview for

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<sup>38</sup> There is evidence to suggest that, perhaps due to his heavy drinking, Faulkner was not always perfectly suited for this role, and records of memos from the US Information Agency kept in archives at The University

Holiday Magazine in 1954 he argued the main thing he hated about Mississippi was “the inequality: the poor schools they [black citizens] had then when they had any, the hovels they had to live”. He then wrote a series of letters to the newspaper the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* to be published in 1955 in which he argued in favour of the Supreme Court ruling in Brown Vs Board of Education. Together, these stances made him an unpopular figure in political circles in Oxford, Mississippi where he made his home.

However, despite these personal views, Faulkner is still generally seen as a broadly conservative figure in his political leanings and many of the features identified in earlier chapters focused on more uncomplicated Lost Cause narratives are present in his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!*.<sup>39</sup> Faulkner, as a man educated in the South in the height of the period identified as the “nadir of race relations” by Loewen and Sebasta, creates a text that is strongly shaped by the fictional representations of antebellum Southern Society found in texts that supported the Lost Cause position. However, unlike Thomas Nelson Page who generally located his work within these tropes associated with that narrative to support it, this chapter will suggest Faulkner crafts his text in such a way as to use those same tropes to undermine the wider narrative as much as he does to endorse them. By doing so, he is able to express those personal views that risked making him an unpopular member of the educated circles in his home state of Mississippi through his fiction. While certainly not the only potential reading, it is thus possible to view this work as a deliberate challenge to

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of Arkansas-Fayetteville suggests he required a handler to limit his alcohol consumption and prevent him causing incidents while exploring foreign cities without proper supervision.

<sup>39</sup> It must be acknowledged that there is much debate over exactly where his political leanings may have been. The view of Faulkner’s politics within this essay is heavily influenced by Deborah Cohn’s article “‘In between Propaganda and Escapism’, William Faulkner as Cold War Cultural Ambassador”, published in June 2016’s Journal 40, Issue 3 of *Diplomatic History*.

Pollard's established narrative of the Civil War. This position can be established by investigating two main aspects of the text. Firstly, the way in which Thomas Sutpen and his establishment of the Hundred can potentially be read as a representation of the idealised history that writers in the Lost Cause tradition championed. Following that, the chapter will move on to explore how Faulkner uses matters of race to expose flaws in this Southern view. This will be a more detailed exploration that will explore physical touch, sexual abuse of black slaves by white masters and even potential attitudes to interracial marriage suggested by the text all of which question that idealised image of antebellum slaveholding society so integral to the moral position essential to the Lost Cause narrative. Taken together, this will show how this text, while not supportive of that Southern Narrative, is still unquestionably influenced by it.

Faulkner's attitudes and representation of race is a frequently considered aspect of his work in literary scholarship and it is important to acknowledge the work that has been done that shapes this thesis. Thadious Davis for instance drew attention to the importance of Mississippi as the birthing ground for Faulkner, exploring how a region marked by "a formidable society of black-looking whites and impoverished clusters of farming blacks" following reconstruction provided a model for a created version of the state where the "increasing industrialisation and the disintegration of rural patterns" failed to delivered the promised "flush times" but did threaten "the old values of individual, family and clan" (Davis: 1986. P471 and P472). As a result of these same themes reoccurring throughout Faulkner's fiction, Davis goes on to argue that Faulkner never did "... Stop being a white Southerner on some basic level of self-identity" and while he unquestionably had "great



pangs of conscience” he could more or less “accept life in Mississippi”, a luxury not available to black writers from the same background (Davis: 1986. P474). This conflict between accepting a social order where his skin colour benefitted him but also being cognisant of the suffering of others inherent in that advantage as well as the collapse of an established social order, especially in terms of racial segregation and family lines are both evidently relevant to any reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* and certainly are reflected in the one presented here.

Alongside Davis’ suggestion that Faulkner is always thinking from inside his upbringing as a white Southerner, there is Kevin Railey’s position that “Faulkner himself did not always accept the Southern ideology of race” within *Absalom, Absalom!* since he depicts Thomas Sutpen refusing to see the difference between black and white as “moral absolutes”, which of course later leads to the birth of Charles Bon. Bon also denies his role in the social order and “denies his relegation to ‘the nigger...’” since his abilities and charm have allowed him to achieve acceptance in other white societies despite his mixed racial heritage (Railey:1999. P49 and P53). This dual refusal of the moral dimension of the racist aspects of Southern Society by first Sutpen and then Bon lead to the downfall of the Sutpen family. This is a persuasive argument and one that fits well with the reading of the novel to come and could be seen to echo many of Davis’ views as well. After all, while Faulkner is unable to escape his experiences growing up as a white Southerner, he nevertheless is uncomfortable with the implications of the social system he is unconsciously shaped by. That in turn leads to him questioning the nature of that social order in his fiction, and since that social order is shaped by the Lost Cause narrative, his fiction may end up challenging that as well.

Before these influences can be explored in detail however, it is important to acknowledge one of the great difficulties in working with *Absalom, Absalom!* as a text. The novel's narrative structure rests on the complex and at times contradictory method by which the reader comes to know the plot. Beyond the aid of a concrete chronology of events provided by Faulkner as an appendix, the events of the novel are narrated, discussed and speculated on by a range of voices, none of whom are particularly reliable. Indeed, much older critical work exists that outlines these contradictions in detail and debates whether they are intentional or the result of unintended authorial error. The most convincing conclusion of this sort of scholarship is perhaps best expressed by Floyd Watkins when he states that "together, all the inconsistencies in narration reflect the technique, the meanings, the aims and the artistic accomplishments of the novel" (Watkins, 1967: p9.). However, the idea that the beauty of the novel rests inherently in its mystery would seem to imply that attempts to find meaning beyond that represented by the contradictions is impossible, a position that I do not share. There are greater certainties and truths within *Absalom, Absalom!*, but they do not rest at plot level - an approach many more modern critics have explored.

A more useful example of such a solution to the narrative complexity for the purpose of this project can be built from Louis Roudiez's 1981 essay '*Absalom, Absalom!*, The Significance of Contradictions', which argues that there is a coherent plot that underpinned the novel in the form of a second and even third narrative level beyond the events around Thomas Sutpen's life. However, Roudiez argued that the author may not have intended to include these additional levels of meaning, stating that to explore them would necessitate ignoring "whatever misgiving Faulkner might have harbored about it" and concludes that the tale's

true goal is “an understanding of the South and the consequences of the civil war”, a position with which I concur, despite a personal suspicion that Faulkner was well aware of the layers of meaning he had crafted in his work (Roudiez, 1981: p71).<sup>40</sup>

Rather, the important thing Roudiez’s essay offers is in suggesting a clear way to interpret the novel’s plot as a metaphorical revision of the history of the South, one that moves beyond the bounds of the consequences of the Civil War on one family by making the character of Thomas Sutpen “emblematic of the South’s history”, more specifically, Roudiez argues, the history not of “The “real” South but Faulkner’s South” (Roudiez, 1981: p64).

While I would agree that the history of the “real” South, whatever value that statement may hold, is not present in the text, the view of the South in *Absalom, Absalom!*, while obviously influenced by the writer’s own views and craft, is far from unique to Faulkner and is, in my view, a reflection on the product of the Lost Cause ideology explored throughout this project. The similarities between Sutpen’s personal progression and that of the white slaveholding class in general are striking not in terms of the actual history of the South but in light of the narrative Pollard later suggested.

The first image of Sutpen we are given is provided by the unquestionably biased voice of Rosa Coldfield. While it is obvious she holds no love or even respect for the man she calls “demon”, she still narrates how he could “drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table...creating the Sutpen’s

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<sup>40</sup> “It” here being the idea that Faulkner had embedded a political or thematic level of meaning into the polyphonic nature of the text, something Faulkner modestly – and perhaps jokingly- denied. Roudiez seems to accept this statement in his argument.

Hundred” (Faulkner, 1936: p8). Despite the fact that much of her dramatic phrasing and hyperbolic phrasing can be seen as an example of her humour, it is still striking that she cannot hide her dislike of Sutpen, as evident in the words “violently” and the connotation of the disreputable practice of gambling in “cards upon a table” and indeed following her treatment of her sister and his attempted sexual advances on her as well, such a dislike is entirely understandable. Still, in spite of that she credits him with founding a plantation out of “Nothing” through an act of sheer will. Indeed, this is later directly connected to God’s creation of the world in Genesis when she says “Be Sutpen’s Hundred like the oldentime Be Light” (Faulkner, 1936; p9). Here we see the creation of a plantation at the will of a white man and through the labour of his slaves directly linked to biblical descriptions of acts of God, clearly an attitude that glorifies the birth of the plantation system and the slavers who caused those plantations to come to be. Of course, this idea that the ruling families formed fully established plantations by acts of will in a single adult lifetime is to ignore the slow development of the ‘king cotton’ economy and social order that surrounded it over more than a hundred years so it is not a reflection of the real history. However, it does fit perfectly with the Confederate desire in the Lost Cause narrative to portray the slave holders as the rightful occupants of position of power in the South. It also links to the depiction of white slave owner as God as explored in the earlier chapter on the work of Thomas Nelson Page where unlike Rosa’s comic hyperbole, the connection is drawn seriously. This shows how the character Rosa, Faulkner’s representative of Southern polite society in the novel, had been influenced by that constructed view of antebellum society originally suggested by Pollard and later propagated through literature, although also perhaps suggesting even she doesn’t take that extreme version of the position entirely seriously.

This metaphorical reading of Sutpen as representative of the experience and interpretation of Southern white slaveholders does not end there. Once the Hundred has developed to become a rough plantation with tended fields and the frame of a house, Sutpen himself turns to domestic matters. He fills that plantation home with “windows and doors and the spits and pots in the kitchen and the crystal chandeliers in the parlor and the furniture and the curtains and the rugs” and a short while later “was engaged to be married” to Ellen Coldfield, a fairly respectable woman in town and the sister of Rosa who is relating these events (Faulkner, 1936: p44, p45). This reflects the development of the Southern slaveholder from establishing their plantations to achieving wealth. Once the plantation houses were established, the owners reflected their wealth in the goods and items in the house. Sutpen has clearly engaged in this since “crystal chandeliers” and the like are clearly a sign of materialistic success and do not fit with the frontiersman image Sutpen has maintained until this point in his development. Equally, until the plantation was running well, Sutpen hadn’t seemed to put time or effort in to finding a wife in his new home yet with successful establishment of agriculture it becomes an important goal to him. Perhaps this quest for as respectable a wife as possible is actually a symbolic representation of his attempt at establishing a foothold in Southern society, suggesting that merely having wealth alone is not what marks out a Southern gentleman and that social propriety was required as well. Again, this reflects the wider Lost Cause narrative as it shows the domestic happiness and preoccupation with sentimentality that the likes of Pollard and Nelson Page argue were common in Southern antebellum society and that were destroyed by the victory of Northern commercial and materialistic attitudes during the war.

Finally, the Civil War comes and Sutpen is appointed as “Second in command” of a regiment whose colours “he and Sartoris had designed” (Faulkner, 1936; p80). Tellingly, Sutpen now a successful planter and slave owner and married to a local woman has earned enough respect to be viewed as a powerful man in the local community. By this point, he has overcome his unorthodox background, coming as he does from outside the local elite, and that acceptance is evidenced by the fact he is given say on the design of the regimental banner, a matter of great local pride. Curiously, he also feels enough of a connection to this community that refused him upon his first arrival and still occasionally treats him with scorn for his unusual manners that he decides to ride out for Mississippi, or the Confederacy itself in 1861.<sup>41</sup> It is also possible this is an outpouring of patriotism, but we have seen no evidence of that from Sutpen prior to this moment, so this strikes me more as a conscious attempt to establish value in the social order as much as anything based on true patriotic feeling.

The date of Sutpen’s enrolment in the military also places his regiment amongst the very first to be raised by the South. He then serves right through the war, returning to the plantation after Bon’s murder in 1865. We also know that he fought in “the Twenty Third Mississippi” and received “A citation for Valor in Lee’s own hand” (Faulkner, 1936: p68, p273). The 23rd Mississippi was a real Confederate unit that fought at Fort Donelson, Vicksburg and during the Atlanta campaign against General Sherman (U.S. National Park

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<sup>41</sup> On the surface, the fact that we don’t know if Sutpen feels pride in a larger nation or a state seems of little difference, but considering the Lost Cause argument that states were the primary political unit of value, hence secession was legal, it is perhaps of more value that it could be state pride that motivates Sutpen.

Service, Civil War Battle Unit details).<sup>42</sup> These battles and campaigns were all defeats for the Confederacy, and it is curious Faulkner chose to place Sutpen's military glories in positions of defeat as well as ground his fictional story in actual history. However, again we can see how Faulkner has the actions of this single man reflecting the ideal role of a Southern gentleman, riding out to defend his community regardless of the personal grievances he has with many members of that same community. He also loyally serves with his regiment long before the first Confederate draft in April of 1862, leaving no doubt that Sutpen chooses to fight to protect his social order, his property and his reputation rather than being forced to bear arms.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that he continues to do so for the entire duration of the war, despite being part of numerous defeats, again reflects the view of Confederate valour in the face of certain loss that is crucial to the idea of Southern heroism in the Lost Cause narrative. While certainly some rich Confederates did opt to fight as officers, it is also telling that the Confederate draft had two different clauses in effect until late 1863 specifically designed to allow rich Southern gentlemen to escape military service if they so desired. The first allowed that any plantation owner who owned more than twenty slaves was exempt from military service due to the perceived need to stay and keep their plantation in order. The second provision allowed that any man could send an undrafted substitute to serve in their place. This allowed any man to pay another to serve, although the price demanded by undrafted men

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<sup>42</sup> These service details are all taken from the U.S. National Park Service who maintain a detailed online archive of Civil War Battle Unit records.

<sup>43</sup> The actual wording of the legal article that introduced the first draft in April of 1862 for the Confederacy can be found in the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Volume 1, P1095-1110.

in order to do so quickly rose to \$300, a price so large only the rich could afford to take up this option. Still, between these two options, even after the draft Sutpen would have likely been able to escape his service if he so chose as many wealthy Southerners did.<sup>44</sup>

It is equally telling that Sutpen, despite being a successful plantation owner and married to a respectable woman, is still seen as an outsider by the respectable townsfolk at this time so his commitment to the Southern cause is even more worthy of comment. Is Sutpen's service an attempt to curry favour with his neighbors through personal bravery or a genuine reflection of Sutpen's sense of loyalty to the social order he had laboured so hard to join? Since Faulkner never gives Sutpen's own version of events, that question is impossible to answer but suggesting that the ambiguity is itself a reflection on the fact that accepting the Southern reinvention of its own history uncritically can be problematic. Just as we can never know the true motivation of Sutpen for offering military service since we get so many voices offering so many different, and often contradictory views on it, perhaps by the time of Faulkner's writing *Absalom, Absalom!*, people cannot easily know the true motivation of the Confederates since the later revisionist interpretations of their stories, united by the overarching narrative of the Lost Cause, present too many contradictory voices for a singular truth to ever emerge. Clearly this is a convincing literary reconstruction of the process of learning about the Confederacy three generations later, as Faulkner himself had,

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<sup>44</sup> William Shaw's 1962 essay "The Confederate Conscription and Exemption Act" in *The American Journal of Legal History, Volume 6* is especially important to my understanding here. Precise numbers of how many men took advantage of these exemptions varies between sources. Shaw's essay includes a quote on p383 from Braxton Bragg that says "over 150,000 men" sent substitutes but that seems very high since it would represent something in the order of 10% of all Confederate Soldiers. Other sources suggest the number may have been closer to 50,000 which is perhaps more reasonable.



with so many contradictory narratives making the true history impossible to ascertain, a consideration I believe this novel deliberately creates.

The war and in turn the success of Sutpen's family and the plantation itself, ends with a fratricide at the very gate of the plantation with Sutpen's son Henry killing his own half-brother Bon and then Thomas Sutpen in turn dying violently a couple of years later. The rise of the plantation class ending in brother killing brother is easy to interpret as a microcosm of the Civil War that was fought on the South's land between Americans. The "plantation gate" as the site of the murder is rendered in the genealogy for Bon as simply "Died, Sutpen's Hundred" further echoing the fact that the war was fought on Southern soil within the metaphor of Thomas Sutpen's own life (Faulkner, 1936. P382, P383).

It is thus evident that the central narrative of Thomas Sutpen stands as a potential cypher for the Southern slaveholding class but, as with so many readings of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the text refuses to conform to any simple interpretation. While on one level, Sutpen is presented as a simple glorification of antebellum Southern values in the same way that many of Nelson Page's heroes are, there are hints like Rosa's use of religious language in jest where it was seriously employed in Nelson Page or the uncertainty around the precise reasons for Sutpen choosing to fight for the South that simultaneously work to expose some of the faults of that narrative rarely evident in Southern fiction produced closer to the dates of the conflict. At this historical distance, Faulkner seems able to criticise the Confederate narrative of the Civil War in his fiction even as he creates a character who seems to embody it in so many ways. Still, this aspect of the text is broadly reflective of the themes common

in Lost Cause narratives. A more striking example of Faulkner's criticism of that wider narrative exists in terms of matters of race, which is what I will explore next.

More than any other factor, the problematic issues around relations between black slaves and white masters are the cause of the conflicts that undermine so many of the characters' lives in the novel. Unlike the universally benevolent Slaveholders found in Nelson Page, Faulkner's work more closely reflects Chesnut in presenting the relationships between slaves and slave owners as occasionally positive but with unquestionably problematic elements, especially when the social barriers constructed between the races get broken. Of course, this aspect of the text could also potentially be considered as a condemnation of the Northern push for equality between the races, suggesting that by blurring the barriers between the two communities the North's victory will only lead to more challenges for the nation down the line since every occasion in the novel where social barriers between the races are overstepped ultimately leads to tragedy. This would certainly fit a common argument against the Union during the civil war that they broke the racial barrier too easily and were deprived as a result.<sup>45</sup>

However, I intend to justify my belief that the criticism in *Absalom, Absalom!* is particularly aimed at the South and a look at Rosa Coldfield's long contribution in Chapter 5 provides a perfect starting point to attempt that. In this section, we find a rather complex moment of

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<sup>45</sup> There are lots of examples of this view from the time. The pamphlets and cartoons against Lincoln's re-election in 1864 published by Southern sources depicting romantic relationships between black and white citizens are prime examples of this. Ohio State University has an excellent archive of these freely available on the internet.

interracial touch. Rosa Coldfield, Faulkner's representative of respectable white society, attempts to go to the aid of her niece Judith who is deeply upset because Charles Bon, the man she plans to marry and also, unknown to her, her half-brother, has been shot dead by her full brother Charles. However, Rosa finds her way blocked by the touch of the black slave Clytemnestra who also happens to be the daughter of her deceased sister's husband. Even from that description of the moment it is clear that the racial dynamics are complex in this scenario, and Rosa seems to openly acknowledge that when she states "*There is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering*", and that we can "*let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too*" (Faulkner, 1936: p39.).

Before exploring these words in depth however, it is important to briefly pause to consider the use of italics, since much critical ink has been spent in discussion of it. These italics blur whether Rosa thought these words or said them aloud to Quentin. In terms of this project, the most useful insight can be found in Eric Casero's work. He argues that the novel blurs the distinction between thought and action leading to "no ascribing agency in the novel to individual consciousnesses" (Casero, 2011: p86) This effect is created because the novel is not so much about why individual characters do certain things, but how people talking of events at later points in history give them meaning in hindsight. It is, in Casero's words, Faulkner is concerned with "how characters consciousnesses interact with each other in the social realm of real time" and here we appear to have an instance of a character's thoughts functioning in precisely that manner. The effect is the same on the reader whether these

words are thought or said aloud by Rosa, so the actual factual detail of if these words were spoken is unimportant because the broader narrative is the same. Of course, this idea is a neat reflection of the idea that the actual motivation of individual Confederates in real history has been lost so much through different voices retelling their story for political ends that what actually may have occurred in real history is less important now than how the retelling of that narrative impacts the reader. That idea, that the narrative is more about the motivation of people telling it later than the actual events that occurred is a beautiful microcosm of how the Lost Cause narrative shaped the understanding of the Civil War by Faulkner's time.

However, to return to my central argument, in this incident whether the thought was given utterance by Rosa or not and why Faulkner chooses to leave that ambiguous is far less important than the content of the thought itself. After all, even if it Rosa has spoken the words aloud, we are told Quentin "*was not listening*" anyway so we cannot look to the reaction of the potential listener Faulkner placed within the text to shape an interpretation and can only look to the image itself for meaning (Faulkner, 1936: p172). Rosa is here suggesting that physical contact between the two races reduces the old customs around slavery and slaveholding to something fragile through the metaphor of the "eggshell". At first, this seems a pretty clear reflection of the idea that the racial boundary is bound to break at some point since it is as fragile as an eggshell, a reflection of the integrationist views that Faulkner would later come to publicly defend. After all, if the barrier is bound to break eventually, the artificial societal efforts by the South to prevent that were at best a futile effort and at worst delaying a necessary step in the evolution of white Southern

Society by preventing emancipation and integration. Since any “touch” between the races is implied to contain the power necessary to break the barrier, that racial divide is effectively unsustainable in the long run and even Rosa, the most complete example of White Southern values within the novel, seems to understand that.

Yet the word “shibboleth” greatly complicates the issue. The uses of the word at the time according to the OED are all concerned with habits that separate members of a group from outsiders. This then means we need to look at which group is using the racial barrier as a shibboleth to keep outsiders separate. The most obvious reading is that the whole of the White community in America use the divide to separate themselves from the black people they treat as literal objects through the institution of slavery or at best as second-class citizens in the often racist North. This means any example of interracial touch will show how fragile the gap between the two groups is, highlighting how narrow the divide between the two groups of people really was all along. Considering how complex the interpersonal relationships are and the romantic or even sexual implications of phrases like “*flesh on flesh*” it is clear that that divide has already collapsed in terms of these characters and Sutpen’s Hundred. Of course, by implication this also captures how inevitable the collapse of slavery was and thus how pointless the Confederate resistance to it was. This is a shockingly liberal view of the inevitable collapse of Southern slavery for a character like Rosa, though one Faulkner himself may certainly have held. Of course, Rosa never acknowledges that implication of the idea and since the novel relies on ambiguity to carry its meaning, there must be a second way of interpreting this thought more in keeping with the character in question, and of course, there is.

If we assume the group using the shibboleth is not the whole of white society but merely the respectable white confederate society who have ruled the Southern states for generations, a group to which Rosa certainly can claim membership, then the shibboleth may be social organisation of that precise group and not the whole of white society. Since there is nothing natural about the “devious” and “decorous” social rules, only those who belong in Southern society will understand them. Outsiders to that society, even if they too were wealthy and white, would not know that the custom around not touching slaves are for the protection of their own group and so may break it out of ignorance. This then means Sutpen’s willingness to touch his slaves marks him out as an outsider to the Southern society even when he seems at least somewhat accepted by it following his marriage. Equally, when the results of his sexual touch leads to the collapse of his plantation, it was not an inevitable result of Southern White slaveholding that causes the collapse at all but the ignorance of the outsider Sutpen regarding these social boundaries. While only subtly different, this second reading has a crucial difference in implication. The eggshell is still fragile, but by understanding and respecting the customs of the group, the social barrier and so slavery itself, could have been maintained indefinitely had outsiders only stayed away from the South. This reading is a nice reflection of how the South presents the “War of Northern Aggression” and much more in keeping with Rosa’s character as a respectable, white Southern lady.

Of course, as with everything in *Absalom, Absalom!*, this complexity is almost certainly a deliberate effort on the part of Faulkner. By writing this section in language that could be

interpreted either way, he reflects the process of learning about the civil war in the South years after the conflict. The inherent cognitive dissonance of having a character (if we accept the argument that the italics imply the text is thought, not spoken) think something that could mean both that the end of slavery was inevitable and also that slavery could continue indefinitely so long as outsiders allowed it to at the same time is a beautifully crafted representation of the Southern mindset as they tried to come to terms with their defeat.

Having established that interracial touch is powerful as a threat to antebellum Southern society in Faulkner's version of the South, a closer look at how the novel presents such incidents becomes a fruitful approach in understanding how the relationship between the two races is understood. The first instance of interracial touch we see in the novel occurs when Thomas Sutpen is found by Ellen in the barn of the plantation engaged in something like a prizefight with one of his slaves. Rosa relates how as they fought it seemed "as if they should not only have been the same color, but should have been covered with fur too." (Faulkner, 1936: p29). The touch here is certainly violent as "gouging at each other's eyes" and "bloody" makes abundantly clear and yet it is also a levelling factor between the two men. Both are drawn together, closer as they struggle for "retention of supremacy, dominance" on an equal footing, allowing Sutpen to reassert white racial dominance and supposed superiority through victory (Faulkner, 1936: p29). However, the fact that the act reduces the two fighters to at least savage if not animalistic baseness as implied by the word "fur" suggests that they are not empowered or ennobled by the touch but rather reduced by it. Even in victory, the white slaveholder appears to be reduced to animalistic levels, as if

somehow proving his superiority on a level playing field with the slave has removed the very trappings of that superiority. That the fight appears to be for no better reason than Sutpen seems to enjoy the challenge of combat and it is implied he does this on a fairly regular basis also adds to the sense that this demonstration of physical dominance has revealed how fragile his civilised demeanour actually is. However, while it is certainly tempting to ascribe this as Faulkner subtly undermining the idea of Southern gentile masculinity as an illusion and that white dominance is really founded on more savage power, it must be remembered that Sutpen is introduced originally as an uncivilised figure who relies on physical prowess and the strength of his will to shape his future, rather than a member of civilised Southern society so this incident is more likely to suggest that despite his acceptance in to polite society and ability to display appropriate behaviour for a gentleman in day to day life, at heart Sutpen remains animalistic and capable of finding great enjoyment in violence.

More crucially for the wider argument of this project is the fact that the fight is observed not just by his black slave population but also by some of the white household as well. Sutpen seems unaware of the presence of his wife and daughter but has ordered the presence of his son who is being restrained and forced to watch by a pair of slaves. This detail of people observing the fight allows Faulkner to further emphasises the emotional effect of the incident of harsh physical contact between the races beyond the participants themselves. We are told Sutpen's son Henry is "screaming and vomiting" at the sight as he is forced to observe by a group of slaves, clearly displaying every sign of great emotional distress (Faulkner, 1936: p79). The reason for this reaction in the young boy could be because of a range of factors. Maybe watching his father at risk of harm is upsetting to him,



perhaps the sheer brutality of the violence he is forced to witness is disturbing to him and it is also possible that it is the impact of the breach of the taboo between the races that contribute to this extreme physical reaction. In all likelihood, it is the combination of all of these that results in such overwhelming distress for Henry but there can be no doubt this incident is clearly a cause of harm. Curiously, Faulkner has Henry, a male born into the role of Plantation owner, appalled by the violence and interracial touch, perhaps implying that the love of violence is removed for those raised in the cultured Southern elite. The revulsion at violence in Henry could even be read as reinforcing the sensitivity of White slaveholders, something Pollard emphasised in his *Lost Cause*.

The final line of this first chapter also introduces what Faulkner will develop into the key racial threat to the social order in the text: miscegenation. We are told there are “two Sutpen faces... once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her” (Faulkner, 1936: p30). However, before we engage with this aspect of the text, it is important to look at the significance of the word “miscegenation” used repeatedly by Faulkner within the text because of its political charge. According to the OED, the word first came into use during the latter years of the civil war to describe interracial relationships that resulted in children and it is clear that the term was rapidly taken up by white supremacist groups in the South along with others elsewhere in America who believed in the idea of white racial superiority. However, based on both the timing of the word coming in to use and building on ideas in Angela Davis’ 1981 work *Women, Race and Class* there is a political motivation for the use of the term in the American South during this period. By referring to sexual acts between white masters and slaves as ‘miscegenation’ rather than labelling it as the sexual assault it

was, the word served to mediate the actions of slaveowners. As Davis argues, rape of female black slaves was not to do with individual sexual urges of white men but “Sexual coercion was, rather, an essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave” and that “rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery” (Davis, 1981: p138). She also argues that this political use of rape continued after the end of slavery in the South in the form of “Group rape, perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist organisations of the post-civil war period” (Davis, 1981: p138). The word miscegenation does not directly imply a lack of consent on the part of the female and by that absence subtly implies consent between the partners, adding to the fabricated image of the promiscuous black female that served as a justification for the horrific crimes of rape perpetrated by powerful white men both during slavery and beyond. That Faulkner, a writer who was known to be in favour of increased integration between the races, uses the word so freely speaks of how accepted the term was in the South in the 1930’s and so provides further evidence of the victory of the Southern narrative following the Civil War since the very word used in intellectual circles to discuss the crimes of slaveholders inevitably serves to ameliorate them.

Returning to the text however, we can see the implication of the two Sutpen faces, one white and one black, is obvious. Sutpen has clearly engaged in sexual relations with one of his slaves and the child is undeniable evidence of this act. In fact, as the novel progresses, we learn that Sutpen not only has a child by a slave on the Hundred, but also had previously married a mixed-race woman from Haiti, a union which produced Charles Bon. Bon in turn has an “Octoroon mistress” with whom he had had a child (Faulkner, 1936: p95). That child

in turn will arrive in Sutpen's hundred to father a further interracial child in the form of Jim Bond. We see a cascade of interracial relationships stemming from Sutpen's first sexual act with a black woman through to the tragic end of the novel, a chain reaction Faulkner takes pain to show ending in repeated tragedy. Far from this form of touch narrowing the racial gap, its revelation to the world only serves to destroy the Sutpen family, the plantation and by metaphorical association, antebellum Southern society itself. At first, this suggests that sexual aspect of control Davis argues is essential to the propagation of slavery sows the very seeds of its destruction, but within the novel it isn't the act of interracial sex that brings destruction to the Sutpen family and their plantation but rather its revelation to Henry who cannot accept the implications of it. Quite how damning this is supposed to be of the actual act thus remains elusive, especially since Sutpen's mistress in New Orleans may not have been a slave but a free black woman he had a consensual relationship with. Here we get the concept of not just interracial touch, but interracial marriage introduced within the novel and the way it is presented is interesting in terms of Faulkner's wider relation to the Lost Cause narrative.

While Judith may have thought of Bon's lover as a "mistress" the text reveals the relationship was more formal than that. The two had had a "ceremony to commemorate it", a "Morganatic" wedding undertaken in New Orleans (Faulkner, 1936: p94). Faulkner's choice of the word "Morganatic" to describe this ceremony on more than one occasion is particularly challenging. Morganatic ceremonies joined a couple together and gave the female the right to call herself married but passed on "no right of succession... or rank or political privileges" to the female (Radin, 1936: p1). They were primarily used in some

European royal families in the 1700's to allow marriage between Princes and ladies of lower rank, particularly in Italy and Germany although they were rare even in those nations where they were recorded as being acceptable at all (Radin, 1936).

That Faulkner chooses to include this term is curious for a few reasons, not least because marriage between slaves were not legally recognised in the South. Firstly, it may suggest mixed marriages of a kind were possible, albeit on unequal terms, in New Orleans prior to the Civil War. Given that "slave marriages were neither legally recognized or recorded in legal documents" whether this was actually possible is unlikely to be determined from historical documents, yet Logan's work researching hospital records in New Orleans prior to the Civil War show that around "a quarter of slaves admitted described themselves as married" (Logan, T. 2018). It is clear from this that there was a socially accepted form of marriage outside the legally recognized definition that could and did apply to slaves, even if only recognised by the slaves themselves. Perhaps Bon had undertaken such a marriage, and these unrecognised marriages, often overseen by the master of the house rather than a priest, is what Faulkner meant by "Morganatic". However, the novel seems to imply that the Octoroon mistress of Bon was a free woman and we know Bon was a free man so the possibility that they would have been married in the style of slaves seems unlikely to have been Faulkner's intent. We also know Bon plans to wed Judith in a traditional, legally binding ceremony, which proves that his black heritage is hidden deeply enough to allow that to be an option. In turn, this appears to lend further credence to the idea that this style of wedding was required for his first partnership in New Orleans because of the interracial

nature of the pairing although again no historical evidence of such marriages being permitted anywhere in the US in this period is known.

A final option, and perhaps the most likely, is that Bon married his mistress in Louisiana as a black man, openly admitting his mixed heritage. This would explain why he had a “morganatic” wedding and would also remove the mixed-race barrier to the ceremony which seems to strain believability for the period in which the novel is set. Of course, this then means that their marriage was far more than a “ceremony” with no meaning but the highest form of bond possible between two freed black people under the law in Louisiana at the time. The implication is that once Bon tries to seduce a white woman in the guise of a white man that previous bond becomes as hollow as his father’s relations with slaves. He owes no loyalty to his previous wife and is free to perform a form of bigamy with Judith if they marry. Thus, interracial relationships are presented as not only a threat in terms of mixing bloodlines but also in terms of allowing this form of bigamy, introducing a moral loophole in what is usually presented as a social order that prides itself on domestic morality within its own terms.

Finally, it is worth returning to the original moment of touch that leads to the original comment from Rosa. Rosa has headed over to the Hundred having heard of the murder of Bon by Henry and travelled the twelve miles to offer support to her niece who had just lost her fiancé and she knows has no one else to help her through these events. Rather than being greeted by Judith or Henry, she is instead confronted by the slave Clytie who is trying to protect her mistress’s privacy. Before the moment of touch itself, we see a distinct

narrowing of the social gap between the Southern Lady Rosa and the slave Clytemnestra in a way that Rosa seems uncomfortably aware of. This discomfort is made more intense by the fact that Clytemnestra's white father, Thomas Sutpen, was married to Rosa's sister Ellen, making them related by law, although her status as a slave prevents this being accepted by either. Of course, Ellen had died at least 5 years before this meeting, so the relationship no longer had that immediacy, but it is clearly present in both character's minds. Rosa takes great care to point out that Clytemnestra calls her by her given name but that "it was not the name, the word, the fact she had called me Rosa" that was causing her distress so much as the sense of Sutpen's spirit being in the room with them, seemingly projected through the person of the slave who is also his daughter although he is away at war still (Faulkner, 1936: p139). Then, when the moment of touch comes, Rosa prevented from heading upstairs to go to Judith by the act, she is clearly hyperaware of the racial connotations at play as she describes "that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh" (Faulkner, 1936: p139). The connotations at play in that phrase both highlights the power and fearlessness of the black hand and the femininity of the "flesh" is hard to ignore and it implies strongly that this act is one that holds a potential for violence and even sexual violence at that. It is therefore easy to understand why Rosa's "shocked" outburst of "Take your hand off me, nigger!" causes no reaction on the part of Clytemnestra because "We both knew it was not to her I spoke" (Faulkner, 1936: p139 and p140). The immediate implication here is that the presence of Sutpen is acting upon them both, with Clytie having his brazen disregard for the rules of polite society and Rosa channelling his temper. Somehow, even when the white slaveholder male has been removed from the plantation, the remaining occupants feel his presence and the echo of his misdeeds remain painfully present.

It is also telling that Faulkner would choose the name Clytemnestra for the girl Sutpen fathered with a slave. The name is an obvious link to the Oresteia and the woman responsible for the death of Agamemnon. Curiously, one of the reasons Clytemnestra gives for killing Agamemnon, along with the death of their daughter, is that he has fathered children by bondswomen (Oresteia, *Agamemnon*: 1432). Interestingly, that quoted line is actually very difficult to translate into English, based on wordplay in the original Greek. The verb used to describe Agamemnon's actions have been various translated as "violated", "defiled" and "was sweet too" depending on the edition and the women referred to as free in some versions and slaves in others. The fact that this complexity mirrors the debate around miscegenation and sexual assault, presenting Agamemnon either as a hero brought low by the consequences of his understandable actions or a rapist who is almost impossible to sympathise with based on the precise words of a translator is a strong reflection of the views of sexual relations between slaves and slave owners presented in this narrative as well and I suspect one that Faulkner elects to deliberately invoke to reinforce the complex, uncertain relationships that gather at this point in the text.

Clytie, unlike her classical namesake, does not kill Sutpen, the equivalent of Agamemnon in this narrative. Instead, it is she who ensures "that closet under the stairs full of tinder and trash" is always ready to burn the plantation house to the ground, as she eventually does (Faulkner, 1936: p374). She may not kill the man Sutpen, but by burning down the plantation house, it is she who burns Sutpen's dream and legacy and so on the symbolic level is responsible for his demise as surely as anyone else. By ending his legacy, it is Clytie

who ends the tragic story of the Sutpen family. Of course, if we are to read the story as a retelling of the fall of the South after the war, it is also telling that Faulkner gives the final act of destruction to a former slave. It is impossible to avoid the echo of Nelson Page's political writings that declared black government of the former Confederate states would bring to ruin all that had been created by the plantation owners. The greatest fear in the Lost Cause and Nelson Page's writings was the loss not of Southern lives, but of white Southern culture, a fear perhaps symbolically echoed by Clytie burning the hundred in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In creating *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner has created a story that both symbolically explores the fall of the antebellum South plantation culture through the tale of Sutpen and his hundred but also echoes the impossibility of knowing the true nature of historical events around the Civil War due to the volume of subjective and often contradictory agendas of those who choose to retell the story. Since the text was produced fifty years after the end of the war, it is able to both question some aspects of the Lost Cause narrative while also reflected some that have become unconsciously accepted. Much as *Absalom, Absalom!* ends with Quentin Compson, a relative of a friend of Sutpen, three generations removed from the events of the novel stating of the South, "*I don't hate it*" to the point the statement is impossible to believe, Faulkner's work challenges many aspects of the Lost Cause narrative without his characters ever acting out of their portrayal to contradict it directly and indeed seeming to hold views that support it.



## Conclusion

This project set out to explore how some aspects of the Lost Cause narrative were reflected in three texts produced in the American South in the aftermath of the Civil War. This was to be achieved by examining how the concepts and ideas found in the influential *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War Between the States* written by Edward Pollard and later refined by a number of Neo-Confederate writers were reflected in fictional works by Mary Boykin Chesnut, Thomas Nelson Page and William Faulkner. These texts were chosen both because they linked to specific historical periods that were seen as important to the development and acceptance of the Lost Cause narrative according to the process outlined by Loewen and Sebasta in their *Neo-Confederate Reader*. From this, it explored how the concept of the long Civil War, an ideological battle that led to the South's culture being maintained despite the loss in the war, was reflected in fiction either because of deliberate decisions by the authors to achieve political views or as a result of the ideas becoming embedded in Southern society and thus influencing the authors subconsciously.

In many ways, this research has indeed supported the idea of aspects of the Lost Cause narrative appearing in fiction texts as expected since the Lost Cause narrative was adopted following Reconstruction. In particular, the texts studied showed that the representation of a pastoral, idealised antebellum Southern society being destroyed by the industrial, greedy North seems to be fairly consistent within the texts. From Chesnut's description of Southern soldiers as "noble" and "brave" when encountered during her nursing duties to Nelson Page's idealised white masters who cared for loyal devoted slaves in "Marse Chan" and "Unc' Edinburg" and even the representation of Thomas Sutpen's first years on the

Hundred in *Absalom, Absalom!* and his gallant riding out to defend the South in the Civil War, we see these traits reflected by male characters across the texts under consideration. These honourable male characters are then contrasted against Northern soldiers that are presented as profiteers driven by greed and either unaware or unbothered by the suffering left behind following the war in the starvation present during the later years of the war in Chesnut and Nelson Page's short stories set following the conflict, though the collapse of Sutpen's Hundred after the war in Faulkner is different since the collapse is clearly linked to the mistakes of Southerners rather than the influence of an external invader.

On the other hand, the expected glorification or at least amelioration of the institution of chattel slavery was far from consistent between the three texts. Nelson Page's work is the closest to the expected Southern view of the institution with happy slaves and devoted masters which is only to be expected given the white supremacist views evident in his political writings. While Chesnut does present this same image of loyal, devoted slaves in some incidents in the text, there is certainly incidents where her private abolitionist views seem to colour the text. Both her diary and Faulkner's novel highlight the damage done to Southern Society and individual slaves and families by the sexual abuse of slaves by their owners. This historical practice, totally ignored by the Southern narrative and Pollard for perhaps obvious reasons in terms of his attempts at maintaining a sense of moral superiority for the South, is ignored in Nelson Page but proves a key aspect in exposing the flaws in the Southern narrative of the Lost Cause in two of these novels.

More than anything this project has shown that the concept of a singular “Southern” narrative on the civil war that sprang out of Pollard’s ideas and was adopted across the South during the establishment of Jim Crow and that was codified by the 1930’s and that remained unchallenged until historians fought against it during the Civil Rights movement simply doesn’t hold true. The Lost Cause narrative produced a series of ideas and images that writers could adapt for different purposes, including to purposefully challenge the narrative Pollard and those who built upon his work had suggested. Different writers emphasise different aspects of the metanarrative. However, they are all influenced by the Lost Cause, using the elements discussed in the introduction even if they intend to challenge it. The influence of the ideas Pollard first suggested simply cannot be avoided when dealing with Southern texts of this period, even if they are presented more in a more varied and complex way than may be assumed from the idea of an ideological conflict between a Southern or Confederate position and that of the North.

Equally, during the twelve months over 2019 and 2020 in which this thesis was being written, the Neo-Confederate ideas that are explored in literature have risen to the wider sphere of public awareness. Mass protests against what were seen as inhuman and brutal treatment by Police Departments across the US under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement have toppled Confederate statues across the South. The organisation behind NASCAR, a sport that draws almost all of its popularity in the former Confederacy has banned the Confederate flag from all races which led to the appearance of a noose in the garage of the only black driver on the grid, calling back to the actions of the Klan during reconstruction. Finally, during the run up to the presidential election in 2020, restrictions in

voter rolls across Republican states in the South and the removal of polling locations from black neighbourhoods called to mind memories of the roll back of enfranchisement amongst black citizens after reconstruction. The ideas that found root in the fiction of this period are evidently still finding expression today and this study is, sadly to my view at least, just as relevant and important now as it was at the start of the year. Perhaps, by understanding how these views were first constructed, some understanding of these divides can be attained, adding some modern value to this project exploring literature that is all at least the best part of a century old.

Finally, in terms of literature on a wider scale, I strongly believe that this pattern of heroically representing the Southern social order and the sacrifice of Confederate soldiers and presenting the North as a military force motivated by greed and jealousy of Southern wealth would be maintained if a larger selection of novels were considered. Particularly, the wide range of intersectional romance stories popular in the South featuring a Southern woman humanising a Union officer to allow marriage following the war seem to suggest this but a more detailed analysis of these texts would be required to confirm this. Equally, I would expect that the cognitive dissonance that reflects itself in difficult and inconsistent presentations of slavery, particularly in terms of sexual abuse of Slaves or the presence of interracial children in the South, at least where these were acknowledged, would echo strongly in a wider texts. However, these must remain as speculation without further study that is impossible in a project of this size.

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