



title: In the Master's Eye : Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature

author: Tracy, Susan Jean.

publisher: University of Massachusetts Press

isbn10 | asin: 0870239686

print isbn13: 9780870239687

ebook isbn13: 9780585186887

language: English

subject: American literature--Southern States--History and criticism, Literature and society--Southern States--History--19th century, Women and literature--Southern States--History--19th century, American literature--19th century--History and criticism, American l

publication date: 1995

lcc: PS261.T73 1995eb

ddc: 810.9/975

subject: American literature--Southern States--History and criticism, Literature and society--Southern States--History--19th century, Women and literature--Southern States--History--19th century, American literature--19th century--History and criticism, American l

In the Master's Eye
Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in
Antebellum Southern Literature

Susan J. Tracy

University of Massachusetts Press Amherst

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LC 94-49536

ISBN 0-87023-968-6

Designed by Susan Bishop

Set in Poppl-Pontifex by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Printed and bound by Braun-Brumfield, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tracy, Susan Jean, 1947-

In the master's eye : representations of women, Blacks, and poor whites in antebellum Southern literature / Susan J. Tracy.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-87023-968-6

1. American literatureSouthern StatesHistory and criticism.
2. Literature and societySouthern StatesHistory19th century.
3. Women and literatureSouthern StatesHistory19th century.
4. American literature19th centuryHistory and criticism.
5. American literatureMen authorsHistory and criticism.
6. Working class whites in literature. 7. Southern StatesIn literature.
8. Afro-Americans in literature. 9. Social classes in literature.
10. Patriarchy in literature. 11. Poor in literature. I. Title.

PS261.T73 1995

810.9'975dc20 94-49536

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data are available.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been written without the encouragement and support of a number of people. Primary are those who kept me employed during the dismal decade of the eighties, when so many of my comrades were forced out of academia. My thanks to the members of the Schools of Social Sciences and Humanities and Arts at Hampshire College, and to the faculty in the Women's studies department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for their continued support. My gratitude as well to Adele Simmons, former president, and Penina Glazer, former dean of faculty of Hampshire College. My gratitude extends to Joseph Duffey former chancellor at the University of Massachusetts, whose generosity and kindness I will always treasure.

The ideas in this book developed over more than a decade as I approached the study of gender, race, and class in American culture first as a student and then as a professor. Listing those people who have had an intellectual influence on me hardly seems an adequate tribute, but it will have to suffice. Robert Stanfield, Mason Lowance, Sidney Kaplan, Milton Cantor, Leonard Richards, and Stephen B. Oates of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, originally inspired my interest in American studies, the nineteenth century, and African American history; Paul Boyer and Henry Steele Commager sharpened my sense of history as an imaginative and critical discipline; Paul Worthman, Alexander Saxton, Gary Nash, and Temma Kaplan directed my initial studies in social, women's, and labor history and Marxist theory at the University of California at Los Angeles; Robert Padgug, Phillip Greven, Judith Walkowitz, Daniel Walkowitz, Tilden Edelstein, Paul Clemens, and the late Warren Susman of Rutgers University, trained me as a historian. Many of these people are recognized as distinguished scholars; they are also exceptional teachers whose enthusiasm and dedication to their students have been an inspiration.

Hampshire College has provided me with an extraordinary laboratory in which to test my ideas. The individualized curriculum for the students and team teaching for the faculty offered a particularly stimulating atmosphere in which to carry on research. Many thanks to those people I have taught with over the years whose own distinguished scholarship demanded I do my very best: Nancy Fitch, Joan Landes, L. Brown Kennedy, Reinhard Sander, Laurie

Nisonoff, Robert Coles, and Miriam Slater. I thank as well those col-

leagues I have encountered at Hampshire and in the Five Colleges on whom I can always depend for a stimulating discussion or to whom I turn when I get stuck: Arlene Avakian, Amrita Basu, Joyce Berkman, Aaron Berman, Myrna Breitbart, Jules Chametzky, Margo Culley, Susan Douglas, Lee Edwards, Ann Ferguson, Leonard Glick, Alan Goodman, Lee Heller, Allen Kaufman, Bruce Laurie, Debra Martin, Cynthia Packard, Kathy Peiss, Mary Russo, David Smith, Doris Sommers, Carrie Mae Weems, and E. Frances White. Catherine Clinton of Harvard University has been most generous in her support of me and my work.

Clark Dougan and the University of Massachusetts Press should be commended for their willingness to take a chance on an unorthodox project. My sincere appreciation and gratitude to Milton Cantor who as a dear friend and colleague helped me edit a lengthy manuscript down to its bare bones. Over the last five years, I have joked with friends that my epitaph should read, "Done in by WordPerfect." Many thanks to those who have dragged this skeptic into the computer age and have bailed me out of major computer disasters: Liz Aaronsohn, Harriet Boyden, Mimi Katz, and Deborah Tomasi.

I get by with a lot of help from my friends and family. I would like to thank those friends who have never stinted in supplying love, laughter, and ice cream: Liz Aaronsohn, P. Roberts Bailey, Sarah Boy, Marcia Carlisle, Alice Dembner, Julia Demmin, Deborah Gaines, Pat Griffen, Mary Ann Jennings, Deirdre Scott, Eileen Stewart, Peggy Anderson and Andrea Wright, Merle Bruno and Peter Vincent, Dick Lipez and Joe Wheaton, Leslie Mason and David Kerr, Betty Mitchell and Mark Gerstein, Philip and Carol Rosen, Leighton Whitaker, the Common Woman Softball Team. I would like to recognize those people who have helped me get through this last and most difficult year: Douglas Anderson, Bev Cowdrick, Susan Craig, Katja Hahn D'Errico, James Gemmell, Mary Hocken, Janice Jorgenson, Ann Kearns, Ann Kerrey, Lisa Leukhardt, Hedy Lipez, Nancy and Tom Lowry, Judith Mann, Paula Murphy, Gregory and Toni Prince, Magdalia Rivera, and my Hospice bereavement group.

Just before I sent off this manuscript, I joked with my sister-in-law that whole families have been started and completed in the time it has taken me to finish this project. My love and gratitude to those families: my brother, Peter, and his wife, Phyllis, and their sons, Taylor and Christopher; my cousin Barry Kingston, his wife, Deborah, and their children, Nathaniel and Emily; and my

best friends, Marie and Frederic Hartwell and their children, Jennifer, Adam, Toby, and Emily, who have helped me remember what was important during my trials in academe and who always help me chase the blues away.

To my sorrow, many family and friends who I would have like to read this book have died. This project might have been dedicated to any one of them. I remember first my parents, Carlton B. Tracy (191559) and Marjorie MacNaught Tracy (191965); my aunt, Dorothea Kingston (192576); my grandfather, Jay Tracy (18871976). Warren I. Susman (192785), a pioneer in cul-

tural history, was an impassioned teacher and mentor whose lessons I take with me daily into the classroom and library. In January 1994, as this manuscript was being completed, my partner, Madilyn J. Engvall, died suddenly of brain cancer. Her steady calmness, patience, intellectual curiosity, and sense of humor sustained me and brightened my life. It will be difficult to go on without her.

Sidney Kaplan (1913-93), noted scholar in African American studies and my mentor and friend for more than twenty years, originally suggested this study. This book is dedicated to Sidney and Emma Kaplan. I have treasured their friendship and their example of political commitment and distinguished scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

In choosing to study the work of those Southern white males who have been credited with creating "Southern literature," I decided to concentrate on an elite group who expressed the worldview of the planter class at the moment when it took the offensive against antislavery Southerners and Northerners. My argument is simply that the proslavery argument concerns gender and class relations as well as race relations. Embedded in the proslavery argument are assumptions about the nature of women and non-planterclass males that shaped how social and political life evolved in the antebellum South. It isn't merely that these texts are sexist, racist, or class-biased, but the ways in which they codify these prejudices leads us to a clearer understanding of planter-class worldview.

I started where everyone starts who undertakes a study of Southern literature and culture, with Jay B. Hubbell's critical *The South in American Literature*; I then returned to Wilbur J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* and William Rogers Taylor's *Cavalier and Yankee*. Hubbell pointed the way to the authors I eventually chose: George Tucker, John Pendleton Kennedy, William Alexander Caruthers, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, and William Gilmore Simms. Much later, Richard Beale Davis led me to James Ewell Heath, the only true liberal of the group. ¹ Cash reminded me that regardless of what apologia I found in planter sources and those of their sympathizers, frontier violence and sadism lay just under the surface in the antebellum South. And Taylor confirmed my instinct that if I considered the images of women, blacks, and poor whites both in relation to the planter hero and in relation to each other, I would not only understand the proslavery argument in a new way; I would begin to understand why this literature is forgotten.

Although in the end, I would disagree with Vernon L. Parrington's assessment of William Gilmore Simms as a democrat and a realist ruined by aristocratic romanticism, his initial suggestion that the North had changed after 1812 while the South remained true to its eighteenth-century roots and his method of analyzing the political and economic foundations of literary production served as critical principles for my own thinking and practice.²

My primary theoretical assumption is that the lived material conditions under which people exist create social structure and social power, and that people in

power institutionalize their ideas in a variety of ways. I found Karl Marx's following observation particularly applicable to the antebellum

South: "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class, which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance." ³ My reading of Antonio Gramsci led me to expect an alternate hegemony to the dominant one and my reading of Raymond Williams led me to expect that neither the material base nor the ideological superstructure was rigid and fixed, but rather fluid and contradictory.⁴ Although I thought I would start with Marx's premise and assume that the Southern ruling class functioned in the way that Marx described, I expected that the evidence I would uncover about the authors' lives and about Southern society would lead me to rethink his proposition along the lines that Williams had suggested. Because I was studying literature, I expected these authors to engage with the complexity and contradiction in the human condition. Similarly, and perhaps a bit naively, I speculated that some yeomen would emerge as heroes in the new democracy, that there would be portraits of rebellious and free blacks as minor but significant characters, and that I would find a range of female characters in a variety of relationships with one another. What I didn't expect was that Marx's thesis would hold and the historical romance as a man's story would dominate the literature, thus precluding substantial descriptions of the plantation household or daily plantation life.

Since I started this study, a diverse group of scholars has created "cultural studies," an interdisciplinary and multicultural field that describes not only *what* ideas and images are produced in a given society by a given group, but explores *how* and *why* they are produced. Because this particular interdisciplinary study moves within the fields of social, political, and intellectual history as well as women's, African American, and labor history, it should be understood as part of this new endeavor.⁵ I think of it as a Marxist feminist project that follows Lucien Goldmann's injunction to consider the parts of a literary text in relation to the whole.⁶ The questions discussed in Part I are concerned with the economic, social, and political setting of these novels; the relation of these authors to the planter class; and the material and intellectual setting in which these novels were produced. Parts II through IV deal with the fictional world created by these authors. My discussion of George Tucker and James Ewell Heath in Chapter 4 argues that

one can discern a range of opinion on slavery until 1831-32, when in the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion and the Virginia Slave debates the planter class began its policy of crushing antislavery opinion in the South. In Parts II through IV, I break with customary literary practice by decentering the authors and their texts and examining directly the images of women, blacks, and poor whites. This approach has the distinct advantage of revealing the similarities among these authors in spite of their seeming political differences as they create

and re-create certain types of characters in their fiction. It allows the reader to ascertain the social vision that permeates this fiction. The primary disadvantage of this approach is that it also decenters the reader accustomed to approaching literary analysis author by author and text by text. The reader's momentary discomfort, I hope, will be assuaged by a convincing argument.

In discussing the images of women, blacks, and poor whites in this literature, I relied heavily on the Southern social history and literary criticism being published literally between the chapter drafts of this manuscript. Still, there are some social historians whose work proved critical for this study. Anne Firor Scott and Catherine Clinton provided valuable studies that enhanced my understanding of plantation mistresses; Robert Shallhope, Angela Davis, John Blassingame, George Rawick, Herbert Gutman, Lawrence Levine, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Deborah Gray White, and Sterling Stuckey provided the critical information on planter violence, slave culture, and the slave's experience of slavery, so I could reliably critique the representations of plantation people in this literature. ⁷ Although the study of nonplantation whites continues to need contemporary revisionist scholarship, Steven Hahn was generous in sharing early chapters of his admirable dissertation, which later emerged as the award-winning *The Roots of Southern Populism*. And James Oakes's controversial *The Ruling Race* provided a critique of my initial position that allowed me to tighten my analysis. Finally, although I disagree with Eugene Genovese's construction of the master-slave relationship, I have been influenced by his early argument that a society with precapitalist labor relations and without fundamental capitalist institutions is not a capitalist society. I amend that proposition to make a distinction between mercantile capitalism and industrial capitalism, but his initial formulation helped me to understand the political economy of the antebellum South.⁸

Although I have now read widely in literary theory and criticism during what will surely be remembered as one of the more confusing decades of literary discourse, in the end only a handful of studies influenced my thinking. In the beginning, there was Simone de Beauvoir. She showed me before Sander Gilman how within Western patriarchal literary convention men created themselves in poetry, novels, and drama as Subject through their creation of "woman" as the Other against whom they measured their "humanness." I surmised that that principle of projection might be applicable to the planter creation of blacks and poor whites as well as women.⁹ Other feminists who influenced my analysis were Sheila Rowbotham, Adrienne Rich, and Cynthia

Griffen Wolff, who in a critical essay pointed to the inherent sexism in the literary construction of the romantic hero and heroine.¹⁰

Although Jean Fagan Yellin and William R. Taylor had taken up the authors I consider in this study, Yellin concentrated on the authors' biographies and their images of African Americans and Taylor argued mistakenly that the plantation was a "matriarchy."¹¹ Prior to the 1970s, previous analyses

of images of African Americans were encyclopedic treatments like Sterling Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction*, which only skimmed the texts I was considering. With the exception of Minrose Gwin's fine analysis and an early chapter of Hazel Carby's 1987 study, many of the most intriguing literary analyses of African Americans and women in the mid-1970s and 1980s have been those that have resurrected and analyzed the work of black and women writers and that argue for an African American and women's literary tradition.¹² Much of this criticism treats texts written after the Civil War and assumes a capitalist base for literary production. Finally, with a couple of exceptions, it seems few scholars since the 1930s have been interested in the issues of class in Southern literature except those people interested in the Southern humorists.¹³ In the end, I leapt from the base which the forementioned scholars provided.

From the comments I have received on this manuscript, I should make a statement about what this manuscript is not. It doesn't treat the nostalgic mythmaking of postCivil War authors like Thomas Nelson Page or Thomas R. Dixon. Although recent studies on the sentimental novelists of the 1850s suggested E.D.E.N. Southworth and Carolyn Lee Hentz as possible subjects, I decided that these and other Southern women novelists of the period deserved a volume in itself, one that would necessarily incorporate several chapters on the Southern response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.¹⁴ Similarly, I was persuaded that my concern with the African American literary response to slavery should be treated in another volume. Instead, I have concentrated on the leading Southern authors who had as their primary concern furthering the antebellum proslavery argument and who developed the first stereotypes of the plantation.

When one considers the literacy rate in the South, the size of the reading public, and the class alliances and politics of the authors themselves in conjunction with the form and content of their work, one reaches two conclusions. First, with the exception of James Ewell Heath who paid the price of intellectual oblivion for his liberalism, this literature was intended to be and succeeded as a proslavery literature that did not speak to postCivil War Americans except as nostalgia; second, it demonstrates that the proslavery argument was as much about gender and class as it was about race relations.

When I started this study, I knew I was going to reverse William Rogers Taylor's proposition. Instead of centering on the white, male hero in his

Southern manifestation, the "Cavalier" an idealization of the historical planter I decided to focus on the female, black, and poor white characters as a way of decoding exactly how these authors created planter heroes who realized their heroism through domination and defeat of the Other. In order for the "hero" to emerge as "moral man," a woman, always of his race and class, must be victimized and rescued by him in his symbolic defeat of an "inferior" man. I have concluded that the romantic heroic mode is the most reactionary form in our literary tradition and reinforces the most conserva-

tive and antidemocratic gender, race, and class impulses. Said another way, there is only room for one hero in the romance. Although momentary shortterm gain may be realized in having the avenging hero be a woman, a person of color, or a working-class person, the fact that someone is victimized and someone else is symbolically defeated means there have been role reversals, but no real challenge to the conservative legitimation of violence to restore "law and order."

While the antebellum Southern fiction considered in this study may be considered "a literature" because of its thematic integrity and its shared vision of a Southern past and present, there is not a single novel that does justice to the complexity of the human spirit. Instead, the historical romance in the hands of these authors, especially Simms, has the staying power of a "thriller." Because they offer caricatures of human beings and are virtually interchangeable with one another the specifics of each novel can be forgotten quite easily. Each character in these novels has a "place" based on his or her gender, race, and class, and with one or two exceptions, the characters act within the prescribed boundaries for their respective stations in life. While this literature shares some of the characteristics of popular fiction, then, the authors' unbridled hostility to the hopes and dreams of average people precludes their work from being acceptable to the middle-class reader. Every line and every scene in this literature was written to assure the reader of the natural superiority of men to women, of whites to blacks and Native Americans, and of the planter class to all other classes. These novels are more valuable than as the cultural artifacts of a defeated planter class than as works of art. They stand as a testament to the failure of an earlier conservatism and dramatically demonstrate the inherent weakness of the elitist fallacies upon which conservatism is based.

I
THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH AND THE PRODUCTION
OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE