William Faulkner's "My Grandmother Millard" (1943) and Caroline Gordon's "The Forest of the South" (1944): Comic and Tragic Versions of the Southern Belle Myth

Françoise Buisson
In *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that the female writer who wants to achieve literary autonomy has to dispose of “those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face” (17). Not only are women writers compelled to wear these “mythic masks,” but the phrase can also apply to Southern belles. The latter are often referred to as archetypes (original patterns in Greek), stereotypes (fixed images or *clichés*) or myths. The distinctions between these categories are all the more blurred as the word “myth” itself is quite polysemous. A myth is usually defined as a traditional narrative involving supernatural people or a set of popular ideas on natural or social phenomena, such as the moonlight-and-magnolias myth for example; the representations it can thus conjure up often prove fallacious. The etymology of the word reveals its close association with fable and fiction, that is to say story-telling, the purpose of which is to account for creation or origins. Mircea Eliade underlines the fact that mythical time is the time of origins, creation and foundation. As such, it deals with what actually happened in the beginning, when Chaos was transformed into Cosmos: therefore, myth testifies to man’s “ontological obsession” (84). In the South of the United States, this obsession is more ideological than ontological, and the Civil War definitely triggers off a return to Chaos.

Myths are thus similar to parables or allegories and take on religious, philosophical or even ideological dimensions. As Roland Barthes suggests in *Mythologies*, when he refers to *bourgeois* myths as myths of Order, the role of myths consists in depriving events of reality (253) and History (262), which is also the purpose of Southern mythology. If we
think of the “mythic masks” that were imposed upon the Southern belles’ faces by a mythmaking patriarchal system, we can easily understand that Southern white women, required to be Southern belles and then Southern ladies once they were married, contributed to the preservation of the Southern plantation and ideological order, as so many historians and literary critics have asserted: “A traditional southern—and uniquely American—character, the belle figure has been a perfect vehicle with which to represent the flowering of the Old South in antebellum times, the ‘rape’ of the South during and after the Civil War, and the decay of the South in the glare of modernism in the twentieth century” (Seidel 164).

Myths, as narratives, are also close to the short story and can have the same symbolical density. Gilbert Durand highlights the “semantic density” of myth (413), which is described as a “dynamic system of symbols” (64). One might be tempted to say that like myth, a short story relies on some minimal narrative space but achieves a kind of maximal signifying power: Pierre Tibi compares short fiction to guerrilla war and novels to traditional warfare (43). This comparison proves quite relevant in studying two Southern authors: William Faulkner (1897-1962) and Caroline Gordon (1895-1981) who were both short story writers and novelists. Some of their short stories can be read as parables or illustrations of truths, but quite often, on account of their epiphanic dimension and of their ironical potential, they question and repudiate myths as fabrications of truth and as fallacious representations of an ideal. Myth, indeed, is sometimes defined as an unfounded or false notion (Merriam-Webster). Pierre Tibi reminds us that according to Valerie Shaw, the specific mode of the short story is neither comic, nor tragic, but ironical (33). The purpose of this article is thus to pay attention to the comic and tragic versions of the Southern belle myth in two stories which were published at approximately the same time. It is also quite challenging to realize that the male and female writers eventually give us the same ironical insight into the Southern mythmaking of women in stories that are more mythoclastic than mythopoeic. This article will first shed light on the ways Faulkner and Gordon “do or write Southern” by exploiting Southern topoi, plots and stock characters from plantation novels or romances, within the frame of the short story. Yet, their rewriting, whether comic or tragic, testifies to a demythologizing process and takes on an iconoclastic dimension, which leads the reader to ponder over the writers’ intentions and their ambiguous stance towards their legacy, for the boundaries between mythmaking and fiction appear quite fluid and elusive. Myths tend to be reassuring and comforting, at least so in the eyes of people in general, and like stereotypes, they seem to provide a stable frame to comprehend reality, whereas short stories can be perceived as a destabilizing and even upsetting genre.

Southern Topoi, Plots and Stocks Characters: Gone with the War

Caroline Gordon’s story, “The Forest of the South” (1944) reads like a revenge tragedy. William Faulkner’s “My Grandmother Millard” (1943) was published after The Unvanquished, a short story cycle on the Civil War, in which the eponymous heroine, the Southern Lady turned warrior, dies because of the transgression of her own code. Faulkner’s short story, a joke or a tall tale, has a comic dimension and sounds like a parody of romance or a personal and historical farce. Gordon’s short story is devoid of
any comic dimension and is tinged with bitterness and dark irony. The short stories are close-ups on women who may be perceived as representations of the Southern belle as defined in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*: “Southern lore has it that the belle is a privileged white girl at the glamorous and exciting period between being a daughter and becoming a wife” (1527). She is both vulnerable and sexually innocent and embodies opposites such as brightness and shallowness, beauty and physical remoteness. She appears to have much in common with the British Victorian lady. The Southern belle was an icon who also had an ideological function: she justified slavery and the patriarchal system aimed at ensuring women’s protection: “As Prenshaw and many others have shown, the image of the southern white woman as frail and weak has long been used to justify, first, the institution of slavery and, second, violence against black men as a means of protecting and serving her” (Bennett 109) and “the belle was placed on a pedestal because men made her the objective correlative for the ideals of the South” (Bennett 110): she thus became a symbol of stability and order and embodied sacrifice for honor, pride and courage. She had an ornamental function in society and epitomized the woman “‘killed’ into art” (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Traditionally, according to Peggy Prenshaw, “The Southern writer repeatedly ‘divides’ the heroine in a *doppelgänger* motif to create a parade of Scarletts and Melanies, or variants of the pair” (81). Scarlett stands for the rebellious Southern Belle, a kind of contradiction in terms, whereas Melanie is the prototype of the Southern lady.

No female character really matches the definition in the two stories that are built around quite a simple plot, that is to say a courtship—or “the process of husband-getting” (Seidel 6)—which takes place during the Civil War and ends successfully in both stories, but whose success is undermined by the ironical tone of the story. “My Grandmother Millard” has mock heroic overtones. The boys hide the family silver in the outhouse and have Melisandre sit on the chest. Armed with a log pole, the Yankees launch an attack on the backhouse which then breaks apart, exposing the outraged Southern belle, thereby debunking the myth. According to Noel Polk, “Perhaps ‘battle’ is too grandiose a name for what actually happened. ‘Skirmish’ might be more apt [...]. She is of course not doing anything we should not be privy to, but she is humiliated nevertheless” (138). She is rescued by a Southern lieutenant whose name is unfortunately “Backhouse.” He falls in love with the young woman in the backhouse, but she is unwilling to marry him because of his name, an obsession with naming that conveys the South’s manipulation of language aimed at “gilding” reality. Rosa Millard and General Nathan B. Forrest then resort to a ploy so as to change the lieutenant’s name: “Granny writes out and Forrest signs a citation that notes simultaneously the death in battle of Lieutenant Philip St Just Backhouse and the appointment of Philip St Just Backus to the rank of Lieutenant” (Polk 139). They invent a Civil War battle, the battle of Harrykin Creek. Onomastics allows decorum to be preserved; as a result the Southern Belle can marry the Southern Cavalier. The success story is all the more tinged with irony as its full title is “My Grandmother Millard and General Bedford Forrest and the Battle of Harrykin Creek,” which may convey the idea that the actual story is also a “duel” or a form of gender war between the old lady and the general. Besides, Backus can also remind the reader of Bacchus and bacchanalia, sexuality and lechery, and such an onomastic choice is all the more ironical as it is hardly reassuring for an uptight Southern Belle.

Gordon’s story could also be interpreted as a success story, for Eugénie Mazereau, the Southern belle, accepts the marriage proposal of lieutenant Munford, a Northerner. Yet
the latter finally finds out that he is mired in murky waters, because of the strong and ambiguous relationship she had with her cousin Frank Macrae, whom she surrenders to her fiancé. She leads Munford to the Macrae place where Frank, a Confederate officer, is hiding, ambiguously wearing a Federal uniform. Ironically, Frank asks Munford if he can marry her before being probably sentenced to death. Although Frank is now Munford’s prisoner, the Northerner realizes that he is actually doomed to be Eugénie’s prisoner. Far from being the traditional tale of sectional reconciliation, the story sounds like a revenge tragedy and the Southern belle may be retaliating against the Southern male figures—including her father who was slaughtered under her very eyes—who failed to protect her as well as “the garden of the South,” a well-known Southern topos that sends us back to the pastoral tradition: “Southern woman, even before the romantic idealizations in the historical novels of Reconstruction authors, was fantasized as a Southern Eve in ‘the highly stylized garden in the wilderness,’ the plantation” (Seidel 120). The Southern belle turns out to be “a mad woman in the attic,” like her own mother, and a seductress who ensnares both Northerners and Southerners. Their “reconciliation” is ironically brought about by a southern Medusa, a freak and a monster. To some extent, structurally, the end of the revenge story testifies to the Southern belle’s subversive power but the price of this power is madness and suffering. Thus, the story-line of each narrative shows the writer’s intertextual play with the clichés and structure of Southern plantation literature and Reconstruction reconciliation narratives, through a more condensed form than the novel, the short story, which sometimes verges on allegory. However, allegory is usually closely associated with truth and authority. In the two short stories, authority and truthfulness are undermined by narration and focalization.

In these initiation stories, which are based on more or less explicit epiphanies, the male point of view is unreliable. “The Forest of the South” is told by a heterodiegetic narrator, through the prism of a Northerner, lieutenant Munford, the main focalizer who projects a naive perspective onto the Civil War and women; the homodiegetic narrator of “My Grandmother Millard,” a portrayal of the Confederate woman who is both a lady and a warrior, is a child, Bayard Sartoris. What is quite original from an historiographic point of view is that the Civil War, in Faulkner’s short story, is viewed through the eyes of children or women (we are, indeed, sometimes given insight into the women’s minds). Both stories are based on pairings of women. Gordon’s story focuses on Eugénie Mazereau, “loonier than the old lady” (155), her mother, the traditional neurasthenic mother figure. In counterpoint, Faulkner’s story is built around Rosa Millard, John Sartoris’s mother-in-law and Cousin Melisandre, the stereotyped Southern belle. Gordon’s story is also based on a pairing of men: Major Reilly, indeed, has more experience than Lieutenant Munford and adopts a more cynical and pragmatic approach to Southern history. Thus, these initiation stories are based on traditional contrapuntal techniques which efficiently add to the conciseness required by the genre.

In the rewriting of Southern topoi and plots, the traditional setting, the plantation, is more comprehensively described in “The Forest of the South” whose symbolism is suggested by the title itself, the forest being opposed to the Garden of Eden. The reference to the forest thus conveys a return to postlapsarian chaos and wildness, as well as a return to unbridled femininity. The Clifton Gardens symbolize the taming of the wilderness by the Old South’s aristocrats but they are arbitrarily destroyed by the Yankees, for a Northern engineer was not invited to dinner by their owner: “The flowers and the fountains he had seen two days before, the camellias, the Cape Jessamines, the
late roses, the marble of the grottoes and the pavilions—all those shining, rose-colored things had vanished in that plume of dull smoke!” (FS 151). The desecration of the Southern garden, a simulacrum of tamed Nature with its fake “grottoes,” can be blamed on the Yankee invasion which had already started before the war when Eugenie’s cousin, Franck Macrae, had already triggered off the demythologizing process by dressing up the statue as a Southern belle in the middle of the fountain. The Southern garden is actually both silent and barren and has turned into a kind of dantesque universe, characterized by an excess of blinding light: “But the stillness was oppressive and the landscape, he thought suddenly, too bright. This shining air held a menace” (FS 152). The treacherous landscape is described as if it were a maze, a labyrinth, and the Macrae place is the place of some inner exile for Eugénie, for it reminds her of her childhood and of her ambiguous relationship with her cousin: “‘That is the Macrae place.’ It was the tone that might have been used by a traveller returning to his old haunts after years of absence” (FS 156). Munford, the Northerner, also feels estranged in the heart of the Southern landscape, and is implicitly compared to Robinson Crusoe; the landscape is as ambiguous and silent as the female character:

He fell to pacing again and as he went was conscious of greenery pressing in there beyond the gravelled walks, of sunshine on the gravel, of pink and white blossoms. And yet it was a hushed landscape. Moving about these grounds he had sometimes the feeling that he imagined a man might have on a desert island. Here in this smiling land he was lonely. (FS 156-57)

The treacherous landscape is definitely an objective correlative for the Southern woman who also appeals to him because of her enigmatic dimension.

Faulkner’s short story borrows many ingredients from the Civil War novel and the romance, yet dialogues and characterization take precedence over the setting which is not extensively described. As regards the plot, Faulkner definitely plays with the reader’s expectations by re-using codified episodes: the ritual consisting in burying the family’s silver; the Yankees’ arrival, the Southern soldier who is a daredevil and a romantic hero embodying the chivalric tradition. One can easily draw a parallel between Cousin Philip and Lieutenant Munford who want to save Southern belles. The use of stock characters and codified episodes enables each short story writer to gain in narrative efficiency. Such narrative condensation can also be found in myths.

The short story as a genre draws heavily on economy and compression, which often compels authors to create flat characters, or to play with the reader’s horizon d’attente due to some form of shared mythology. As Eudora Welty puts it, in the short story, characters do not have “the size and importance and capacity for development they have in a novel” (112). This explains the predictability of some characters who have turned into myths, such as the Confederate Woman and the Southern belle. Onomastics also enhances the reader’s ability to decipher the implicit meanings of the text—the use of French names can send us back to the Middle Ages and feudal society. Melisandre is the chatelaine rescued by Philip, the Knight endowed with a regal name, just as Bayard refers to the Cavalier myth. Some characters then prove to be “overreadable” whereas others are “unreadable,” such as Eugénie, whose madness her fiancé fails to understand. These stock characters are in fact just pre-texts as we are presented with different versions of the Southern belle who can be quite ambivalent.
The Avatars of the Southern Belle

12 The representation of the Southern belle wavers between caricature, ambivalence and sheer mystery. In Faulkner's story, Melisandre is taken off the pedestal and literally put into the backhouse so as to hide the family's silverware under her hoop skirt; the comic situation is not devoid of scatological humour, especially when the Yankees decide to launch an attack onto the outhouse, which is also a kind of metaphorical rape suggesting that the patriarchal system was based on the illusion of protecting the white Southern belle. Melisandre, who is thus portrayed in 1943, is an anachronistic figure fabricated by the plantation class. She is represented with her dulcimer and her skirts swaying like balloons. Yet the use of the name “Melisandre” may be ambiguous, for it contrasts with the heroine's womanliness: “Melisandre”, as an avatar of Melusine, calls to mind a woman with a snake's tail, a hybrid creature; moreover, the suffix “andre” may also hint at manhood and some potential androgyny. Giving such a name to a so-called vulnerable young woman is both upsetting and ironical. She is definitely a foil to Granny Millard, the Southern Lady, who embodies courage and daring: patriotism also needs myths.

Eugénie Mazereau is no innocent Southern belle either. The short story is based on an epiphany, for Munford's perspective, though rather limited, makes it possible to remove her “mythic mask” and to discover an evil-meaning woman. This kind of metamorphosis, or even anamorphosis, is a major feature of myths the contents of which can be potentially violent and threatening, and Eugénie proves to be dangerous and manipulative. She uses a Yankee soldier to betray the Southern cousin who had desecrated the myth of the Southern belle imposed upon women: “He put Cousin Maria’s crinoline on that statue there and he put a bonnet on it and painted its face with pokeberry juice and put a prayer book in its hand. He said she was going to church” (FS 162). She is forever faced with the trauma of having witnessed her father's death. Like the statue in the garden, she is an unreadable petrified mad woman; her petrifying gaze—“[...] those large strange-colored eyes fixed on his” (FS 158)—turns her into a Medusa figure by which the young Yankee is increasingly enthralled:

She looked up. Her eyes were blue! He had thought them brown. That was because of the stain of light brown about the iris but the eye itself was blue. Blue, that is, if you stood there and looked into her eyes but if you stepped back a few paces you would say, ‘The girl's eyes are brown, pale brown,’ and you would say, too, ‘She looks at me but she never sees me.’ Why should an eye look out and not see? Does it look within? Has it something it cannot look away from? (FS 161)

Munford's attitude also testifies to the North's inability to read and understand the South, the vacant stare standing for a kind of hermeneutic deadlock. Eugénie shows no concern for the Confederate Cause; far from being the Confederate woman, she has no ideological stance and experiences the collapse of the South as a personal tragedy: “The word ‘Yankee’ was never on Eugénie Mazereau's lips. She seemed to have no concern for the Confederate Cause, and yet, he thought, she might be patriotic, and proud too, in other circumstances [...]” (FS 160). She does not match the myth of the sexually pure Southern Belle, for she behaves in a most unladylike manner. Just as the garden turns into the forest, the tamed girl turns into a wild woman: “And yet when they had stopped there in the woods a moment ago she had yielded herself to his embraces more freely than at any time yesterday. She had even put up her arm up about his neck to draw his head down to hers” (FS 164). The myth is entirely debunked when Macrae declares he
wants to marry her, the duel over the woman being a mirror image of the duel between North and South, which finally ends with the mad woman’s laughter. The end of the story is rich in structural irony, for, unexpectedly, the prisoner who is going to die is the winner, as conveyed by his “hard, victorious glance” (FS 166): Munford then realizes that he is engaged with a hysterical woman obsessed with her father’s bleeding and symbolical castration, a metaphor for her own defloration, and the defloration of the South. The debunking of the Southern belle myth is thus far more bitter than in Faulkner’s story and is actually representative of its evolution: “The metamorphosis began abruptly, about 1914, and continued until 1939. It was during this period that the southern belle as a character in fiction discarded her cloak of gentility and purity to reveal depravity, destructiveness, rebellion, or neurosis” (Seidel xi).

In Faulkner’s “My Grandmother Millard,” the representation is not that subversive. According to Peggy Prenshaw, Rosa Millard is among those “strong matriarchs who gain their strength at the expense of submissiveness and innocence” (82). Diane Roberts rather focuses on her duality, since she owns children and slaves, like any planter, and she tries to preserve feminine standards of behaviour and religion, like any Southern lady (15-17). For example, she orders the two children, Bayard and Ringo, to wash their mouths with soap when they use coarse language. The grandmother figure as “a protector, an upholder of virtues, of past values” (Petry 230) is also a prototype in Faulkner’s work. Alice Hall Petry, in her article, refers to Noel Polk’s analysis of the grandmother figure: “[…] Polk notes further that ‘the gray-haired bespectacled old lady’ was a ubiquitous character in Faulkner’s writings of 1927 to 1931—a character who often functioned as the conscience of another individual” (225). Yet, the fact that she is short-sighted or that she needs spectacles may suggest her inability to see beyond the Old South and her lack of insight into Yankees’ possible lack of respect towards Southern belles: “She said she would rather have Yankees [instead of Ab Snopes] in the house any day because at least Yankees could have more delicacy” (MGM 674). Moreover, one may wonder if her very strength does not deprive her of her womanhood, to some extent; the tomboy heroine was also a Southern stereotype (and Drusilla Hawks provides a version of the tomboy in The Unvanquished: she dresses like a man, rides horseback and fights with men). Rosa Millard’s fall results from her misunderstanding of male behaviour. Indeed, she trusts any Southern man, whatever his ethic: “Her belief that the chivalric code will protect her proves to be her downfall; a gang leader who is rumoured to have served in the Confederate army kills her” (Seidel 51). And she is not killed into an art object, but into a heap of little sticks: “all the little sticks had collapsed in a quiet heap on the floor” (“Riposte in Tertio,” The Unvanquished, 107). The image can be construed as both the reification and disintegration of the myth of the Southern belle and lady, that is to say the fall of a monument.

The Two Facets of Myth: Monumentalism and Fictionalization

In his article “The Unvanquished: Faulkner’s Nietzschean Skirmish with the Civil War,” John Lowe applies the concept of monumentalism to the South’s cult of remembrance and underlines the dangers of the monumental concepts of history. “My Grandmother Millard” can be construed as a mise en abyme of the rewriting of the history of the South. This history is but a collection of myths which are actually fictions, as the invention of
the battle of Harrykin Creek suggests. Southern history is literally rewritten by Granny Millard and Nathan B. Forrest, who invent a battle so as to meet bureaucratic requirements.

17 The fabrication of the battle can be perceived as a secondary short story framed within the short story itself and as a fragment of “historiographic metafiction.” Still, the story also has a didactic purpose in a country at war in 1943, as Faulkner suggests in a letter sent to Harold Ober in March 1942. The story could provide American readers with courage in time of war: “Faulkner thought it had not only humor but a message: ‘a willingness to pull up the pants and carry on, no matter with whom, let alone what’” (qts. in Blotner 436). Therefore, the international context at the time of the publication can explain why the debunking of war has its own limits and why the message of the short story is ambiguous, Rosa Millard winning a fictitious victory through a fictional device. As for “The Forest of the South,” it is a *mise en abyme* of the chaos generated by the Civil War and, more precisely in Gordon’s story, the destruction of a Southern monument, the Clifton gardens. The short story form, an apparently “minimal” form, is thus as efficient as the novel, a “maximal” form, to debunk Southern monumentalism and memorialization.

18 The fallacy—or myth—of sectional reconciliation is exemplified by the false relationship between Eugénie Mazereau and Lieutenant Munford, who empathizes with the victims and proves to be manipulated as a tool of revenge against her cousin Franck Macrae. Eugénie could be perceived as the winner, but what does she actually win? She falls a prey to neurosis as a result of the Yankees’ occupation. Paradoxically Gordon is often said to be conservative and to cling to the Agrarian ideal, but she is amazingly subversive in her treatment of the Southern belle. In her story she underlines the elusiveness of myths and the disintegration of values; the South cannot overcome the trauma; but she also may blame her female protagonist for her inner rebellion and her betrayal of two soldiers: during the Reconstruction, Southern ladies devoted themselves to what LeeAnn Whites calls “the reconstruction of their men’s self-image” (90). Eugénie Mazereau deconstructs men’s self-image and deconstructs herself in the process; either she remains the Southern belle or “angel in the house” (Gilbert and Gubar 17) or she loses her identity and integrity. She thus has the illusion of power, and finally, no more power than the Southern belle who is respectful of codes. Although she vanquishes the two men, the limitations of this “victory in defeat” are thus tangible.

19 Myths are also narratives dealing with creation and origins. What is questioned in these two stories is also the very origin of the war, and especially the myth of the Lost Cause. One may wonder whether Cousin Melisandre is worth the Southern soldiers’ sacrifice. Melisandre disappears from the narrative once she is married. She thus has only one function in the plot as well as in life. Eugenie Mazereau loses her mind; she is both petrifying and petrified into madness. Rosa Millard is given masculine features and has unladylike language or attitudes. For example, she refers to Melisandre as “that damn bride” (MGM 697). She plays an active part in the war and proves to be indomitable; the comic overtones are not detrimental to the myth of the Confederate woman, according to Jean Rouberol who thinks that the comic dimension is but a counterpoint to mythic exaltation (195). Rosa Millard definitely has some power, but she fails to control time and is also faced with slippage. Her lack of control over time is conveyed in several sentences: “And when the time came to really bury the silver, it was too late” (MGM 672); “It just all happened at once” (MGM 675); “And that shows how things were then: we just never had
time for anything” (MGM 675). The war seems also all the more absurd as one of its origins, the so-called protection of the ideology embodied by the Southern belle, is itself an absurd entity: Melisandre is a maudlin and excessively fragile woman devoid of any psychological depth. The war is compared to fireworks or associated with entertainment: “a feeble popping of pistol-shots from down along the creek that didn’t sound any more like war than a boy with firecrackers” (MGM 677). The portrayal of Nathan B. Forrest as a bureaucrat obsessed with law is also all the more ironical as the real Forrest was rather famous for “his disregard of traditional rules of warfare” (Polk 139): “Confound it, Miss Rosa, can’t you understand either that I’m just a fallible mortal man trying to run a military command according to certain fixed and inviolable rules, no matter how foolish the business looks to superior outside folks?” (MGM 696). In The Unvanquished, Rosa Millard is murdered and vanquished because she has stepped down from her pedestal; she lies and steals, thus violating her own code; yet, she has obeyed a feudal ethic so as to protect her kith and kin. She is all the more the victim of her own code as she expects the “Grumpy’s Independents” to regard her as a Southern lady. Her flaws are her ignorance of the Old South’s decline and her allegiance to Southern mythology, which is but a fiction. Actually, all the women in the two short stories seem to be the victims of the myth—or fiction—of Southern womanhood. Like Madame Bovary, they are the victims of such fictionalizing.

***

20 The reader who is faced with ambiguous versions of the Southern belle myth, is led to conclude that “The ‘lady’ is no more nor less a human fiction than is the past itself” (Prenshaw 87) and the myth is once again an apocryphal story, a well-known story that is not true. Both stories show that women can step down from the pedestals on which they were required to stay and have an iconoclastic potential towards male mythmaking. The authors’ attitudes towards their heroines can prove quite ambiguous as well; and a short story can be all the more ambiguous as it is short, leaving no room for detailed introspection or analysis.

21 The debunking of the Southern belle myth by women themselves is also a form of self-sacrifice. Eugenie, who rebels against a male order that fails to protect her, is not redeemed and her madness is a form of retribution. As John Lowe puts it, “Revenge, however, is the curse of the South, for its endless repetitions have led to physical devastations, personal corruption, racial catastrophe, and breakdown of the law” (431). Eugénie violates her own code: by betraying a member of her family, she also betrays the South. When Granny dies, she is totally reified into a heap of little sticks, as if she were but a puppet. This desecration of the Southern warrior leads Anne Goodwyn Jones to conclude: “Faulkner writes out his resisting women with great empathy. But it seems impossible for him to imagine a conclusion that is not, however agonizing it may be, tragic for these women who resist the Southern patriarchal sex-gender system” (71). To some extent, Faulkner wavers between monumentalism and demythologizing: Faulkner’s qualifying, destabilizing, of the figure on the pedestal marks his struggle with a past he sometimes finds attractive and frequently finds appalling. The carefully constructed Confederate Woman is readily visible in Faulkner’s fictions: she is also deconstructed, demystified, and exposed as Faulkner contests and debates the history he inherits. (Roberts 10)
Michel Gresset shares the same point of view as Anne Goodwyn Jones about the dangers involved in crossing gender boundaries, for an energetic and creative woman is often compelled to deny her femininity (151). This can account for Gavin Blount’s nostalgic stance in “A Return” (1938), another short story written by William Faulkner: “Do you know why I have never married? It’s because I was born too late. All the ladies are dead since 1865. There’s nothing left now but women” (567). Or there’s nothing left but old stories—myths. Both Faulkner and Gordon use Southern mythology as a springboard for the writing of their two stories, the better to denounce its fictional dimension. The short story, which often presents readers with blind or short-sighted characters, like Eugénie Mazereau or Rosa Millard, paradoxically explodes myths as fallacies, through the same weapons as myths, *diegesis* or story-telling which relies on efficient structures and/or heavy symbolism. Yet, the short story, which undermines the patriarchal ideological authority of myth, also leaves room for ambiguity because of its very conciseness and allusiveness. The Janus-faced Southern belle portrayed by Caroline Gordon also embodies the elusive nature of the relationships between myth and fiction: myth nourishes fiction but fiction nourishes myth and creates new “mythic masks.” Kathryn Seidel underlines the fact that the Southern belle as an ambivalent figure created by writers or filmmakers has also become another version of the myth: “In fact, the fallen belle, an astonishing development in the 1920s, has become a new stereotype, a cliché that only the best writer can handle with freshness” (165). Fiction can thus be both mythoclastic and mythopoeic, and the shorter it is, the more challenging it proves by facing readers with the ethical or ideological ambiguities entailed by its aesthetic density. Such ambiguities result from the elusiveness of the genre that hovers on the borderline between myth and fiction, as well as over the limits between conciseness and expansion, closure and openness, at the crossroads of wholeness and fragmentariness:

As we read, we can sense the precarious nature of any literary construction, its barely containable excitation of words which mimics our own suffusion in experience, and whose eventual style, like a ballerina’s line, is an expression of the manner by which chaos is conditionally and beautifully held at bay. (Ford xvii)

What Richard Ford writes in his introduction to *The Book of the American Short Story*, actually applies to our reading experience of Faulkner and Gordon’s short stories: both authors give a frame, however fallacious it may be perceived as a literary construction, to the chaos brought about by the Civil War.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


ABSTRACTS

Les deux récits étudiés ici sont des Civil War stories au sein desquelles les femmes sont finalement amenées à jouer un rôle qui semble indiquer la faillite du mythe de la Belle du Sud. Néanmoins, alors que la nouvelle de Faulkner revêt une dimension comique et tourne à la farce aussi bien historique que personnelle, le ton de la nouvelle de Gordon, au message plus oblique et ambivalent, s’avère profondément amer et tragique. En fait, c’est l’ironie qui domine dans ces deux récits qui tournent en dérision le mythe de la Belle du Sud, en jouant avec les codes de la romance et du roman de la Plantation. L’utilisation de topos, d’épisodes traditionnels et de personnages stéréotypés permet de gagner de l’espace narratif. D’où la dimension symbolique, voire allégorique du genre qui le rapproche du mythe. Néanmoins, les deux nouvelles se nourrissent de la mythologie sudiste pour mieux dénoncer sa dimension fictionnelle.

AUTHORS

FRANÇOISE BUISSON

Françoise Buisson is Associate Professor at the University of Pau (France) where she teaches translation and US history and literature. A member of AFEA (Association Française d’Etudes Américaines), she has written a PhD dissertation on “Faulkner as a short story writer: tradition and modernity” and published critical essays on William Faulkner, Mark Twain and contemporary writers such as Kaye Gibbons, TC Boyle or Bret Easton Ellis.