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“Le Mulâtre”:

A Call to Connection through Narrative Technique

The short story “Le Mulâtre” (1837), which recounts the tragic history of a slave during Haiti’s turbulent 1790s, was Victor Séjour’s first published work and also the first known work of fiction by an African-American writer. Though it appears a typical melodramatic tale of brigands, betrayal and revenge, the work is anything but typical in its sophisticated use of voice and plot and in its commentary on slavery.

Using adapted Structuralist analyses of narration, this article explores how Séjour opens up burning questions of human identity within the constraints of 19th-century tragic melodrama. The transitions through levels of narration and perspective form a focused commentary on the action, while the apparently standard tragic trope is undermined by a weaving of life histories in which the triumph of humanity overturns the notion of tragic loss. Thus a story of oppression and inevitability is structured within a voice of compassion and agency, reconnecting the strands of humanity in a starkly demarcated sphere

and underscoring the stakes for both master and slave in the exploitation of human being by human being.

“Le Mulâtre” Re-Discovered

I first encountered Victor Séjour’s short story “Le Mulâtre” in a decontextualized online version.¹ Initially, I found the writing somewhat over the top—passion, assassination, revenge, spattered blood, secret societies: in short, all the clichés of classic melodrama, a sort of French-language *Princess Bride*. Nevertheless, as I read, I began to be drawn into the complexity of the narrative, the subtle shifts of point of view, the manner in which the story itself situates the reader in its larger context, and above all the bold and trenchant critique of slavery. Moreover, though the plot appears to be a typical tragedy, it is not so clear in the end who actually wins or loses.

A little background study revealed that the story was written in 1837 and that it *was*, at least in terms of form, a classic melodrama. It remained virtually unknown to American readers because of its composition in French² and little appreciated by French readers because of its scathing depiction of slavery as

¹ I found the story in October 2013 in the collection of the Bibliothèque Tintamarre, an online repository of Louisiana francophone literature compiled by the French language students of Centenary College; the works are presented without commentary.

² More than a century and a half after its initial appearance, the story was finally translated into English by Philip Barnard for the 1997 *Norton anthology of African American literature* (see Gates, Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay, eds.).

well as its problematic literary value.³ Thus the earliest work of fiction by an African-American writer was relegated to obscurity for a century and a half after its appearance. A superficial reading of this tale of a young slave in pre-revolutionary Haiti who takes vengeance upon his master but thus destroys his own identity does indeed suggest a tragic melodrama with all its hackneyed conventions. However, a more profound analysis reveals a carefully crafted work which transcends the genre and defies simplistic categorizations. Far from typical, Séjour's "Le Mulâtre", penned at a time when both the United States and France were deeply and unashamedly involved in the slave trade, provides a sensitive, nuanced and daring commentary on slavery and on the humanity, exposed at its best as well as at its worst, which is the shared heritage of both slave and master.

After surveying briefly the life and times of Victor Séjour, this article will examine the story by means of three analytical methods: temporal sequencing, levels of narration, and mythic structure. It will be noted that in all three cases I am reviving aspects of Structuralism, a movement which dominated literary analysis in the middle of the twentieth century. Structuralism insisted that the appearance of order did not arise from phenomena, but was rather imposed upon phenomena by innate structures within the human mind; language, behaviour and literature could all be reduced to their basic and shared constitutive patterns. The tendency of Structuralism thus to limit interpretation

³ A summary search turned up three or four research articles on "Le Mulâtre" in English and none in French.

and to enforce sameness while effacing difference led to its widespread rejection in literary circles.⁴ However, certain of its instruments, especially narratology, are not-to-be-discarded aids to close reading and can enable the reader to clarify and expand investigation. A story such as “Le Mûlatre”, whose force depends so much upon its intricate structure, provides an opportunity to cautiously rehabilitate and re-integrate into a broader approach certain elements of Structuralist analysis and thereby to probe more deeply into the voices and perspectives that Séjour explores.

Victor Séjour, Literature, and Slavery

Juan Victor Séjour Marcou et Ferranda was born in Louisiana in 1817 into a well-to-do family. His father was a free mulatto from Haiti and his mother a free octoroon from New Orleans. After an excellent education he was sent to Paris to pursue a literary career: his parents recognized that the America of the early nineteenth century was not propitious for the social or professional advancement of young African Americans.⁵

In Paris, Séjour encountered a number of important people of colour, notably the elder Alexandre Dumas and Cyrille Bisette, who was the editor of *La revue*

⁴ Indeed, most of the “de-” and “post-” -isms of literary theory in the latter half of the twentieth century were reactions, from nuanced to vitriolic, against the reductionism of Structuralism and its stultifying claims to provide the so-called correct interpretation of literature; reactions which testified both to its serious flaws and its important resonances.

⁵ “Given this conclusion in which a man of color kills his white father, it is not surprising that such a text was published abroad: while there was a thriving society of free people of color in New Orleans at the time, it remained an oppressive and segregated society” (Rouillard 1102).

des colonies.⁶ It was in this periodical that he published, at the age of twenty, his first work, the short story “Le Mulâtre”. Following this, his writing career flourished with the authoring of historical dramas and comedies which commanded great success on the Paris stage, but remarkably, he never revisited the genre with which he began nor did he again take up the theme of slavery. Toward the end of his life, his work waned in popularity as public tastes in drama changed. He died of tuberculosis in 1874.⁷

The later French assessment of Séjour’s contribution may be represented by the *Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française* (1984) which characterizes his writing as “melodrama” that “uses all the conventions of the genre: love, crime, heroes, grand passions; all in a pseudo-historical setting” (“la voie du mélodrame [...] utilise toutes les ficelles du genre: amours, crimes, héros, grands sentiments, le tout dans une atmosphère pseudo-historique”, Preiss 2161).⁸ And while the few English-language sources which discuss Séjour strongly underscore the significance of “Le Mulâtre”, the *Dictionnaire* is pointedly unaware of the short story’s existence.

Its importance, however, can hardly be overstated. The first known work of fiction by an African American writer, a Haitian setting just a generation after the bloody Haitian revolution, a biting critique of slavery by an African

⁶ Dumas’s grandmother was a black born in St-Domingue (later Haiti), and Bissette was a black from Martinique who became a force in the Abolitionist movement and served as a deputy in France’s Assemblée Nationale.

⁷ The biographical information above comes from Philip Barnard, “Séjour, Victor”, in *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Oxford UP, 2002 (online version).

⁸ All quotes translated from French by the author.

American writing in France at a time when both the United States and France were still unapologetically promoting the slave trade, “Le Mulâtre” not only places itself in the genre of melodrama but indeed skillfully exploits its contemporary popularity to deliver a daring anti-slavery message. It must strike the reader with its representation of brutality, agency and human aspiration that lead to a destiny where there remains no distinction between black and white, master and slave.

The Story

A brief summary of the plot of “Le Mulâtre” will help us to examine more closely the story’s unique elements. The frame-narrator, a traveler in St-Domingue (later the Republic of Haiti) stops to hear the tale of Georges as told to him by the embedded narrator, an old slave named Antoine. Georges’s story begins with a beautiful Senegalese girl forced to be the mistress of a French planter named Alfred. She has a son by the master Alfred, but then is cast off by him into disgrace and misery. The son, Georges, does not know who his father is; the mother dies in neglect and the boy grows up ironically devoted to his cruel master. Years later, the son saves the father’s life from an attempted assassination and is wounded in the fray. Caring for the self-sacrificing slave in his little hut, the master gets a glimpse of his son’s wife and desires her. She, however, faithful to her husband, rejects the master and finally must resist him forcefully, an act which results in her condemnation. Georges begs for his wife’s life but Alfred, unmoved, proceeds to have her executed. Georges then swears

vengeance and departs to join the rebels, taking with him his infant son. He waits patiently, brooding and planning, until the master Alfred has a wife and son of his own. Then he returns by night to the plantation, poisons the wife and strikes down his former master. In the very moment of execution, he learns that he is killing his own father and, deeming himself accursed, takes his own life.

Analysis I: Anachrony – Situating the Reader

Structuralists have succeeded in demonstrating that while the sequence of events in the basic structure or fabula of a narration is chronological, the sequence of those events on the level of story-telling is not necessarily so (Lammert 1955, Genette 1972 (in Bal)). This anachrony, or presentation of events in a non-linear fashion, can be used by a writer to provide a wealth of information. For our story, the question may be posed as follows: In temporal terms, what is the relationship between the narration to the reader by the frame-narrator, the narration by Antoine to the frame-narrator and the events of the embedded story? The text begins:

The first rays of dawn had barely begun to illuminate the black peaks of the mountains when I left the Cape to travel to Saint Marc, a little town in St-Domingue, now the Republic of Haiti. I had seen so many beautiful rural landscapes, so many deep, dark forests, that, to tell the truth, I thought myself sated with such virile splendours of creation. Still, at the sight of this latest town, with its picturesque greenery and its unique, unworldly air, I was astonished, dumbfounded at the sublime diversity of God's handiwork. As soon as I arrived, I was hailed by an old Negro, some seventy years of age [...]

"Good day, master," he said to me, taking off his hat.

“Ah! There you are...,” and I gave him my hand, which he shook gratefully.

“Master,” he said, “what you do there, well, that shows a noble heart. ...”⁹

The chapter continues with the traveler requesting to hear the story of the old man:

“Antoine,” I said to him, “you had promised to tell me the story of your friend Georges.”

[...] Now this is what he told me:...¹⁰

I have recounted above some aspects of the social and political reality which formed the environment of the creation of the story in Séjour’s day. However, background research is scarcely required to situate the reader in the story’s setting since the writer subtly and effectively uses the narrative itself to provide this. First of all, we learn that the frame-story told by the traveler took place in “Saint Marc, a little town in St-Domingue, now the Republic of Haiti.” This means that the frame-story (essentially, the story of a traveler meeting an old man and listening to the tale of Georges’s life) took place on the island before

⁹ “Les premiers rayons de l’aurore blanchissaient à peine la cime noir des montagnes, quand je partis du Cap pour me rendre à Saint Marc, petite ville de St-Domingue, aujourd’hui la République d’Haïti. J’avais tant vu de belles campagnes, de forêts hautes et profondes, qu’en vérité je me croyais blasé de ces beautés mâles de la création. Mais, à l’aspect de cette dernière ville, avec sa végétation pittoresque, sa nature neuve et bizarre, je fus étonné et confondu devant la diversité sublime de l’œuvre de Dieu. Aussitôt mon arrivée, je fus accosté par un vieillard nègre, déjà septuagénaire [...]

— Bonjour, maître, me dit-il en se découvrant.

— Ah! vous voilà..., et je lui tendis la main, qu’il pressa avec reconnaissance.

— Maître, dit-il, c’est d’un noble cœur ce que vous faites là. ...”

¹⁰ “Antoine, lui dis-je, vous m’aviez promis l’histoire de votre ami Georges.

[...] Voici ce qu’il me raconta :”

the revolution, but that the narrator is recounting it to the reader after the revolution, when St-Domingue has been renamed Haiti. Moreover, the history of Antoine's "friend Georges", that is, the embedded fabula, occurred probably some years before this meeting. In other words, in just these few lines the writer has positioned the reader after the Haitian revolution but before the abolition of slavery in the United States and probably France as well, to hear of a meeting that happened a few years earlier, that is, before the revolution in Haiti, in which is related the tragic history of a young slave of some few years before that. The embedded fabula must have unfolded, then, in or around the turbulent 1790s when the excesses of cruelty against the black slaves was only about to be matched by the excesses of revenge against the white former masters. Our post-Derridean, post-Bakhtinian age places great and indeed valid emphasis on the reader's involvement in creating meaning in the reading of a story. Nonetheless, this analysis of anachrony reminds us that by probing deeper into the structure of a work, the reader can be better situated to understand the historical context and thus to create richer meaning from the process. Once thus situated, she or he is also in a position to interpret the subtle shifts in perspective that are woven throughout the story: the levels of narration.

Analysis II—Levels of narration: Whose story is this?

Narratology does not take for granted that the represented voice is the actual one, that it transmits its source objectively or that it reaches the reader without passing through the forming and distorting influences of one or more filters. In

this section, the structure of the narrative is examined in order to answer one of the fundamental questions of narratological analysis: Who is speaking?

As shown in the excerpts above, the travelling frame-narrator meets the embedded narrator Antoine and asks about the history of Georges. All that follows, the story of Georges and Alfred and the terrible vengeance, is recounted by the character Antoine, with only occasional reminders that he is sitting with the traveler and is speaking to him. As the one who speaks to the frame-narrator, Antoine is already the second-level narrator, and when Antoine reports the discourse of others we reach a third level; when those words or actions could not have been witnessed by Antoine himself but must have been mediated through other witnesses, at the least a fourth level is brought into play. Moreover, as noted above, the frame-narrator relates the story after the independence of Haiti but the encounter with Antoine takes place earlier, and the embedded story perhaps years before that. The actual complexity of construction, as opposed to the apparent seamless surface of the narrative, is remarkable.

Thus, facile answers to the ostensibly simple question as to who is speaking turn out to be unsatisfactory. Is it Séjour who speaks to the reader? Undoubtedly, as he is the writer—it is his words which are read. But those words are a *construction* of the author: he creates characters that act and speak; he fabricates their opinions and motivations. It cannot therefore be maintained (whether true or not) that anything in the story represents the view or voice of the author, but only of one or another manufactured characters. Then is it the

voice of the traveler in Saint-Domingue, the “I” of the first chapter? Again the response begins with an affirmative but must immediately be qualified. The traveler conveys a story that comes to him from another; the embedded story (that of Georges) is not part of his own experience but is told to him by old Antoine. Thus we arrive at the principal voice. Nevertheless, Antoine reports the discourse of others: Laïsa, Alfred, Georges, and so on. Does the reader receive their actual voices or has their speech been filtered, recreated, even distorted, unconsciously or deliberately, by transmission? How in any case could Antoine report private conversations, asides, or thoughts?

There is no doubt but that simply identifying the narrative voice will not adequately permit a valid interpretation of the discourse. Rather, the filters through which the voices reach the reader must be identified and kept in mind. Bal (146) rejects older terms such as “perspective” or “point of view” to describe this act of filtering since they do not adequately distinguish between the one who speaks and the one who transmits, which of course is not always the same voice; she adopts rather the term “focalization.” Ultimately, the story is told through the focal filter of the frame-narrator, who within the space of a few lines positions the reader both emotionally and culturally. The emotional context is established at the very beginning of the first chapter as the remarkably beautiful countryside of St-Domingue is set starkly against the brutality of slavery. Furthermore, these lines also provide the cultural situation. A surface reading suggests a simple binary: black vs. white, slave vs. master: it is far from being so simple. Frame-narration, often seen as a device to create the impression of eye-witness authenticity, here actually offers much more. From the snatches of

conversation it is revealed that the frame-narrator is a white man, that the character-bound narrator is a black slave, and it is soon clear that the protagonist of the embedded fabula, Georges, is a mulatto—all of which positions were very nuanced in the slavery and post-slavery era, and all of which are undermined in this story. Normally, the white does not offer his hand to the black and address him with the French polite form, as occurs in these lines. Normally, the slave is regarded as less than human, and is not the outspoken and articulate mouthpiece of a bitter and threatening diatribe on the evils of slavery. Yet in this story it is just such a slave, old Antoine, who furnishes most of the focalization, or the emotional filter, regardless of who is actually speaking. From his entrenched and heatedly declared perspective, it is easy to understand what factors led to the Haitian Revolution:

...But don't you know that a Negro is as low-down as a dog... society pushes him away, folks despise him, the laws curse him... Ah! He's surely a miserable creature, without even the consolation of remaining virtuous... Though he be born good-hearted, noble, generous; though God give him a great and faithful spirit, nonetheless he so often goes down to the tomb with bloodstained hands and a heart still lusting for vengeance; for more than once has he seen his dreams of youth destroyed, for experience has taught him that his good deeds mean nothing, that he must love neither wife nor children, for some day the one will be seduced by the master and the others sold and taken far away no matter how it breaks his heart. So what do you expect him to do?... Shall he dash out his brains on the cobblestones?... Kill his tormentor?... Or do you believe that the human heart can adapt itself to such miseries?... [...] If he lives on, it's for vengeance; for one day soon he will rise up, and on the day he shakes off his slavery, it would be better for the master to hear the famished tiger roaring at his side than to meet that man face to face
...¹¹

¹¹ “My mais ne savez-vous pas qu'un nègre est aussi vil qu'un chien... ; la société le repousse ; les hommes le détestent ; les lois le maudissent... Ah ! c'est un être bien malheureux, qui n'a pas même la consolation d'être toujours vertueux... Qu'il naisse bon, noble, généreux ; que Dieu lui

Of course, we are receiving the story through two or more filters, for the frame-narrator, as the first level of narration, is ultimately responsible for telling the story to the reader, but Antoine is the emotional architect both of what he transmits and of his own commentaries. When he reports the dialogue of others, there is a change of narrative voice in terms of structural analysis, but it is he who remains the focalizer. Indeed, his violent partisanship on the issue of slavery calls into question the accuracy of his report, and the traditional view of the change of narrative voice, even with awareness of focal shifts, may be inadequate to interpret the story. As useful and insightful as is Bal's delineation of focalization, I often prefer Anne Malena's insistence on the term "representation." In that sense, the reader must remember that even though the narrative voice *ostensibly* changes, the *actual* narrator remains the one who is telling the story — he or she in fact does not really shift to another voice, but only *represents* such a shift as though it had taken place. Or in other words, it must be remembered that in any case of narration, direct discourse is merely a fiction; it is indirect (reported) discourse with quotation marks provided by the

donne une âme loyale et grande ; malgré cela, bien souvent il descend dans la tombe les mains teintes de sang, et le cœur avide encore de vengeance ; car plus d'une fois il a vu détruire ses rêves de jeune homme ; car l'expérience lui a appris que ses bonnes actions n'étaient pas comptées, et qu'il ne devait aimer ni sa femme, ni ses fils ; car un jour la première sera séduite par le maître, et son sang vendu au loin malgré son désespoir. Alors, que voulez-vous qu'il devienne ?... Se brisera-t-il le crâne contre le pavé de la rue ?... Tuera-t-il son bourreau ?... Ou croyez-vous que le cœur humain puisse se façonner à de telles infortunes ?..." ; "S'il vit, c'est pour la vengeance ; car bientôt il se lève... et, du jour où il secoue sa servilité, il vaudrait mieux au maître entendre le tigre affamé hurler à ses côtés, que de le rencontrer face à face".

narrator.¹² Antoine's storytelling technique does not simply relate discourse but puts it to use to carry forward his agenda: discourse becomes expressive rather than simply communicative (Maingueneau 111). He sees one side of the complex tragedy, tragedy in the classic sense: the inevitable and just doom upon the transgressor. And all of this, it must be remembered, comes in its final form through the voice of the traveler, the frame-narrator, the white who shakes the hand of the black slave and who speaks to him with graciousness, who perhaps sees more than simple tragedy in the final outcome and adds his own focalization to this end. It appears, then, that such an extended layering of narration, rather than distancing the reader from the stark reality depicted, rather builds voice by voice into a chorus of protest that cannot be ignored.

Analysis III: A Tragedy? Undermining the *Mythos* of Autumn

Structuralism was indeed guilty of reducing all stories to basic exemplars, seeing their similarity as more significant than their diversity. Yet by the same token, an identification of the more common patterns can expand rather than reduce story elements, highlighting the presence and significance of variation.

¹² Professor Malena has made this distinction in countless lectures on literature at the University of Alberta. Furthermore, Fontanier (375) noted almost two centuries ago: "'Dialogue' consists of reporting directly, and just as they are *supposed to have* come out of the speaker's mouth, speeches *attributed* to a character or to oneself" (my translation of "*Le Dialogisme* consiste à rapporter directement, et tels qu'ils sont censés sortir de la bouche, des discours que l'on prête à ses personnages, ou que l'on se prête à soi-même"; italics added in the translation). As well, Barthes (27), discussing the style of scientific writing, exposed the fallacy of a so-called objective or passive voice trying to hide the subjective speaker: "what is in question here are purely grammatical stratagems, simply varying how the subject constitutes himself in discourse, i.e. gives himself, theatrically or fantasmatically, to others; hence they all designate forms of the image-repertoire."

Northrup Frye saw tragedy as one of the four basic genres of human stories (along with comedy, romance and irony), and depicted it as autumn, the image of summer or joy turning into winter or bleakness and failure. In his schema, tragedy is a simple binary category which is “sensational” (194) in the literal sense, that is, emphasizing corporeal and emotional sensations (melodrama is of course by its nature suited to take advantage of this approach). Tragic heroes are excluded from the place in the world to which they rightly belong, which engages the reader’s sympathy (37), and their doom is inevitable (198).

A cursory reading of “Le Mulâtre” supports this analysis. The superficial indicators incarnate all the standard elements of tragedy (and in addition, as noted above, all the clichés of period melodrama, which was typically tragic): a young slave, son of a devoted mother and a powerful father, succeeds in gaining his father’s confidence; his father treats him with cruelty and betrays him; he swears vengeance but in the fulfillment of his vow discovers that he is killing his own father and, unable to live with this reality, kills himself as well. To an even greater degree, “Le Mulâtre” displays the simple binaries of Frye’s schema: Georges’s mother and her brother are joyously reunited but whipped by the unfeeling Alfred (confraternity opposed to brutality); Georges is wounded while defending Alfred, who rewards him by trying to seduce Georges’s wife (faithfulness opposed to betrayal); Georges’s wife refuses Alfred’s importune advances, opposing purity to depravity, for instance (Piacento 124-6). Moreover, the trope of revenge is widespread in tragedy and is part of the stock-in-trade of every writer of melodrama. Finally, the parricide reformulates the oedipal plot-

line common to tragedy since antiquity (Daut). At least on the surface, the autumnal fabula of tragedy is repeated here.

To remain on the surface would be to ignore the much more complex structure fashioned by Séjour. In fact, “Le Mulâtre” presents the reader with three tragic story lines which can only be understood in their interrelation and which subvert the notion of tragic nemesis by outlining a cycle of humanity-dehumanization-humanity regained, terminating in a mutual realization of shared humanity — as I would argue, the crux of the story—in the very moment of ultimate personal loss.¹³ These three tragedies are those of Georges’s mother Laïsa,¹⁴ of Georges and of Alfred.

The life of Georges’s mother Laïsa could be summarized as a standard tragedy: a free, noble woman captured, degraded, killed. However, since the overall plot passes beyond her story—and what is more, since her story triggers the crucial events of the plot—her destiny cannot be reduced to simple failure. Indeed, her story and its ramifications overturn, as it were, the *mythos* of autumn. The unfolding of Laïsa’s life constitutes a cycle of humanity into dehumanization followed by a return into humanity. From free she becomes a slave; she suffers the degradation of becoming the forced mistress of a cruel

¹³ Frye does allow for an ambiguous ending, tranquil or even happy; he cites Aristotle to show that the intensity of the tragic effect does not depend on a dark ambiance but rather on the structure of the plot itself (192-3), an observation which is illuminating in the context of “Le Mulâtre”.

¹⁴ Pace Daut, who maintains that “Zélie [Georges’s wife] is the first tragic character in ‘The Mulatto,’ since she is the first to die an untimely death.” (27). This assertion overlooks the fact that the death of Laïsa must surely be regarded as premature. I suggest that the life and death of Zélie, important as they are, insert the theme of feminine progress since the humiliation of Laïsa and offer the provocation for Georges’s rage, rather than supplying an additional character and plot line.

man; she bears a son; she is relegated to neglect and dies. Her son, born of rape and violence, nevertheless finds his place as a trusted slave, intelligent and resourceful; he founds a family which holds to honesty even to death; although dominated by rage and obsessed by revenge, he succeeds finally in demonstrating, in the presence of the master who has humiliated him, their common humanity: a highly abstract and elevated insight subtly permeating a brutal and bloody scene.¹⁵ Thus, under the overall rubric of a simple structure of revenge (Frye 194), the narrator delivers an interlaced account of a complexity much greater than appears on its streamlined surface, in which figure four premature deaths and three principal characters whose agency, whether cause or effect, allows them to struggle in order to maintain or to regain their status as human beings. In this regard, the female characters are of central importance. At the story's opening, the young slave girl is forced to become Alfred's mistress, and is rejected afterwards. The doubled event (see below) follows some years later, when Alfred sees his son Georges's wife and tries to compel her to become his mistress. She refuses consistently, finally resorting to violence. Her death which resulted, obviously an unjust and tragic death and the direct result of Alfred's sin, just as was the humiliation and death of Georges's mother, unleashes nevertheless something startlingly new. The first woman was forced

¹⁵ According to Daut, "Séjour's tale suggests that colonial-plantation sexual practices lead both the slave and the master to a kind of dehumanization that is worse than slavery itself" (10). Of the final scene she remarks: "This passage remains powerful precisely because it answers the excesses of slavery with the excesses of the Haitian Revolution, showing how one engendered the other" (33). I am in agreement if the analysis is restricted to a simple tragedy, but it is conceivable that the reader should be so impressed by graphic imagery of violence and revenge that he or she would miss the astonishing moment in which Georges calls forth a dawning realization of the humanity shared by man, human being, husband, father, son, etc.

to her degradation, but the second woman has been able to assume a powerful agency. Georges's wife is able to preserve her integrity, insist on her humanity. The cost is her own life, which constitutes a tragic loss — however, in the event she is faithful to her own character to the end, so she triumphs in her humanity. Surely the contradiction is deliberate.

Thus it is for the two principal men in the story. Each has been born into a place of love, each falls to the depths of hatred and vengeance, and each dies a violent and clearly tragic death as a result. But in that moment when the master begs the slave for mercy, when the slave sees the master losing all that the human soul holds most precious, there is the profound connection. The two have become identical, equal; they were once innocent, then degraded, now fully human. Each has been master, each a slave; each has enjoyed the pinnacles of human relationships and each has brought them to a brutal end for the other. This final moment makes an undeniable connection between black and white, slave and master, a connection that is based on the full beauty and the full ugliness of being human. The cycle of humanity regained, and hence, the triumph is complete, and it is no longer clear that this is a tragedy.

At the risk of over-complicating the discussion, I advance the analysis that Séjour has constructed, within these three tragic plot lines, a *doubled* tragedy—from mother to son, or repeated in the second generation—as well as a *double* tragedy—the parallel destinies of George and Alfred. The doubled tragedy deals

directly with slavery: the mother, a young woman, proud and pure,¹⁶ becomes a slave and, what is worse, the mistress of her owner in such terms that she “was practically raped” (“fut presque violée”).¹⁷ After tiring of her, Alfred casts her off. Laïsa, in spite of her desire to raise her son, weakens and dies within a few years. The young Georges attributes this early death to the neglect of the unknown father and determines to punish such “abominable behavior” (“sa conduite infâme”). The tragic demise of the mother thus leads directly to the tragic destiny of the son, doubled in the second generation but nevertheless caused by the same transgression of the same man. In both cases, also, nemesis is precipitated by cruelty, especially in the form of unbridled sexual desire: Alfred’s lust for Laïsa is doubled a generation later in his lust for Georges’s wife.

This sets in motion the second category, the double tragedy, which inexorably leads the master and his son to destruction. This aspect is a doubling in another respect as well, for the descent of Georges from trusted slave to rebel and murderer corresponds to Alfred’s descent from powerful colonizer to miserable wretch fatally confronted with his sins.

¹⁶ Recall Antoine’s description (Chapter. I) of the Africans before their capture: “Though he be born good-hearted, noble, generous; though God give him a great and faithful spirit”. On the other hand, Rouillard (1101-1103) maintains that this description deals primarily with the males and that Séjour tends to represent female degradation as complicit.

¹⁷ It must be noted that the notion of rape at the time, especially with regard to master-slave relations, differed significantly from the modern one; and the novel perspective in this text weighs against Rouillard’s argument of complicity.

Conclusion

The past, and to some degree the present, reception and evaluation of Victor Séjour's 1837 short story "Le Mulâtre" indicate that a determined focus is needed in order to more fully unravel and appreciate the complexity of its message and the importance of its critique. Structuralism tended to force such works to conform to basic and inflexible genre; more recent approaches, while rejecting Structuralism's excesses, may have jettisoned instruments of great value for directing and expanding close reading. In this case, it is certain that an impassioned heart and a literary gift has surpassed the limitations of genre. A cursory reading might give the impression of a work that relies simply upon all the commonplaces of nineteenth-century melodrama. However, even such a reading cannot escape the complexity, the force, the appeal of the narrative. A deeper analysis, using the limited but still productive tools of Structuralism, reveals the reasons for this: by means of a narration which convolutes temporal sequencing to situate the reader in the historical context, a construction of ever-deepening narrative layers, and an intricate structure which at the same time reinforces and undermines the expectations of the tragic trope; above all, a frank, sensitive, and profoundly human treatment of a critical theme, Séjour demands of the reader the examination, reflection and re-reading of his short story, involving no less than a re-reading of history itself.

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