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""A Pornish Shadow, Signifying Nothing": A contrastive
analysis of Palahniuk's *Snuff* and Faulkner's *The
Sound and the Fury.*"

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es el estudio comparativo de la novela modernista canónica de William Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury* y de la novela del escritor postmodernista norteamericano Chuck Palahniuk *Snuff*, considerando esta última como una versión pornográfica híper paródica de la primera. El trabajo se centra en el estudio de los personajes de ambas novelas dentro del marco teórico post estructuralista, más concretamente referido a los trabajos de Jacques Derrida, en tanto que los personajes son considerados como signos o símbolos lingüísticos, y a las obras de Judith Butler en referencia al tema de la performatividad del género. A través de este análisis se pretende demostrar cómo ambos autores logran, por medio de sus personajes, desmontar las estructuras ideológicas de la sociedad de su tiempo y abrir el camino a nuevas estructuras donde los habitantes de los márgenes sociales puedan converger en los centros de poder social.

Palabras clave: Faulkner, Palahniuk, Derrida, Butler, Pornografía, Parodia, Deconstrucción, Subversión, Performatividad de Género Márgenes, Poder Social.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is the comparative study of William Faulkner's canonical modernist novel *The Sound and the Fury* and postmodernist American author Chuck Palahniuk's *Snuff*, considering the latter as a pornographic hyper parodic version of the first. The work focuses on a study of the characters in both novels within the post- structuralist framework, specifically referred to the work of Jacques Derrida, insomuch as the characters are regarded as signs or linguistic symbols, and the work of Judith Butler referring to the issue of gender performativity. This analysis is to show how both authors manage, through their characters, to deconstruct the ideological structures of the society of their time and pave the way for new structures where the inhabitants of the social margins may converge in the centers of social power.

Key words: Faulkner, Palahniuk, Derrida, Butler, Pornography, Parody, Deconstruction, Gender Performativity, Subversion, Margins, Social Power.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Porn” has always been a controversial term that prompts a wide variety of reactions, ranging from its consideration as an instrument for female oppression (Kappeler 1986; Dworking 2000) to its rethinking as a subversive catalyst for the reorganization of power relations (Williams 1992; Dyer 1989). Within the pornographic genre, many scholars and journalists (Booth 2014, Radakovich 2010 et al.) have outlined the rise in popularity of a pornographic trend since the 80’s that is particularly related to porn’s subversive potential: pornographic parody.

This type of parody characteristically offers pornographic versions of well-known cultural referents recognizable by their humorous pun-based titles. As Booth (2014) states, alluding to Peter Lehman’s (1996) suggestions, “the humor of these parodic titles comes not just from the punning nature of the words, but also from the juxtaposition of what would be considered a ‘mainstream’ media text with overt sexuality” (1). In other words, the subversive potential associated to porn in these texts would start in their titles and be enacted by “sexualizing” the original text by means of parody. If, as Linda Hutcheon (1985) states, parody—notwithstanding the complexity of the term—is an imitation characterized by ironic inversion that implicitly critiques an original work from a distance, it is plausible to think that this type of texts entail “a subtle, yet powerful critique of contemporary culture.” (Booth, 2014:1).

This was, in my view, the intention of the always-polemical Chuck Palahniuk when he wrote *Snuff* (2008), his particular critique to the pornographic industry.

Nevertheless, this minor work of the author may offer more than what some consider a mere opportunistic parody of a debatable issue with some gorish touch (see Lily Burana 2008, Sara Chuchwell 2008 et al.).

Snuff (2008) is a highly controversial work about Cassie Wright, a porn queen in the doldrums wanting to set an unbreakable 600-men gangbang record and die while trying. The real motivation behind her comeback is to provide for a long lost child she conceived in her youth after being raped by the “pornosaur” Branch Bacardi, an old porn glory taking part in the gang as no. 600. The other characters in the novel are Mr. 72, a young boy who firmly believes he is Cassie’s lost child; Mr. 137, a homosexual porn golden-ager trying to relaunch his career, and by Sheila, Cassie’s talented young assistant working as stage manager of the venue and her real lost child. The novel is divided into sequential chapters narrated alternatively by the three male characters identified as numbers (Mr. 600, Mr. 72 and Mr. 137) and Sheila, the only named narrator.

Coming back to Hutcheon’s definition of parody, and even at risk of erring on the side of naivety in disregarding the complexity of the term, there is a chance for the existence of an “original text” which Palahniuk would have inverted with the help of relentless pornish irony in order to write his parody. The inversion itself would not have to be necessarily ridiculing, for as Hutcheon states in *A Theory of Parody*: “many parodies today do not ridicule the backgrounded texts but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny.” (1985: 57) In this sense, the “backgrounded, original” text behind *Snuff* would function as a vehicle for parody, not as its target. Indeed, John A. Yunck (1963) distinguishes between

parodies that use the parodied text as a target from parodies that use it as a weapon (in Hutcheon 1985: 52).

At first glance, one may have the feeling that there is something strangely familiar in this pornish-parodic familial drama where sex and death combine. The narrative structure sustained on four homodiegetic narrators who blend the recall of past experiences with their present actions around the figure of “Cassie,” the absent voice and unifying principle, inevitably brings to the mind William Faulkner’s classic novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). This is a family drama on the decay of the once-aristocratic Compson family of Yoknapatawpha County in the Southern state of Mississippi. It is divided into four sections, being the narrators of each the three siblings (Benjy, Quentin and Jason IV), whose actions and thoughts revolve around the absent figure of their sister Caddy, and a fourth external omniscient voice narrating through the focalizing eyes of Dilsey Gibbons, the black servant.

Indeed, it could be stated that there are solid structural parallelisms between most of the characters in both novels. There is a clear relation between the main female characters’ names (Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Cassie in *Snuff*), and there are also three male characters in both novels telling their own stories (Benjy, Quentin and Jason in *The Sound And The Fury* and Mr. 600, Mr. 137 and Mr. 72 in *Snuff*). There is, in addition, a “gendered-undefined” character in both novels turning to be the “daughter/son” of the main “female” character in both. The vagueness of these characters results, in the case of Miss Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*, from having been named with a masculine name after her deceased uncle, and in the case of Sheila in *Snuff* for being

publicly made believed, in the best economic interest, that Cassie's lost child was a boy.

Remarkable parallelisms are also to be found in the main leitmotifs running through both novels, namely, decay and death connected to moral and social values contextualized at the time of conception of each novel. According to Julian Obenauer, these leitmotifs in Faulkner's work represent "merely symptoms of the radical changes in all aspects of life in the South during that time" (2015: 3). Brown even remarks the fact that "the decaying world is [...] at the heart of the novel" (1980: 544). Despair and decay are epitomized in the conception of time in the novel because "no battle is ever won [...]. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair [...]" (Faulkner 1984: 74). In effect, the most important events in the novel focus on death and decay: Damuddy's funeral, Quentin's suicide, Caddy's social banishment on the grounds of promiscuity, Compson's family economic demise, moral deviation from the traditional Southern code, etc.

Likewise, death and decay pervade Palahniuk's novel, especially with regard to the characters' physical and moral dimensions. Rape, sexual illness, incestuous performance, death connected to sex and evoked sensory discomfort anticipate the final death and physical resurrection of Mr. 600 and Cassie.

What would the implications of the depiction of decadence in this second novel be? If *The Sound and the Fury* attempts to portray the morally decaying world of its time, it would be reasonable to think that there may be a certain criticism in *Snuff* translatable to the state of contemporary zeitgeist, especially with regard to the pornographic and sex industries and the lack of human values and emotional connections behind them.

Yet, why would Palahniuk want to write a pornish parody of a canonical text in the first place? What would be his motivation to choose Faulkner to do so?

Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin have in fact outlined Palahniuk's indebtedness to American tradition, and indirectly to Faulkner and American Gothic, in their critical work *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*:

[A]lthough Palahniuk is marketed as a renegade outsider, his work may be profitably understood as a continuation as opposed to a break in the mainstream American tradition. His narratives perpetuate familiar, even quintessential patterns ... Indeed, Palahniuk's ability to intrigue and to unsettle the reader concurrently grants him a place in the American Gothic lineage following luminaries Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, H.P. Lovecraft, Shirley Jackson, William Faulkner and Toni Morrison. (2009: 4)

If Toby Clements (2003) even dared to compare Palahniuk's dysfunctional background to "a Faulkner novel," thus, it would be reasonable to think that Palahniuk found a mirror for his unsettled family life in Faulkner's novels. According to Gary Storhoff:

In Faulkner's "family-centered literature," we discover the ravages of alcoholism and its effects on the family, miserable marriages that lead to spousal abuse, threats of sibling incest and sibling violence, violence against infants and children, and violence of adult children against their parents. In short, Faulkner's families are (to use the popular term) a "dysfunctional" lot indeed! (1998: 465).

In addition, the values we find in Faulkner's novels are rather contemporary and the portrayed individual isolation and familial dysfunctionality are to be recognized within recent blank and minimalist fictions as well. These represent parallel literary trends that reflect the emotional and moral vacuum brought about by late capitalism and the fierce consumerism stemmed from it. As Francisco Collado points out, Chuck Palahniuk has inherited many of the characteristics of both literary trends whose transgressive potential he attempts to take one-step further by means of fierce parody at the time he delves into the need for an ethical purpose. In this sense, "his characters' actions repeatedly reach a hyper-parodic level that results in an over-emphasis of the lack of moral purpose manifested in so many aspects of contemporary U.S. life" (2007: 194).

Gender issues are likewise inherent to most of his works, even if he insists on dissociating himself from such grounds: "If you consider all my novels, you'll find gender...become[s] unimportant"¹. Nevertheless, in Kjersti Jacobsen's view:

"Palahniuk's books definitely deal with gender, but the portrayal of his characters takes the reader beyond the boundaries of genders, demonstrating how individual freedom, community and love grow out of a society that does not uphold the social laws of separation" (2013: 2)

¹ Matt Kavanaugh, "Of Failed Romance, Writer's Malpractice, and Prose for the Nose: A Conversation with Chuck Palahniuk," in *Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, Ed. Jeffrey A. Sartain. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009:184.

In the same fashion, Faulkner explores gender and sexuality in his works, being recurrent the trope of “inversion” in his life and novels, as Michelle Ann Abate has remarked (2001: 301). Minrose Gwin also points out that “throughout his career [Faulkner’s] works evince an interest in sex and sexuality, gender and gender behaviour” (1996: 122).

That been said, this dissertation intends to focus on the way in which the hypothetical “backgrounded text” behind *Snuff* (Faulkner’s canonical *The Sound and the Fury*, *TSAF* from now on) has been ironically inverted in order to create the porno-parodic version offered by Palahniuk. I will subscribe to the poststructuralist framework, specially focusing on the works of Derrida and Butler regarding textual and gender notions respectively. I will focus more specifically on character construction and de-construction in both texts, as well as on the effects and consequences in the construction and de-construction of their gender. The intention of this procedure will be to establish parallelisms that may validate my thesis statement and eventually demonstrate how a subversive use of the American literary tradition leads to criticism regarding the current state of affairs in contemporary America.

2. CHARACTERS AS SIGNS: A DERRIDEAN ANALYSIS

In postmodern times, language has become one suspected tool of communication, and our reality, mediated by that language, becomes exposed as a mere representation of “reality,” if such a thing really exists as people traditionally conceived of it. Jacques Derrida (1967), Michel Foucault (1975), and Jacques Lacan (1953) are some of the theorists who have used language as the basis for their studies, which reveals that the postmodern problematic is, basically, a linguistic one.

If the postmodern “linguistic” (also called “symbolic”) being has become a fragmented void, a draft of itself hidden behind the bars of its own written or spoken representation (see Jameson 1984, Gergen 1991, Tseëlon 1991 et al.), it would be convenient to analyze the characters in both novels as linguistic signs, for they are part of the linguistic text.

According to Madan Sarup, Derrida sees the [linguistic] sign as “[a] structure of difference: half of it is always “not there” and the other half is always ‘not that’” (1993: 32). There is not a settled distinction between signifier and signified, and they are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations, which makes ultimate meaning to be deferred, not immediately accessible (33).

One of the main implications regarding characters as linguistic signs in both novels is that they cannot be truly apprehended, for they are constantly being re-signified and, consequently, not showing their real “being” to the reader. This fact

is particularly noticeable in the constant repetition of names that refer to different characters in *TSAF*, namely, the same signifiers are ascribed to different signifieds. As a way of illustration, Benjy's name, which used to be "Maury," is changed when he is around three. Quentin and Jason are named after their ancestors in order to perpetuate the familial lineage and keep alive their presence after their absence. The word "caddie," uttered by nearby golfers, is confused with the name "Caddy" in Benjy's infantile mind; and Quentin's name is confused with Caddy's illegitimate daughter's, who is named after his deceased uncle. As for *Snuff*, names-signifiers are explicitly re-defined and changed once and again, constantly forcing the reader to modify the connection signifier-signified: Mr. 600, whose "real" name used to be "Irwin," becomes "Branch Bacardi"; Mr. 72, who believes to be Wright's son, turns out to be "Darin Johnson." As for Sheila, her "real" name is revealed to be "Zelda Zonk," Marilyn Monroe's fake intellectual name given to her by Cassie, the "eternal Marilyn Monroe sacrificial goddess of adult entertainment" (2008: 28).

Characters in both novels are, thus, half "not there," for their "being" is not immediately available to us, and half "not that," for their names are somehow inaccurate to define them. For Derrida –who takes the notion from Martin Heidegger's (1958)² crossed-out term– "being" represents the "transcendental signified," namely, the final signified to which all signifiers refer (1993: 33).

My point is that only when the characters in each novel (the "signifiers") interact with or dilute themselves in the "others" are they able to contour their own

² As stated in the definition of the term "erasure" provided by *Key Concepts in Literary Theory* (2014), "Heidegger employs this practice in *The Question of Being* in which the word Being is crossed through. Heidegger's purpose is to show how the term can no longer be employed, given that the concept as it is used has slipped away from, and thereby forgotten the question of Being."

“beings” (their “signifieds”). This notion has been already outlined by Neil T Phillips in relation to Faulkner’s familial bondings when he stated that “each character [in Faulkner’s novels] seems to exist, or whose subconscious becomes fully elucidated, only within the framework of his family and the values in place therein” (2011: 11). In other words, characters as linguistic signs obtain their meaning (signifieds) from the interaction within the familial context.

Nevertheless, there is a “characteristic” difference between both texts: whereas *TSAF*’s characters aim at being defined by means of their familial connections and lineage, the result is ultimately tainted by a sexual component on the part of the characters that brings about the eventual destruction of the family.

Ren Denton (2014) alludes to the concealed sex secrets in the family and points at the narrative gaps in the novel as the loci where they emerge to the surface:

Sex secrets plague the Compson family. Their secret is so damaging that they dare not speak of it even to each other. [...] As a result, silences build around their socially damning secret until they both form and fill the novel’s narrative gaps [...] The secret, however, manifests itself within the novel. Treating the novel as a series of images spliced like a film montage, the secret emerges from the gaps of those frames that would otherwise keep the secret unperceivable. (2014: 175-177).

In *Snuff*, on the other hand, the overtly performed sexual interactions between the characters are the element that provides the basis for the familial

bonding and what ultimately “creates” the family and keeps it together. As a consequence, and in the line of the thesis of this dissertation, the pornographic performativity of the characters in *Snuff* stands in stark contrast to the concealment of the sexual component in *TSAF* which, in my view, evidences a parodic element in *Snuff* in relation to the canonical text.

As a way of illustration, let us analyse the characters’ interactions in both novels in depth to reveal some remarkable parallelisms.

2.1. CHARACTERS IN TIME AND HISTORY

At first, the characters in *TSAF* are set on display through mere dates when the narrated events are supposed to be occurring. They become progressively connected as the reader is provided with the necessary clues to unwind the plot: Benjy’s section is narrated under the headline “April seventh, 1928”; Quentin’s section took place on “June second, 1910”; Jason’s section is supposed to have happened on “April sixth, 1928” and finally, Dilsey’s section was to be displayed under the headline April eighth, 1928.”

According to Faulkner, “no man is himself, he is the sum of his past [...] And so a man, a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him” (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner, 1995: 84). Thus, the titles of each section actually reveal the importance of time as a leitmotif in the definition of the characters in the novel, which eventually gets reflected in their actions and becomes ultimately connected to the leitmotif of decay previously mentioned in the introduction. In Perrin Lowrey’s (1954) view, each section of the

novel addresses the unique way in which each character deals with time: Benjy has no sense of it and past actions are experienced as present ones; Quentin is obsessed with the past and conceives time as something to be destroyed whereas for Jason time is money exclusively (qtd. in Skirry 2001:17).

Apart from their responses to the issue of time, the characters become also defined by the use they make of language in the novel. Thus, according to Michael H. Cowan, the different styles of narration of the three brothers are adequate to each one of them and to the themes in the book (1968: 9). In this sense, Benjy's section is narrated as a juxtaposition of events intermingling past and present in a non-metaphorical simple style attributable to an "idiot." Jason's narrow-minded bigotry and materialism are perfectly exposed in his informal, aphoristic and sarcastic language while Quentin's high intelligence, education and idealism are proved in his "fusing [of] widely varying experiences to conform to the rigid pattern of his obsessions" (19).

Thus, it could be stated that the characters in *TSAF* are totally determined by time and history, as their language shows. If we can only get to historical facts through language, the initial argument in this section stating that the "beings" intended to be analyzed are to be only found within the limits of the linguistic text is reinforced. The historical component in the characters, on the other hand, is to be found in the familial bond and values, fact that, according to Neil T Phillips's determines the character's interactions in the text (2011: 10).

2.2. SURROGATE MOTHERS

In spite of their differences as members of the Compson family sharing the same precepts of lineage, and the a priori little interaction among them, there is a focal point for the three brothers' definition as characters, and this is their common obsession with their sister Caddy and her actions.

She acts as a foster "mother" for her brothers in lieu of the deficient parenting provided by Mrs. Compson, and in doing so Caddy "re-creates" them. Within the limits of the linguistic text, this "re-creation" is reduced to an act of re-signification, as it has been explained above. The following example may serve as illustration:

Your name is Benjy. Caddy said. Do you hear. Benjy. Benjy.

Don't tell him that, Mother said. Bring him here.

Caddy lifted me under the arms.

Get up, Mau- I mean Benjy, she said. (1995:59)

Whilst Mrs. Compson fails at re-naming Benjy, it is Caddy the one assuming the task of properly re-naming and thus "re-signifying" her brother. They need Caddy as the epitome of motherly virtue and stability as depicted in the Southern creed, but once she rebels against this conception by means of her sexual freedom, her brothers "use" her as a target for their obsessions. According to Neil T. Phillips:

The Compsons (most saliently the men) are powerless to overcome their obsession with Caddy's promiscuity and although we hear little of her voice, she remains the most important figure propelling the novel's action...Caddy comes to represent a gateway into other characters' sexual subconscious and the anxieties perpetuated by their respective, complicated conceptualizations of identity in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender. Thus, more broadly, she very much acts to define a basis for others' individual conception of reality. (2011: 17)

The sexual component in the characters' interactions is revealed here: Caddy, the "lost" promiscuous sister, and her "extension" in the figure of Miss Quentin, would then represent the meeting point for her brothers' sexual obsessions. She would, in Derridean terms, symbolize the ultimate "being" previously mentioned, the "transcendental signified" that each of the characters attempt to reach, for she is to give the ultimate meaning to their realities as characters in the novel and to act as a "mirror" for their obsessions. As André Bleikasten notes:

Caddy ... is first and foremost an image; she exists only in the minds and memories of her brothers ... She is in fact what woman has always been in man's imagination: the figure par excellence of the Other, a blank screen onto which he projects both his desires and his fears, his love and his hate. And insofar as this Other is a myth and a mirage, a mere fantasy of the Self, it is bound to be a perpetual deceit and an endless source of disappointment. (1990: 405)

What all of the characters channel through the figure of Caddy, in Neil T. Phillip's view, is the "idea of sex as a corrupting or even destructive force" (2011: 9) In fact, the destructive potential of sex in the novel is enhanced by connecting it to the idea of death: "*Did you love them Caddy did you love them When they touched me I died*" (1984: 148). Caddy's answer to Quentin's question about her feelings for her lovers equates the sexual intercourse with "an Elizabethan view of sex as a "little death"" (qtd. in Margaret Bauer 2000:75). It should be mentioned that this very same idea is present in *Snuff*, as I shall explain later on.

Caddy's "death" as a consequence of sex does not bring with it only physical but also social consequences: "*But now I know I'm dead I tell you*" (1984:122). Caddy's pregnancy outside wedlock is the physical evidence of her "social death" brought about by her own family: "by decree of Mrs. Compson, Caddy's name is never openly spoken after this disgraceful episode" (Bass 1961:729).

This connection of sex and death in the physical and in the social (and with implications for her name) may explain why the sexual component outlined before remains veiled within the narrative and concealed to the realm of the gothic underlying discourse, which is the liminal space where traditional structuring notions of morality and values in the family are exposed as constructs and can thus be de-constructed³. Consequently, according to Michael Millgate:

³ Liminality (L *limen*, "threshold") is a term much used in anthropology and literary and cultural theory to designate a space or state which is situated in between other, usually more clearly defined, spaces, periods or identities. The threshold, the foundational metaphor, occupies a liminal space between the inside and outside of a house; dawn and dusk hold liminal positions between night and day; transgender and intersex people assume liminal identities in relation to the established categories of gender. (J. A. Cuddon, 2013: 398)

Caddy finds an outlet from family repression in sexual activity, but she is also both a principle and a symbol of social disruption [...] [S]he is brought [...] to break with traditional patterns and, in so doing, to demonstrate just how moribund those patterns have become, how irrelevant both to modern conditions and to the needs of the human psyche. (1965: 117)

Indeed, what Michael Millgate exposes here is the criticism conveyed in the book with regard to the rigid morality and values the Compson family are still clutching at, which have become totally useless for the modern world and whose pursuit brings about the eventual disintegration and obliteration of the Compson clan.

In the case of *Snuff*, the characters (and narrators) start being referred to as mere numbers in the gang bang sequence (paralleling the device of introducing the characters (and narrators) through dates in *TSAF*) to end up transforming and disclosing their “real” names only after they interact among themselves. The difference in the narrative style with respect to *TSAF* relies on the fact that each narrator narrates as much about themselves as about the others. Every character describes the scenes around and intermingles these descriptions with clips of the history of the other characters making the different voices sound undistinguishable. The feeling is one of a continuum of cinematic travelogue where all the actions and past deeds of the characters are well known and documented –in a way resembling Benjy’s section, with the implications it would have for the consideration of the character-narrators here–, and they all revolve around porn

and sex. We are again dealing with character's actions determined by their familial bonding and love for Cassie but expressed by means of sex:

Wasn't a performer at that shoot who didn't love Cassie Wright and want to make her make history. Other dudes ain't dicked anything but their hands watching nothing but Cassie Wright videos. To them, it is a kind-of-fidelity. A marriage [...] today is their kind-of-honeymoon. Consummation. (2008: 4)

From a Derridean perspective, the characters could be interpreted as being connected signifiers referring one another and containing (familial-sexual) traces of the others in themselves. For instance, Mr. 600 is only recognized as Branch Bacardi by Mr. 137 once he takes the role of the father and interacts with Mr. 72, his initially thought-to-be son:

Across the waiting area, the real-life genuine Branch Bacardi is talking to Mr. 72, that kid holding a bouquet of wilted roses. The two of them could be Before and After pictures of the same actor. (2008: 12)

In a further step in his evolution to gain meaning and find his true "being," Bacardi's original name is revealed. This happens when he gives his "son" a cyanide pill aimed to kill Cassie. Only when he tries to help Cassie accomplish her plan is he allowed to use his real name:

She wants it, he says, She begged him to bring it, even gave him her necklace to sneak it in here.

Mr. Bacardi says, "Say it's from Irwin, and she'll know."

I ask him, Irwin?

"That was me," he says. "It used to be my name." (2008: 139)

Likewise, Mr. 72, who already knows about his fall in disgrace, recognizes Mr. 137 as Dan Banyan:

The gossip stuff why Dan Banyan got his TV series toof off the air. That gossip they printed was real. "I was starving, I was a starving actor," says guy 137 [...] "Doing an all-male gay gang-bang is an act of resignation," [...] Porn, he says, is a job you only take after you abandon all hope. (2008: 106-107)

We find here an explicit criticism of the industry of porn. Characters are depicted as victims of the system whose only hope is to hold on to porn to keep afloat. As Mr. 137 puts it: "They're the generation of genuine stage actors; they studied their craft at UCLA or NYC, but need to pay the rent" (2008: 13).

Criticism to the system and its corrupting force is especially focalized in the *mise-en-scène* in the novel: the waiting room for the men is a dark basement depicted as a sort of hellish underworld from which they need to ascend into the "whiteness" of the stage where Cassie is performing. Here we find again clear ironic allusions to death and resurrection carried out by Cassie, the "sacrificial goddess" (2008:29).

In the same line, TV screens are constantly playing old porn movies starred by some of the characters in their youth. These screens entail a powerful symbol

of connection between the past and the present. In the same way as mirrors provide the basis for the re-writing of the characters in *TSAF* as it will be explained later on, the screens serve a basis for character resignification in performance, where the pornish nature of the performances reveals a parodic component even within the parodic text itself. If *Snuff* is a parody of *TSAF*, the porn movies projected on the screens in *Snuff*, with the subversive parodic potential of porn as explained in the introduction, would stand for a myriad of different parodies of the parodic text projected *ad infinitum*, as if they were caught within two mirrors in a “mise-en-abyme” fashion.

The contrast between their past image as portrayed on the screens and the degraded present one brings about a feeling of decay in the physical translatable into the moral, in a manner of Gray-esque portrait: Mr. 600 and Mr. 137 careers are as dead as their bodies: “That videotaped Branch Bacardi, his pecs don’t sag and flap. His arms aren’t red with razor burn and rashy ingrown hairs” (2008:15); “And he [Mr. 137] winks big enough to wrinkle half his face around one eye [...] Three colors of brown powder around his eyes folded into the little wrinkles there” (8).

Mr. 72’s purity becomes progressively as wilted as his white roses (61, 80), whereas Sheila wraps herself in physical and moral sepsis manifested in the comparison of her heart to a stopwatch (5) and her crave for money obtained from a morally debatable activity (20), facts that don’t exempt her body from decay: “My defenses still intact. Safe and clean, but feeling nothing, too old for the twenty-year-old rest of me” (25); “White flakes cling to the shoulders of her [Sheila’s] black turtle neck sweater. Dandruff. (89).

Characters in *Snuff* are as determined by time, remembrances and history as were the ones in *TSAF*, and their only hope to escape decay and death is to cling to the figure of Cassie to accomplish a resurrection, which in Derridean terms would be a “resignification”: “My agent thinks that if I’m seen in this project it will “out” me as being secretly straight” (2008: 110). In order to do so, Cassie has to be sacrificed: “The government will step in, and no babe will ever set any new record of 601. Cassie will be dead, but us six hundred dicks here, we’ll go into the history books [...] first-timers launching new careers, old-timers making comebacks” (29).

She, in the same line as *TSAF*'s Caddy, is a *differant*⁴ character in Derridean terms: her presence and voice are deferred, and may have probably differed from the other characters' expectations had she been given the chance to narrate her own section. She is a mother figure as well as Caddy, and her motherhood, as sexually tinged as it is, becomes sacralized:

These men buy her [Cassie's] backlist movies, her plastic breast relics and pocket vaginas, but not for any erotic purpose. They collect the blow-up sex surrogates and signature lingerie as some form of religious relics. Souvenirs of the real mother, the perfect mother they never had. (2008:90)

This fact implies a subversion of the sacredness of motherhood qualities in sex and a new evidence to be added to the list of parodic parallelisms between both texts. If Caddy in *TSAF* was targeted as a source of disgrace for not

⁴ The term “différance” was made up by Derrida. In it, he combines the sense of difference as time (defer) and difference as space (unlike, distinction between proximate things) to make the point that an idea of “being” and/or “presence” that has been so central to Western culture is not so authoritative.

conforming to the motherly-virginal ideal in the South, Cassie in *Snuff* is venerated precisely because of the same reason.

As the characters in the novel need her to get meaning by means of an act of “resignification”—both aged Mr. 600 and Mr. 137 want to relaunch their careers, Mr. 72 wants to reunite with his alleged long-lost mother and Sheila wants to get her money—she may then linguistically symbolize the perpetually postponed signified towards which all signifiers lead, their ultimate “being,” just exactly the same as Caddy meant for her brothers in *TSAF*.

The difference between the characters of Caddy and Cassie relies on the “s,” namely, on the degree of explicitness in their approach to sex as an agent for familial bonding. This fact reinforces the original idea of *Snuff* being a porno-parodic version of the canonical text, for the liminal space in the canonical text where the sexual component was concealed is transcended in the second text, allowing the traditional structuring and moral notions of the family to be parodied and deconstructed by means of porn.

The sexual explicitness in *Snuff* becomes evident in the character’s interactions as a family through sexual performance. In order to reach Cassie, the “male” characters need to be called on set and have sex with her, whereas Sheila comes to represent an “extension” of Cassie in her absence. Cassie, the “sacrificial mother-signified,” is giving “meaningful” birth to their “sons-signifiers” through a sexual-linguistic act of resignification in the case of “males,” and by allowing an extension of herself in the case of Sheila.

In all cases, the characters become re-signified by means of their direct or indirect interaction with Cassie: Mr. 72 recuperates his sexual performativity

(2008:167), Mr. 137 “becomes” heterosexual (145), Mr. 600 dies and regains “youth” and Sheila is revealed as the real daughter (194). It seems, much in the opposite line of the Compsons’ traditional ideology, that sex is the regenerating force in *Snuff* by means of which all the characters may subvert the damaging effects of the passing of time and re-write their worn-out history. The effect is ironical and, in my view, clearly parodic when compared to the canonical text.

It should be noticed that, as already mentioned, the resignification of the characters in *Snuff* could only take place if Cassie died, so there is a clear connection between sex and death as it is the case in *TSAF*. The already mentioned Elizabethan conception of orgasm as a “little death” is repeated here: “Anytime you need to watch somebody die, die for real, check out how they get their orgasm at the end of a porn” (2008:178); “Watch *World Whore Three* and you’ll see how certain folks say the death scene is just another cum shot.” (179).

2.3. THE FATHER’S BETRAYAL

Yet, why would the characters need to be “re-signified” by the surrogate “mother” in the first place? In order to answer the question, we need to refer to another key concept regarding the Derridean paradigm: the notion of *trace*. According to Derrida, “[i]n each sign there are traces of other words which that sign has excluded in order to be itself... All words/signs contain traces. They are like reminders of what has gone before.” (Qtd.in Sarup 1993: 34). For him, the structure of the sign is determined by the trace of the absent other (1993: 33). Being this true, we may presuppose that there is a “lost part” in the characters as

signs, previous to them, that has defined them as they are. This “lost part” is, in my view, represented by the character’s relationship to their parents, especially the fathers, in both novels.

Benjy, the idiotic brother, is largely ignored by his father and the most pernicious evidence of his influence in the character is Mr. Compson’s decision to have Benjy physically castrated after the incident with the girl (1984: 51). Benjy seems not to be affected by this decision except when he sees himself naked in the mirror, even if he is not even able to point to his father as the responsible for his loss. He suffers the literal castration of the *Law of the Father*⁵, and this absence is the trace the father left in him.

Jason IV, traditionally the villain in the family, can be considered in fact a victim of his father’s alcoholism. As a child, he provokes his father’s anger and whipping only to call his attention, and as Gary Storhoff (1998) has stated:

As a family scapegoat, he misbehaves to supply both Caddy and Quentin with a sense of their importance to the family. It is he who seems the source of disruption that the family combats—so as to avoid the possible identification of Mr. Compson alcoholism as a source of the home’s disorder. (526)

⁵ The *Law or Name of the Father* is a concept Lacan reworked from Freud. It would represent the regulatory norm by means of which the child enters the symbolic order and thus resolves the Oedipal conflict in the family. According to *IEP Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, “Because the child’s own desire is structured by its relationships with its first nurturer (usually in Western societies the mother), it is thus the desire of the mother, for Lacan, that is the decisive stake in what transpires with the Oedipus complex and its resolution. In its first years, Lacan contends, the child devotes itself to trying to fathom what it is that the mother desires, so that it can try to make itself the phallus for the mother— a fully satisfying love-object. At around the time of its fifth or sixth desire, however, the father will normally intervene in a way that lastingly thwarts this Oedipal aspiration. The ensuing renunciation of the aspiration to be the phallic Thing for the mother, and not any physical event or its threat, is what Lacan calls castration, and it is thus a function to which he thinks both boys and girls are normally submitted.”

Later on, once Quentin and the father disappear, Jason has to take the place of the head of the family and simultaneously occupy two antithetical roles in it: the “hero” (as breadwinner and father surrogate) and “scapegoat” (his originally ascribed role) (527). This fact brings about contradictions in his actions and a polarized behavior, together with a propensity to violence directed towards the weakest characters in the novel. Thus, it could be stated that Jason’s relationship with his father, in a way, determines his character by forcing him to take the blame for his father’s actions and then to replace him within the family. He necessarily becomes a signifier related to two opposing signifieds and constantly needs to figure out which one he should choose. This is the trace left out by the father in him.

Notwithstanding Jason’s inherited “trace,” it is perhaps Quentin the one who ends up being more seriously damaged by the relationship with his father. Quentin constantly aims at communicating with the father, but the latter’s nihilism and alcoholism turn all occasions into fruitless attempts. He even copies his words, as Ineke Bockting (1990) has remarked:

When one reads the first two pages of the text, it becomes clear that Quentin's language is full of abstract terms: time, hope, desire, experience, needs, folly, despair, victory, illusion, mind, habit. Close reading will reveal, however, that these terms are almost all his father's words, repeated by Quentin and presented without quotation marks. (1990: 37)

He identifies himself with his father whom he admires and wants to protect. Thus, he takes the role of the “hero” in childhood, and this role is encouraged not only by his own peculiar code of Southern honor, but also by the whole family. (Stornhoff, 1998: 472). In the same way as Jason had to be the “scapegoat,” Quentin had to play the role of the “hero” in the family (alternating it with Caddy) in order to compensate for the meager parenting of both Mr. and Mrs. Compson and to conceal his father’s alcoholism. Again in Gary Stornhoff’s (1998) words:

In his childhood, Quentin's heroism in his family revolves around his academic achievements, his efforts supplying a compensatory role in a system distorted by his father's alcoholism. As his father is a notable failure in the world, his son is a remarkable success. This "fit" of father and son makes comprehensible their seeming closeness, Quentin's obsession with his father's last conversation with him and his need to "confess" to his father his imagined incest with Caddy. (1998:472)

In opposition to Benjy’s case, Mr. Compson is unable to impose the “Law of the Father” on Quentin, even after his eldest son’s attempt to make him believe he had had an incestuous relationship with Caddy (the surrogate mother). Thus, Quentin is unable to position himself in the symbolic order and risks a fall into psychosis:

This fundamental signifier [the Name-of-the-Father] both confers identity on the subject [...] and signifies the Oedipal prohibition, the “no” of incest taboo. If this

signifies is foreclosed (not included in the Symbolic order) the result is PSYCHOSIS. (Dylan Evans, 2006:122. Emphasis in the original)

As a consequence of the unsolved Oedipal crisis and, as Nathaniel Miller states, of his failure in filling an archaic role of masculine honor, Quentin remains a virgin by positioning himself in Caddy's failed role as a "demure virgin" (2005: 39).

In this sense, we find another son caught within two different and opposing roles for the sake of the family: Quentin the signifier rambles from the signified of the hero to the one of the virgin-victim. The consequence of this "trace" originally left out by the father is a fractured psyche, which, together with his own sense of failure, eventually pushes him to commit suicide.

In all cases, it could be stated that the trace inherited by the male characters in *TSAF* is one of the betrayal of the father. The father betrays his sons inasmuch as he is unable to assume properly his role as a father and, consequently, renders them "psychologically castrated," unable to live their own lives outside the role of the father in the family, especially in the cases of Quentin and Jason IV. That is the reason why they eventually end up betraying Caddy: Jason IV will use Miss Quentin to blackmail her whereas Quentin will be held responsible for her unhappiness and promiscuity, as it will be explained later on.

The analysis of the concept of the "trace" in the characters of *Snuff* brings about further parallelism when compared to the ones in *TSAF*: In both novels, the characters result psychologically "castrated" by their family codes and dynamics, being that castration more sexually related in the case of *Snuff*.

Both Mr. 600 and Mr. 137 had been sexually “castrated” by father-son conversations in their youths that left them marked forever. In Mr. 72’s case, the castrating trace comes represented by his foster mother, who makes him believe Cassie is his “real” mother after catching him in the act with her sex doll replica. He becomes unable to perform sexually from then on (2008: 87).

Mr. 600’s father did not believe his son was good enough for the love of his life:

I loved Brenda so much I showed her picture to my old man...He handed Brenda back to me saying, “How’s a doofus like you rate something so fine?” My old man goes, “Kid, that snatch is way way out of your league.” (2008: 155)

Due to this lack of faith in his son, he gives him the wrong sexual advice and ruins his relationship. The father betrays the son as the son will eventually betray Cassie: “she didn’t want to marry me...I ended the old life she had, wanting to act, and gave her a new life [in porn]” (186-187). The betrayal inherited from the father represents the trace *always already* inhabiting Mr. 600 as a linguistic sign. As he states in his own words, “we all leave our tracks” (56).

Similarly, Quentin in *TSAF* betrays Caddy and ruins her only chance to be happy with Dalton Ames, the only man who treats her as a human being, not as a symbol. In Margaret D. Bauer’s view, it is Quentin’s realization of his betrayal to his sister what takes him to suicide: “What pushes him [Quentin] to carry out his plan [to commit suicide] this time is his realization that he and his codes have helped to ruin Caddy’s life (2000: 76).

In Mr. 137's case, again, a father-son conversation reveals a family secret entailing betrayal. The day he was leaving Oklahoma, as he was having the same father-son conversation about sex, Mr. 137 confessed to his father that he was a homosexual. His father said: "It's a misunderstanding, you being how you figure...It's on account of somebody doing something to you when you was little" (2008: 118). He ended up confessing: "It was me...It was a one-time mistake, boy." He says, "But don't you make it last the rest of your life" (2008: 120).

It was too late. This new betrayal is the trace that had *always already* inhabited him as a linguistic sign. The father, after the confession, keeps imploring him to write home. Mr. 137 never does, for writing, in Derridean terms, is "the name of the structure always already inhabited by the trace" (1976: xxxix). The father's betrayal will always be the trace in the act of writing, and that is why he constantly tries to "re-write" himself, especially through the white-canvas teddy bear called M. Toto that he has covered with fake "traces" of autographs. That is why, once Sheila exposes his lie, he starts telling the story about his father:

On Mr. Toto, I spelled her autograph with only one "L." "Agnes de Mile." A dead giveaway. That's okay, I tell her. In my life, I've been wrong about almost everything. You'd better believe I didn't give them the full story about me, my beloved father and all that lovely, lovely Oklahoma lying flat, as far as the eye could see. (2008: 114)

In the case of *TSAF*, we can find evidence of the trace of the father in Quentin's suicidal note:

Sealed in an envelope and unread by us, it is a structural reminder that Quentin's narrative comes close to, but falls short of, providing an explanation for his self-drowning, a reminder that is amplified when we witness Quentin carrying the note throughout the day, provocatively touching it through his coat, as if it were a closely guarded secret, and feeling it crackle on five occasions. (Chung, 2008: 206)

Its contents are never displayed nor commented within the family. The note and Quentin's suicide are silenced within the Compson household, in the same fashion as Caddy's name was. His family disregards him even after his death, a fact that becomes evident in the lack of ornament in his grave as opposed to the generous amount of flowers in the grave of the father (Chung, 2008: 219). What is being really muted is the evidence of the betrayal of the father (and extensively of the whole family) in disregarding Quentin's obsessions and, presumably, the latter's failure in acknowledging his reasons to commit suicide.

In all cases, as the betrayal of the father, and extensively of the "biological" mother as well, cannot be expressed with words, the blame is to be displaced to the "scapegoat" in the family. This role, originally performed by Jason IV, is transferred to Caddy once Jason is forced to take up the role of the father following Mr. Compson's death. As she is the absent one, she becomes a mirror, a "blank screen" in which history and time can be rewritten, projected back and re-signified in the minds of her brothers. Indeed, there are several allusions to the mirror as a symbol, especially in Benjy's section, as it is the frame through which

Benjy sees the world and his family reflected without even understanding the concept of reflection.

The symbol of the mirror, together with the one of the fire, plays a large part in the memory of Benjy's name change (thus connected to the idea of the "rewriting" of his history), and he watches the various members of his family move in and out of the mirror: "Caddy and Jason were fighting in the mirror"; "he rolled into the corner, out of the mirror; father brought Caddy to the fire; they were all out of the mirror" (1984: 64-65).

Consequently, Caddy stands as the ultimate Derridean signified onto which her brothers project themselves in order to be re-signified and, thus, rewritten in order to delete the *trace* of the father, namely, his betrayal.

There is another consequence of the father betrayal in regarding Quentin's sexuality. Even though the traditional criticism of the novel stands for Quentin's heterosexual incestuous desire for his sister (Irwin 1975, Tanaka 2009), some critics have argued the existence of evidence in *TSAF* that support the idea of Quentin's homosexuality. Indeed, readers get to know he remains a virgin and that Caddy frustrates his initial "sexual" games with Natalie. In Noel Polk's view, the father has played an important role in creating a rejectable image of women in Quentin's mind:

Father has filled him with disgust for sex, women, the monthly cycle of "periodical filth." Female genitals shaped "suavely" need only a touch to turn them to putrefied liquid; men are always "outside outside" but always want to get inside. His final vision combines a semen-filled condom—"drowned things floating like pale rubber

flabbily filled [with semen]”—and the honeysuckle, which connection is why he forever is suffocated by the smell of honeysuckle (Polk, 2008:28)

Polk goes on remarking further evidence of Quentin's homoerotic desire with regards to Shreve, who calls himself his "husband" and attempts to touch Quentin's knee twice (1984:146). He rejects Shreve's approaches but there is something revealing in his connection of the two episodes when he tries to hit two men. The first one is his "duel" with Dalton Ames for the sake of Caddy's virtue that ends up in Caddy's attentions: "fool fool are you hurt I opened my eyes her hands running on my face" (161), while the second one is his attack on Gerald Bland for his offensive remarks about women (163). In the second case, Quentin is carried away by his previous experience and attacks Bland once he asks him the question: "Did you ever have a sister? Did you?" (165). A revealing fact for the argument of the homoerotic in Quentin is that the episode of the second assault is followed by Shreve's attentions, who comes to take the place of the caring Caddy: "Does your eye hurt?" "Let your clothes alone and put that rag on your eye" "Want some fresh water?" (163-165). According to Polk, the attack on Bland on the grounds that he is defending Caddy's maidenhead (Did you ever have a sister?) would be "at least in part a denial of the homosexual: he is angry because Gerald can get laid in the right and proper normal way and he, Quentin, cannot." (Polk 2008: 30). By letting Shreve take care of him as a surrogate of Caddy in this second occasion, and, as Polk states, rebelling against the homosexual in the act, he is paradoxically reinforcing the idea of Shreve as a suitable "husband." Maybe that is the reason why he leaves a suicide note to him.

The readers never get to know the contents of this note, but there exists a possibility that Quentin may have re-written himself as a homosexual in it, confessing to his “husband” the homoerotic desire alluded before. What it is really a solid argument is the fact that Quentin manages to “come back” within the gothic discourse of the novel as Miss Quentin. Caddy’s daughter inherits her uncle’s name and manages to subvert the “traditional Southern code” imposed on her by the family by escaping with a carnivalesque man whose “red tie” could represent, according to Michelle Ann Abate, “a symbol that announces him as homosexual” (2001:293). Abate goes on saying:

Echoing Mikhail Bakhtin’s observations about the transgressive nature and regenerative power of medieval carnivals, the carnivalesque showman may help establish an entire new order by liberating Miss Quentin from the oppressive hierarchy of the Compson home. (2001: 293-294).

Thus, it could be interpreted that both Caddy and Quentin manage to subvert their roles in their family and societal context regarding gender and sexual notions by means of their descendant entering a new “inverted” order provided by the carnival man, whose tie may label him as “inverted.”

In both novels, the characters seem to find a liminal space for subversion within the underlying gothic discourse favored by the irruption of the carnivalesque.

In the case of *TSAF* the carnivalesque becomes a reality within the narration, whereas in *Snuff* it is made evident in the grotesqueness of the descriptions of the character’s pornographic bodies and actions. Indeed, Paul

Booth, in an analysis of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque element present in porn parodies, states that “[T]he grotesque manifest in pornographic parodies through the excessive physicality they depict within the frameworks of the text they parody.” (2015: 141). The grotesqueness in *Snuff*, again, is made evident in the sexualization of the familiar bonding and interactions. Thus, the “male” characters in this case attempt at deleting the sexual trace left out by the betrayal of their “fathers,” metaphorically killing that part of them by means of having sex with the “mother” and attaining resignification, in a sort of sexually-linguistic Oedipus complex resolution.

As a way of illustration, Mr. 137 wants Cassie to autograph his teddy bear in order to provide a “real” basis for the told stories behind the fake autographs (2008: 43). Ironically, contrary to Quentin’s case, he eventually manages to “re-write” himself as a heterosexual after having sex with Cassie and being truly autographed by her on his own body.

To explain the consequences of Quentin and Mr. 137 characters’ “sexual” re-writing in the written (hypothetical in the case of Quentin), we should refer to Derrida’s concept of Phonocentrism. If Phonocentrism, as Sarup puts it, represents the traditional prevalence of speech over writing due to the fact that speech is connected to the moment and place of presence (1993: 35-36), it may be implied that Mr. 137’s character is used in the narrative to subvert this opposition and deconstruct the biased pairing speech-over-writing by giving prevalence to the writing on his body as a sign of “truth.” Nevertheless, as the rest of the characters were “not there” when it happened, he can only use his speech to explain it: “So you managed to fuck her’. Not to brag, but I performed so well

that I'm beginning to wonder if my poor dear father in Oklahoma isn't in fact the pervert he confessed to be" (2008: 145). His "re-writing" as a character proves futile, as he needs to keep using words, his speech, to explain it. The signifiers he uses keep on referring to other signifiers.

More ironically, he becomes blind after his supposed change to the "normative" sexual orientation and subsequent attempt at erasing the homoerotic trace in him: "I blink. Squint. I lean forward too far, too fast [...] with my right eye shut, I'm blind. Open or shut, I can't see anything out of my left eye" (2008: 146).

If "blindness" traditionally represents the punishment for those subverting the "Law of the Father," we may infer that the text has managed to deconstruct the meaning of this "blindness" in order to be reinstated as the punishment for those subverting the *Law of the Trace of the Father*.

It seems the text has managed to mimic and displace one heteronormative rule regarding gender in order to reveal its constructed nature, fact that will be further explained in the next section of this dissertation.

3. CHARACTERS AS PERFORMERS: A BUTLERIAN ANALYSIS

After having analyzed the characters as linguistic signs, it would be convenient to consider the trace of gender always already inhabiting them, and see how the gender identities of the characters are constructed and re-signified.

If the voided postmodern “linguistic” mentioned in the introduction comes to be analyzed on gender grounds, concepts such as “man” and “woman” are only to be found in the words describing them.

For Judith Butler, “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (1990: 25). Moreover, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler states that gender is understood as an “assignment [...] never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate” (1993: 231).

If the “imposed” ideal is only an illusion of performance, one may infer there is room still for a re-definition of gender identities by subverting the performance and thus, re-creating the identities. A hyper-parodic version of this subverted performance is what Chuck Palahniuk’s uses in his representation of characters in his novels, especially the male ones, constantly performing and rewriting their roles. Such roles are, for instance, the bored white-collar man gone mad and anarchic in *Fight Club* (1996), the lost brother customized as her sister in *Invisible Monsters* (1999), or the traumatized kid grown into a sex addict in *Choke* (2001).

If characters are always under construction in Palahniuk's works, it is for the attainment of a common goal: the quest for the "other" in a futile attempt to find their true "selves," their meaning, be it by massive destruction (the ending in *Fight Club*, 1996), by self-annihilation (*Choke*, 2001) or even by physical "porn-fusion" (*Snuff*, 2008). This idea refers us back to the previously commented Derridean interpretation of the characters: they need one another for attaining signification, namely, their signifieds are made dependent on the interaction with other signifiers.

As part of their construction as characters depends on the way they perform their gender, we should consider the extent to which the repeated gender performances of some characters manage to subvert the conventions to which they are subject.

3.1. MALE PERFORMERS

Mr. 600 is characterized as a representation of hypermasculinity in *Snuff*. He shaves his pectorals compulsively and is obsessed with tanning, while his words and acts are those of a "tough man" trying to instruct his believed-to-be son into sex, and bully Mr. 137 on the belief that he has AIDS. He also describes typical male behavior of the rest of the men in the room:

Dudes have a million ways of peeing on what they claim as just theirs... High-school virgins trying to lose it on camera... Loud dudes talk on cell phones talking stock options and ground-floor opportunities at the same time they pinch and milk

their foreskins... Other dudes ain't dicked anything but their hand watching nothing but Cassie Wright videos. (2008: 1-4)

Regarding Faulkner's novel, the closest character to a "hyperman" to be found is Jason IV, who is a narrow-minded, bitter misogynist who only dares to confront the weakest but who is also the only sexually active man in the Compson family.

In comparing both characters, it is worth mentioning that the two of them make use of animal imagery in their internal monologues. Mr. 600 uses synecdoche of body parts to refer to the other "men":

[t]he motley collection of dicks they cattle-called today" (2008: 26).

Above us on TV, the camera comes in for a close-up penetration shot, and the wop dude's nut sack is pockmarked with botched electrolysis scars... (2008:103).

Walking, I'm pacing same as those tigers at the zoo, weaving between dudes... (2008: 129).

As for Jason, he uses animal imagery mainly to refer to "women" and to anyone he considers inferior to him:

Once a bitch, always a bitch, what I say (1995: 179)

I could see them watching me like a hawk (1995: 233)

I'll run into them right in the middle of the street or under a wagon on the street, like a couple of dogs (1995: 240)

Ben and that nigger hanging on the gate like a bear and a monkey in the same cage (1995: 253)

According to Irene López (2009), the use of animal metaphors is a common linguistic resource used by the dominant ideology aimed at downgrading “otherness” outside the “male white heterosexual” ethos:

The equation human-animal usually goes hand in hand with negative connotations. Obviously, within the hierarchical organization of the Great Chain of Being (*cf* Lakoff & Turner, 1989) humans stand above animals, and, therefore, by conceptualizing people as animals, the former are attributed with the instinctual qualities of the latter. In fact, animal metaphors are always at hand to disparage marginal groups such as homosexuals, women and immigrants (i.e. “the other”). (2009: 80)

This seems to be truly the case in Jason’s use of the animal metaphors. He holds such a high opinion of himself encouraged by his mother and by the inheritance of his name that, when confronted with the reality of his situation, brings about resentment displaced onto the weakest ones in society. As he cannot confront the “damn eastern jews” who hold more financial power than he does, he places his rage on the carnival people (who represent everything his profit-

oriented mind rejects, not to mention the previously alluded homosexual connotations entailed), on the black people (who remind him he is not their master anymore) and on women (whom he especially despises). As Michelle Ann Abates explains, following the ideas of Tom Bowden⁶:

[w]herever Jason refers to his mother, sister or niece, Faulkner chooses the abnormal spelling of a common expletive. Instead of referring to his “damn niece” or “damn sister” the author has Jason characterize them as his “dam niece” or “dam sister.” [...] While the word “damn” means cursed to hell, a “dam” is a domesticated female animal. (2001: 299)

In spite of his ill will, he ends up emasculated by his subdued niece and the carnival man, two “inferior” human beings in his mind, a fact that places him “below” the animal realm. The ultimate sign of his emasculation is, according to Doreen Fowler, his inability to drive his car back (1994: 10). Letting aside the sexual and power symbolism of cars explained before, the final blow comes when a black man, another “inferior” creature, has to drive his car in his place.

The case of hyper-masculine Mr. 600 in *Snuff* is different. His use of the traditional mechanism for subjecting the margins into “otherness” applied to the heteronormative subjects (the other white male) constitutes, in my view, a Butlerian successful subversive attempt at mimicry and displacement. In doing so, he is displacing himself as well, for he belongs to the same group of heterosexual white males that he is downgrading and thus, displacing to the margins.

⁶ Tom Bowden, “Functions of Leftness and “Dam” in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*.” *Notes on Mississippi Writers*, 19. (1987): 82.

Apart from this displacement aimed at the anonymous “male” characters in the story, there are two defining events related to Mr. 600 that would place him in the gender margins as well. One takes place after his initial approach to his believed-to-be son. He is shaving off his pectorals with a razor when Mr. 137 makes him notice his nipple is bleeding (2008: 31). The blood coming out of his nipple after approaching the son points to a symbolic gorish breast-feeding offering, not only subverting, but also destroying all the manly performance on his part. This gorish element anticipates his death as well.

The second element subverting his manly performance is represented by the feminine heart-shaped necklace he is wearing, which belongs to Cassie (2008: 55). In the same gorish way, the necklace contains a baby picture and a cyanide pill that he will eventually take in his final sexual encounter with Cassie (2008: 159). Mr. 600 is not only invested with feminine elements that openly question his performance as a “hyper-man,” but also he is being denied the possibility of any “humanized” gender outside the same “beastification” he is using to define the other “men.” Indeed, at the end of the novel, he is described as a “monster”: “The photographer’s flash and the spark of paramedic lightning turning Bacardi into a buff Frankenstein’s monster” (2008: 194).

Mr. 72, on the other hand, is characterized as a sensitive, gullible boy trying to “save” his mother from the porn industry. The greatest subversion regarding his manly performance comes after he recounts his purchase of a second-hand sex doll replica of his “mother” and how he had to bathe and dress her (2008: 86). By using a parodic pornographic parallelism of the relationship between mother and son, and presenting the son as “playing” with a doll as a “girl” would do, the novel

manages to re-signify the sexual intention behind the game at the time it reveals the constructed character of the gender of both son and mother. The final blow at his gender comes just before having sex with Cassie, when she confesses that her lost child was in fact a “girl” (2008: 166).

Mr. 137, on the other hand, is probably the best “performer” among the “male” characters in *Snuff*. At the start he is described as “wearing make-up” (2008: 8) and being obsessed with physical appearance and clothes. This traditional feminine and homosexual stereotyped behavior is challenged by his acquisition of a full bottle of Viagra that he compulsively takes. His virile empowerment ends up in a successful intercourse with Cassie and his subsequent redefinition as a “heterosexual.” Indeed, when he comes back for his clothes, he says, “You are no longer looking at a perfect Kinsey Six⁷” (2008: 144). He keeps on performing as a heterosexual man when he tells Mr. 72: “Your mother is such a hoot . . . You think, if I asked, would she go out to dinner with me? . . . You think she’d marry me?” (2008: 162-163). This theatrical change in sexual orientation adds to the performative nature of the character, reinforced by his reference to Rock Hudson’s hollywoodesque-orchestrated performance as a heterosexual (2008: 182). In a sense, this character resembles the carnival man in *TSAF*. His carnivalesque moods, together with his final wish to marry Cassie, even if he is a homosexual, brings to mind the mentioned idea of the carnival man providing the key for Miss Quentin’s liberation from the constraints of the Compson household.

⁷ “Kinsey Six” is a gay nickname for a person completely homosexual, in clear reference to the Kinsey Report.

As regards the character of Mr. 72, he constitutes a parodic reflection of Quentin Compson, whose narrative, in Bing Shao's (1994) words, "problematizes rather than clarifies the gender issue" (qtd in Abate, 2001: 305). As I have noted above in this dissertation, Quentin is targeted as a possible homosexual, and the fact that his niece, a woman, is named after him problematizes his gender identification, especially in Benjy's section. He ends up being emasculated (like his brothers) not only for his total inability to "act like a man," but also for the subversion of his male performance. He decides to take the place of his sister and remain a virgin, even if he feels ashamed for it, as his father and Caddie outline: "poor Quentin [...] youve never done that have you" (1984: 150). In doing so, he pushes himself to the margins and takes the place of "the other," a fact that eventually forces him to "have a date" with death.

Indeed, as Kevin Alexander Boon (2003) puts it, "[i]n the cultural milieu of the late 20th century manhood can only be found in death [...]. In death [man] gains an individual identity and recaptures the name of the father" (qtd. in Pascual 2013: 267).

Something similar could be said for the "Southern" cultural milieu of the first half of the 20th century. According to Luis M. García Mainar, following the works of John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, between the years 1880 to 1930 the United States experienced a profound industrial and economic transformation that was translated into strong tensions within the bosom of the middle-class family. Men gained a progressively easy access to commercialized sex and women were still perceived under the veil of purity, but at the same time these women were

provided with alternative models of sexual behavior outside the domestic sphere (1999: 61).

Bearing this fact in mind, it would be logical to think that, at the time of the conception of *TSAF*, men had started to feel threatened on grounds of the instability generated by the new demands of women. In fact, this seems to be the real problem within the novel: the “new” women in the Compson family (Caddy and Miss Quentin) do not fit the traditional Southern female pattern, especially regarding sexual behavior and, consequently, they bring about instability within the family. Men try unsuccessfully to impose their rule in order to reaffirm themselves in their traditional dominant roles but they end up being emasculated, by either alcoholism (Mr. Compson), physical castration (Benjy), bitterness and dispossession (Jason IV) or neurosis (Quentin).

If women in the South start behaving against their “natural” feminine gender, it may be inferred that such notion of gender is a created mutable illusion as changeable as the rapidly evolving society of the South.

Indeed, Butler’s envisioning of gender as a construct brought about by the repeated performance of an imposed ideal of gender negates the notion of an “essence” behind the concept and reveals the constrictions imposed on the gendered subjects by the linguistic structures—the dominant discourse—constructing them (“Performative” 1990: 273).

Notwithstanding the difficulties entailed, Butler still harbors some hopes for subversion on gender grounds. Thus, in *Gender Trouble*, she asks “If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of subversive repetition might call into

question the regulatory practice of identity itself?" (1990: 32). She would eventually provide the key at an interview for the magazine *Artforum*: "I do think that for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has both to mime and displace its conventions" (1992: 3).

3.2. FEMALE PERFORMERS

One example of performativity in the role ascribed to women in Southern society is to be found in most of Faulkner's novels. He constantly recurs to the character of the Southern belle, but he does not merely portray a series of stereotyped copycats. In fact, as Nataša Intihar Klančar has pointed out, Faulkner's heroines have to undergo a series of hardships that prevent them from becoming or sticking to the role of a "proper" Southern belle (2011: 47).

As Anne Goodwyn Jones states in *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, the jobs and duties of a Southern lady were:

[S]atisfying her husband, raising the children, meeting the demands of the family's social position, and sustaining the ideals of the South. Her strength in manners and morals is contingent, however, upon her submission to the source—God, the patriarchal church and her husband—and upon her staying out of the public life, where she might interfere in their formulation. (1989: 1527-1528)

Kathryn Lee Seidel, in her extensive study of the depiction of the Southern belle in fiction recognizes all those characteristics in the classical type of belle

depicted during the 19th Century. Nonetheless, she argues that there is a “metamorphosis” in the literary character of the belle between the years 1914 and 1939 when “the Southern belle as a character in fiction discarded her cloak of gentility and purity to reveal depravity, destructiveness, rebellion and neurosis” (1985: xii).

Focusing on *TSAF*, we find two different prototypes of “belles” which may correspond to each of the ends of the “belle” spectrum: Mrs. Caroline Compson and her daughter Caddy, each of them considered to be failed stereotypes.

Caroline Compson’s character shows certain indications of performance in the role ascribed to her gender. Indeed, part of her role as a Southern belle requires a certain amount of conscious performance: she needs to act flirtatious in front to men as well as she needs to project the idea of the perfect family and show pride in her name and origins. Nevertheless, as Kathryn Lee Seidel remarks, “Her belief that a lady is chaste, refined, fragile, and must be sheltered and fiercely protected by doting Southern gentlemen not only warps her personality but contributes to the destruction of her husband and children” (1985: 112).

If, as Intihar Klančar states, the image of the Southern belle originated in a patriarchal society where a woman’s role was to act fragile and helpless and empower the man's feeling of confidence, strength and domination (2011: 48), we find a reversal in the “belle” performance of Mrs. Compson, whose narcissism prevents her from successfully accomplishing her role. She rejects the “Compson” lineage of the family represented by her husband and which she also finds in Quentin, Caddy and Benjy. She can only show her affection for Jason IV, whom

she recognizes as a “Bascomb” like herself and molds him according to her inherited ideas of what a Southern gentleman should be. Her performative potential is well addressed in her obsessive hypochondria and her excessive dramatic reactions to events. The following quotation about her overreaction at Caddy’s pregnancy may serve as an example:

you cannot hurt me anymore than your children already have [...] who can fight against bad blood you won’t let me try we are to sit back with our hands folded while she not only drags your name in the dirt but corrupts the very air your children breathe Jason you must let me go away I cannot stand it let me have Jason and you keep the others they are not my flesh and blood like he is (1984: 102)

In spite of being such a talented performer, Mrs. Compson’s efforts are not aimed at fulfilling the role of “belle” she was supposed to be playing, for she limits her role to scarce superficial performances without really putting extra work on it outside the walls of the Compson’s house. In a way, her deviance from the path of the “proper” belle allows her to run the whole household from her bed, displacing the rule of the men in the family. She manages to keep Dilsey under control with her demands, while she entitles Jason to mind Miss Quentin, a job she should have carried out herself. It is her failure to perform as a proper Southern belle what really empowers her and relieves her from the duties of her role. Her repetition and mimicry of the role of the Southern belle brings about the displacement of the patriarchal rule in her case.

Caddy, on the other hand, renders a different type of female performance. She never identifies herself with the role of the traditional “belle,” as Quentin addresses in the novel: “*You know what I’d do if I were King? she never was a queen or a fairy she was always a king or a giant or a general I’d break that place open and drag them out and I’d whip them good*” (1984: 172).

Her role is closer to the role ascribed to men in the family, and that includes the power to exert control over the opposite sex, as she wished to do when they were little: “‘Quentin’s mad because he had to mind me tonight.’ Caddy said” (43).

In this sense, her character is closer to the idea of the “new belle,” for her depiction is one of a girl:

[O]f unrepressed passion and courage; torn between the alternatives of becoming a “lady” like her mother or becoming a fallen woman, she chooses the latter. Ironically, rebellion against the code is as self-destructive as conformity to it. Women can’t win in southern society, according to Faulkner. (Kathryn Lee Seidel, 1985: 112)

Even though Caddy, as a Southern woman, “cannot win,” she manages to exert a certain power inherent in her ascribed role that manages to grant her certain independence. Her choice of sticking to the “fallen woman” role is, indeed, a choice she makes, notwithstanding the consequences of such decision. She chooses to defy the Compson men’s attempts to redress her deviance from the “right” path by allowing her sexual desire to take over and, in doing so, she manages, intentionally or not, to get the male in the family emasculated. Her fall from grace is, at the same time, her getaway from family and moral constrictions

and, even though she eventually conforms to a hurried marriage for the sake of the family's good name, her subsequent husband's abandonment may be taken as a second narrow escape from the claws of patriarchy and the role of "belle."

She decides to take the role of the "fallen woman" so consciously that, even the moments of repentance experienced by her family's reactions do not suffice for her to change roles. For instance, Benjy's bellowing at her preliminary liaisons with boys does not prevent her from doing it repeatedly, even if she initially repents and washes her mouth. In the same fashion, Quentin's accusations of doing things "like nigger women do" (1984: 90) do not stop her from running to her lover. As for her father, even when she is aware of her part of guilt in his fall into alcoholism—*"Father will be dead in a year they say if he doesn't stop drinking and he won't stop he can't stop since I did last summer (123)*—she seems to accept the situation without trying to change it.

Even if her retreating from initial deviance of her belle role by marrying Herbert Head has been considered by many critics as a sign of passive approval and submission (Tao 2000, Intihar Klančar 2011), in my view, it represents an exceptional display of Caddy's outstanding performative abilities. In complying with her mother's indications to find a husband, she manages to find a way out for the delicate issue of pregnancy outside wedlock at the same time as she manages to fix the strained relationships with most of the members in her family.

Ironically, her husband buys her the first car in Jefferson. The car represents a symbol of status for Mrs. Compson: *"It's her car aren't you proud of your little sister owns first auto in town Herbert his present"* (1984: 91), but at the same time it represents freedom. What is more, she comes to have a car before Jason does,

fact that places her in a successful and powerful position above her emasculated brother.

Thus, there is some evidence to state that Caddy's retreat towards her imposed role as an obliging wife brings her about the benefit of "freedom of movement" outside her family control. Even after flunking back again into the role of the fallen woman following her husband's discovery of the lie of their marriage, she is released from familial responsibility. In taking her daughter away from her, the Compsons are liberating Caddy from the patriarchal imposition on the belle role of taking care of her progeny, paving the way towards her final independence.

She demonstrates again her performing abilities in succeeding in the fallen woman role, as she manages to earn her living and send substantial amounts of money home, overshadowing Jason again in his breadwinner role:

I [Jason] opened the letter first and took the check out. Just like a woman. Six days late. Yet they try to make men believe that they're capable of conducting a business (1984: 189)

She looked at the flowers again. There must have been fifty dollars' worth (201)

'Jason,' she says, looking at the grave, 'if you'll fix it so I can see her a minute I'll give you fifty dollars' (202).

Jason only manages to exert control over Caddy by using Miss Quentin's tutelage to his advantage. This chance, if significant, is not enough to keep Caddy

at bay, for she ignores his indications to stay away from Jefferson and shows up after their father's funeral. (201). She even dares to inquire about the way in which the money she sends for her daughter is being spent. (189). It is precisely because of Jason that Caddy eventually manages to give the final blow to the imposed patriarchal structures underlying the role of the "belle"; this is going to be carried out by the performance of her extension in the character of Miss Quentin.

Entitled with a masculine name given to her by her own mother, Miss Quentin comes to represent Caddy in her absence and takes the role of the "belle" to a completely new level. She lacks all sign of Southern gentility in her appearance and manners and she seems to have inherited her mother's sexual drive:

[h]er face looked like she had polished it with a gun rag [...] "None of your damn business' she said" (183).

She wasn't even listening, with her face all gummed up with paint and her eyes hard as a fice dog's. (186).

I'm [Quentin] bad and I'm going to hell and I don't care. (188)

So I stood there and watched her go on past, with her face painted up like a damn clown's and her hair all gummed and twisted and a dress that if a woman had come out doors even on Gayoso or Beale Street when I was a young fellow with no more that that to cover her legs and behind, she'd be thrown in jail. (232)

In spite of Jason's harassment, she manages to escape with his money, which is in fact her own, having been sent by her mother all over the years. She escapes from her locked room by climbing down the very same tree her mother climbed up to spy on Dammud's funeral:

It was not a girl's room. It was not anybody's room, and the faint scent of cheap cosmetics and the few feminine objects and the other evidences of crude and hopeless efforts to feminize it but added to its anonymity, giving it that dead and stereotyped transience of rooms in assignation houses. The bed had not been disturbed. On the floor lay a soiled undergarment of cheap silk a little too pink, from a half open bureau drawer dangled a single stocking. The window was open.

A pear tree grew there, close against the house. It was in bloom and the branches scraped and rasped against the house and the myriad air, driving in the window, brought into the room the forlorn scent of the blossoms. (282)

This connection represents the alpha and the omega of the performance of the rebellious unrefined "new belle" and her final vengeance over the suppressive Compson environment and, ultimately, over the traditional role of belle. The fact that Quentin's room (which had been originally Caddy's) is not "a girl's room" anymore for it does not look "feminized," turns out to be quite revealing inasmuch as it may stand for a symbol of the performative nature of gender. If the room could belong to "anyone," it could be "dressed" anyway to comply with either masculine or feminine tastes. On the other hand, the "soiled undergarment" on the floor may stand for a resounding symbol of menstruation linked to an idea of

filthiness in the Southern mind while, at the same time, bringing echoes again of the episode of Caddie's muddy bottom when climbing up the tree.

The ending bears the mythic trace of the vengeance of the menstruating gender, as Dana Medoro points out:

The figure of the menstruating daughter forges a counter-narrative of cultural healing within the dominant although splintered narrative of the South's ruin following the Civil War. [...] Miss Quentin's escape with her mother's money is a triumph that invests the title word *fury* with its feminine, mythological resonances.

From the daughter's perspective, the spirit of retributive justice against a household that banishes Caddy and persecutes her daughter is conjured in the name of the ancient female spirits. (2000: 92-93)

The narrative comes full circle as Dilsey states: "I've seed de first en de last [...] I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin" (297-298). The circle of the Compson family starts closing with a failed belle (Mrs. Compson) that is succeeded by new altered versions, each one more deviated from the original. Their failed mimicry in the repetition of their ascribed roles has, in all cases, brought about the displacement of the manly rule, destroying the patriarchal structure of domination within the family.

In the case of *Snuff*, an initial important element to consider regarding miming and displacing of gender conventions is its promotional video launched in 2008⁸. On it, there is a performance of Palahniuk himself acting as a journalist

⁸ See *The Cult: The Official Chuck Palahniuk Website* at chuckpalahniuk.net

interviewing “Cassie.” The interesting thing about the character of Cassie is that her performance is carried out by a drag queen, subverting all gender expectations and pointing at the constructedness of gender behind the roles of the characters in the novel.

In Palahniuk’s novel, a similar pattern mother-daughter appears again, but there is a remarkable difference with respect to the canonical text. If the blood-related female characters in *TSAF* are supposed to perform the same role (the role of the “belle”), even if they end up transforming that role with their “failed” performances, in *Snuff* we find two initially diverging female roles representing two sides of the same coin, which end up converging for the sake of blood. They are depicted as two of the different personalities of the mythical figure of Norma Jeane Baker: Cassie, the Marilyn-like porn star and Sheila, her secret daughter and efficient manager whose real name is Zelda Zonk, the person “Monroe dreamed of being” (2008: 183). Both are different replicas of the same actress, and one cannot be really sure about which replica is more faithful to the original Norma Jeane.

What is certain is that both women perform their roles and are very conscious about it. Cassie is a true performer, while Sheila-Zelda is assuming the role her mother wanted for her. In doing so, Sheila makes sure her long-lost mother, her own blood, will accept her as a personal assistant and eventually as her lost daughter by means of her metaphorical “bloody” baptism:

Spots of blood well up from everywhere. Every hair follicle a pin-spot of red. I slap again, to kill the pain, and a tear mixed with mascara tips out one eye and rolls a

black stripe down Mr. Wright's face. So I slap harder, leaving both of us spattered in her blood. (2008: 127)

Only after Cassie's near death can Sheila tell the truth about her real parents and her name, leaving her performed coldness aside and showing her true feelings: "With my other hand, I tap my chest. Tapping where my own heart's supposed to be [...] And I say it again. My secret name" (197). Again, we find the previously mentioned idea of the resignification of the linguistic signs by sacrificing the mother-signified as well as a parody of religion and its performativity by means of turning the figure of Jesus into a "fallen woman."

This sacrificial mother-performer ready to lead her last performance is depicted as a "professional actress" in the eyes of her daughter-narrator, a fact that turns out to be ironic:

In the past year, Ms. Wright had only been offered one script. A low-budget musical, a fetish vehicle based on Judy Garland–Vicent Minelli classic about a sweet, innocent woman who goes to the World's Fair and falls in love with a handsome young sadist. Called *Beat me in St. Louis*.

She learned the songs and everything. Took dance lessons. Never got a second call. (2008: 48)

The effect brought about by the description of the porno-parodic version of the classic, together with the details about the "professionalism" in her acting, is absolutely parodic with respect to her real role, and comes in sharp contrast with her quasi-religious idealization on the part of some male characters:

Right now, up those stairs, the lady behind the door, she's neutral territory. A shrine where you pilgrimage a thousand miles on your knees to pay tribute. Same as Jerusalem or some church [...] Our Holy Ground. (2008: 38)

The fact that men idolize her as a “goddess” evidences the exaltation of porn as a “new religion” under the protection of capitalism, arrived to make up for the failures of the “old” one. According to Dr. Robert Crocker:

[P]ornography, more than simply the representation of the erotic, is also big business founded upon the commodification of sexual desires, the result of a historical process that began in earnest, so far as we can tell, in the early eighteenth century. As such, its emergence is also a monument to the failure of the Judaeo-Christian religious and cultural tradition in Europe to severely restrict or even eradicate sensual enjoyment and sexual desires from western human experience (1998: 2)

Indeed, Cassie is the “new savior” in the minds of the men for whom she performs and this fact begets, in my view, two important premises: first, Cassie is a void character in herself, only to attain (mythical) entity in the minds of the men for whom she is being commodified. She is indeed a performer and, as such, she needs to act many roles without necessarily identifying with any of them. As all she comes to perform are female roles, she reveals the artificiality of the performance behind the gender:

I point up at a video monitor, where Cassie Wright's wearing rice powder on her cheeks and ink-black geisha eye-make up, playing a lovely demure Japanese American heroine in *Snow Falling on Peters*. (2008: 59)

Above us, on the TVs my mom's starring in *The Italian Hand Job*, where she plays an international mystery woman looking to steal the crown jewels of some place. (2008: 106)

Notwithstanding the difference in the roles, they all end up being reduced to sex aimed at pleasure, thus she ends up being a commodified customizable object, like an inflatable doll that can be dressed and undressed, but whose purpose is always the same. As Meagan Tyler contends (quot. Kathleen Barry 1995), commodification "far from being harmless, can be seen as a severe form of objectification, which creates dissociation and dehumanization" (2011: 101).

Indeed, commodification of the body for the sake of consumption is a self-conscious motif criticized in the novel. As a way of illustration:

A kind of immortality. A person can always ask: How does it feel that the cock of Branch Bacardi and the vagina of Cassie Wright are reduced to kitsch? Camp objects like Duchamp's urinal or Warhol's soup can. (2008: 41)

Porn and ultimately sex are shown as creative performative forces inasmuch as they represent the means through which Cassie is commodified and "created" in the minds of men for the sake of consumption. This assumption is twofold: on the one hand, Cassie becomes, by means of sex, a dehumanized object

earmarked for male pleasure and, on the other, sex empowers her with the agency to perform and subvert any female role.

From this duality, one discerns the two confronted stands on the part of feminism regarding pornography: Anti-pornography feminism, represented by Catharine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and the Sex-positive feminist views of Ellen Willis and Holly Hughes, among others.

Either way, the most revealing fact about Cassie's performances is their connection to history and relevant episodes in it. Most of her representations correspond to different historical scenes where she has to lead a role in the pornographic version. This fact may help tip the balance towards the idea of pornography as an instrument of female empowerment insomuch as it may allow women to "re-write" history from the parodic perspective of porn and its carnivalesque potential⁹:

It was after *World Whore Two* won the Adult Video News award for the best boy-girl-girl scene, where Cassie Wright teamed with Rosie the Riveter to suck off Wiston Churchill. (2008: 16)

Above the young man, the television hanging over his head shows Miss Wright's groundbreaking civil-rights statement about racism, the sexy comedy

⁹ See Paul Booth (2014).

where a fresh-faced college sophomore comes home for Christmas and tell her doting parents that she's dating a chapter of the Black Panthers. (64)

The critics [...] justifiably raved about her portrayal of Mary Todd Lincoln in the Civil War epic *Ford's Theatre Back Door Dog Pile*. [...] in the scene where Cassie Wright gets double-teamed by John Wilkes Booth and Honest Abe Lincoln, thanks to her research, she truly makes American history come alive. (10)

Thus, in both works the repetition of the performed identity (what Butler called "iterability") on the part of the female characters allows for a certain displacement of the patriarchal rule as well as for empowerment within the environments in which the characters perform their roles.

In the case of *Snuff*, the parodic element sustained on the transgressive potential of porn and its ultimate relationship to the canonical *TSAF* reveals itself in a historical nod to Faulkner's classic, as we are about to consider.

The Compson Appendix, written originally by Faulkner in 1946 as a synopsis of the novel for Malcom Cowley's *Portable Faulkner*, recontextualizes the novel in spite of certain incongruences with respect to the original text and ponders on the lives and deeds of the characters beyond 1928.

Regarding Caddy, Faulkner presents her as "doomed," but conversely, she is depicted as "skill beautiful and probably still wealthy too since she did not look within fifteen years of her actual fortyeight" (1946: 7). An old librarian recognizes her picture in a magazine:

a picture filled with luxury and money and sunlight--a Cannebière backdrop of mountains and palms and cypresses and the sea, an open powerful expensive chromium/rimmed sports car, the woman's face hatless between a rich scarf and a seal coat, ageless and beautiful, cold serene and damned; beside her a handsome lean man of middleage in the ribbons and tabs of a German staffgeneral [...] 'It's Caddy!' the librarian whispered. 'We must save her!' (1945: 8)

She seems to have dealt with the devil, as she retains youth and money and is associated to the Nazis, which may have personified pure evil in the minds of American people at the time. Nevertheless, the only one understanding Caddy is the sage character of Dilsey, who decides to ignore the librarian's concern for she knew that "Caddy doesn't want to be saved hasn't anything anymore worth being saved for nothing worth being lost that she can lose" (9).

Likewise, we find explicit parodic references to Hitler and the Nazis in *Snuff*: Cassie's gangbang movie is called *World Whore Three*, and the men have to take turns in wearing Gestapo uniforms to perform sexually on camera. Sheila carefully applies make-up on Cassie in order for her to look like "Hitler's perfect blonde, blue-eyed idea of a sex doll" (2008: 151). There is even an allusion about the alleged fact that Adolf Hitler invented the blow-up sex doll:

During the First World War [...] Hitler [...] was disgusted by seeing his fellow soldiers visit French brothels. To keep the Aryan blood-lines pure, and prevent the spread of venereal disease, he commissioned an inflatable doll that Nazi troops could take into battle. (49)

Additionally, Cassie asks Bacardi for a cyanide pill to end her life while performing, which is a reference to the method some high-ranking Nazis used to end their lives once they lost the war or when caught. Thus, to the already explained connection of sex and death found in both novels, the historical element is incorporated. Yet, which would be the implications of this reference to the historical events of both world wars and the Nazis that represent a merging point for both novels?

The answer would be that for *TSAF*, Caddy's connection to the evil Nazis presumably by means of sex consolidates her sense of "failing" woman. She has not only failed her family and the female code of behavior by engaging in inappropriate sexual liaisons but also she has failed her entire nation and culture by aligning with the enemy, a fact that reinforces the traditional idea of sex as a corrupting force.

On the other hand, Cassie's performance as Hitler's perfect blonde engaging in a gangbang with 600 "Gestapo officers" represents, in my view, a clear parodic attempt to subvert the official underlying condemnatory view of sex in the canonical text still present in contemporary America by means of the carnivalesque element in porn.

Finally, the parodic text seems to suggest that contemporary America does not deviate ideologically that much from Hitler's Germany inasmuch as the middle-class white heterosexual male still displaces the "others" to the margins of economic, social, and sexual visibility.

4. CONCLUSION

In this dissertation we have considered that, from a Derridean perspective, the characters are portrayed as mere signifiers continuously interacting and associating in an attempt to re-signify themselves by means of bonding with a longed-for idealized signified represented by the absent-postponed character of Caddy in the case of *TSAF* and of Cassie in the case of *Snuff*. On the other hand, from a Butlerian perspective, these characters have been portrayed as mere performances of a socially constructed gender idea, never totally fitting in the role.

There seems to be a dialogical relationship between both texts analyzed. As the thesis of this dissertation initially proposed, the parodic text ends up revering the canonical insomuch as it ends up the work initiated by the canonical regarding the exposure and deconstruction of the pervading social structures constraining the lives and deeds of the characters.

Faulkner's masterly use of modernist narrative experimentation and exploration of the inner minds of the characters delving into the haunting memories of the past and national anxieties concealed within an underlying Gothic discourse have certainly paved the way for his postmodern inheritors. Likewise, his advanced conceptions and depictions of sex and gender as well as his mythical awareness in his novels have granted him a leading role in fiction and a place in the literary canon.

Palahniuk, for his part, takes the baton held over by Faulkner and makes his novel unravel its postmodern constructed awareness at the time he makes use of mimicry and displacement of conventions in it, so as to subvert traditional social constructs, especially regarding gender and sex.

The connection of sex, death and eventually history brings about the disclosure of the ideological apparatus pervading the canonical text and criticized by it, at the time the parodic text reveals the need to subvert such apparatus, for it seems to be still in force in contemporary America as the ones in the margins still struggle to reach the central positions of power.

If women, as Faulkner stated, “cannot win,” at least they can find their victory within the liminal spaces in the canonical novel, as commented above, as well as by progressively transforming their ascribed roles by means of the mechanisms of mimicry and displacement. Besides, as the parodic text seems to suggest, women can take the lead of sex and benefit from the transforming carnivalesque potential of porn, even if they take the risk of becoming commodified objects for consumption within the dominant capitalist ethos. The condemnatory view of sex inherited from Puritanism is revealed as a noxious sound filling the mind and the spirit with raging fury, while sex becomes the instrument of those in the margins, especially women, to subvert their roles and rewrite their fortunes.

Yet, the quest for a defined identity or even for meaning of any kind is disclosed in both novels as obscure and futile due to the very same nature of language itself. Characters remain doomed and emasculated by the underlying ideological forces acting upon them as the subverting power of carnival is, nonetheless, temporary.

Settled in ill-fated times, the only hope both novels seem to harbor relies on the merging of the margins. Faulkner's Dilsey "endures," while Palahniuk's damned characters fuse metaphorically and literally at the end of the novel; the young generation represented by Darin Johnson and Zelda Zonk seal their new identities with a hug:

"Did she really name you Zelda Zonk?" [...] And I say my real name is Darin, Darin Johnson, holding Zelda until her cheek comes back to rest against the cross of my chest. Her stopwatch clock tick-tick-ticking against the skin of my gut. (2008: 181)

Whereas the old generation represented by Cassie and Brach Bacardi literally fuses their bodies in sex:

The defibrillator melted Bacardi and Ms. Wright into a human X. Joined at the hips. Their flesh married in hate, burned together deeper than any wedding could leave them. Conjoined. Cauterized. (196)

In this way, “the damaged” who “love the damaged” (25) manage to write their own particular “American History X”. As the X, apart from being a symbol of pornography, is commonly regarded the symbol for an unknown value, their re-written “history” may stand for all that remains hidden and excluded within American society, namely, the ones on the margins, who are progressively adding up their own verses to what Walt Whitman, the creator of the myth of modern America, called “the greatest poem.”¹⁰

Thus, as the spirit of social bonding and resilience helped America survive the worst moments, against the isolation and alienation of the individual sustaining the base of the capitalist system where consumption has replaced religion in its guiding role, the final message encrypted in both novels seems to be one of coming together and withstanding as a group. It is only in communion that the individual can attain real signification in the same way that collective meaning and action are provided by the sum of the different individualities.

We will meet; and there we may rehearse most
obscenely and courageously. Take pains; be perfect: adieu.

(A Midsummer Night's Dream, 1.2 106-8)

¹⁰ Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings: Authoritative Texts, Other Poetry and Prose, Criticism*. Eds. Michael Moon, Sculley Bradley, and Harold William Blodgett. 2005: 2

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