

The Presence of Cassandra: Women in Faulkner's *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, and in José Lins do Rego's *Fogo Morto*

Heloísa Toller Gomes

An air Cassandralike and humorless and profoundly and sternly prophetic out of all proportion to the actual years even of a child who had never been young (*Ab*, 22).

The presence of woman is very strong in *Fogo Morto* and *Absalom*, *Absalom!* and, though this presence rarely commands the development of action, it participates decisively in the narrated events. Woman appears basically as the one who suffers the consequences of action propagated by man and it is she who, frequently, reflects upon such action. In this reflective role, woman, in both novels, is closer to the poor white - who will often have his voice heard - than to the 'sphinx-faced' Negro. Woman submits herself - socially, economically, morally - to the demands of a society in which masculine values prevail. However, as she is not directly involved in issues of class and competition whose resolution is delegated to man, woman allows herself to think. In both novels, she is a reflective being rather than one of action, and she sometimes reveals, as such, an intellectual depth which man himself lacks: that man of whom, like property, she is the mere extension. Her existence is a vicarious one and she follows husband, father, brother, in their trips and tribulations. Their occasional successes touch her, in such a way that woman becomes *part* of the male status; their failures also grasp her, and it is then that she is capable of thinking and of questioning and demystifying the values she had been taught to honour.

The analysis of woman in both novels reveals, therefore, something peculiar: she is often shown from the masculine point of view and, moreover, it is man who determines her destiny and position in the social body. But the study of such position and of the ways she re-acts to and inter-acts with male activity provides precious elements for the comprehension of man himself and

1 See William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, New York, Vintage, 1972 (abbreviated as *Ab*); and José Lins do Rego, *Fogo Morto*, José Olympio, 1973 (abbreviated as *FM*).

of the social structure to which both belong.

As we examine what woman represents in the complex system of relationships which determine the meaning of each particular relation in the textual society under study, and what properties the feminine structure presents, we will consider the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic properties of female characters. In other words: we will examine her situation in terms of the concepts of sexual differentiation the texts present (intrinsic properties), on the one hand; and, on the other, we will look at the *position* each woman occupies in the social body (extrinsic properties) and the ways through which she is affected by her relationships with the other parts of that body: women and men of her own class, as well as of others. In this respect, we will be following Pierre Bourdieu's theorization.²

The *situation* of woman in *Fogo Morto* and in *Absalom, Absalom!* is, primarily, one of a passive, impotent creature in a repressive society, whatever her *position* in that society may be. Her home contains her world and, even there, man's power is absolute: 'I am the master of this house. (...) This is a man's house' (*FM*, 6), cries out José Amaro, the saddle-maker. 'In my home, I wear the pants' (*FM*, 7).

The poor *pater familias* sits at his door, while his wife and daughter toil in the kitchen. The plantation owner rides by on horseback as he crosses his fields, while the ladies, closed up in suffocating rooms, play the piano, sew, walk to and fro - like Dona Olivia, in *Fogo Morto* 'endlessly, from the living-room to the kitchen, all day long' (*FM*, 35). The open spaces belong to man: woman only passes them, on the way to visit other homes - and, of course, she makes use of her own backyard when looking after the poultry. She is not allowed to invade the male space, as we may see in this passage from *Fogo Morto*: 'Dr. Joaquim Lins do Pau Amarelo's wife started riding on horseback like mad. She would ride all day long until, one day, she broke her leg in a fall. And she died because of that fall' (*FM*, 35). This picturesque passage leaves no doubts as to the consequences that threaten the woman who dares to intrude upon the masculine universe.

The supremacy of man over woman is established, first of all, in the way both use the space of the house and in what it represents for each of them. The house, for man, is the place where he keeps the woman, so that, there, she may take care of his comfort and guarantee his posterity. Woman assumes this role passively: 'We kept the house, (...) we kept the room which Thomas Sutpen

2 See Bourdieu, 'Condition de classe et position de classe', in *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, VII, 1966, 201-203, and *Le marché des biens symboliques*, Paris, Centre de Sociologie Européenne, 1970.

would return to - (...) just as we kept Henry's room' (*Ab*, 155). She, herself, accepts the limitations of her domestic space: 'I also live like that, inside home' (*FM*, 95). Generations of 'iron prohibition' (*Ab*, 156) make her live in a house 'smaller than its actual size' (*Ab*, 10). Inside it, sexual hierarchy makes itself explicit: it is the man who *names* the different parts of the house (*Ab*, 7); it is also he who allocates them: 'Go to your kitchen and leave me in the living room' (*FM*, 287). The house, therefore, is a key element which characterizes the situation of dependency and subjection the woman endures in relation to man: she acknowledges his decisions and respects his words. We may see how cleverly both texts critically construct the idea of male supremacy and reaffirm the notion of woman's inferiority through the speech of male characters. 'I don't expect you to understand it', he said. 'Because you are a woman' (*Ab*, 30; see also *FM*, 52).

In spite of all this, however, the woman is capable of harshly criticizing the treatment given to the female condition. Rosa thus narrates her childhood: 'I displaced no air, gave off no betraying sound, from one closed forbidden door to the next and so acquired all I knew of that light and space in which people moved and breathed' (*Ab*, 145). There grows, in the woman, hatred and fear in relation to her house (*FM*, 103) and to everything it represents: the house which, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is associated with the image of the tomb, in *Fogo Morto* with that of prison (*FM*, 36). Even in the very interior of her house, woman's life is restrained and her steps always controlled. Both texts register a thoroughly passive suffering: 'Because she waited; she made no effort to do anything else' (*Ab*, 121). But, as she gives up her own interests, she actively contributes to man's social ascension - like Mariquinha, Tomás's wife (*FM*, 139). She also constitutes the living image of masculine prestige: Neném is the prettiest woman in the valley, Amélia and Ellen Sutpen parade, exhibiting their jewelry. It is also the woman who sustains man in his misfortunes: 'Old Adriana spread vinegar on [her husband's] bleeding wounds' (*FM*, 277).

The texts present some strong women in the unreality of female life. In this way, they criticize the ideology proposed through the speeches of their characters, by contrasting women's apparent fragility with their latent potentiality which makes them capable of evaluating situations and adopting courses of action. Adriana is the main example of the lucid, strong woman in *Fogo Morto*: 'She had had no education, no book learning at all, but she knew that all that was pure nonsense' (*FM*, 90); Sinhá also provides a vivid contrast to the sterile aggressiveness of her husband, José Amaro: 'For a long time she stared at the fence she had made with the bayonets, the pigsty, the rose-trees she had planted. Everything had come out of her own hands' (*FM*, 99).

We must, nevertheless, observe that such a force is always kept under restraint: 'fenced around', as the passage above suggests. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Judith Sutpen is compared to her father several times ('They were too much alike' - *Ab*, 122), but the daughter's actions tend to be restricted to the hypothetical level: 'She would have acted as Sutpen would have acted with anyone who tried to cross him:' (*Ab*, 120). The woman's thoughts and her critical capacity, however, sometimes flow with liberty. Amélia, the fine lady, judges her husband severely and, through him, all the male community: 'that night she had seen him as she saw the other men in the valley, treating the women as if they were beasts' (*FM*, 175).

Man never openly admits being helped - not to say protected - by his wife. He is supposed to be the bread-winner, and a dependency on this level would jeopardize his supremacy. But it is Amélia de Hollanda who supports the plantation as it totters on the brink of ruin: 'God forbid Lula would come to know such a thing. (...) A plantation owner being supported by his wife's labour!' she thinks (*FM*, 198). Like Amélia, the women in *Absalom, Absalom!* endorse the myth about themselves created by centuries of subjection: 'That normal useless woman - worrying about the absent male', says one of them (*Ab*, 157-158).

In this way, both texts converge as they simultaneously oppose woman's latent strength (which makes her recognize at a certain point: 'No. We did not need him', *Ab*, 154) and, paradoxically, the notion of the vacuity of woman's existence: her life is annulled by her 'mission' in relation to man, and her vitality is utterly exhausted as she strives to participate and to cooperate in man's work. In this respect, her major achievement, of course, consists in guaranteeing man's posterity. An indispensable instrument in the materialization of his descent, her only goal in life is marriage. Only through marriage can she reach the privileges of motherhood - the only genuine emotion allowed to her - and then acquire social respectability. However, in both texts, marriage is seen as something rather sinister. As she gets married to Sutpen, Ellen disappears 'into an edifice like Bluebeard's and there transmogrified into a mask looking back with passive and hopeless grief upon the irrevocable world' (*Ab*, 60).

Marrying off one's daughter constitutes a serious paternal concern. 'Captain Tomás brooded. Why hadn't his elder daughter got married?' (*FM*, 139); Amaro pounds angrily while working on his saddle: 'It was his family. A single daughter, no marriage in sight, no bridegroom, no decent life' (*FM*, 16). One may remember that, in *Fogo Morto*, Tomás's social ascent is associated with his daughter's marriage (*Fogo Morto*, 146). Colonel José Paulino's economic instability is also visible on the family plane: his daughters' weddings are marked by great festivities, but he soon loses one of them in childbirth (*Fogo Morto*, 131). Colonel Lula's decadence may be read in the sterility of his spinster daughter and

in the absence of an heir to whom he might transmit his name. Amélia and Lula have a crippled son, with 'a monstrous head' (*FM*, 167). In the same way, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen fails in his great design: to found a dynasty. As we have seen, both texts establish a connection between the family and the social. between private dramas and the collapse of a class which encompasses a whole culture. As Peter Swiggart correctly remarks: 'The failure of Thomas Sutpen to establish the roots of a family dynasty in the South's fertile soil assumes the status of personal tragedy as well as social allegory' (3).

Put primarily at the service of a reproductive 'mission', female sexuality becomes atrophied. For the woman of *Absalom, Absalom!*, 'sex was some forgotten atrophy like the rudimentary gills we call the tonsils' (*Ab*, 155). The result is that, together with the existing solidarity which unites women subject to the same morality, there exists, on the part of women, a marked hostility towards those of their sex in conflict with their moral standards: 'There go the filthy whores' (*FM*, 74), says Sinhá about the Pilar girls. As a consequence of all these frustrations, woman develops a resentment in which hatred is mixed with the respect she devotes to man. Suspiciousness insinuates itself in matrimonial relationships: 'He feared his wife. She was his enemy. Why? What had he done, to deserve Sinhá's terrible hatred?' marvels José Amaro (*FM*, 127).

There is nothing left to woman but to sublimate her repressed instincts. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, women sublimate their instincts as they replace them by a rigid sense of morality: 'the honour of a family the good name of whose women has never been impugned' thus sounds Rosa's proud voice (*Ab*, 19). Women in *Fogo Morto* find their refuge in religion: 'This is where I put my trust, *comadre*, it's in my saints' (*FM*, 97). Never blossoming as a woman, the female being remains forever tied to childhood, from which she is never released - 'too long a child yet too short a woman' (*Ab*, 149). Lula de Hollanda's daughter, in *Fogo Morto*, will be forever called 'Neném' (Baby). Both novels provide a number of metaphors stressing the psychological consequences of female repression: Rosa's childhood will be 'a grim mausoleum' (*Ab*, 60); her growing up process, 'that womb-like corridor where the world came not even as living echo but as dead incomprehensible shadow' (*Ab*, 162); Rosa is doll-sized, black clothes restraining her body. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, she embodies the tragedy of woman: 'from the too tall chair in which she resembled a crucified child' (*Ab*, 8).

In *Fogo Morto*, the most dramatic denouncement of female repression may be read in the lunacy which possesses Olívia and Marta. Olívia is the old member of a plantation owner's family; Marta is young, a poor white's daughter. But both are identical in their madness, despite age and social differences. Only

3 Swiggart, Peter, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels*, Austin, Univ. of Texas Press, 1962, 149.

in madness can they rid themselves of the male yoke and express their sexual fantasies. In madness, Olívia and Marta subvert all the prevailing codes, ignoring time and space: Marta runs out of the house (*FM*, 101), Olívia speaks words of ancient times. For her, in the paradoxical lucidity of the mad, slavery was not over. 'Dona Olívia was always the same, as if time did not exist for her' (*FM*, 175).

We are trying to signal the fact that both texts elaborate such a similar treatment of the female situation that they may be read simultaneously. In both cases, for example, the image of the 'ghost' is associated to the woman: Olívia 'was that living ghost, with her void eyes' (*FM*, 155); 'Dona Amélia and her tresses, her fingers covered with rings, walked stiff just like a ghost' (*FM*, 166); Neném, at the Santa Rosa parties, stayed away, 'indifferent to the merriment of the square-dances, like a ghost, all white, dark circles under her eyes' (*FM*, 192). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the narrator explains: 'Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts' (*Ab*, 12).

Another textual element in common that serves to denounce the social and psychological consequences of this female condition is the acknowledgment of the cruelty with which woman often responds to her frustrations. Both texts, thus, model a quite diverse figure from that of the legendary Southern Belle - or *sinhá-moça*, in the Brazilian case - that heavenly 'creature of peach-blossom and snow'. For instance: 'One of old João Alves's daughters always had a little negress by her side for her to kick about and spank' (*FM*, 160). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, in turn, Rosa Coldfield is described as 'cold, implacable and even ruthless' (*Ab*, 10). With cruelty, woman takes revenge on the one who combines a sense of both sexual and racial inferiority - the black female - as man perpetually underlines *his* superiority over women and negroes and, in this way, equals them: '*Comadre*, this is man's talk. Negroes and women are not supposed to mingle' (*FM*, 53). Male characters in *Fogo Morto* and in *Absalom, Absalom!* reveal identically negative conceptions about women: 'Woman is a malign animal, she is', sounds an anonymous male voice in *FM* (60); in *Absalom, Absalom!*, both Compson men speak of her with irony: 'They lead beautiful lives - women' (*Ab*, 191,211).

With the Civil War, women in *Absalom, Absalom!* are forced to retreat from their customary lives - 'not only divorced from, but irrevocably excommunicated from, all reality' (*Ab*, 191). The new circumstances temporarily abolish barriers of class, race and sex. Rosa, Judith and Clytie for a time live 'not as three negroes or three whites, not even as three women, but merely as three creatures' (*Ab*, 155). Hunger equals 'lady or female' (*Ab*, 129), and the woman has to come to terms with social reality. But her destiny continues to be 'endure and then endure, without rhyme or reason or hope of reward - and then endure' (*Ab*, 144).

If the *situation* of woman in both novels presents common properties, now we must examine how the *position* of each female type is defined in the social scale. For this, we will refer to Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, in order to understand one social class, it is necessary to establish its links with the other social spheres. The members of each class are involved in symbolic relationships with the individuals of other classes, and thus express differences both in terms of situation and position. These differences depend on a systematic logic and, in Bourdieu's terminology, tend to transform into significant distinctions. It is through such distinctions that the social subjects express and constitute their position in the social structure. On the other hand, Bourdieu writes that the characteristics of different social classes depend not only on their position in the social structure, but also on their functional weight in that structure. This functional weight is proportionate to the contribution of the class to the constitution of the structure.

The textual analysis reveals that, in both texts, the functional weight of woman is zero, whatever her social stratum may be. Her actions in both novels have no collective meaning, and so she does not represent any social force, positive or negative. She belongs to the class of the plantation owners or to any other social group only and exclusively as a reflection of man - father or spouse - on whom she depends in order to survive. This granted, we may see how the texts designate woman's position in the social structure.

The ancient male code which governs woman's position in the society of *Absalom, Absalom!* defines 'three sharp divisions, separated (two of them) by a chasm which could not be crossed but one time and in but one direction - ladies, women, females' (*Ab*, 109). This code is, therefore, very precisely defined. It includes, in the first group, the 'ladies' who present the necessary requirements as spouses and housewives, in the master's class. In the second group, one might include the women of lower social levels, seen in the passage above from the selfish perspective of the hegemonic class: their goal is to provide man's sexual pleasure and, hopefully, to enlarge his descent. Exemplary in this respect, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is Wash Jones's granddaughter, Sutpen's last attempt to establish a family dynasty. Social class functions, in this way, as a dividing line between the two previously mentioned types of women, and it is colour that creates an abyss between both of them and the third type, the 'females'. But the same character criticizes the prevailing sexual ideology, as he shows that, in spite of such drastic distinctions, the destiny of the ladies is connected to that of the social pariahs: 'the slave girls and women upon whom that first caste rested and to whom in certain cases it doubtless owed the very fact of its virginity' (*Ab*, 109). The precision of the code is such that its textual definition includes the word 'caste', thus indicating the fixed nature of the dividing line separating these three types of women.

The literary discourse of *Fogo Morto* never theorizes about woman's position in society. But one may notice that, besides the three categories present in *Absalom, Absalom!*, there is a fourth category which would be the remaining alternative offered to the woman who is poor: to follow the same rigid moral patterns imposed on the woman of the commanding class and thus to become her humble replica. The difference between these two - which in *Fogo Morto* may be perceived in the confrontation between Amélia and Adriana - would be the fact that the latter, being poor, is not expected to be idle but, instead, to serve the head of the family with her domestic chores. This type of woman is absent in *Absalom, Absalom!* but may be found in other texts by Faulkner (*As I Lay Dying* is a good example).

The women in *Fogo Morto* and *Absalom, Absalom!* who belong to the master's class make themselves different, through their behavior, from the other women in society. In this respect, they are absolutely identical. They are defined by a 'style of being' rather than by what they have as it is not only money that determines one's social position in the social body. In fact, Bourdieu states that pure economic power and the crude fact of money do not necessarily constitute a recognized basis for social prestige and he reminds us of Max Weber's theorization about status groups. Such groups are defined by a certain position in the hierarchy of honour and prestige.

The ladies in both novels constitute society's most homogeneous status group. The passiveness which, as we have indicated, is a fundamental property of the feminine personality makes her claim not for her own status, but for the one that corresponds to her husband's or father's social position. Whatever her degree of self-awareness, she herself becomes man's status, and this factor demands from her a specific behaviour, worthy of the prestige he thinks he deserves.

Before anything else, she is - or should be - the very image of idleness: 'The supremely and traditionally idle' (*Ab*, 125). Needless to say, this is connected to the *pater familias*'s necessity of proclaiming, in public, his economic autonomy. A passage in *Fogo Morto* refers to the possibility of a lady working 'just for the fun of it' - but, simultaneously, leaves it clear that that was not the case with Colonel Lula de Holanda's family (*FM*, 198). This sort of woman's behaviour was inspired by distant times - 'the times when ladies did not walk but floated' (*Ab*, 31). Rosa Coldfield, though financially poor, reveals her social position in the smallest details: her way of sitting, of dressing; her house's furniture; her education which, in her own words, had made her conceive 'the sun from seeing it through a piece of smoky glass' (*Ab*, 145); in the cautious distance, until the time of a prospective marriage, from members of the opposite sex. Rosa, who had transferred all her frustrated romanticism to the love affair between her elder sister Judith and Charles Bon, years later insists in repeating that she had never actually met him: 'I had never seen him (I never saw him. I

never even saw him dead: I heard a name, I saw a photograph, I helped to make a grave: and that was all)' (*Ab*, 146; also 150-152); and, finally, in thorough ignorance of the financial aspects of life (*Ab*, 77).

In *Fogo Morto*, Amélia is the grand lady *par excellence*: 'Dona Amélia played the piano like a fairy' (*FM*, 141); 'Amélia was a silk, a garden flower' (*FM*, 140). Such a woman corresponds to the male ideal characterized by Lula's reverie: 'Amélia full of love, Amélia loving him like a slave. Later [their daughter] Neném, the lovely, blue-eyed Neném, with her blonde tresses, all his, fulfilling every one of his wishes' (*FM*, 189).

Both texts insinuate with mastery how the patrician lady is contaminated by the aristocratic mentality which prevails in her milieu. But if man sees her as a luxury commodity, she may reciprocate. Ellen, the most dramatic example of this process of human annihilation brought about by the lady condition - and which is expressed in the metaphor of the transparent butterfly - sees her future son-in-law as 'a garment which Judith might wear as she would a riding habit or a ball gown, a piece of furniture, which would complement and complete the furnishing of her house and position' (*Ab*, 75). Each sex, in reality, lends to the other a *merchandise value*, since in *Absalom, Absalom!* the sexual thematic is inherently linked to social or economic interest. Such a mentality is not attributed only to the members of the master's class: all women are summed up as 'commodities' (*Ab*, 117).

In *Fogo Morto*, in turn, the discourse of sexuality is practically absent: while an atmosphere of sensuality involves the 'octoroons' of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in the Brazilian novel only the 'Pilar girls' ['as raparigas do Pilar'] are given, in passing, a vague sensual touch (*FM*, 74). We therefore would not agree with the critics who say that sex, in José Lins do Rego's books, is a sort of mystic exercise, a restorer of normality and balance, a source of vitality and spiritual therapy. This certainly does not apply to *Fogo Morto*, a work in which the absolute absence of the sexual thematic reinforces the atmosphere of weariness, exhaustion and decadence.

Both in *Fogo Morto* and in *Absalom, Absalom!*, sex is utterly subordinated to the social and economic interests. Marriage, therefore, is directly linked to social affirmation and their respective participants are evaluated as consumption goods. Let's see the way old Tomás, in *Fogo Morto*, considers his daughter's hypothetical marriage: 'No son of João Alves do Canabrava should knock on his door. To his and his likes he wouldn't give away his daughter in marriage *for no price at all* (*FM*, 140 - our italics); 'But his daughter, who played the piano like a city girl, who read beautiful books, who had been given such an expensive education, wouldn't get married' (*FM*, 140). We may conclude therefore that marriage defines *status groups* in both texts. And *status groups*, as we read in Max

Weber, define themselves according to their consumption principles, which materialize in specific life styles.⁴

Rosa Coldfield suggests her own commodity value when she defines herself as 'good for nothing else, yet still too valuable to be left alone' (*Ab*, 146). Sutpen, in turn, 'bought [...] a wife after three years to scrutinize, weigh and compare' (*Ab*, 178). Later, in his wife Ellen's perspective, status would and should be reinforced by a desirable marriage for their daughter. Individuals are thus transmuted into goods, and these, in their turn, into signs, which clearly express the position of their 'possessors' in the social structure. The prospective spouse becomes one of those 'marks of distinction' which have the social function of stressing the division between the affluent and the 'inferior' ones.

Trying hard to correspond to the image that is expected of her, the lady comes to acquire a second nature, which makes her believe in the role she plays and even value it highly. So Ellen, after her wedding, 'went through a complete metamorphosis, emerging into her new lustrum with the finality of actual re-birth' (*Ab*, 64). In her last years, 'She seemed not only to acquiesce, to be reconciled to her life and marriage, but to be actually proud of it' (*Ab*, 68). Getting used to moving 'from attitude to attitude' (*Ab*, 69) makes her lose touch with reality: 'the foolish unreal voluble preserved woman' (*Ab*, 69), the text insistently points out.

Also the lady in *Fogo Morto* enjoys and becomes an accomplice of the illusory perpetuation of social prestige: 'It was Dona Amélia's only joy. For her, everything was sadness, humiliation, trials coming from God. But in those moments, when she rode down the main street and saw people in the windows, women and men staring admiringly at her carriage which filled that despicable world with grandeur, she was happy, very happy indeed' (*FM*, 199). She forgets - or attempts to forget, as the repeated affirmation of her happiness suggests - that her grand apparel and 'ladylike airs' ['ar de dona'] (*FM*, 191) really have their origin in a basic submission to a decadent man.

When we analyze both woman's general situation and position in the social body, we notice how the female subjection to that essentially male world brings malign consequences for her. The literary discourse, by means of fictive plots, characterizations, descriptions, weaves a sombre feminine landscape, which it criticizes with lucidity. Submission - such as that of Ellen, Amélia, Neném - materializes itself at the cost of one's own identity. And submission may represent the way to madness, as shown by Olívia and Marta in *Fogo Morto*. Death is the only possible way out for the women in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as we

4 Weber, Max, *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, trans., ed., and with an Introduction by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948.

may read in the epitaph Judith Sutpen prepares for herself: 'Suffered the Indignities and Travails of this World for 42 Years, 4 Months, 9 Days, and went to Rest at Last February 12, 1884' (*Ab*, 211). Taking an ironical revenge against that male world, Judith mentions only her mother's name in the epitaph: 'Daughter of Ellen Coldfield'. In this, the text stresses the abyss that exists between a man's and a woman's worlds. As she chose her epitaph, Judith at last felt free from the male yoke and, simultaneously, signaled the heritage of sacrifice received from her mother.

Only one female character, in each of the two texts, escapes from a disastrous or a melancholic end: Sinhá, José Amaro's wife, who leaves the place, in *Fogo Morto* and the picturesque aunt of Ellen and Rosa, in *Absalom, Absalom!*: 'So one night the aunt slid down the rainpipe with a horse trader' (*Ab*, 176). But we may well recognize that, in both cases, the attitude corresponds to an evasion, rather than to a reaction. Such evasion, therefore, adds nothing to the conception both texts construct with respect to women.

The basis of their relationship with men consists in the tension between oppressor and oppressed which always brings about, in reality, a mutual subjection: because man himself reveals a mistrust and a fear of women which, once more, causes both textual discourses to coincide: 'Woman is a strange animal' (*FM*, 283); 'When a woman is up to something, leave her alone' (*FM*, 245); 'Old women, I always respect. My mother always said: Be careful of old women' (*FM*, 254). Vitorino, Amaro and Silvino, the bandit, all express collective notions. The discourse of *Absalom, Absalom!* also refers to such fear: '...didn't the dread and fear of females which you must have drawn in with the primary mammalian milk teach you better?' (*Ab*, 265).

Be it as a servant to command, be it as evil to fear, woman is wrapped up in an atmosphere of mystery, always associated with negative connotations, on the part of male characters. We have selected, however, two passages in the novels which express, both from the point of view of woman herself and from the narrative perspective a criticism which transcends by far the consciousness of the well-known 'female mystery': 'Then Ellen died, the butterfly of a forgotten summer two years defunctive now - the substanceless shell, the shade impervious to any alteration of dissolution because of its very weightlessness: no body to be buried: just the shape [...] light paradox beneath the thousand pounds of marble monument' (*Ab*, 126). In *Fogo Morto*, Sinhá listens to a carol brought by the wind, which celebrates women's condition: 'Blessed be / O Mary beloved! / And the good hour/ In which you were born' (*FM*, 104). *Absalom, Absalom!* here speaks of death: *Fogo Morto*, of birth. Both find one another, however, as they signal - in *Fogo Morto* with a large dose of irony - the living death which is female existence in their fictional universe. And the figure of woman, in the two novels, may be read as that of a new Cassandra - she who forebodes imminent disaster, without being given any credit for it.