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Author	白川, 恵子(Shirakawa, Keiko)
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# From Uncle Tom to Shadrach:

## Liberation, Appropriation and Reconstruction in Four (Fugitive) Slave Narratives

Keiko Shirakawa

### 0. The Unusable Text

William Styron's "Shadrach" (1978) tells the story of a ninety-nine year old ex-slave's heart-warming relationship with a white Virginian family.<sup>1</sup> Set in Norfolk, in Virginia's Tidewater District in the summer of 1935, the narrative reflects the author's experiences at the age of ten through its narrator, Styron's alter ego Paul Whitehurst. In Styron's words, the narrative thus comprises "an imaginative reshaping of real events and are

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1. The story was also adapted into a film entitled *Shadrach* (1998), written and directed by Styron's daughter Susanna. The plot of the film follows the original closely, though the ending is slightly different. Specifically, the short story ends with Shadrach's death, and it is implied that the Dabney's will not bury him on their land, despite Shadrach's strong wishes, because interment on private property had become illegal. In contrast, the Dabneys in the film version grant Shadrach's wish, pretending to have him buried in a legally-sanctioned graveyard by paying for a counterfeit funeral, then burying him as promised on their own land. The film thus asserts the affectionate relationship of the ex-slave and the ex-plantation family more strongly than the short story, presenting a closer semblance of the old plantation myth than the story to viewers.

linked by a chain of memories” (“Author’s Note,” *A Tidewater Morning*<sup>2</sup>). As such, the narrative is fundamentally in accord with the proslavery arguments of antebellum Southerners such as Thomas R. Dew and George Fitzhugh, and thus offers a significant link between the racial discourses of America’s past and present.

Interestingly, however, the story has been neglected by literary critics, including even those who attacked Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* a decade earlier. Moreover, the Styron bibliography in Daniel W. Ross’s edited volume of critical studies on the author does not list “Shadrach,” even though it does include the other two stories that together with “Shadrach” constituted the collection *A Tidewater Morning*. The story thus amounts to what might be called an “unusable text”; in terms of literary influence, it is as if the story never appeared — or to borrow from the title of Peter Carroll’s study of the 1970s, “it seems like nothing happened.”

In spite of this literary neglect, however, “Shadrach” provides an important connection between the slave narratives of the antebellum years and those of more recent writings on race by both black and white authors. From the perspective of the Nat Turner controversy of the late 1960s as well as subsequent revisions of stereotypical antebellum “happy ducky” myths, Styron’s “Shadrach” affords a reconsideration of the idealized 1970s (re)presentations of the Old South that it epitomizes. In view of the thematic conventions of the slave-narrative genre, more generally, the eponymous old ex-slave Shadrach’s return to Virginia amounts to an inversion of both the slave-narrative and historical slaves’ escapes to freedom. Particularly

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2. *A Tidewater Morning*, which was published in 1993, included three short stories: “Love Day” (1985), “A Tidewater Morning” (1987), and “Shadrach” (1978). Each of these stories was originally published in *Esquire*.

in view of an interesting relationship between the central character of “Shadrach” and the Fugitive Slave Act included in the Compromise of 1850, moreover, the story plays an important role in delineating the tradition of the fugitive slave narrative from the antebellum period to the present, though it is ostensibly a mediocre, memoiristic fiction by a white Southern writer.

For the purposes of my argument, the slave narratives of three writers in particular serve to best represent this tradition up to Styron. America’s most famous slave narrative, first, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852; *UTC*) relates the stories of two slaves who contrast sharply: George Harris, who flees to Canada to escape bondage, and Uncle Tom, who is sold to a plantation in the Deep South, only to return at last to the plantation on which he was raised and happily lived, like Styron’s Shadrach. Secondly, the autobiography of Rev. Josiah Henson presents the narrative of a slave who escaped to Canada and became a prominent anti-slavery activist; interestingly, Henson served as the model for Stowe’s Uncle Tom (rather than her Harris), an appropriation with significant implications for Stowe’s racial polemics. Finally, the post-modern black writer Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (*FC*; 1976) deconstructs received notions concerning the fugitive slave and the faithful “house nigger” in its representation of the prototypical relationship between Henson and Uncle Tom.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the intertextuality of the slave narratives of Stowe, Henson, Reed, and Styron as they converge around the theme of the slave’s experience of escape from and return to the Old South. In Section 1, I identify and examine three precursors of Styron’s Shadrach, each related to this fictional character. In Section 2, I explore the relationship between Stowe’s Uncle Tom, who longs to return to the Kentucky plantation where he dwelled, adoring his master, and Henson, the fugitive slave whose strange experience has been identified as the inspiration for Uncle

Tom's life. In Section 3, I analyze Ishmael Reed's neo-slave narrative *FC*, showing how antebellum stories have been reconstructed in modern black metafiction. In Section 4, I conclude by speculating upon the underlying reasons for the neglect of Styron's "Shadrach" to date.

### 1. Four Shadrachs

The plot of Styron's "Shadrach" is straightforward. At somewhere "between fifteen and twenty-five years" of age (56),<sup>3</sup> the African-American slave was sold from the plantation of the Dabney family in Norfolk to a plantation in Alabama. However, as an old ex-slave sensing that his days are few, Shadrach walks from Alabama back to his ancestral homeland in the Tidewater District of Virginia. At the time of Shadrach's return, the latter Dabneys have been ruined by the Great Depression, and they suffer from extreme poverty. Nonetheless, they take in this senile black stranger and care for him until he passes away peacefully. Speculating upon the reason for Shadrach's return from Alabama to Virginia, the narrator Paul supposes that Shadrach undertook his journey "out of no longing for the former bondage, but to find an earlier innocence" (73).

The character Shadrach himself says hardly anything during the course of the story, but nonetheless he makes a powerful impression on the reader due to the strikingly dark color of his skin,<sup>4</sup> his obscure Negro dialect, and

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3. The narrative describes Shadrach reporting the date of his sale from Virginia to Alabama inconsistently due to his advanced age: "Once he said 'fifty,' meaning 1850, and another time he said 'fifty-five' [...]" (56). Regardless of which date is correct, the years between 1850 and 1855 were the harshest for fugitive slaves and abolitionists in both the North and the South.
  4. The narrator describes Shadrach's skin color as follows: "He was astonishingly black. I had never seen a Negro of that impenetrable hue: it was blackness of such intensity that it reflected no light at all, achieving a virtual obliteration" ↗

his childish yet solemn calmness. The mystery surrounding his return to the Dabneys is also a major source of the reader's engagement in the story. Yet more provocative than either Shadrach's characterization or Paul's speculations on his return is his name: as the title of the story, the name "Shadrach" is a central focus of interest, and thus merits consideration in terms of its resonances and associations.

At least three figures named Shadrach can be identified who closely relate to Styron's protagonist. The first is a biblical character with whom Styron links his Shadrach as follows:

He [Shadrach] looked older than all the patriarchs of Genesis whose names flooded my mind in a Sunday school litany: Lamech, Noah, Enoch, and that perdurable old Jewish fossil Methuselah. [...] I sensed the way he observed our approach; above the implacable sweet grin there were flickers of wise recognition. His presence remained worrisomely biblical; I felt myself drawn to him with an almost devout compulsion, as if he were the prophet Elijah sent to bring truth, light, the Word. (48–49)

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↘ of facial features and taking on a mysterious undertone that had the blue-gray of ashes" (48). Shadrach's total blackness may allude to a character in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) who is also named Shadrach. Morrison's Shadrach is an insane man who symbolizes the fear of unexpected death. As a young man on the battlefield, this Shadrach witnesses the gory deaths of a soldier whose head is destroyed but whose body continues to move, and this experience deprives him of his sanity. It is noteworthy that this Shadrach recognizes his own presence and identifies himself by the blackness of his face. Although the episode of Morrison's Shadrach does not directly relate to that of historical Shadrach Minkins, nor to the return trip of Styron's Shadrach, it expressionistically represent black humanity and transcendence, as well as the presumed predicament of African Americans.

In the Judeo-Christian culture in which Styron and his narrator Paul were raised, it is quite natural to form the sort of Biblical associations related in this passage.

Yet the Shadrach of the Bible is an obscure figure, one of the three faithful Jews in the Book of Daniel, and the biblical story of this figure therefore bears closer consideration. In Daniel, Shadrach and his two faithful fellow Jews lived under the reign of a Babylonian king who commanded that his people all worship a golden idol that he had ordered built. However, Shadrach refused to worship the king's idol out of devotion to God, and consequently the angry king cast him into a blazing furnace. However, God witnessed Shadrach's ordeal and protected his faithful servant from harm: instead of being consumed, Shadrach danced gleefully in the flames. Impressed by this miracle, the king acquiesced to the god who had protected this believer, declaring that anyone who spoke anywhere in any language against this god would be cut into pieces. The king then raised Shadrach and the two other Jews to positions of prominence.

Like the biblical Shadrach, Styron's character is also a faithful adherent to his beliefs — in this case, his belief in the Old Virginia and his sense of belonging to the Dabneys. Although the financial decline of this family had led them to sell Shadrach to another plantation in the Deep South, Shadrach held no grudge against the Dabneys, for he thought of himself as one of them. He walked over one hundred miles to return to the former plantation in his old age, because for him it was a holy place. Shadrach's faith in the Old Virginia is thus analogous to the biblical Shadrach's faith in God, and much as the biblical Shadrach's adherence to his faith ultimately led to his salvation, Styron's Shadrach is finally embraced again by the Dabneys, and thereafter dies in peace. Styron's Shadrach thus constitutes a sign of the religious authority of the Southern myth; Styron (re)presents a

biblical figure of piety as one who is faithful to Virginia.

The second precursor of Styron's Shadrach is presented in the list of the rebels attached to Thomas R. Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner (CNT)*; this Shadrach is one of the black slaves who participated in Turner's Rebellion of 1831 — which also took place in the Tidewater District of Virginia wherein "Shadrach" is set. According to the trial record compiled by Henry Irving Tragle,

Jack and Shadrach negro men slaves the property of Nathaniel Simmons who stand indicated for Treason, & c. were again set to the bar by the Sheriff of this County into whose custody they were heretofore committed. And the Court being of opinion that a slave cannot be tried in this court for Treason. Therefore it is ordered that the said Jack and Shadrach be discharged from further prosecution in this behalf. (217)

No information is provided either in Gray's *CNT* or Tragle's trial report about either what constituted the "treason" of the Shadrach mentioned in this passage or the circumstances of his acquittal; nor is there any extant documentation of his life before or after the trial. It is not certain that Styron took a particular interest in the rebel Shadrach, and therefore a direct connection between the rebel Shadrach and Styron's character cannot be asserted conclusively.

Nonetheless, the coincidence of the names and circumstances of the two characters are suggestive. Troublesome slaves in the northernmost antebellum slave states were frequently sold at a loss to plantations in the Deep South as the most practical means of getting rid of them, and such a fate is easy to imagine as having been that of the Shadrach of Gray's



*CNT*. After such a sale, this Shadrach would have been excluded from the structure of the paternalistic plantation pseudo-family, much as Styron's Shadrach was excluded after his sale to a plantation in Alabama. The two slave Shadrachs of the Tidewater District may therefore be understood to correspond closely, and the strong affection that Styron's Shadrach harbors for his homeland thus effectively signals Styron's admiration for Old Virginia.

The third Shadrach — the most significant for my argument — was a historical figure named Shadrach Minkins who lived around the same time as Styron's fictional character, and who was also once a slave in the Tidewater District. Yet Shadrach Minkins's life followed a significantly different course from that of Styron's Shadrach. To locate Minkins in context, let us consider the historical circumstances within which his story unfolded.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 — which strengthened controls over slave flight by providing for the punishment of whites who assisted fugitive slaves — angered many Northerners, leading to their increased involvement in the slavery argument. Already aroused by the incursions of Southern slave hunters into the Northern states, abolitionists increasingly undertook radical antislavery activities, with prominent ministers including Charles and Henry Ward Beechers, Gilbert Haven, and George B. Cheever advocating adherence not to the laws of Congress but rather to higher moral laws. Moreover, antislavery activists including Samuel J. May, Theodore Parker, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, advocating “practical Christianity” (Stewart 154), undertook public protests against the Fugitive Slave Law, and black communities increased their involvement in the activities of the Underground Railroad.

On the morning of February 15, 1851,<sup>5</sup> an African-American man

named Shadrach Minkins<sup>6</sup> was arrested in Boston under the provisions of this notorious law. This Shadrach, who had been working as a waiter in a coffee shop in the center of the city, had been identified as a fugitive slave from Norfolk, Virginia. It seemed certain that he would be returned to Norfolk, but an angry group of black Bostonians stormed the courtroom where he was being tried, freed him, and spirited him away to Concord, Massachusetts, from which he reached Montreal, Canada with the aid of the Boston Vigilance Committee.

Shadrach Minkins was thus the first fugitive slave seized under the Fugitive Slave Law who nonetheless escaped to freedom. Anti-slavery activist Theodore Parker praised the dramatic rescue of this Shadrach, characterizing the act as “the noblest done in Boston since the destruction of the Tea” (Stewart 155)<sup>7</sup>; Shadrach’s rescue was thus a major achievement

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5. Higginson and Collison both date the Shadrach rescue as having occurred on February 15, 1851. However, Packer reports the rescue to have taken place on February 18, three days later.
  6. After his escape from slavery, Shadrach Minkins, as he was legally named as a slave, called himself both Fredrick Wilkins and Fredrick Jenkins (Collison 1).
  7. For more on Minkins’s rescue, see Stewart, Packer, Higginson’s “Cheerful,” and Collison. Collison in particular provides a new and interesting perspective on Minkins, examining both his life as a slave in Norfolk, Virginia and his life after his rescue in Montreal — a life that had been neglected by historians previously. Collison offers two possible explanations for this neglect. First, compared to other fugitive slave cases in Boston such as those of Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims, the rescue of Minkins happened so quickly — less than three hours after his arraignment — and was so effective, insofar as he was never recaptured, that it offered little detail to draw the interest of historians. Secondly, since Minkins’s rescuers were all black Bostonians, the case held less appeal for historians — who have predominantly been white — than other cases that involved white abolitionists (3). This second possible reason for the neglect of the Minkins case, however, is at least partially inconsistent with the suggestion by Stewart that ↗

for the black and abolitionist communities of Boston. At the same time, however, the rescue led to strengthened enforcement of the law.

This case of Shadrach's rescue and flight contrasts significantly with the return of Styron's Shadrach to the Dabneys. Although both Shadrachs lived in the same time and place, and although both left the Virginia plantations where they were slaves around 1850, the historical Shadrach escaped to Boston, was captured, was rescued, and ultimately reached freedom in Canada, whereas Styron's Shadrach was sold to a plantation in Alabama, from which he never aspired to travel anywhere but "Old Virginny" (49, 50, 52). Beginning in Virginia, a moderate slave state at the border of North and South, the two Shadrachs thus reach locales that are polar opposites: the Deep South and the free country of Canada. The intermediate setting of the Tidewater District is particularly significant, moreover, as the location of Turner's Rebellion, insofar as Styron's description of the insurrection in his *CNT* essentially supports the old plantation myth. In "Shadrach", Styron thus constructs a reality that is the opposite of that of Shadrach Minkins, one in which the strong bonds connecting slave and master endured even into the 1930s.

Yet contrary to Styron's idealized Old South, late antebellum Virginia confronted institutional cracks in the slavery system that opened as Northern

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↘ Minkins's freedom was attained with the help of white abolitionists as well as blacks: "In 1850, Parker, who never claimed to be a nonresistant, took command of the Boston vigilance committee, which now included [Thomas Wentworth] Higginson, Wendell Phillips, and Samuel Gridley Howe, and the black escapee Lewis Hayden. In 1851 the muscular Hayden led a group of blacks into a Boston courtroom and forcibly rescued a much-surprised fugitive Fred Wilkins (locally known as Shadrach). [...] Higginson, who was also running for Congress at the time as a Free-Soil Democrat, likewise defended publicly Hayden's recourse to force" (155).

antislavery sentiment penetrated into the South, giving rise not only to increased resistance and flight by slaves but also to support even from some Southern whites for fugitive slaves (Schwartz, Chapter 5). Styron's Shadrach figuratively mends these cracks; in this regard, his narrative emerges as a typical conservative Southern reaction to the rescue and flight of Shadrach Minkins.

Styron's narrative technique, blurring the boundaries between this real Shadrach and Styron's imaginative character, thus illuminates Styron's own orientation toward race and slavery. Yet Shadrach's dual identity as both a fugitive slave and an obedient returnee to Old Virginia — an identity that merges flight and return — more importantly affords insight into the structure of appropriation throughout the slave narrative tradition, as the discussion of Henson, Stowe, and Reed in the following two sections will illustrate.

## **2. The Politics of Appropriation**

The linkage of fact and fiction in "Shadrach" — specifically, the association of a slave's flight to Canada and his embrace of Southern ways — is not original to Styron; on the contrary, it is a common narrative strategy that recurs in both antebellum and subsequent slave narratives. Numerous pre-Civil War slave narratives presented the narrator's escape from the humiliation and exploitation of slavery as the climax of his/her experience, with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 marking a significant watershed in the development of this tendency. In this regard, it bears considering that whereas the first political achievement of anti-slavery activism that followed the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act was the rescue of Shadrach Minkins, the first major abolitionist literary response to this legislation was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which established the narratology of

subsequent slave narratives much as Shadrach Minkins's rescue and flight to Canada set an influential political example.

This raises the questions of how Stowe, who elevated the slave narrative genre to national prominence, may have been influenced by the Minkins case, and of how Shadrach Minkins's experience relates to the slave narrative genre in general. Although Stowe's awareness of Minkins during her writing of *UTC* is a matter of conjecture — as there is no direct evidence that she knew of the case — five circumstances amount to an argument for relating Stowe, Shadrach Minkins, and the slave narrative tradition down to Styron.

First, *UTC*, the Shadrach rescue, and subsequent slave narratives were all, to varying degrees, responses to the Fugitive Slave Law. Secondly, the Beecher Family was involved with the Underground Railroad, and it is therefore likely that Stowe was cognizant of the Minkins case, which drew the attention of many prominent white abolition activists. Thirdly, according to Stowe's son and grandson, Charles and Lyman Stowe, the author met Josiah Henson at the home of her brother, Lyman Beecher, in Boston in January of 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Law was being debated; Henson was an escapee from slavery who, like Minkins, had fled to Canada, where he became a prominent minister, anti-slavery activist, and supporter of fugitive slaves and lived to the age of ninety-four. Fourthly, Stowe is believed to have modeled her character Uncle Tom on Henson,<sup>8</sup> who at the time of their meeting had already published his own autobiographical narrative. Finally, the contrasting cases of the fictional and factual Shadrachs — Styron's character and Shadrach Minkins — significantly parallel those

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8. For more on the debate concerning Stowe's modeling of Uncle Tom on Henson, see Hill and Winks. See also Stowe's *Key to Uncle Toms Cabin*, Chapter VI.

of Uncle Tom and Josiah Henson: whereas the obedient Uncle Tom longs for his old Kentucky and finally returns there even after he dies, the resistant Henson escaped from his master and fled to a free country.

In regard to the final two points here, it is worth noting the irony of the distinct differences between Tom and Henson, despite Stowe's patterning of the former on the latter. That is, despite Stowe's anti-slavery intentions and activism, her Uncle Tom amounts to a typical depiction of the submissive slave whose example supports the old plantation myth. Moreover, despite the fame and freedom Henson won by escaping from slavery, he is nonetheless ultimately an exploited figure insofar as he provided the model for the rhetorical figure of Uncle Tom.

The narratives of Stowe's Uncle Tom and the historical Josiah Henson<sup>9</sup>

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9. Josiah Henson was born on June 15, 1789, on the plantation of Dr. Josiah McPherson in Charles County, Maryland. At the age of five, he was sold to a tyrannical master named Robb, and shortly thereafter to Issac Riley. In his youth, Henson was maimed for life by the white overseer of one of his master's neighbors. With his reputation for faithfulness, Henson was trusted by Riley to such a degree that in 1825 he was given the task of transferring some of Riley's other slaves to the plantation of Riley's brother in Kentucky. En route, the other Negroes tried to convince Henson to free both them and himself, but he refused, delivering his charges to Riley's brother. At the age of eighteen, Henson became a Christian, and after a time, a Methodist preacher. In 1829, Henson negotiated successfully with his master for manumission, but as he was preparing himself for freedom, he realized that his master was planning to betray him by taking him to New Orleans and selling him. As he was sailing to New Orleans with his master, he had the opportunity at one point to murder Riley and his white employees, but recalling his religious beliefs, he resigned himself to his fate. However, upon their arrival in New Orleans — as Riley was about to sell Henson — the master fell ill, and Henson subsequently returned to Kentucky with his sick master. Henson escaped soon after. He traveled through Indiana, Ohio, sailed to Buffalo, ↗

thus embody the central thesis and antithesis of the slave narrative genre: flight to Canada and return to the South — themes that both inform and are informed by the Fugitive Slave Law and the Shadrach Minkins case. Yet in examining the narratives of Tom and Henson, even greater significance emerges through a consideration of the rhetorical process of rewriting by which the former of these two rewrote the latter in Stowe's intentional adaptation of episodes from Henson's narrative to *UTC*.

It must be noted, however, that although Stowe is widely believed to have modeled Uncle Tom on Henson, as mentioned above, it is not certain that this was truly the case. In her essay, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Key; 1853), Stowe herself cites Henson as the source of Uncle Tom's fidelity and piety: "A last instance parallel with that of Uncle Tom is to be found in the published memoirs of the venerable Josiah Henson, now, as we have said, a clergyman in Canada" (50); however, the phrase "[a] last instance" allows for the possibility of other models, and indeed, Stowe also relates Tom's characteristics to those of other "valuable negro[es]" (45). According to Robin W. Winks, Stowe always avoided any direct identification of Tom with specific historical figures, writing to the editor of the *Indianapolis News* in 1882 that Uncle Tom was "not the biography of any one man"

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↘ and reached Upper Canada in 1830. At the age of forty-one, he became a free man. In Canada, he worked as a farm laborer, preached, learned to read, became an anti-slavery activist, and helped organize and establish a settlement for fugitive slaves in Dawn Township, Upper Canada. He also participated in abolitionist activities in the United States. During a fundraising trip to England, discussed below, he met numerous secular and religious leaders who supported his enterprise. In addition to encountering Queen Victoria, he was invited to meet with Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister of England. Henson died on May 5, 1883, at the age of ninety-four. For more on his life and times, see *Father Henson's Story of His Own Life*. For the publication history of his autobiography, see n. 11.

(qtd. in Winks 128). Moreover, Stowe asserted in her correspondence that Henson had visited her in Andover, but he could not have done so before she completed or nearly completed her writing of *UCT* (Winks 127–28). In sum, it is not certain that she could have been influenced by Henson directly.

In a fundamental sense, furthermore, Tom and Henson have little in common. Although Henson was a pious man and had been trusted by his master when he was a slave, he nonetheless decided to escape, and succeeded in doing so, becoming a prominent anti-slavery activist in both the United States and Canada. In contrast, Tom is sold twice to plantations in the Deep South for financial reason, cruelly abused on one of them (the Legree plantation), and finally beaten to death, but never once complains much less attempts to escape. Indeed, Tom's heroic efforts at the end of his life, culminating in his burial near his beloved young Kentucky master, bring to mind not Henson's narrative but the plot of Styron's "Shadrach."

Despite the differences between Tom and Henson, however, Stowe nonetheless drew on the following elements of Henson's character and narrative in creating Tom. As a slave, Henson served his master as a faithful supervisor of other slaves, not betraying his master even when called upon to transport other slaves to another plantation, despite being tempted to free them. As he dreamed of seeking freedom himself at one point, Henson considered murdering his master, but immediately reminded himself that as a Christian he could never do so. Finally, when his master fell ill, Henson cared for him as though he were a close friend, though his master was about to sell him.

Yet in providing Tom with characteristics and experiences similar to Henson's, Stowe added attributes reflecting what George M. Frederickson calls "romantic racism," a notion of blacks' as simple and possessed of a childish religious faith. Henson's life is thus subsumed within that of the



feminine and tender-minded Tom.

It is noteworthy that Stowe's explicit identification of Tom with Henson in the passage from *Key* cited above was probably a response to an attempt on Stowe's part to forestall or evade contemporary criticism of the authenticity of her portrayal of slavery. It is well established that Stowe herself had little practical experience of the slavery system, and that she relied on books in forming her understanding of it. Partly as a result, the representation of plantation life and characters affiliated with the slavery system in *UTC* were harshly criticized not only in the South but in the North as well.<sup>10</sup> The subtitle of *Key* is thus "Original Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded, Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work," as if Stowe intended the work to establish the authenticity of her sources and the plausibility of her story. Stowe most likely asserted the connection between Tom and Henson in *Key* for this purpose, for Henson was already famous at the time *Key* was published.

Indeed, Henson's renown had spread even to Europe. On a fundraising trip for a manual labor institution he headed, Henson traveled to England in 1849 with samples of lumber that the institution had produced; Henson hoped to sell this lumber, and towards this end he exhibited the samples at the World's Fair in London, where he attracted the attention of the Queen of England. Henson described his encounter with the Queen as follows:

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10. Winks comments on the attacks on *UTC* and Stowe's reactions to them as follows: "Assuredly, the virulence of the Southern attack upon her novel, upon not only its sentiments, its plot, and its style, but also upon its allegedly factual base, disturbed her. Even friendly reviewers doubted her veracity: *The Times* of London found Tom too pure, too perfect to believe, and thought Mrs. Stowe's 'honest zeal' had outrun her discretion" (Winks 122).

Among others the Queen of England, Victoria, preceded by her guide, and attended by her cortege, paused to view me and my property. I uncovered my head and saluted her as respectfully as I could, and she was pleased with perfect grace to return my salutation. “Is he indeed a fugitive slave?” I heard her inquire; and the answer was, “He is indeed, and that is his work.” (191)

The following passage relating Henson’s response to the Fair further underscores his unusual prominence as a free black man and presents his reflections on his unique status:

But among all the exhibitors from every nation in Europe, and from Asia, and America, and the Isles of the Sea, there was not a single black man but myself. There were negroes there from Africa, brought to be exhibited, but no exhibitors but myself. Though my condition was wonderfully changed from what it was in my childhood and youth, yet it was a little saddening to reflect that my people were not more largely represented there. The time will yet come, I trust, when such a state of things will no longer exist. (192)

With his enthusiasm for improving his people on the basis of Christian principles, and his fame in both the Old and New Worlds, Henson offered Stowe an ideal model for Tom. Perceived since the publication of his autobiography as loyal, devoted, and self-sacrificing — whether to whites as a slave or to blacks as an ex-slave — Henson lent his popular image to that of Uncle Tom, who in turn was identified with and reinforced the fame of Henson in a multiplier effect that accompanied the success of *UTC*.

For his part, Henson is understood to have handled comparisons

between himself and Stowe's Tom carefully. Whenever he was introduced as the model for Tom, Henson was believed to have humorously asserted his own independent identity, disavowing a complete correspondence between himself and the fictional character. Henson thus addressed one audience as follows:

It has been spread abroad that ‘“Uncle Tom” is coming,’ and that is what has brought you here. Now allow me to say that my name is not Tom, and never was Tom, and that I do not want to have any other name inserted in the newspapers for me than my own. My name is Josiah Henson, always was, and always will be. I never change my colors. (Loud laughter.) I would not if I could, and could not if I would. (Renewed laughter.) Well, inquiry in the minds of some has led to a deal of inquiry on the part of others. You have read and heard some persons says that, ““Uncle Tom” was dead, and how can he be here? It is an imposition that is being practised on us.’ [...] Very well, I do not blame you for saying that. [...] A great many have come to me in this country and asked me if I was not dead. (Laughter.) Says I, ‘Dead?’ Says he, ‘Yes, I heard you were dead, and read you were.’ ‘Well,’ says I; ‘I heard so too, but I never believe it yet. (Laughter.) I thought in all probability I would have found it out as soon as anybody else.’ (qtd. in Winks 126)

Despite Henson's comical separation of his identity from that of Tom, the confusion engendered by the convergent figures of Henson and Tom impinged on Henson's own narrative, as this passage makes clear.

Beyond the public's difficulty in distinguishing fact from fiction, moreover, Henson's autobiography was intentionally revised to take

advantage of his unexpected identification with Tom. Of course, revising one's account of one's experiences is not in itself unusual; American writers have done so since Benjamin Franklin, and the ex-slave Frederick Douglass wrote no less than three autobiographies. Yet the shadow of Uncle Tom — which fell over Henson even after his death — renders the revisions that were made to Henson's autobiography particularly interesting.

Nine versions of Henson's autobiography were produced in all, as Winks documents in his "A Note on the Printing History of Henson's Autobiography." Winks also shows that after 1877, Henson's writings were edited and/or ghost-written by John Lobb, an English clergyman and editor; Lobb included the name "Uncle Tom" in the title of versions to which he contributed and listed his own name on the title pages of a number of versions.<sup>11</sup> Comparing two of the earlier editions, Sister Mary Ellen Doyle

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11. Henson's autobiography first appeared in the following editions, according to Winks (132): *Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada. Narrated by Himself* (as ghost-written by Samuel A. Eliot and published in Boston in 1849), *The Life of Josiah Henson, formerly a Slave: As Narrated by Himself* (published in London and Edinburgh in 1851), and *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (published in Boston in 1858 and in London in 1859). All subsequent editions were edited by John Lobb, who usually listed himself as editor on the title page. The titles of these editions all made reference to "Uncle Tom," as the following list of these editions reflects: "*Uncle Tom's Story of His Life*": *An Autobiography of Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom")*, *From 1789 to 1876* (published in London in 1877), *The Young People's Illustrated Edition of "Uncle Tom's" Story of His Life (From 1789 to 1877)* (published in London in 1877), *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom")*: *From 1789 to 1877* (published in London in 1878), "*Truth Stranger Than Fiction*": *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom")*, *From 1789 to 1879* (published in Boston in 1879), *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson ("Uncle Tom") From 1789 to 1881* (published in ↗

concludes that “[t]he 1851 edition may be called a ‘pure’ slave narrative, factual and terse, while the 1858 has creative elaborations proper to the genre of fiction” (181); as Francis Foster observes, the publication of *UTC* and *Key* undoubtedly influenced the changes observed by Doyle (146–47). Although the fabrications that were introduced into Henson’s autobiography may have benefited not only Stowe, Lobb, and other abolitionists, but also Henson himself, it is ironic that his queer fictional-factual life was thus created and controlled by a white author and a white editor.

Furthermore, as Walter Fisher observes in keeping with the discussion above, “It is one of the ironies of American history that Josiah Henson, the prototype of ‘Uncle Tom,’ should have been in his total life so much the opposite of what Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional projection of a segment of his life ultimately came to make of him” (v). As Fisher implies, Henson, like Shadrach, was the product of an amalgamation of rhetoric and politics who was effectively recaptured after his escape and flight to Canada. In reflecting the political intentions of Stowe in *UTC* by revising and being revised by his autobiography, Henson was engulfed by the maelstrom of America’s national narrative of slavery. By recreating himself in view of Uncle Tom, a world-famous emblem of anti-slavery advocacy, Henson — in the idealistic role of the pious fugitive — was ultimately more constrained in freedom than Tom was in slavery. The title of the second edition of Henson’s

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↘ Ontario and London in 1881), and *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (“Uncle Tom”) From 1789 to 1883* (published in London in 1890). With Lobb’s shrewd editorial manipulation, Henson’s narrative found favor with Sunday schools, and sold a quarter of million copies, though Henson received little financial benefit from these sales. Interestingly, Lobb advertised the narrative sensationally as “dealing with ‘Legree, who maimed Josiah Henson for Life,’ and with ‘Eva, who was saved from Drowning by Josiah Henson’” (Winks 127).

narrative, “Truth Stranger than Fiction,” thus proves an apt characterization of Henson’s life.

### 3. The Fall of the House of Swill

The narratological thread that ties the Uncle Tom-Josiah Henson stories to those of Shadrach Minkins and Styron’s Shadrach extends as well to the postmodern black metafictionist Ishmael Reed. In his novel *Flight to Canada*, Reed rewrites the experience of slavery in full view of the ways in which slave narratives by whites and blacks differ, focusing specifically on the rhetorical exploitation by Stowe of Henson: in Reed’s picaresque story of a slave who escapes from Virginia to Canada, the slave — like Styron’s Shadrach but with a very different significance — returns to Virginia in the end.

Reed’s *FC* employs numerous historical figures as characters — including Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Queen Victoria, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Wells Brown — but the focus of the narrative is Stowe. As the title of the first part of the novel, “Naughty Harriet,” reflects, Reed condemns Stowe for stealing Henson’s narrative — the basis for her Uncle Tom — for her own considerable profit:

She’s read Josiah Henson’s book. That Harriet was alert. [...] It [Henson’s narrative] was short, but it was his. It was all he had. His story. A man’s story is his gris-gris,<sup>12</sup> you know. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that is himself. It’s like robbing a man of his Etheric Double. (8)

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12. The term “gris-gris” refers to an African good luck charm.

This assessment informs the plot of *FC*, which follows the ostensibly opposite paths taken by two slaves who belong to Arthur Swill, a decadent Virginian who names his plantation “Camelot.” On one hand, Raven Quickskill is “the first one of Swill’s slaves to read, the first to write and the first to run away” (14). On the other, Uncle Robin seems to be patterned on the obedient, childish, master-admiring figure of Stowe’s Tom, but emerges as sufficiently cunning and intelligent to usurp the entire Swill plantation. Together, these two subversive blacks succeed in reversing the planter-slave power structure, collaborating to (re)write the slave narrative as such.

More specifically, Uncle Robin is presented within the novel as the model for Stowe’s Uncle Tom. The character Stowe is particularly interested in the fame that Robin wins for taking over his master’s residence, and Stowe plans to write Robin’s story for profit. However, Robin understands the white on black structure of literary exploitation — the structure of the real Stowe’s exploitation of Henson — and refuses to share his story with her. Instead, it is Raven who ultimately writes Robin’s story, and in doing so preserves the integrity of the slave’s narrative (173–74). Thus, *FC* functions to restore the voices of African Americans that have been appropriated and utilized by white authors throughout American literary history; that is, Reed’s retelling of the slave narrative effectively revises that history.

Parody and satire are the driving literary techniques of this neo-slave narrative. Arthur Swill, for example, is clearly a parody of Poe’s Roderick Usher. Swill’s sister, Vivian, like Madeline Usher, is likened to one of the living dead, and in this role precipitates the burning of her opium-addicted brother to death (135–37). After Arthur is reduced to ashes, the Swill family completely collapses and Robin happily takes over the house. Insofar as Poe was regarded as a proslavery author, Reed in *FC* contrasts what might be termed “the fall of the house of Swill” with the dramatic rise of the black

slave.

Insight into the victory of the slave protagonists of *FC* is afforded by the bird imagery invoked by the names of Robin and Raven. The birds associated with the two slaves may be understood as tricksters<sup>13</sup> who perform the function that Henry Louis Gates Jr., describes as Signifyin(g), “a uniquely black rhetorical concept, entirely textual or linguistic, by which a second statement or figure repeats, or reverses the first” (*Figures*, 49). If Raven, for example — the sort of subversive black who strikes fear into the minds of whites like Poe — outwits his masters, escapes oppression, and finds a voice for speaking out on his own terms, he exerts a fatal pressure upon the white-dominated order of society by doing so. Literacy and the ability to revise the narratives of their own lives empower these two subversive black tricksters to gain freedom.

Let us explore specifically the contrasting ways in which Robin and Raven, as tricksters, use literacy and language. Uncle Robin, wearing the mask of the good slave, reassures his master that the Swill plantation is his Canada (19). However, after Swill’s death, Robin falsifies his master’s will to make the plantation his own:

Well, anyway, Swill had something called dyslexia. Words came to him scrambled and jumbled. I became his reading and writing. Like a computer, only this computer left itself Swill’s whole estate. Property joining forces with property. I left me his whole estate. I’m it, too. Me

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13. In an interview with John Domini in 1977, Reed remarked that he based Raven Quickskill on a Tlingit Indian myth. For the Tlingits, tribal totems — including the raven’s crest — are humorous, satirical objects. Like Signifyin’ Monkey in African American folklore, the Tlingits’ Raven is a little creature that outwits bigger, more powerful ones. See Dick, 134.



and it got more it. (171)

The double irony of Robin's tricky subterfuge is that the master's movable property — Robin himself — comes to dispossess the master of his immovable property, and that the slave gains the upper hand over his master precisely because the slave is literate and the master illiterate. The positions of master and slave, in both respects, are thus reversed.

In contrast, Raven employs his literacy to forge a slave passport and to alter Swill's slave register. Most significantly, having quickly mastered the skill of creative writing, Raven Quickskill writes a poem entitled "Flight to Canada" based on the conceit of a fugitive slave writing a note to his master. Raven sends this poem to a publisher, who accepts it and pays Raven the money he needs to escape to Canada in reality. The reader witnesses the trick of the trickster Raven writing "Flight to Canada" within the framework of *Flight to Canada*, a text thus created by another trickster, Reed. Raven understands that

it was his writing that got him to Canada. "Flight to Canada" was responsible for getting him to Canada. And so for him, freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo. Other has their way of HooDoo, but his was writing. It fascinated him, it possessed him; his typewriter was hid drum he danced to. (88–89)

In contrast to other fugitive slaves, who write their autobiographies after winning freedom, writing is a means of obtaining freedom for Reed's Raven. That is, writing precedes escape, since writing is "responsible for getting him [Raven] to Canada," and since it affords the emergence of Raven's true nature. Much as Raven and Robin outwit their master in *FC*, Reed reverses

the conventional order of the escape-writing relationship, replacing it with a writing-escape relationship. All three of these tricksters thus deconstruct and reconstruct African-American narrative.

More generally, a central concept of the multicultural narrative that Reed pursues in his fiction — which is more than simply African-American revenge parody — is that of “HooDoo,” a spiritual practice amalgamating the practices of various cultures, and thus de-centering the dominant intrinsically. Concerning the significance of HooDoo in *FC*, Reed states in a 1977 interview:

I call it *vodoun*, “VooDoo,” because this is what *vodoun* does, it mixes many traditions. It may have an African base, but it’s adaptable, eclectic. It’s able to blend with Christianity, with Native American forms, and with many others. I try to do the same in my art. For example, *Flight to Canada* uses European forms, Native American forms, Afro-American forms; It’s syncretic. (Dick 137; emphasis original)

As Reed asserts, *FC* is indeed a “syncretic” narrative that represents not only the oppression of blacks but that of other peoples as well. The many voices of characters incorporated within its cultural syncretism cannot be circumscribed by any single race, value system, or history; Reed thus adds a new dimension to the conventional style and structure of narrative.

Let us consider the diversity of characters confronting oppression in *FC*. First, the father and brother of Raven’s girlfriend, the Indian princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, are killed by the white rogue Yankee Jack before the story opens. The skull of her father is subsequently polished and used as an ashtray in a tavern (146), and her brother’s body, preserved by taxidermy,

is exhibited in a museum diorama, standing upright in a huge log boat beside a shaman figure (154). After these murders, Quaw Quaw is carried away, raised, and sent to the best Eastern schools by Yankee Jack, who had been attracted to her all along; as a result of this experience, she comes “*under a white spell and has no feeling for her own people’s culture*” (147; emphasis original). Quaw Quaw’s story is thus a perfect inversion of the conventional Indian captivity narrative, in which whites are attacked by Native Americans, and their children are carried off and raised as members of the tribe.

In addition to African and Native Americans, white women are also the victims of dominant white men in Reed’s neo-slave narrative. Swill ignores his wife, for example, allowing her to be humiliated and abused even by a black servant woman (112–13, 115–18); after Swill’s death, the distraught wife is sent to a sanitarium, and then to a rehabilitation program for the wealthy (172). To consider another example, the body of Swill’s dead sister is molested by her own brother, who is a necrophiliac (135).

In each of these examples of oppressed white women, it is noteworthy that the conventional structure of the ruler-ruled relationship is deconstructed, as it is in the cases of the African-American protagonists and the Native-American Quaw Quaw. Although white mistresses conventionally held authority over black servants in the Southern order, it is the black slave who has the upper hand over Swill’s wife. Although Swill’s dead sister is indeed humiliated, her shade exacts vengeance upon her brother. The former of these two examples represents an unusual form of exploitation within exploitation, and both examples portray resistance to exploitation.

Other conventional structures challenged by *FC* include the realistic framework of the traditional slave narrative, which is undermined by the fusion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the novel. The antebellum

cast of *FC* lives in the modern world, surrounded by technology and mass media. The assassination of Lincoln is a broadcast event akin to that of the Kennedy assassination in the real world, complete with a reporter pointing a microphone in the face of Mary Todd, the president's wife (130–34). Lounging in her bed, Swill's wife enjoys watching the "Beecher Hour" on television (110). Stowe, whom Swill's black slave woman describes as an "old crazy [...] doin nothing but causing a mess" (111), uses the telephone to speak with Uncle Robin in the course of trying to make the further mess of stealing his story (173–74). Such comical anachronisms foreground the complex narrative tensions interwoven throughout the experience of slavery, and furthermore suggest that racial oppression has continued into the present.

In general, the multiracial panoply of oppressed voices interacting in Reed's satirical postmodern narrative decenters the racial and social dominance of whites. With regard to this decentering, Reed fundamentally revises not only the conventions of the slave narrative but the master texts of African American history, as two final examples portraying Robin's thoughts on himself and Raven illuminate.

First, as Robin relaxes on the large, comfortable premises of the plantation at the end of the novel, he considers the contrast between Uncle Tom, with whom he identifies, and Nat Turner:

*I couldn't do for no Canada. Not me. I'm too old. I done had my Canadas. I'm like the fellow who, when they asked why he sent for a helicopter to get him out of prison, answered, "I was old to go over the wall." That's the way I feel. Too old to go over the wall. Somebody had to stay. Might as well have been me and Judy [Robin's wife]. Yeah, they get down on me an Tom. But who's the fool? Nat Turner or us? Nat said*

*he was going to do this. Was going to do that. Said he had a mission. Said his destiny was a divine one. Said that fate had chosen him. That the gods were handling him and speaking through him. Now Nat's dead and gone for these many years, and here I am master of a dead man's house. Which one is the fool? One who has been dead for these many years or a master in a dead man's house. I'll bet they'll be trying to figure that one out for a long time. A long, long time. (178; emphasis original)*

Robin's perspective thus both challenges and subverts the conventional understanding of two mythic black figures who have long been regarded as polar opposites. In black history, Uncle Tom has been viewed as a figure of ignominy, and Nat Turner as a hero, but Robin sees the two as both having pursued similar goals. Robin even considers Uncle Tom, with whom he identifies and upon whom he is purportedly modeled, as smarter than Turner. In a sense, Robin's thoughts in this passage amount to a declaration of victory; he has not only outwitted and outlived his white master, but also has surpassed a historical black hero. And with this declaration, Reed himself claims victory in his project of deconstructing and/or reconstructing the slave narrative as such.

Secondly, Robin's thoughts turn to a letter he has received from Raven, about which he draws conclusions that further subvert the conventions of the slave narrative genre. Contemplating the meaning of freedom and Canada in relation to Raven's actions, Robin thinks,

*[t]hat was a strange letter from Raven this morning. I'm glad he's doing my book. I'll be glad to see him again. I wonder did he find what he was looking for in Canada? Probably all that freedom gets to*

*you. Too much freedom makes you lazy. Nothing to fight. Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind. Them counts and earls look like they're free, but they're not free.* (178; emphasis original)

As if in response to Robin's thoughts, Raven returns to Virginia at the close of the novel; ultimately, Raven and Robin thus become each other's "Ethereic Double[s]" (8, 172), that is, spiritual alter egos. In the end, freedom is not located in Canada for either character, but rather in their own minds. It is this freedom — real freedom — that they have been fighting/writing to win. In Reed's *Flight to Canada*, the final subversion of conventional fugitive slave narratives that describe flight to Canada is thus its challenge to the status of Canada itself — a place where racial prejudice surely existed and continues to exist — as the ultimate destination for black slaves.

#### **4. The Silence of the Black, the Eloquence of the Text**

Having explored the slave narratives of Henson, Stowe, and Reed along the axes of flight to Canada and return to the South, let us briefly reconsider Styron's "Shadrach," which at last emerges as a conservative narrative reaction to Reed's *FC*. That is, where *FC* gives voice to oppressed blacks, as did Henson in the antebellum era, "Shadrach" confines its ex-slave within a counter-narrative informed by the structure of antebellum racial politics. Hence, although both narratives concern the return of their protagonists to Old Virginia (and although the publications of *FC* [1976] and "Shadrach" [1978] nearly coincided), the returns that they portray have very different meanings.

Considering first the meaning of Shadrach's return in Styron's story, the narration of Shadrach's voice is particularly revealing. Because of his senility and strong accent, Styron's Shadrach requires an interpreter. This

role is performed by Paul Whitehurst, Styron's "Etheric Double," who uses his own language — and adds his own interpretation — in telling Shadrach's story. Thus, what the reader learns about the ex-slave is almost entirely dependent upon Paul's understanding of him; Shadrach himself says only a few phrases, of which the most important are "Praise de Lawd. Praise his sweet name! Ise arrived in Ole Virginny!" (49, 50, 52) and "Ise a Dabney" (55). Paul indicates that the latter of these utterances, to which the following quotation refers, has registered with him as especially significant: "One phrase, repeated over and over, I particularly remember" (55). Paul displays a similarly self-referential perspective in presenting his interpretation of Shadrach's return:

So now, as we began slowly to discover, this was Shadrach's return trip home to Old Virginny — three quarters of century or thereabouts after his departure from the land out of which he had sprung, which had nurtured him, and *where he had lived his happy years. Happy? Who knows? But we had to assume they were his happy years — else why this incredible pilgrimage at the end of his life?* As he had announced with such abrupt fervor earlier, he wanted only to die and be buried on "Dabney ground." (56; emphasis added)

Paul's narrative approach to Shadrach's story thus represents Styron's way of rewriting the slave narrative from a white perspective.

Although both Reed and Styron employ a slave's return to Virginia in their rewritings of the slave narrative as such, Styron thus pursues an opposing course to that of Reed: whereas Reed opens his narrative to the voices of slaves and others of diverse experience and backgrounds to subvert the conventions of the genre, Styron dominates his slave's voice, subsuming

it within his own interpretation. To the reader who has encountered Reed's story, Styron's therefore appears both reactionary and self-centered.

Other factors may also have contributed to the almost complete lack of attention "Shadrach" has received from literary and cultural critics. Like his *CNT*, Styron's "Shadrach" inescapably reflects the old plantation myth favorably, but in contrast to *CNT*, this memoiristic fiction is too narrow in scope to engage substantial historical/cultural argument. Moreover, from a literary viewpoint, literary critics may simply find "Shadrach" too trifling a story to engage their interest, despite its beauty.

In its narrowness of scope, furthermore, Styron's "Shadrach" reflects the spirit of its age, the 1970s — a time when "Tom Wolfe's vision of the 'Me Decade' became the dominant cliché" (Carroll, "Preface to the 1990 Edition" x), and when "Americans [...] retreated to purely personal occupations," as Christopher Lasch remarks (qtd. in Carroll, "Preface" x). The 1970s were also a time of reevaluation for the South, and hence Styron — retreating "to purely personal occupations" — may have been trying in the heartwarming and consoling terms of "Shadrach" to clear himself of the charges of racism that were leveled against him by black writers during the Turner controversy.

In the later half of the 1970s, during which both *FC* and "Shadrach" appeared, it furthermore bears noting that Jimmy Carter, a Georgia senator, was elected President, and this contributed to a political, economic, and social revival in the South: the site of America's disgrace was reborn as the brilliant Sunbelt. Riding the tide of this Southern revival, Styron followed "Shadrach" with *Sophie's Choice* (1979), "A Tidewater Morning" (1987), and "A Voice from the South" (1989), each of which preciously portrays relationships modeled on those of Styron's ancestors and their slaves. Of these works, *Sophie's Choice* in particular was received as a masterpiece;



positioned in Styron's publication history between this work and *CNT*, which was also received as a masterpiece, "Shadrach" was unsurprisingly eclipsed.

Finally, "Shadrach" may also have been neglected due to its political impotence. The story lacks the strength to confront issues of national evil such as slavery or the Holocaust. Moreover, a narrative in which an ex-slave's voice is subsumed within that of a nostalgic white Southern narrator was incapable of fulfilling the social and racial demands placed on literature in the wake of the Black Power movement of the 1960s.

For all of these reasons, perhaps, "Shadrach" has remained buried in the critical history of American literature. Brought to light, the story ultimately emerges as little more than a narrative of the Southern revival, ironically reflecting the author's retreat "to purely personal occupations."

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