

Slave Religion and the Bible in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

by William Styron

Aspects of Historical Representation & Biblical Intertextuality

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Tämän tutkielman aiheena ovat orjien uskonnon kuvaus sekä Raamatun intertekstuaalisuus William Styronin Pulitzer-palkitussa romaanissa ”The Confessions of Nat Turner” (1967, suom. Nat Turnerin kapina). Musta orja ja saarnaaja Nat Turner johti Yhdysvaltain historian väkivaltaisinta orjakapinaa Southamptonissa Virginian osavaltiossa vuonna 1831. William Styronin romaani on fiktiivinen kertomus Nat Turnerin elämästä; hänen lapsuudestaan aina johtamaansa kapinaan ja kuolemantuomioon asti.

Työni ensimmäisessä teoriaosassa tarkastelen orjien uskontoa Pohjois-Amerikan etelävaltioissa eri tutkimusten ja elämänkertojen valossa. Tutkin myös valkoisten seurakuntalaisten ja valtakirkkojen näkemyksiä ja asenteita orjiin sekä orjuuteen. Eri tutkimuslähteistä käy ilmi, että kristillisen uskon vaikutus orjien elämään oli mullistava, koska orjuus voitiin nähdä Raamatun valossa Jumalan tahdon vastaisena asiana. Orjuutta tuli siten vastustaa eri tavoin ja monet kapinat tai niiden yritykset saivatkin alkunsa mustan kirkon piiristä. Tutkimusosassa pohdin muun muassa sitä, inspiroiko usko Styronin romaanin mustia henkilöhahmoja taistelemaan orjuutta vastaan ja minkälaisen kuvan Styron luo mustista miehistä ja naisista kristillisessä etelässä.

Toisessa teoriaosassa esittelen jälkistrukturalistisia ja strukturalistisia intertekstuaalisuusteorioita. Gérard Genetten strukturalistisen teorian avulla rajaan tutkimuksen intertekstuaalisuuteen, joka sisältää lainaukset ja viittaukset sekä paratekstuaalisuuteen, jota edustavat mm. otsikot ja motto.

William Styronin romaanissa vallalla olleet orjuutta puoltavat näkemykset tulevat ilmi valkoisten henkilöhahmojen välityksellä ja myös kirkon sitä kannattava teologia tulee papiston puheissa ja toiminnassa esiin. Styron kuvaa mustan orjan Sambo-tyyppinä, joka sopeutuu orjuuteen eikä vastusta sitä. Lisäksi kuvauksessa voidaan nähdä myös muita stereotyyppioita, kuten musta raiskaajamies tai moraaliltaan epäilyttävä musta nainen. Usko näyttää olevan voimavara ainoastaan Nat Turnerille, joka saa innoituksen väkivaltaiseen kapinaan Raamatun profeetallisista kirjoista.

Romaani sisältää yli 80 suoraa Raamatun lainausta sekä lukuisia viittauksia siihen. Styron yhdistää taidokkaasti Raamatun kohtia Nat Turnerin erilaisiin elämäntilanteisiin ja piirtää hänen kauttaan lukijalle monia niistä merkityksistä, joita Raamatulla oli mustille orjuuden aikana. Kirjailija viittaa myös Raamatun eri henkilöihin, tapahtumiin ja paikkoihin romaanin eri henkilöhahmojen, tilanteiden ja paikkojen kautta. Nat Turner tulkitsee Raamattua elämäntilanteestaan käsin, johon eniten vaikuttaa kokemus omasta ja myös toisten mustien orjuudesta. Lukiessaan Raamattua, Turner samalla ”kirjoittaa” sitä uudelleen sillä tavoin, että se vastaa hänen omaa kokemustaan riistosta, sorrosta ja väkivallasta sekä oikeuttaa hänet kostamaan valkoisille heidän pahuutensa. Samalla hänestä tulee valkoisille Jumalan ruoska ja mustille Messias-tyyppi, joka vapauttaa kansansa orjuuden ikeestä.

Hakusanoja: Nat Turner, orjuus, orjien uskonto, Raamattu

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1. Introduction

This pro-gradu thesis examines slave religion and the Bible in William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. William Styron is regarded as one of the major novelists of the U.S. South after the Second World War. At the age of twenty-six he made his debut as a writer with *Lie Down in Darkness* in 1951 which earned him the Prix de Rome of the American Academy. After *Set This House on Fire* which was published in 1960, Styron wrote one of his most controversial novels: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, published in 1967. *Sophie's Choice* that followed twelve years later in 1979, established Styron's position as an author in the history of literature. Both *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice* deal with racial questions, the latter with the Holocaust of Jewish people in Poland under the Nazi regime. William Styron's next significant work was *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* in 1990, in which he candidly describes his experience with depressive mental disorder. The book appeared on the best-seller list of the *New York Times* for several weeks.¹

The historical Nat Turner was a slave preacher who organized and led the most violent slave revolt in the U.S. South. He was and has remained a highly controversial figure in the minds of Americans, for, on the one hand, he was a hero for the blacks and, on the other hand, a vile terrorist for the whites. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is William Styron's narrative about Nat Turner's life and events that led to the insurrection. As Turner was a Christian slave, the author also portrays the religious life in the Old South and thus provides some material for reflection on the aspects of historical representation of slave religion. In addition, the Bible quotations and allusions of the novel constitute an interesting research subject. In the following chapter I will first introduce the historical Nat Turner for the reader and also take a look at how common resistance and rebellion were against whites in the history of slavery in the United States. Then I will share a few words about William Styron and how *The*

¹ West, 1998, 455

Confessions of Nat Turner was received by the critics. At the end of the chapter I will present the research questions of the thesis more profoundly.

1.1. The Historical Nat Turner and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Nathaniel Turner was born on October 2nd, 1800 in Southampton County, Virginia.

According to Oates², his mother was a native African who was imported to America sometime in the 1790s. The slaveholder Benjamin Turner bought her at a slave auction. At the Turner's place she soon married another slave, a son of Old Bridget. As Nathaniel was a little child, his father escaped slavery to the North. The boy spent much time with his grandmother while his mother worked for the Turners. Bridget was a born storyteller, and she led him into the world of the Bible stories and slave tales. Interestingly, the historian W.E.B. Du Bois writes in *The Negro Church* about Nat Turner's father much more than Oates, for example that he was a preacher, and evidently a significant person in Nat Turner's life and spiritual calling. His father, among other things, set him apart for "the gospel ministry" with the church and visiting preachers. Du Bois does not mention the father's flight from slavery at all, and does not write anything about the grandmother.³ One must admit that there is little information available concerning Nat Turner's life, and the information also varies in different sources.

Nat Turner was an intelligent slave who could read and write. This is important because a literate slave was an exception among the slaves. Whites considered slaves who could read a danger and they therefore forbade their instruction. This is demonstrated, for example, in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published 1845. When Mrs. Auld began to teach the young slave Frederick to read, her husband stopped it. Mr. Auld told his wife that "a

² Oates, 1975, 8-13

³ Du Bois, 2001, 24

nigger should know nothing but to obey his master”, and if Frederick would learn to read he would “at once become unmanageable” and unfit for slavery. Mr. Auld had no idea that his words would open Frederick’s eyes to understand the power of literacy for a slave. Douglass realized that it was “the pathway from slavery to freedom” and from that on Douglass set out to learn to read. In Baltimore he made friends with poor white boys who gave him lessons in reading. In exchange, he gave bread to the boys, for the Aulds were wealthy persons.⁴

Thomas Gray⁵ mentions that Nat Turner’s parents had taught him to read, whereas, Du Bois⁶ writes that his parents were illiterate. Again, the information about Turner differs depending on the source.

In the slave community everybody was of the opinion that Nat Turner was too gifted and too intelligent to become an ordinary “cotton-patch nigger”. However, as he was twelve years old, his new master, Samuel Turner, did not respect the bright slave boy, but sent him out to the cotton fields to labour there. Perhaps it was an awakening for him and a beginning to understand that the black folk would have to serve always as bondsmen, if it depended on white slaveholders. Turner served Marse Samuel ten years until his master died in 1822.⁷ At that time Nat Turner had already a wife. This is supported by the information from Virginia newspapers: The newspaper articles reported that “Nat Turner had a wife who belonged to a different master”.⁸

Nat Turner had already started his spiritual ministry at the Turners’ farm, by preaching to the slaves and exhorting them to resist slavery. He was also known as Prophet Nat who had visions. When he was toiling for Thomas Moore, his new master, he began to see apocalyptic visions on the coming Judgement Day of God. In addition, he started to meet with the inner circle of his followers after the prayer meetings and told them that there was a mission

⁴ Douglass, 1995, 20-3

⁵ Gray, 1991, 18

⁶ Du Bois, 2001, 24

⁷ Oates, 1975, 13-30

⁸ Quoted in French, 2004, 118

coming and that God had chosen him as his instrument to carry it out. Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, Sam Francis and Henry Porter became his closest partners in the uprising. The bloody revolt started on Sunday night, August 21st and lasted twenty-four hours. During that time Nat Turner's black warriors slaughtered at least fifty-five white people. The whites soon defeated the rebellion, and in revenge killed at least one hundred and twenty innocent black persons in the area. The rebels were captured and after a short trial hanged. Nat Turner, however, was able to hide until October 30th when he was discovered and caught. He was tried in the Southampton County court and sentenced to death by hanging. The sentence was carried out on November 11th, 1831.⁹

Nat Turner's slave revolt in Virginia became the most violent and bloodiest one in the history of the United States. However, slave resistance in one way or another was a common phenomenon already from the outset of the slavery of Africans. The historian Herbert Aptheker¹⁰ has "found records for approximately two hundred and fifty revolts and conspiracies in the history of American Negro Slavery". At least ten blacks were involved in each of them. The fear of slave insurrections was widespread among white society in the Old South, and one important reason for this was a growing number of blacks.¹¹ For example, in Southampton County, Virginia the African Americans outnumbered the whites, so that in 1830 there were 9501 blacks and 6574 whites living in the area.¹²

The Haitian revolution which started in 1792 proved that African Americans were ready to fight for their liberty at any costs. In 1804 the revolutionists declared the independence of Haiti, a new African nation. Dessalines, the liberator of black people, ordered thousands of white settlers to be killed as a revenge for the murders and tortures of Africans. The whites in the Southern slave states of America began to fear that the same would happen there, too, for

⁹ Oates, 1975, 31-126

¹⁰ Aptheker, 1993, 162

¹¹ *ibid.*, 18

¹² *ibid.*, 293

they were not ignorant of the fact that slavery was in no way accepted by African Americans. The first large-scale slave conspiracy in the Old South was led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800 in Virginia. He planned to attack Richmond and arm the men with the guns from the town's main armoury. Prosser was a devoted Christian who plotted the conspiracy under the cover of black religious meetings. It is estimated that thousands of slaves were involved with Prosser's secret plan and were ready to fight for freedom with him. However, just before the attack two slaves betrayed him and the whites were warned. The result was that Prosser and his followers were captured and later hanged. Although Prosser's revolt was stopped in time, the whites were terrified throughout the South.

Another slave revolt that frightened slaveholders everywhere immensely was Denmark Vesey's conspiracy in 1822. Vesey was a free man and the leader of the African Church in Charleston. He was deeply inspired by the Scriptures, especially by the Old Testament stories, which he also used to stir slaves into uprising.¹³ For instance, he often preached on the Book of Joshua in which God tells Joshua to utterly destroy the enemies of Israel, including women and children. Vesey hated slavery intensely and felt obliged to fight to obtain freedom for his countrymen in bondage. Thousands of slaves were involved in the plot from the surrounding plantations to kill the whites and capture the town of Charleston. But, only one day before the attack, one slave informed the whites about the coming revolt, and Vesey's plan was thwarted. The fate of the rebels was inevitable; Vesey and his companions were executed by hanging.

William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is a fictionalised version of Nat Turner's life and rebellion. The novel is based on Turner's confession to Thomas R. Gray in the Southampton jail. Nat Turner told about his life and insurrection to the white Southampton County lawyer, who published the confession shortly after Turner's execution. Gray's

¹³ Harding, 1983, 69

document has been widely regarded as reliable, containing Turner's own words and voice. However, it is worth noting that there are scholars who do not accept Gray's *Confessions* as a trustworthy historical document at face value. For example, the legal historian Daniel S. Fabricant considers the text "as a legal and literary instrument of repression". It is the work of a "white Southern racist" for defending "the political, social, and economic interests of the Southern slaveocracy".¹⁴ Indeed, one proof of its biased nature is that the document victimizes the black rebels by giving an impression that the slave owners were good people and innocent victims of cruel insurgents. For example, Joseph Travis who was Turner's last owner is mentioned to be a kind master. However, in the governor's proclamation of reward Nat Turner was described in the following way¹⁵: "...A scar on one of his temples produced by the kick of a mule – also one on the back of his neck by a bite – a large knot on one of the bones of his right arm near the wrist produced by a blow...". Slavery's critics interpreted the scars and knots on his body as evidence that Turner's owner had been physically violent towards him.

Styron included the known facts about Nat Turner in his novel and when, as he states in the Author's note, there was little knowledge regarding Turner, he gave full rein to his imagination. Indeed, in his preface Styron says that his novel is "a meditation on history rather than a historical novel". As an author he tried to put himself inside the mind and life of Nat Turner. What makes this interesting is that Styron himself is a liberal white Southerner and comes from a family of former slaveholders. His grandmother, for example, owned two black girls just before the Civil War broke out and the emancipation of slaves. Styron was born in Newport News, Virginia in 1925 which was a strictly segregated town in his childhood and near the region where Turner's insurrection took place.

¹⁴ Quoted in French, 2004, 276

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 43-4

The novel was published in the 1960s which was an era characterized by racial and political turbulence. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, a black minister and the leader of the Civil Rights Movement fought against racial segregation and for equal voting rights in the United States. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his non-violent approach to solving racial problems. Styron's novel was released in 1967 which was the year of racial riots in American cities, such as Newark and Detroit. Perhaps expectedly, the riots were immediately connected with the rebellion of Nat Turner. For example, *Newsweek* compared Nat Turner's and his followers' "*Us gotta kill*" rhetoric in Styron's novel to that of Rap Brown, one of the leaders of the Black Power movement.¹⁶ In 1968 ten black intellectuals attacked William Styron and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* with the publication *William Styron's Nat Turner, Ten Black Writers Respond*. Among other things, Styron was accused of distorting the historical records and promoting racial stereotypes. The critics tried to reveal underlying reasons for the misrepresentation of Nat Turner, and came to the conclusion that Styron was a white Southern racist at heart who only saw Turner as a black slave obsessed with white women. Furthermore, the black writers criticized Styron for the fact that he did not consider a black man's desire to be free a strong enough motive for an insurrection.

Styron's novel also angered many whites in Southampton County, especially the descendants of slaveholders portrayed unfavourably in the novel. Likewise, these Southern white critics blamed Styron for defaming their ancestors and distorting their history. Styron even received hate mail that wished him to be lynched.¹⁷ Despite the criticism, the novel was also highly praised by many literary critics for its introspective style and psychological depth, and for its realistic description of the horrors of slavery. William Styron was consequently awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1968 for *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 247

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 265-6

In my pro-gradu thesis I will examine the religious life and practices of the blacks in the slave communities in the Old South depicted in different books and studies on slave religion and investigate how they are represented in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. For example, I will look at various issues, such as slave preachers and their roles in slave conspiracies. I will also examine to what extent the images of the blacks are stereotypical in the novel, the setting of which is the slave state Virginia whose culture was strongly affected by Christianity. For instance: Does the strong stereotyping explain almost a total absence of Christian African American women in the novel? I will begin my research by surveying the whites in the antebellum South, particularly their attitudes towards the slaves and the institution of slavery.

In addition to the historical information on Nat Turner and the slave revolts in this chapter, the religious life and practices in the Old South will be examined in the following chapter. This forms the cultural and historical framework of my thesis and also serves as a starting point for the analysis of the historical representation of the slave religion in Styron's novel.

The Confessions of Nat Turner has a great number of Bible quotations and allusions, most of them from the Old Testament, and the Book of Revelation. My intention is to explore what exactly is quoted from the Bible and what functions the quotations serve in the novel. For example: Is Nat Turner motivated by the Scriptures to rebel against the whites in such a violent and turbulent manner? In order to carry out the intended textual analysis I need to be familiar with the notion of intertextuality. Consequently, in the third chapter of the Introduction I will examine the poststructuralist and structuralist concepts of intertextuality, part of which will be utilized in the analysis. Because intertextuality is a wide concept, I decided to acquaint myself only with the structuralist and poststructuralist theories in which the term was first employed. In addition, the concept of representation will be discussed in that section.

1.2. Slave Religion

The enslavement of black people in North America began when the first Africans were imported to Virginia in 1619.¹⁸ When England entered the slave trade on a larger scale, Africans started to serve without pay for their lifetime in very large numbers. The British drew huge profits from the slave trade, and for instance, the cities Liverpool and Bristol became wealthy slave ports through which about 18 000 slaves were transported to the New World yearly. The North American colonies later joined its mother country in the lucrative slave trade. It is estimated that by the end of the eighteenth century there were about one million African slaves living in the new continent, and by 1840 the number of slaves was already more than two million. Although the importation of slaves was prohibited in 1809, Northern slave traders continued to smuggle slaves to North America. By 1860 the amount of African American slaves had already risen to almost four million persons. Virginia had the largest slave population; about 40 percent of its population was made up of slaves.

Harding¹⁹ states that the cotton mills in England became even more profitable with the new technological invention of the steam engine. It multiplied the production of mills at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Also, the invention of the cotton gin, a machine that separated cottonseed from cotton fibre, rapidly increased the need of raw material. The American cotton fields, where slaves were forced to work, provided the industry with the needed raw material. The rapid economical growth of America was achieved at the expense of African American slaves who toiled in the cotton, tobacco, sugar and rice fields from dawn to dusk. Indeed, there seemed to be no end for the bondage of the Africans; instead, laws that supported the system of slavery were continually being “redefined, reshaped and reproduced”. This was due to the fact that the cheap labour of black slaves had become the backbone of the primary industry and agriculture in the Southern states. Therefore, slave codes were passed to

¹⁸ Pinn, 2003, 9-10

¹⁹ Harding 1983, 53-54

control slaves and their possible resistance. According to Pinn²⁰, the need of slave legislation was linked with the common assumption that “slaves were less than fully human, a form of property – both as body and labor – over which whites had clear rights”.

Simms²¹ informs us that black slavery and white dominance were defended from various viewpoints. The rationalists, such as Thomas Jefferson²², claimed that blacks were by nature physically, intellectually and temperamentally inferior to whites, which had also contributed to the emergence of the institution of slavery. Although enslavement was an evil thing, it had to be legitimised because of the economic well-being of the Southern states. Indeed, Pinn²³ points out that physical features were effective justifications for chattel slavery when there was an economic need for a consistent and strong workforce. Therefore, black colour became a marker and justification for enslavement, for blacks and whites could be easily distinguished based on it. Consequently, slavery defined the nature and status of the Africans; the status as property and a “less-than-fully-human being”.

Also rationales of the antiabolitionist theologians were used to legitimise slave labour in the South. White Southerners found grounds for the enslavement of Africans both in the Old and New Testament. They argued among other things that the Africans were a divinely cursed people and therefore destined to bear enslavement.²⁴ This view was based on Genesis 9 where Noah utters these words to his son Ham, the father of Canaan: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren”. The whites commonly believed that Canaan was the ancestor of the African tribes and his brother Japheth, for his part, was the ancestor of Europeans. Thus, when the whites in North America enslaved Africans they just fulfilled the divine law written in the Bible. The Apostle Paul’s writings in the New Testament were also interpreted as being proslavery. For example, when the Apostle exhorted the servants to obey

²⁰ Pinn, 2003, 12

²¹ Simms, 1998, 49-50

²² the third President of the United States (1801-1809)

²³ Pinn, 2003, 12-15

²⁴ Simms, 1998, 50

their masters in all things in Colossians 3:22, the African American slaves were similarly instructed to be docile to their masters, because it was God's will.

Bonomi²⁵ writes that the Church of England had encouraged American congregations to convert the black "infidels" to Christianity. Indeed, some missionary organisations took the advice seriously and did evangelistic work among slaves. Lincoln²⁶ states that white Christians in general agreed that the religious teaching of black slaves was "a good thing". However, slaveholders often rejected missionary attempts to Christianise their slaves out of fear that religious instruction would lead to difficult questions about the master-slave relations. This would again produce arrogance and attempts of rebellion from the part of the slaves, although the gospel message of the missionaries was laced with exhortations to humility and submission to white masters.²⁷ Further, if slaves would somehow learn to read through missionary activity, it would be an empowering thing for the blacks and endanger the maintenance and control of slavery. These fears caused for the most part that black involvement in the Christian church was strictly restricted and controlled by white parishioners. For example, laws were passed which required at least five white persons to be present at any religious meeting in which blacks participated.

According to Turner²⁸, the evangelicals in America had a clear idea of how they would treat the blacks in their congregations. "The sons and daughters of Africa" were under no circumstances to be given honourable status or the same treatment as full members in the church of Christ. Some members of the evangelical church regarded the black folk as "little more than chattel or beasts of the field". In their opinion they belonged to other species, had no souls, and therefore should not have any rights to be admitted to Communion or other

²⁵ Bonomi 1986, 119

²⁶ Lincoln, 1985, 38

²⁷ Bonomi, 1986, 119

²⁸ Turner, 1989, 44

sacraments.²⁹ Others thought blacks as suitable candidates for being preached the gospel so that their souls would be saved, but it was nevertheless pure infidelity to demand equal treatment for them.³⁰ Racial inequality was evident and indeed deeply rooted in various church practices. For example, the black Church members had to wait until the Lord's Supper had first been served for the whites.³¹ The blacks also had to sit on their own benches "around the perimeter of sanctuary", or in the "nigger heaven" built at the rear of the church. In this way they were segregated from the white churchgoers and were out of their sight too. Turner³² contends that the "formal statements of inequality and theological justification of slavery" founded on race made blackness a strong factor within the psyche of white Christians. It was such a powerful factor that it effectively broke up the possibility that people of two racial groups would join together, even when they confessed faith in the same God or belonged to the same denomination.

According to Pinn³³, "more docile church gatherings" controlled by white Christians led to the development of new religious establishments with African American leaders. Black Baptist churches started to grow in the South as early as the 1750s, and black Methodist denominations were founded in the North in the early 1800s. Indeed, by the 1860s, there were more than one hundred black Baptist churches, and two black Methodist denominations in the North. Black churches differed from other churches in the sense that together with the Christian tradition and doctrine the African heritage was also valued. The independent black congregations in the South were not well received by Southern whites, and became targets of suspicion and hostility. The whites curtailed the freedom of black churches by law and some African Baptist churches were forced to merge with white Baptist churches by 1832, as a

²⁹ Lincoln, 1985, 38-44

³⁰ Turner, 1989, 44

³¹ Lincoln, 1985, 43-44

³² Turner, 1989, 44

³³ Pinn, 2003, 86

counterattack against the abolitionist movement and slave conspiracies.³⁴ However, in spite of persecution and restrictions by law a few Southern black congregations not only continued to exist but they even grew.

The slaves' religious life and practices had their own emphases and characteristics, as will be discussed below. Turner³⁵ writes that "the conversion experience was at the heart of slave religion" and still is a central characteristic of black evangelicalism. In spiritual conversion the person meets the Almighty God, and his or her life changes radically. The experience is also known as "finding the Lord", "getting saved", or "being born again". In the "born again" experience black slaves were spiritually set free from sin, chattel slavery and discrimination, and they received a new existence and a new identity. Richard Allen³⁶, a former bondsman and bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America (1816-1831), describes his moment of salvation at the age of seventeen as follows:

One night I thought hell would be my portion. I cried unto Him who delighteth to hear the prayers of a poor sinner; and, all of a sudden, my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and Glory to God, I cried. My soul was filled. I cried, enough for me--the Saviour died.

Simms³⁷ notes that an intimate relationship with God helped the enslaved people to overcome "the mental and emotional horrors" of bondage. They also strongly identified with the history of Israel and the passion of Jesus and in this way came to terms with the severity of their lives.³⁸ For example, the Old Testament exodus of Israel out of slavery was constantly applied to their own enslavement. They knew that the bondage of Israel had ended and that "the sacred history of God's liberation of his people would be or was being repeated in the American South", as the historian Raboteau³⁹ puts it. African slaves found new spiritual and physical strength in the Bible, and were consequently encouraged to seek freedom from their

³⁴ Raboteau, 1980, 178-179

³⁵ Turner, 1989, 45-6

³⁶ Allen, 2000, 5

³⁷ Simms, 1998, 51

³⁸ Hardman-Cromwell, 2000, 279

³⁹ Raboteau, 1980, 311-312

earthly slavery. African Americans were convinced that they were God's people like Israel, and that God had not intended them to be slaves. Further, the Old Testament prophecies about the obliteration of Israel's enemies met the bondsmen's deepest desire that whites would receive a just retribution for the cruelty of enslavement. The New Testament writings, too, showed that God was on their side, and they were consoled with the hope that God would vindicate the cause of those who suffer unjustly. A fine case of God's vindication is the New Testament story of Dives and Lazarus related in many African American spirituals⁴⁰:

Poor old Lazarus, poor as I, Don't you see? Don't you see?
 Poor old Lazarus, poor as I, Don't you see? Don't you see?
 Poor old Lazarus, poor as I, When he died had a home on high.
 He had a home in-a that Rock, Don't you see?

Rich man, Dives, lived so well, Don't you see? Don't you see?
 Rich man, Dives, lived so well, Don't you see? Don't you see?
 Rich man, Dives, lived so well, when he died found home in hell,
 Had no home in that Rock, Don't you see?

The relationships between whites and blacks resembled that of Lazarus and the Rich man in the sense that the black churchgoers were at the mercy of whites not only in earthly but also in spiritual matters. For example, the slaves could not reflect their own spiritual heritage, desires and needs in white-controlled churches. Slaves also grew tired of the sermons that exhorted them to be docile and subject to their masters. Therefore, they often slipped away to the so called "hush arbors" at night, that is, to the secret gathering places in the woods, swamps, ravines and gullies where they could sing and pray together freely, away from the eyes of overseers.⁴¹ They always took a risk by doing this, for a flogging often awaited a slave who was caught attending a secret religious meeting. A former slave Fannie Moore⁴² describes these secret gatherings: "Never have any church. If you go, you set in de back of the white folks' church. But the niggers slip off and pray and hold prayer-meetin' in de woods, den dey turn down a big wash pot... to drown out de sound of de singin". To the slaves, these

⁴⁰ Quoted in Lovell, 1986, 340

⁴¹ Simms, 1998, 52

⁴² Quoted in Yetman, 1970, 229

hush-arbor meetings created inseparable bonds of spiritual brother and sisterhood, as the worshippers shared their deepest feelings of suffering and despair with each other.⁴³ These clandestine gatherings cultivated the spirit of endurance and encouraged the slaves not to give up the hope of freedom.

It is assumed that black spirituals developed in hush-arbor meetings, challenging the slaves' dehumanisation and the opinions on black inferiority.⁴⁴ Their experiences with God and the Bible stories, especially the Old Testament and the Gospels of Jesus, became the sources of spirituals. The slaves wanted to sing about their relationship with God. Their confidence in being children of God and thus created in God's image powerfully rejected the claims that slaves were of no significance and that they were not valued by God. The songs spoke about the significance of their lives in the eyes of God, and thus had a revolutionary message for blacks. It meant that they were persons of great value, and in no way "things" or "objects" as whites labelled them. If God recognized their full citizenship before Him, it also disproved the legitimacy of the slavery system regardless of various theological justifications offered by slave masters and clergymen.

The lyrics of the spirituals, Pinn⁴⁵ declares, "were coded so that the whites who might hear them sung outside hush-arbor gatherings would think of the tunes as referring only to otherworldly spirituality, which posed no threat to the social system". This means in other words that the spirituals were "double-voiced". Because slaves were deprived of their own language by separation from those within the same language group, they created "the skill to say one thing in front of 'massa' and have it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves".⁴⁶ Moreover, according to Gates⁴⁷, "saying one thing to mean quite other" has been essential to

⁴³ Simms, 1998, 52

⁴⁴ Pinn, 2003, 84

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 85

⁴⁶ Aschroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1989, 146

⁴⁷ Gates, 1984, 6

the survival of blacks “in oppressive Western cultures”, and therefore, the technique of “reading” signs was an integral part of “metaphorical literacy” training of children.

The identification with the children of Israel and its hero Moses was a popular theme in spirituals. For instance, by retelling the story of Exodus the blacks condemned the system of slavery and insisted on freedom. Almost every song about Moses is intended to reproach Americans for allowing slavery and to deliver a grave warning that it will not be tolerated forever⁴⁸:

When Israel was in Egypt land,
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go!

Go down, Moses, ‘Way down in Egypt’s Land,
Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go!

“Thus saith the Lord”, bold Moses said,
Let my people go!
“If not I’ll smite your first-born dead,”
Let my people go!

According to Blassingame⁴⁹, most bondsmen, disgusted by “the brand of religion” taught by the ministers and masters, the racism and freedom limitations in white congregations, invented new ideas and practices in the slave community. The blacks were not content with white pastors, and whenever possible, went to listen to a black preacher. Accordingly, the true spiritual leader of the African American believers was the slave preacher. He was often one of those few who could read, and usually a highly intelligent person who was noticed for his “powerful imagination and memory”. W.E.B. Du Bois⁵⁰ describes the slave preacher in *The Souls of Black Folk* as follows: “The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a “boss,” an intriguer, an idealist,—all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in

⁴⁸ Quoted in Lovell, 1986, 326-7

⁴⁹ Blassingame, 1979, 130-1

⁵⁰ Du Bois, 2001, 190

number”. Because of his character traits and remarkable personality, he could “unify the blacks, console the sick, weak, and fearful, uplift and inspire them”, as Blassingame⁵¹ puts it. Black preachers showed real talent in their calling, and their sermons excited the emotions of both black and white listeners. When the slaves listened to the slave preacher they were encouraged by the hope that God was moving in his church in a powerful way, and would soon break the yoke of bondage and set the captives free. The black folk appreciated the Bible very much, and accordingly, the preachers drew their inspiration for the sermons, for instance, from the Exodus story, the Prophet Daniel, and Jesus’ lowly birth and passion that slaves identified with.⁵²

The slave preachers were faced with a challenging mission. On the one hand, they had to be able to preach in a way that the whites did not get offended. They could not speak against the white community and the institution of slavery too openly so as not to be accused of incitement to rebellion. Indeed, the whites considered the preachers potentially the most dangerous persons in slave communities to urge other slaves to revolt. If a slave preacher was heard preaching earthly liberty to fellow slaves, he was usually badly beaten up or sold away from his dear ones and friends. On the other hand, slave preachers had a divine call from God to strengthen their brothers and sisters to be strong and courageous in their oppression. Their more radical messages were prepared for the secret gatherings when there were no whites within earshot. For many slave preachers the radical sermons, even if delivered in secret, were a self-evident part of the calling, because they considered themselves God’s fellow-workers and spokesmen in the battle against the devil and his invention, slavery.

The fierce opposition did not frighten all black preachers from attacking the dominant ideology of black inferiority. For example, after having seen how the whites turned blacks out of their seats in a church, Meshech Williams delivered a sermon in which he showed from the

⁵¹ Blassingame, 1979, 131

⁵² Hardman-Cromwell, 2000, 280-2

Scriptures that both whites and blacks are of one blood.⁵³ He consistently and persistently spoke against slavery, despite the threats of violence he got from the white anti-abolitionists. Eventually, after the insurrection of Nat Turner he was not allowed to preach at all. In addition, free black ministers in the North, for example, bishop Richard Allen, fought to demolish slavery. Allen⁵⁴ considered slavery so “hateful” in the eyes of God that He had destroyed “kings and princes” because of it. Allen exhorted Americans to clear their hands from slavery, if they loved their children and country. God would similarly destroy the nation of America, if the oppression of the poor black folk would not end. Also, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass sharply criticized the hypocritical Christianity of the old South. Douglass himself had escaped from slavery at the age of twenty, and later became the most important black leader in the United States. Douglass⁵⁵ writes in the Appendix of his narrative about the Christianity of the slaveholders:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest, possible difference--so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of “stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in.”

1.3. Intertextuality, Transtextuality, Representation

The French poststructuralist theorist Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of *intertextuality* in her essay “World, Dialogue and Novel” in 1969. This and her other essays on semiotics and literature are compiled in English in *Desire in Language* and *Revolution of Poetic Language*.

⁵³ Williams, 1997, 26-7

⁵⁴ Allen, 2000, 45

⁵⁵ Douglass, 1995, 71

In “Word, Dialogue and Novel” Kristeva introduces the Russian linguist and critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s insights and major theories on dialogism to the West. Bakhtin’s writings had a great influence on Kristeva and they formed the theoretical basis of her theory of *intertextuality*. According to Kristeva⁵⁶, Bakhtin considers “the literary word” rather an intersection of textual surfaces than a fixed meaning, where various texts⁵⁷, namely, that of the writer’s, the addressee’s (or the character’s), and that of the historical or contemporary cultural context are in dialogue. Kristeva refers to texts in terms of two axis: the word on the *horizontal axis* of a text belongs both to the author and the reader, and on *the vertical axis* the text is connected to other literary texts. The notion of *double-voiced* discourse is based upon Bakhtin’s recognition that when we speak or write we use words and phrases which have already been used in different contexts before.⁵⁸ Therefore, any text is *double*, in other words, “the absorption and transformation of another”.⁵⁹ Thus, no text “is original and unique-in-itself; rather it is a tissue of inevitable, and to an extent unwitting, references to and quotations from other texts”, as Allen⁶⁰ puts it.

Bakhtin and Kristeva share the opinion that “texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed”.⁶¹ Consequently, all texts reverberate “within them the ideological structures and struggles of society expressed through discourse”. Texts are made from fragments of ‘the social text’, and the prevailing ideological tensions and struggles that “characterize language and discourse in society” will have an effect on the text itself. Texts do not, therefore, provide us with obvious and fixed meanings. For instance, the words such as “God” and “justice” in a literary work include “society’s conflict over the meanings of these words”. Intertextuality, thus, involves “a text’s emergence

⁵⁶ Kristeva, 1989, 65.

⁵⁷ The ‘text’ is here understood as the meaning produced by the intertextual relations which readers activate.

⁵⁸ Allen, 2005

⁵⁹ Kristeva, 1989, 66.

⁶⁰ Allen, 2005

⁶¹ Allen, 2000, 36

from the ‘social text’ but also its continued existence within society and history”.

Accordingly, intertextually viewed texts are considered within society and history.

The French semiologist Roland Barthes has had a great impact on the poststructuralist concept of *intertextuality*. In his famous essay “The Death of the Author” (published in 1968) Barthes⁶² overthrows the idea of the Romantic Author-God who is the origin of all textual meaning:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.

Instead, he announces “the birth of the reader” which must happen “at the cost of the death of the author”. By this statement he means that “textual meaning is generated in reading rather than in an original act of writing”.⁶³ Terry Eagleton⁶⁴ illuminates this by saying that “all literary works ... are “rewritten”, if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a “re-writing””. However, for poststructuralist theorists only Modernist and Postmodernist literature allows the reader to re-write texts and thus generate a meaning rather than just simply read a text. Barthes seems to contradict this view with his structural analysis of the Bible’s Genesis 32:22-32. Indeed, Barthes⁶⁵ states that “there may be a “text” in a very ancient work, while many products of contemporary literature are in no way texts” that can be re-written by a reader.

In a textual analysis Barthes⁶⁶ endeavours to see how the text is unmade, “explodes and disseminates – by what coded paths it *goes off*”. This kind of approach opposes the traditional examining of an ultimate meaning delivered by the author and interpreted by the reader. Barthes, instead, tries to “see” a text in its “difference”, that is, with an infinity of

⁶² Barthes, 1989, 146.

⁶³ Allen, 2005

⁶⁴ Eagleton, 1983, 12

⁶⁵ Barthes, 1989, 156

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 127

meaning. Allen⁶⁷ explains Barthes's "difference" further: "texts are potentially infinite in their meaning since readers activate (and activate differently) the intertextual meaning". Barthes⁶⁸ wants to demonstrate how the text is woven from the threads of the social text:

...woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?) antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall with the myth of filiation⁶⁹; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without commas.

The term *intertextuality* is, according to Allen⁷⁰, often misused to refer to intentional allusions, citations or quotations of previous texts in literature. It is employed to study "literary relations of conscious influence", for example, when a writer intentionally quotes from another writer. The obvious reason for this is the complexity of Kristeva's and Barthes's theories which are difficult to put to use in textual analyses. Indeed, if the "sources" or "influences" are impossible to trace, the theory is just an empty rhetoric, as Tammi⁷¹ emphasizes in his article. However, despite the theory's complexity, especially Barthes's insights might be useful in my own textual analysis when I look at the fictional Nat Turner as a reader of the Bible. I will, for example, explore the questions how he interprets the Bible, and whether his interpretation encourages him to resort to violence. In addition, I will ask how the social context, e.g. slavery, affects his or the whole society's way of reading the Holy Bible. Further, the Bible quotations and allusions in the novel constitute an interesting object of research. Among other things, I will examine what is quoted from the Bible, and analyse their function in the text and their overall scale within the work. The Bible quotations particularly are explicit in the novel since they are italicised. Thus, I need to find more practical theories of intertextuality than Kristeva's and Barthes's to accomplish the intended

⁶⁷ Allen, 2005

⁶⁸ Barthes, 1989, 160

⁶⁹ The term 'filiation' refers to the traditional view on the author as a parent who gives life to a text.

⁷⁰ Allen, 2005

⁷¹ Tammi, 1991, 73

analysis. Therefore, I will leave the poststructuralist theories and take a closer look at the structuralist conceptions of intertextuality.

Especially the French structuralist theorist and critic Gérard Genette has developed a theory of intertextuality as a practical tool for textual analysis. In his well-known essay “Structuralism and Literary Criticism” Genette reduces literary works to “themes, motifs, key-words, obsessive metaphors, quotations, index cards, and references”. Firstly, the critic breaks down a work’s structure into its elements and, secondly, rearranges the elements by following the methods of the structuralist literary criticism. For Genette literary works are not unique or original but made out of pieces of other texts, which form an enclosed system.⁷² A critic’s task is to place the work back into the closed literary system by illuminating the relation between it and other texts.

Genette⁷³ introduced the notion *transtextuality* as a more exhaustive term than the poststructuralist intertextuality. He defines transtextuality as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obviously or concealed with other texts”. The term encompasses five subtypes: *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *architextuality*, *metatextuality*, and *hypotextuality*. The first subtype intertextuality does not mean the same as the poststructuralist concept. Instead, Genette⁷⁴ terms intertextuality as a “relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts” and “the actual presence of one text within another”. More precisely, he restricts its meaning to quotation, plagiarism and allusion. The second subtype, paratextual relations occur between a literary text and the “paratexts” surrounding the main body of the text. Paratextual elements of a text, such as chapter headings, prefaces, epigraphs, and notes help the reader to discover the text’s intention, for instance, how he or she should interpret the text.⁷⁵ Allen⁷⁶ contends that Genette’s formulation of paratextuality sets it apart from “the

⁷² Allen, 2000, 96

⁷³ Genette, 1997, 1

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 1-2

⁷⁵ Allen, 2000, 104

poststructuralist dismissal of authorial intention” which is held as a major tenet of intertextuality. As a matter of fact, Genette⁷⁷ states in *Paratexts* that paratextual relations “ensure for the text a destiny consistent with the author’s purpose”.

The last three subtypes of transtextuality will probably not be applicable to my textual analysis, so I will present them very shortly. By architextuality Genette⁷⁸ means a text’s designation as part of a literary genre, which also affects the reader’s expectations and reception of a literary work. Metatextuality is in question when a text includes a critical commentary on another text, which is either explicit or implicit. And finally, hypotextuality deals with relations between a “hypertext” and its prior “hypotext”. A “hypertext” (such as a parody) is a transformation from a “hypotext”.

In Barbara Godard’s⁷⁹ opinion, Genette’s taxonomy “limits the implications of “intertextuality” to questions of stylistics and neglects the social (and conflictual) overlapping of texts”. Arguably, this could be due to different ways of approaching intertextual relations. Allen⁸⁰ explains that Genette does not concentrate on semiotic processes in the creation of cultural and textual meaning, as the poststructuralist theorists do. They observe microstructures of a text “at the level of a sentence, a fragment, or a short, generally poetic text”. Instead, Genette approaches intertextuality from the perspective of entire literary works. Allen argues that in this way Genette provides us with very pragmatic and determinable intertextual relations between specific components of separate texts. Arguably, even though Genette does not pay attention to social or cultural contexts very much, his method does not make them impossible to be studied either. Thus, critics who use Genette’s methods can also examine intertextual relations from a wider perspective than just stylistics.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 107

⁷⁷ Genette, 1997, 407

⁷⁸ Genette, 1997, 5

⁷⁹ Godard, 1993, 570

⁸⁰ Allen, 2000, 101

Finally, I will present some broader and later views on intertextuality that come close to Genette's views. Pietiläinen⁸¹ writes that although each text can be understood as a junction of infinite number of other texts, practically the explicit intertextuality plays a central role in textual analysis. This in turn leads to examining the intertexts' role in the process of generating meaning. In a sense, there is a play going on between the writer and the reader in constructing a meaning, in which the reader cannot play freely with his or her own associations or intertextuality. Saariluoma⁸² writes in the late 1990s that the author is again rehabilitated in literary criticism. However, he or she is not regarded as an autonomous origin or creator of a text, but as a socially and culturally determined subject who at the same time determines social and cultural reality for his or her part. Many authors use intentional and visible references to other texts while constructing their own works. In other words, the author writes about reality by means of literary tradition; intertextuality is a tool for writing about the non-literary reality; the text-external context. The writer is in dialogue with what the other texts claim about the reality outside them.

To summarize, Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality serves as a frame for the study of the Bible in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. To be more precise, I will especially concentrate on two subcategories of transtextuality: intertextuality (quotations and allusions) and paratextuality. In addition, I will also employ Roland Barthes's ideas when examining how different characters of the novel read the Bible.

Since my aim is also to examine the representation of slave religion in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, I will next introduce some general aspects of the concept of representation. According to W.J.T. Mitchell⁸³, the distinctive character of human beings is an "instinct" for representing things, in other words, to create and manipulate signs – things that "stand for" or "take place" of something else. In the last three centuries, in addition to "aesthetic or semiotic

⁸¹ Pietiläinen, 1998, 128-129

⁸² Saariluoma, 1998, 10-11

⁸³ Mitchell, 1995, 11

representation”, the term has also become significant in political systems based on the principles of democracy, in which persons “act for” other persons. What the political and semiotic representation have in common is that they are “always *of* something or someone, *by* something or someone, *to* someone”.

Mitchell⁸⁴ describes the concept of representation with two diagonal axes: on the one axis “the representational object” is connected to “that which it represents”, on the other axis “the maker of the representation” is connected to “the beholder”. The crossing of the two axes might suggest some problems in representations, such as “the possibility of misunderstanding, error or downright falsehood.” Representation is an “extremely elastic notion which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing a day in the life of several Dubliners”, as Mitchell⁸⁵ puts it. In addition, “the representational sign” never exists in isolation from “a whole network of other signs”. This means that if one thing that stands for one other thing is taken out the context, it ceases to represent the other thing and becomes merely a thing. For example, the word “tree” stands for a particular set of objects only in the context of language. Furthermore, the word “tree” represents a tall plant which has a wooden trunk and branches only by “a kind of social agreement”.

Mitchell⁸⁶ points out that “even purely “aesthetic” representation of fictional persons and events”, can never be totally secluded from ideological and political questions. As a matter of fact, one could argue that representation is exactly the place where these questions most probably get into the work of literature. If literature represents life, then representation is precisely the point where “life, in all its social and subjective complexity”, enters the work of literature.⁸⁷ *The Confessions of Nat Turner* seems to prove this statement true, for although

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 12

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 13

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 15

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 15

the novel is a fictionalised version of slavery in the U.S. South, it launched a debate on racial questions in the U.S after its publication.

Stuart Hall examines the concept of representation from a viewpoint of black cultural politics. A post-war “political and cultural analysis” expressed critique of “the way blacks were positioned as the unspoken and invisible ‘other’ of predominantly white aesthetic and cultural discourses”, as Hall⁸⁸ states. The analysis was based on the recognition that the black experience was marginalized by various political and cultural practices in Britain. Black cultural politics challenged, resisted and struggled to change “the dominant regimes of representation” in music and style, and in literary, visual, and cinematic forms. In these fields blacks have characteristically “been the objects, but rarely the subjects, of the practices of representation”. “Fetishization, objectification and negative figuration” which have been characteristic to the representation of the black subject, were criticized in the analysis. In addition to “the absence or marginality” also the “simplification” and the “stereotypical character” of the black experience were matters of concern.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* the images of blacks and their possible stereotypical character form a question worth examining. This is due to the fact that black critics condemned the novel for its stereotypical quality and negative images of blacks in *Ten Black Writers’ Respond*. Therefore, the question is: are there any of those features of representation present in Styron’s novel that black cultural politics tried to transform in post-war Britain? *Ten Black Writers’ Respond* provides an example of similar struggle and ongoing change in black cultural politics in the U.S in the late 1960s.

Hall⁸⁹ also points out that in a new phase of black cultural politics “the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity”. This new recognition marks “the end of innocence”, or “the end of

⁸⁸ Hall, 1992, 252

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 254-5

essential black subject”. In other words, once a necessary characteristic in fiction to present all black people as good or “*the same*” has passed away. Instead, the recognition of “the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects” is at issue now. The goal is to construct a politics “which works with and through difference” which does not suppress “the real heterogeneity of interests and identities”.

2. The Historical Representation of Slave Religion in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

This chapter examines aspects of historical representation of slave religion in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In the first subchapter I will look at the attitudes of the whites towards the blacks in the novel with a special interest in the proslavery argumentation presented in the Introduction. In addition, the white Christian church, its clergy and members are examined more closely. In the second subchapter I will especially look at the central characteristics of black religious life discussed in the Introduction, and explore whether these features are also present in Styron's novel. The author's portrayal of black women and men slaves will also be examined with the help of other literary and historical sources. The third subchapter will concentrate mostly on Nat Turner; his relationship to God and his spiritual calling.

2.1. White Attitudes towards the Blacks in the Christian Old South

The proslavery Southerners defended the enslavement of Africans from three main viewpoints.⁹⁰ Firstly, the rationalists believed that blacks were inferior to whites and therefore could be enslaved. Thomas Jefferson, being a rationalist himself, thought that slavery in itself was immoral, but it had to be tolerated in order to maintain the economic well-being of the Southern states. Secondly, the proslavery pseudo-scientists tried to find biological and cultural differences between blacks and whites that would justify the enslavement of black people. Thirdly, the evangelical clergymen who supported slavery tried to find theological grounds for it in the Scriptures. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* this threefold proslavery argumentation is expressed by numerous white characters, as will be shown next.

⁹⁰ Simms, 1998, 50

Styron portrays the Southampton County lawyer Thomas Gray as an atheist who believes in the power of science. He fills his court speech with pseudoscientific arguments typical of the time in order to show the court members the weaknesses of blacks' character. These deficiencies, among other things, had contributed to "the aimless and pathetic and futile slaughter of Nat Turner". In his speech Gray, for instance, refers to "an important work" of "the Professor Mebane"⁹¹:

...it remained the achievement of Professor Mebane to prove beyond the iota of doubt that the Negro is a *biologically* inferior species... all the characteristics of nigger head... conclusively demonstrate that the Negro occupies at best but a middling position amongst all the species, possessing a relationship which is not cousin-german to the other human races but one which is far closer to the skulking baboon of that dark continent from which he springs...

In the novel Mebane is described as a phrenologist who examines the bones of the head. Phrenology was employed by pseudo-scientists in order to give authority for racist depictions of blacks as subhuman and inferior beings. For example, Josiah Nott who was an influential and reputable scholar in the mid-nineteenth century, argued that the blacks had smaller brains than the whites – a fact which contributed to their inferiority.⁹² Styron skilfully makes Thomas Gray a character of the novel who uses pseudoscientific arguments to convince his audience of African Americans' bestiality. This, for its part, confirms the right of whites to subjugate them and justifies the oppressive and exploitative actions towards them.

Benjamin Turner, Nat Turner's first owner, represents slaveholding rationalists in the novel. In the conversation about slavery with the visiting clergymen and his brother Samuel Turner he strongly stresses that blacks are both intellectually and morally inferior to whites.⁹³ He is even more racist than Jefferson by claiming that the blacks are just animals "with the brain of a human child" and their only value is the work that they can do for the whites. He admits that he does not accept the institution of slavery, but in the same breath mentions that

⁹¹ Styron, 2004, 92-4

⁹² Simms, 1998, 50-1

⁹³ Styron, 2004, 158

slavery is something they must accept. If only a machine was invented that would do all the work the “darkies” do, he would kiss goodbye to the slavery system forever.

Benjamin Turner hates the institution of slavery in the same way as Thomas Jefferson did. Jefferson realized that his livelihood was dependent on its continuation.⁹⁴ Indeed, it was commonly thought that without the labour of black slaves it would be impossible to cultivate the plantations of the Old South. On the one hand, Southerners needed Africans for the work that the white Americans themselves could not or did not want to do. In this they clung to an old myth that while whites would die on the boiling swamp in the summer heat blacks only thrived in these conditions. God in his wisdom had created the black African to fulfil the white man’s need for suitable labourers to turn his wilderness into fertile land.⁹⁵ However, on the other hand, they grumbled over how expensive slaves became, for slaveholders had to rear their own labour force, take care of them when they were infant, sick and old.⁹⁶ Benjamin Turner also moans that his slaves eat him bankrupt. For example, he must take care of them still in their old age, and that is not even enough, for they steal from him and lie to him whenever possible.

Samuel Turner is a slaveowner with abolitionist views. West⁹⁷ informs us in Styron’s biography that Samuel Turner’s character is based on John Hartwell Cocke’s (1780-1866) life. Cocke was a philanthropist and a devoted Christian who gradually became a strong abolitionist. He taught his slaves to read and count, gave them religious instruction and encouraged them to avoid alcohol and gambling. He was of the opinion that before the slaves could be emancipated they should be educated and trained in all fields of their lives. However, Cocke failed in his efforts, because so few other persons shared his views and the

⁹⁴ Jordan, 1977, 430

⁹⁵ Stamp, 1989, 7,11

⁹⁶ Tise, 1987, 65

⁹⁷ West, 1998, 352-3

problems were too great to overcome alone. Samuel Turner clearly is like John Cocke in that he several times stresses that slaves should be educated and later freed⁹⁸:

I have long and do still steadfastly believe that slavery is the great cause of all the chief evils of our land. It is a cancer eating at our bowels, the source of all misery, individual, political and economic... I am not without faith and I pray nightly for the miracle, for the divine guidance which will somehow show us the way out of this terrible condition. It is evil to keep these people in bondage, yet they cannot be freed. They must be educated!

Samuel Turner decides to instruct Nat Turner in order to show that black Africans are as capable and intelligent as the white race. He too, like Cocke, sees the importance of training for a slave, and therefore sends Nat Turner to learn the carpenter trade. Samuel Turner, however, abandons his ideals as soon as he runs into financial difficulties and most likely sells Nat Turner after having promised to emancipate him. In this aspect Samuel Turner differs from John H. Cocke, who was fierce and uncompromising in his views. Therefore, Turner's idealism is only hollow words in comparison to Cocke's. Although he hopes that slavery would some day be extinguished, he finally decides to leave the affair of emancipation to the time and the Providence of God, as also many other Southerners did at that time.⁹⁹

Another character in the novel that has negative attitudes towards the institution of slavery is the judge Jeremiah Cobb, who condemns Nat Turner to the gallows. Cobb curses the day when the first black slaves entered the soil of America. He despises slavery and laments over Virginia which has become a wasteland as a result of excessive farming with slave labour. Virginia has now turned into "a nursery" for the Deep South. Jordan¹⁰⁰ writes that Virginia's slave population was growing rapidly, and the changes in agriculture had made slavery unprofitable at the turn of the 19th century. For this reason the planters wanted to get rid of their slaves, and as the Lower South needed slave labour, the Virginians "had every economic reason to sell" their slaves southward. In that way they became the major slave breeders for the Lower South.

⁹⁸ Styron, 2004, 156

⁹⁹ Tise, 1987, 242

¹⁰⁰ Jordan, 1977, 319-20

“Is not the handwriting on the wall?”, Cobb asks.¹⁰¹ The phrase is from the Book of Daniel in which the Babylonian King Belshazzar sees a hand writing on the wall. The Prophet Daniel is called upon to interpret the mysterious handwriting to the King and explains him that God intends to destroy his kingdom for the reason that he holds the Jews captive in his land. The prophecy is fulfilled and the Babylonian kingdom is conquered and destroyed the very following night. Jeremiah Cobb understands that such madness as American slavery will lead to no good. He is like Bishop Allen who anticipated God’s judgement upon America for its sin of slavery.

Harriet Beecher Stowe¹⁰² contends in the *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that “there is no other country in the world where the religious influence has a greater ascendancy than in America”. She further points out that in no other nation the clergy has a more powerful position. For instance, the statesmen esteem its views most seriously when making up their political decisions. The clergy thus has “a power to rectify” any great national wickedness in the country. And about individual clergymen she says that because they are elected by the church members they therefore are “the very ideal and expression of the church”. A clergyman conveys most perfectly “the ideas of truth and right” of the congregation. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* Richard Whitehead is a young Methodist minister who preaches to the slaves on Mission Sunday in the church. Whitehead exhorts them with the exact words of Meade, the Bishop of the Church of England¹⁰³:

Your bodies, you know, are not your own; they are at the disposal of those you belong to, ... for your idleness and wickedness are generally found out and your bodies suffer for it here... I say, that what faults you are guilty of towards your own masters and mistresses are faults done against God himself, who has set your masters and mistresses over you in His own stead, and expects that you would do for them just as you would do for Him.

The formal stance of different Southern denominations on the issue of slavery was racist and pro-slavery. For example, the Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist denominations believed

¹⁰¹ Styron, 2004, 64-9

¹⁰² Stowe, 1998, 382

¹⁰³ Styron, 2004, 96,100

that as the Scriptures taught “the relative duties of master and slave”, in the same way “as those of parent and child, and husband and wife”, slavery’s existence was not against the will of God. In addition, because the institution of slavery was a political question the church had no right to interfere in it. In fact, as an arrangement of society God had left slavery to the control of white men entirely, and the church’s duty was only to define the reciprocal responsibilities of slaveholders and slaves.¹⁰⁴

By using Meade’s sermon in his novel Styron captures the atmosphere in the churches controlled by whites in the antebellum South. It gives the impression that Richard Whitehead has completely understood his duties as a clergyman in the service of the church by preaching what it wants him to preach. In this connection the author also makes two interesting allusions to the hypocrisy of the church and its members. Firstly, when Margaret Whitehead sees the whitewashed church she exclaims in delight¹⁰⁵: “Oh, look yonder, Nat, the Church! Look at how Richard has gotten one whole side whitewashed already!” Secondly, after the church service the whites go to the graveyard to bury a dead person, and the slaves are not supposed to follow them. The whitewashed church and the gathering at the graveyard bring to mind the Pharisees in the New Testament who Jesus rebukes for being like “whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness”.¹⁰⁶ The Christianity of Whitehead’s flock is not real, but merely a mask for the mammon-worship and power lust that are satisfied by exploiting their African American slaves.

Nat Turner’s third master the Reverend Eppes is a revealing example of how some of those who claimed to be Christians, in fact, were the most hard-hearted and brutal towards their slaves. Without pity or mercy Eppes forces Turner to toil for him and his parishioners seven days a week from sunrise to sunset. In this way he wants to break his will and make

¹⁰⁴ Stowe, 1998, 385-7

¹⁰⁵ Styron, 2004, 92, 99

¹⁰⁶ The Bible, Matthew 23: 27

money as much as possible at the expense of his labour. At one point Turner is driven to despair and nearly commits suicide. Turner's time with the Reverend Eppes resembles Frederick Douglass's life when he was sent to a slave breaker Mr. Covey, who also was a leader in a Methodist congregation.¹⁰⁷ At Covey's farm Douglass was compelled to work long days to the point of collapse. In addition, Covey beat Douglass savagely, and succeeded in breaking him in "body, soul and spirit". However, he could not break his spirit entirely, for he finally found enough courage to defend himself against Covey's violence. Douglass later writes that the religion of the Old South was only "a mere covering for most horrid crimes" and that the worst slave masters he had ever met were the religious ones.

The two Episcopal clergymen's visit to the Turner brothers is a good example of how the clergy avoided taking any political stance on the issue of slavery. The younger minister is portrayed very feminine in appearance that hints at the weakness of churchmen in the question of slavery on the whole. He remains almost completely silent during the conversation and just titters at Benjamin Turner's remarks. Dr Ballard, the elder minister, seems to choose his words carefully and remains as neutral as possible. He probably is afraid of supporting Samuel Turner's views on the education of slaves, because they are too radical. Therefore, his only comment to him is, "how interesting".¹⁰⁸ However, his answer to Benjamin Turner is: "yes, I see what you mean... yes, I do see clearly what you mean". He seeks to understand Benjamin Turner most probably because he represents the prevailing thinking of the slaveholders. When Ballard starts to express his own opinion on the subject, he suddenly breaks off talking and falls silent. He also flatters the wealthy slaveholders with his farewell words: "God watch over your dreams, Mr. Turner". As already mentioned, the church had the power to change society and take a radical stance on any injustice, however, it was afraid to exercise this authority and was instead extremely toothless on the issue of

¹⁰⁷ Douglass, 1995, 34-46

¹⁰⁸ Styron, 2004, 156-161

slavery. The reason for this was very likely the fact that the church was dependent on the voluntary support of its members. To make the point another way, the church sympathized with slaveholders, because its finance was endowment based.

The Quakers differed from other American denominations in the matter of slavery. Postma¹⁰⁹ writes that The Society of Friends, known as the Quakers, advocated the abolition of slavery most actively. However, before the eighteenth century Quakers had been involved in slave trade and had owned slaves, but little by little their attitudes began to change and they became fervent opponents of slavery. Quakers emancipated their own slaves and petitioned both the U.S. Congress and the British Parliament to pass the laws that would end the slave trade. They considered African Americans their brothers and wanted to make amends for their wrongdoings against them.¹¹⁰

However, the slaveholders regarded Quakers as troublemakers who continually sought to stir up insurrections among the blacks in the Southern slave states. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* this view on Quakers as troublemakers is also evident when a Quaker missionary was soon chased off the plantation when he probably was found out to be a secret conductor on the Underground Railroad.¹¹¹ The conductors guided fugitive slaves to freedom. Indeed, many Quakers helped slaves to run away and assisted them finding places where they could live as free men and women. For example, the former slave Harriet Tubman¹¹² tells the writer of her biography about Thomas Garret, a Quaker¹¹³:

...man of a wonderfully large and generous heart, through whose hands, Harriet tells me, two thousand self-emancipated slaves passed on their way to freedom. He was always ready, heart and hand and means, in aiding these poor fugitives, and rendered most efficient help to Harriet on many of her journeys back and forth.

¹⁰⁹ Postma, 2003, 66

¹¹⁰ Jordan, 1977, 357

¹¹¹ Styron, 2004, 270-1

¹¹² Harriet Tubman was the most famous activist of the Underground Railroad. She delivered hundreds of slaves by conducting them into freedom in the North. She was called the "Moses" of black people.

¹¹³ Bradford, 2000, 30-1

In Styron's novel Hark tells Nat Turner about the Quaker meeting house at Susquehanna where there is always someone to receive fugitives to help them escape. Hannibal had earlier advised Hark to follow "the North Star" on his flight to freedom. Indeed, the North Star¹¹⁴ guided many fugitives heading North in the nighttime. They were also aided by the Underground Railroad which meant a huge network of people, consisting mainly of free blacks and white Quakers who worked secretly to help the slaves to escape to the North and Canada.

Quakers are mentioned two more times in the novel in discussions between Nat Turner and Thomas Gray. The latter speaks about the "meddlin' and pryin'" Quakers, and Turner remembers a Quaker man who had told him about the solar system. Indeed, Quakers also saw the instruction of slaves of vital importance.¹¹⁵ Quakers or other abolitionists do not play a significant role in the novel, and thus the abolitionist attempts to destroy slavery seem ineffective which emphasizes the power of the "peculiar" institution in the Old South. However, the fact that Quakers every now and then come on the scene gives the reader the impression that there is something going on behind the backs of slaveholders.

Styron's portrayal of the white Christian South is convincing, for he is able to create believable characters of those historical figures of whom there is little historical information available, for example, of Jeremiah Cobb and Thomas Gray. This further points out that Styron has done careful research on slavery and the Old South. The various white characters of the novel reflect the prevailing attitudes towards the blacks and the institution of slavery at that time, for instance those of the clergy. Styron's knowledge of the antebellum South becomes alive for the reader through the white figures of the novel.

¹¹⁴ Frederick Douglass began publishing his antislavery paper, *the North Star*, in Rochester in 1847.

¹¹⁵ Jordan, 1977, 359

2.2. The Images of Black Women and Men

How does the author portray black women and men in the novel? What kind of influence does Christian faith have on their lives? First, I will look at the images of African American women, that is, how they and their roles in Southern society are represented. In fact, there are only few black women characters in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* that are portrayed more closely. One of them is Nat Turner's grandmother who was a native African from Gold Coast. In the novel she is already dead and Turner reminisces about her. The grandmother was only thirteen years old when she was imported to America and sold into bondage at the slave auction. The experience was so traumatic to her that she became mentally ill, and as a result, refused to eat and finally withered away. However, she was baptised before her death, and the inscription on the cross reads¹¹⁶: "Tig... born an heathen, died baptised in Christ".

Raboteau¹¹⁷ says that Christian colonists believed that their duty was to evangelise the heathen. "Preaching the gospel" to all people usually meant that the Christian church sent out missionaries to proclaim good tidings to the pagans. In contrast, in America this was done the other way round, that is, the heathen slave was brought to the Christians. Richard

Whitehead's Methodist congregation sings about the heathen mission in the service¹¹⁸:

"Salvation, O Salvation! The joyful sound proclaim, Till each remotest nation Has learnt Messiah's name..." Nat Turner's grandmother was imported to America and was baptised, but she probably never understood what the ceremony was all about, and rather chose to die than to become a slave in a purportedly Christian country.

Tig's daughter and Nat Turner's mother, Lou-Ann was brought to the Big House where she was raised by the house-servants. She is a "tall" and "beautiful" woman who occupies a privileged position as a cook. Slave society was a hierarchical system in which field slaves were at the bottom of the hierarchy whereas house servants, blacksmiths, wheelwrights and

¹¹⁶ Styron, 2004, 128

¹¹⁷ Raboteau, 1980, 98, 120

¹¹⁸ Styron, 2004, 102

carpenters were at the top.¹¹⁹ Lou-Ann is well aware of her better status in the slave society and expresses contempt for the field slaves. “Us folks in de house is *quality*”, she explains to the other house-servant.¹²⁰ However, although having a better position compared to the field hands she is not spared from sexual exploitation by white men. Little Nathaniel comes to witness her mother’s rape by McBride, an Irish overseer. The situation is very violent, for McBride is heavily drunk and threatens to cut Lou-Ann’s throat with a broken neck of a liquor bottle if she is not willing to have sexual intercourse with him. Lou-Ann surrenders.

Angela Davis¹²¹ writes that compared to slave men, slave women were not only “whipped and mutilated, they were also raped”. Rape was used as a weapon to dominate and repress “slave women’s will to resist”. The terrorist masters raped slave women in order to put them in their place, and in the long run, to “demoralize their men”. Indeed, Jones¹²² informs us that white masters tried to humiliate and provoke black men by sexually abusing their women. For example, a white man would enter a slave cabin and order the husband to go outside and wait “til he do what he want to do”. Some male slaves run away, for they could not stand the horrors towards their women they had to witness.

A slave woman who passively accepted the sexual abuse was an exception in the South.¹²³ Frederick Douglass¹²⁴ recalls the event when his Aunt Hester was severely beaten when she was not available when her master “desired her presence”. She had gone out with a black man whom she loved. Douglass was so “terrified and horror-stricken at the sight” of Hester’s whipping that he hid himself in a closet and did not leave it before the whippings were over quite a while ago. The former slave, Harriet Jacobs¹²⁵, who managed to resist her master’s attempts to violate her sexually says that a master’s “favourite” slave “is not allowed to have

¹¹⁹ Bradbury & Temperley, 1992, 117

¹²⁰ Styron, 2004, 133

¹²¹ Davis, 1983, 23-4

¹²² Jones, 1986, 37-8

¹²³ Davis, 1983, 20

¹²⁴ Douglass, 1995, 4

¹²⁵ Jacobs, 2003, 49, 115

any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous". When she told her master that she wanted "to live like a Christian" he said: "if you are faithful to me, you will be as virtuous as my wife". Harriet answered that "the Bible did not say so".

Lou-Ann also seems to possess faith in Christ. When she is informed that McBride is coming to her and also after the rape she sings a gospel song while sweeping in the kitchen¹²⁶:

Bow low, Mary, bow low, Martha,
For Jesus come and lock de do',
An' carry de keys away...

Some critics, such as Daniel Ross, have interpreted that Lou-Ann actually enjoyed having sex with a drunken slave-whipper.¹²⁷ Interestingly, in the novel the only time she is mentioned to sing is just before and after her rape. Her song is about the sisters Martha and Mary whose brother, Lazarus, is sick.¹²⁸ They send Jesus a message to come, however, he tarries on the way and Lazarus dies in the meantime. When Jesus arrives Martha and Mary bow down before Jesus and pray to him although logically all hope is gone. Jesus goes to the already sealed tomb and calls Lazarus out, for he as God "has the keys" to bring the dead back to life. On the one hand, Lou-Ann feels like Martha and Mary who put their hope in the Lord, and, on the other hand, she is like Lazarus who is in the tomb behind the seal from where only Jesus has the power to liberate.

W.E.B. Du Bois¹²⁹ writes in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the music of black religion is the true expression of a black people's "sorrow, despair and hope" under the pressure of "law and whip". Frederick Douglass¹³⁰ also declares that it is a mistake to believe that the blacks' singing is an evidence of contentment and happiness among them, for black slaves "sing most when they are most unhappy". He further states that the "songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its

¹²⁶ Styron, 2004, 142

¹²⁷ Ross, 1993, 82

¹²⁸ The Bible, John 11

¹²⁹ Du Bois, 2001, 191

¹³⁰ Douglass, 1995, 9

tears”. In fact, one of William Styron’s sources for the novel was Frederick Douglass’s narrative of his life.¹³¹ This fact could indicate that Lou-Ann was sad and anxious about McBride’s sexual attentions to her.

Nat Turner’s grandmother and mother are the only black women that have any connection with the Christian faith in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Instead, the novel includes many white women characters that are pious Christians, such as Marse Samuel’s wife and Margaret Whitehead. In addition, the white women are described as subjects who actively build their lives around them and have own thoughts and views. Styron characterizes the black women solely as objects for sexual use, for example as “fine heifers” to breed more slaves like Turner’s grandmother. In addition to Turner’s grandmother and mother, the other black women appear like shadows in the novel, and have questionable moral values. For example, they are described as “available and willing little black girls”.¹³² As a matter of fact, Davis¹³³ points out that the Southern politicians, journalists and literary artists have often portrayed black women as “chronically promiscuous” who “welcome the sexual attentions of white men”. As they are represented as “loose women” and whores their cries of rape have no legitimacy. For some reason, Styron also portrays black women in a stereotypical way, that is, being somewhat immoral.

In a way, Nat Turner’s mother becomes a feminine Sambo figure in her relationship with McBride. Out of fear she suddenly submits to his groping, starts to please him and shows her submission with a childish giggling. The narrator also interprets the grandmother’s hunger strike and the intention to kill her little child from a viewpoint of the white dominant class. These are explained as being the result of her insanity, and not as a fight against slavery. Before her death she is described as a fragile child mother. The anthropologist Melville

¹³¹ West, 1998, 339

¹³² Styron, 2004, 168

¹³³ Davis, 1983, 176, 182

Herskovits¹³⁴ writes about Nat Turner's mother who tried to murder her little son right after his birth. The reason for this was that she did not want "to bring another slave into the world". Herskovits himself was convinced of the widespread discontent among the slaves whereas the old myth of black inferiority claimed that slaves were childlike, docile and accepted their slave status. Racial prejudice and discrimination against the blacks gained their power from this myth.¹³⁵

French¹³⁶ informs us that Styron abandoned Herbert Aptheker's *The American Negro Slave Revolts* which rejected the common myth of "universal content and docility among the slaves" and demonstrated that "unrest and discontent were considerably more widespread than previous historians would grant". Instead, Styron embraced Stanley Elkins's theories on slaves' "submissiveness, cheerfulness, and childishness" that were observable among the Southern plantation slaves.¹³⁷ Elkins refused the ideal picture of a black slave who could fully resist the impact of slavery on his personality. Instead, he argued that the coercive and cruel system of slavery severely damaged the psyche of the slave and generated the childlike "Sambo" personality. The Sambo stereotype was often depicted as a black man who was "docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing". He was "the perpetual child incapable of maturity". Elkins drew his conclusions on the Sambo personality by comparing American slaves to the Nazi concentration camp prisoners who developed similar personality traits in the concentration camps.

Styron characterizes Nat Turner's friend Hark as a good-natured, giggling Sambo type who is easily frightened and fears high places. When Miss Maria Pope and Putnam drive him up a tree as a punishment, for not doing his daily chores, he is very clownish in his inability to

¹³⁴ Herskovits, 1990, 103

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, 1

¹³⁶ French, 2004, 241

¹³⁷ Elkins, 1963, 23, 82, 112-13

cope with his fear. Indeed, Du Bois¹³⁸ writes in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the old South believed that God created “a Negro – a clownish, simple creature, at times even lovable” whose status was somewhere between men and cattle. Du Bois also contends that the “peculiarly complete system of slavery” emasculated black men. Nat Turner is revolted by Hark when he takes the role of Sambo in Jeremiah Cobb’s presence. He berates Hark for being “the unspeakable bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, snivelling servility” and for not being a man, but a fool when acting like that.¹³⁹

However, Hark is Nat Turner’s nearest friend and a dear “brother” to him. Turner firmly believes that he can “eliminate” the trait of a weakling from his character, because a slave is not docile and submissive at bottom, but instead rebellious and filled with rage. Nat Turner starts to teach Hark religion, but he soon must admit that his Christian teachings make only “the shallowest imprint upon his spirit”.¹⁴⁰ Instead, Hark shares with him his disappointment with God:

Figger when I gets to heaven like you says I is, de good Lord hisself even He gwine make old Hark feel black-assed, standin’ befo’ de golden throne. Dere He is, white as snow, ...I can hear him holler out: “Hark! You dere, boy! Need some spick and span roun’ de throne room. Hop to,...

Raboteau¹⁴¹ writes that for some slaves Christianity was “a white man’s religion”, and they refused to have any part with “the religion of menstealers”. Others explained that they were too tired to go to church, and that it was “hard for them to serve their earthly and heavenly master too”. On Sundays they rather preferred to go hunting, fishing or cultivated their little gardens. The missionaries complained that the “wicked life of Christians” was the main obstacle for slaves to convert to Christianity. In Hark’s life this wickedness of the white man culminated when Travis sold his wife and little boy to slave traders and separated him from

¹³⁸ Du Bois, 2000, 89, 22

¹³⁹ Styron, 2004, 56-8

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 53-4, 282

¹⁴¹ Raboteau, 1980, 176-7, 121

his most beloved ones. No wonder that Hark tells Nat Turner: “On’y a God dat was white could figger out how to make niggers so lonesome...”¹⁴² Turner tells Gray that Hark is so “torn up” that he cannot keep his mind on anything and for that reason he forgets his duties. With this Styron alludes to Elkins’s theories on the psychologically damaged “Sambo”.

Hark is not the only person Nat Turner tries to instruct. Willis, his closest friend at the Turners’ farm becomes his first disciple. Willis is in the darkness of paganism, part of which is belief in omens and conjures, and therefore Turner wants to “bring him out of ignorance and superstition and into the truth of Christian belief”.¹⁴³ Willis has respect for his friend and holds him in awe. Turner seems to take advantage of this and in his proselytising zeal leads Willis to confess his faith in the Lord: “Das right, Lawd, Willis he believes”. How genuine his conversion is remains unclear in the novel, for Willis is soon sold away from the farm. Nat Turner also starts to teach Willis to read and write so that he would grow as a Christian by reading the Word of God. Also later, when Turner belongs to Thomas Moore, he forms a group from his followers and gives them instruction on the Bible each Saturday. The Old Testament stories of Joseph and Moses excite and fascinate his disciples somewhat. However, Turner realizes that “few of them had the ability to become what one might call devout; none of them was disposed to really cease from foul language or to abstain from drinking whatever brandy they could filch from a white man’s wagon”.¹⁴⁴ This again points to the psychologically damaged slave who has degraded to a state of bored indifference, and has no interest in educating himself and improving his life.

Frederick Douglass, instead, has a different experience of educating his fellow-slaves. Douglass writes how he kept “a Sabbath school” on Sundays, for had been able to create in his black brothers and sisters a strong desire to learn to read. The school was kept at a house of a free coloured man, and there were forty ardent slave men and women to receive

¹⁴² Styron, 2004, 282

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, 197-8

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 304, 322

instruction at one time. They had to do practise their skills as secretly as possible, for it was illegal for a slave to learn to read or write. Douglass¹⁴⁵ explains:

It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael's unacquainted with the fact, that, instead spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God; for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings.

If they were caught attending the reading lessons they were liable to be punished by whipping. Despite the danger of getting caught these people came to the lessons, because they were so hungry to learn to read.

In the novel Nat Turner prepares his followers for the coming insurrection with religious instruction. The Old Testament heroes Joshua and David are turned into black militants so that his followers are able to identify with them better. During Whitehead's sermon in the church the rebels exchange information about the uprising and plan where they could meet after the service. When the white parishioners go to the graveyard the insurrectionists meet behind the church at a stream. French¹⁴⁶ informs us about a house slave Beck who testified in the court during the Southampton trial in 1831. She had overheard slaves plotting to kill the white people both in Southampton and Sussex County several times and she maintained that the black men had been planning the insurrection for over a year. Once she had listened to the older black men gathered outside the church after the service in the Baptist Church in Sussex County. Two slaves had, for example, said that "they would join the Negroes to murder the white people". Beck's testimony aroused suspects that the plot was more extensive than believed. Although many later challenged Beck's testimony, there could be some truth in it, for it is strange if someone would invent such a story out of nothing. The testimony may, therefore, demonstrate how the revolts were plotted under the cover of religious activity.

¹⁴⁵ Douglass, 1995, 48

¹⁴⁶ French, 2004, 37-41

Harding¹⁴⁷ points out that “the spirit of resistance and struggle had been lodged deeply in the black community’s religious life”. In addition to collective resistance, such as attempts of insurrection, a covert “day to day” resistance was a common way to fight against the white man’s oppression. The strategy of passive resistance included, for instance, ‘accidental’ breaking of tools, stealing food and slowing down work.¹⁴⁸ In Styron’s novel the blacks are constantly stealing food which also influences the attitudes of the whites towards them, for they “suspect a nigger of taking almost anything that is not nailed down”.¹⁴⁹ Raboteau writes about stealing which is labelled as a sin in the Bible. The slaves, however, denied that stealing from the slaveholders was a sin, because “they themselves were stolen property”. Also the worker’s “right to the fruit of his labours” justified ‘taking’ from the master. Moral vices, such as lying and deceit were virtues to slaves when they dealt with slave masters. In fact, it was a religious duty to deceive them, and the motto “us against them” was essential in slaves’ moral system.¹⁵⁰

This principle also involved that blacks hid their true feelings while they acted the opposite. The former bondsman, Jacob Stroyer¹⁵¹ gives an illuminating example of this, and at the same time of double-voiced discourse, when his master’s corpse was carried home:

...all the slaves were allowed to stop at home that day to see the last of him, and to lament with mistress. After all the slaves who cared to do so had seen his face, they gathered in groups around mistress to comfort her; they shed false tears, saying “never mind, missus, massa gone home to heaven.” While some were saying this, others said “Thank God, massa gone home to hell, massa gone home to hell.”

A similar situation also happens in Styron’s novel when Marse Benjamin dies. The slaves sing a song on the funeral day behind the Big House¹⁵²: “O my massah’s gone! Massah’s gone! My massah’s gone to heaven, my Lord! I can’t stay behind!” The narrator continues

¹⁴⁷ Harding, 1983, 68

¹⁴⁸ Oakes, 1991, 138

¹⁴⁹ Styron, 2004, 140

¹⁵⁰ Raboteau, 1980, 295-7

¹⁵¹ Stroyer, 2001, 21-2

¹⁵² Styron, 2004, 163

with the following words: “the insincerity of their words was as plain as the difference between gold and brass”. This sentence implies that the slaves were hiding their true feelings: They neither grieved over Benjamin Turner’s passing, nor believed that a slaveholder can get to heaven. There were also insinuations about some “foul play” concerning Marse Benjamin’s death among the slaves, because he had been with two black timber hands in the woods when a falling tree crushed him. In the history of slave resistance there are hundreds of cases when individual slaves have tried to kill their masters, for example, by poisoning them.¹⁵³

Vincent Harding¹⁵⁴ criticizes *The Confessions of Nat Turner* for its lack of spiritual depth. For example, he argues that African American spirituals have a minor role in the novel. Indeed, there are no other gospel songs than those two which are sung by Lou-Ann and by the slaves at the funeral of Marse Benjamin. Styron’s choice to follow Elkins’s theories on the Sambo personality in his portrayal of black slaves influences his representation of slave religion in the novel. The slaves are weak in character, because slavery has damaged their personality. Christian faith cannot reach them either and change their lives. Indeed, the faith in God has little meaning in the lives of Turner’s fellow slaves, and therefore, the religious music of the blacks never really becomes a structural element in the novel.

Harding¹⁵⁵ also questions Styron’s way to deal with baptism that is one of the major sacraments of black Christianity. In black Christianity, for example, according to the Baptist view, the person must first become a born-again Christian before he or she can be baptised. In other words, a personal faith in Christ is the condition for it.¹⁵⁶ In Styron’s novel, however, baptism is followed by the sense of sinning against God. Baptism itself, therefore, becomes the forgiving and saving power and not the faith in the Lord. This is clearly seen in Brantley’s words right after he is baptized: “Saved at last!” In addition, the essential characteristic of

¹⁵³ Gilbert, 2000, 84

¹⁵⁴ Harding, 1968, 28-29

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 27

¹⁵⁶ Iso Raamatun Tietosanakirja, Vol. 3, 1989, 61

African American Christianity, namely, the conversion experience, in which a person “finds the Lord” has no relevance in the novel. The reason for this must be the fact that the slave resistance in antebellum America received its power and authorization from the Christian faith. The Bible’s message was liberating for a slave, for he or she was no more ‘chattel’ or a ‘thing’ in the sight of God, but a valuable individual. This led to resistance to American slavery. Indeed, the most dangerous insurrections or attempts of them in North America were plotted by black Christian leaders, such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. The power of Christian faith was stronger than anything to protect the slaves’ minds from degeneration and damage under the harsh conditions of slavery. Elkins’s theories on the Sambo personality are difficult to combine with this. However, the author sometimes seems to refer to resistance covertly, under the cover of Elkins’s theories and white viewpoints. For example, the reader can interpret the grandmother’s mental distress and Marse Benjamin’s sudden death as opposition to slavery.

2.3. Nat Turner and His Relationship to God

Elkins¹⁵⁷ admitted that there were blacks who could escape the full effects of American slavery and its coercions drawing sustenance and strength from their personal integrity. Out of these people emerged black leaders and rebels, such as Nat Turner. Elkins was of the opinion that because Nat Turner was “a literate preacher of recognized intelligence” it made him resist the effects of slavery. The people who belonged to the “elite” of blacks, and thus were capable of protecting their “souls”, were, for example, free blacks, house slaves and skilled craftsmen.

In addition to Elkins’s *Slavery*, another work that influenced Styron was Erik. H. Erikson’s *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History*. Styron was fascinated

¹⁵⁷ Elkins, 1963, 137-9

by Erikson's attempt to go back in history in his imagination and get into the mind of the young rebel Martin Luther. Styron was especially interested in Luther's complicated relationship with his father, his asceticism and "his mixture of love and contempt for the people he sought to save", as West¹⁵⁸ puts it. In Styron's novel Turner has no recollection of his biological father, for he had escaped slavery. Indeed, Styron declared while writing his novel that Nat Turner's only meaningful father was Samuel Turner, the white master "who owned and raised" him.¹⁵⁹ In the novel there are many parallels between Turner and the Luther of Erikson's study. For example, Martin Luther's father was sometimes violent and harsh to his son and sometimes he treated Martin in a way that made him become attached to his father.¹⁶⁰ In other words, his behaviour was inconsistent towards Martin. Nat Turner's master Samuel Turner is not harsh; instead, he is rather a saint-like person with kind eyes. Nat Turner holds him in such awe that he almost identifies him with the biblical figures Moses and Elijah. He describes his attitude towards Marse Samuel as follows¹⁶¹: "my regard for him is very close to the feeling one should bear only toward the Divinity".

Despite his warmth and friendship and "a kind of *love*" Samuel Turner shows to his young slave, Turner is "an experiment" to him as "a lesson in big-breeding".¹⁶² Together with his wife Miss Nell he takes him under his protective wings for the purpose to prove that a black slave can be educated. Miss Nell and her daughter Louisa commit their time to teaching him to read, write and count. In addition, being a very religious person and a fervent reader of the Bible, Miss Nell leads Nat Turner into the world of the Scriptures. In a way, Nat Turner becomes a sort of black "pet" of the family. Marse Samuel's inconsistent behaviour towards his slave boy is already visible during the first years of his instruction, for Turner explains¹⁶³:

¹⁵⁸ West, 1998, 340

¹⁵⁹ Shapiro, 1975, 103

¹⁶⁰ Erikson, 1962, 66

¹⁶¹ Styron, 2004, 124

¹⁶² *ibid.*, 152, 165

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 166

“days and weeks might go by without Marse Samuel paying any note of me... and thus those special moments when I was the object of his attention...”

“I have grander plans for this young darky”, Marse Samuel announces to Turner one day when he is sixteen. First Nat Turner will be trained as a skilled carpenter and then at the age of twenty-five Marse Samuel would draw up the papers for his emancipation. However, he alters his mind and probably sells him to the Reverend Eppes. He tells Nat Turner that he has put him “under the protection” of Eppes for a year, and after that he would start an apprenticeship in Richmond and soon be a free man. Marse Samuel promises to write to him, but he never does. Nat Turner’s maltreatment is not physical, but mental, because he becomes the target of Samuel Turner’s changing mind. Although he seems to be a noble and truthful person and hold Nat Turner as his equal, yet, at bottom he considers him only his property.

According to Erikson¹⁶⁴, Martin Luther “could not hate his father openly” for his unjust treatment and for hindering his development in childhood and youth. But, later in his life Luther demonstrated a great capacity to hate vehemently, and often the victims of his hate were outsiders. Turner’s passionate hatred towards his former master begins to grow right after he realizes that he is betrayed¹⁶⁵: “...hatred so bitter that I grew dizzy and thought I might get sick on the floor... for Marse Samuel, and the rage rose and rose in my breast until I earnestly wished him dead... I saw him strangled by my own hands...” His feelings of hate grow and grow every day and their target become white people in general. Turner conceals his feelings well and pretends to be a trustworthy and docile slave, but finally his hatred explodes in the insurrection.

The father’s injustice towards young Luther clouded his picture of God. Martin believed that the father, when he was punishing his children, followed the rules of “arbitrariness and malice”, and not those of “love and justice”. The doubts of his childhood were later directed

¹⁶⁴ Erikson, 1962, 65

¹⁶⁵ Styron, 2004, 241

at God whom he saw as an angry judge.¹⁶⁶ As already mentioned, the young Nat Turner regards Samuel Turner as a father figure who even possesses godlike characteristics in his eyes. Therefore, Marse Samuel becomes a person who influences his conception of God, and in his mind God resembles his earthly master in certain aspects. For example, when there is a sudden setback in his plans of insurrection, he says¹⁶⁷: “I felt that the Lord was playing with me, taunting me, ...if the Lord had really called me to such a great mission after all”. He has the sense that God is unreliable like Marse Samuel who had only played with him by promising him first freedom and then abandoning him. Again, when Turner’s mission turns out to be futile, he feels that God has left him and has feelings of apartness from Him.

Erikson¹⁶⁸ writes that men who possess hidden creative powers abstain from social and sexual relations in order to build the basis of their life’s work. In Gray’s *Confessions* Nat Turner’s seclusion from society is mentioned three times which points out that it was an essential element in his character and a source of interest. Turner tells Gray the reasons for his seclusion from social intercourse with his fellow slaves¹⁶⁹:

...having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society... devoting my time to fasting and prayer ...I now withdrew myself as much as my situation would permit, from the intercourse of my fellow servants, for the avowed purpose of serving the Spirit more fully...I sought more than ever to obtain true holiness before the great day of judgment should appear.

This displays clearly that Nat Turner had a vision for his life’s work and was ready to make sacrifices for it, and therefore abstained from the company of his fellow slaves. He also realized that he was God’s instrument for some greater purpose and it meant that he had to seek true holiness before God. In addition to leading a secluded life he was austere both in his life and manners. In Styron’s novel Nat Turner also lives an ascetic and secluded life. To emphasize this, Styron quotes the part of the original confession where his avoidance of

¹⁶⁶ Erikson, 1962, 58, 156

¹⁶⁷ Styron, 2004, 346

¹⁶⁸ Erikson, 1962, 44

¹⁶⁹ Gray, 1999, 8, 10

“mixing in society” is mentioned. The novel’s Turner fasts and spends time in prayer whenever he gets an occasion. Interestingly, in Gray’s *Confessions* Turner does not mention that he spent time reading the Bible, he was just praying and feeling how the Spirit talked to him. Styron’s Turner, however, is an eager student of the Holy Word. In the novel the Bible reading and studying the Word of God is as important as praying and communicating with the Spirit. It might be that Turner in Gray’s *Confessions* omits to mention the reading of the Bible, because it was illegal for a slave to own a book. Turner just mentions how he almost miraculously had learnt to read. Perhaps he also did not want to reveal who had taught him to read, for it was strictly forbidden to teach a slave to read and write.¹⁷⁰ Or, Gray might also have changed Turner’s account or fabricated parts of it.

Styron makes Nat Turner an ascetic who despises his fellow slaves and his “lifelong” contempt and loathing of all black people crops up regularly in the novel. For instance, he refers to his black brethren as “the black riffraff” or “creatures beneath contempt”. When he observes the slaves in the wagon on the way to the slave auction he describes them in the following way¹⁷¹:

They cared nothing about where they came from or where they were going ...Like animals they relinquished the past with as much dumb composure as they accepted the present, and were unaware of any future at all. Such creatures deserved to be sold, I thought bitterly, and I was torn between detestation for them and regret that it was too late for me to save them through the power of the Word.

Turner’s feelings towards the slaves were not just those of dislike, but also sadness. He compares their mental state to that of animals, and is sad that he had not been able to raise them out of their state of degradation with God’s Word. However, towards his nearest friends, such as Hark, he has feelings of brotherly love. The free black Northern abolitionist David Walker had similar opinions about slaves who accepted their slavery without resisting. Walker regarded black resistance to slavery as sacred obedience to the Lord, and therefore,

¹⁷⁰ Aptheker, 1966, 29

¹⁷¹ Styron, 2004, 219

the continued submission was a sin and would cause God's judgement. Walker¹⁷² declared: "The man who would not fight under our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in the glorious and heavenly cause of freedom and of God...ought to be kept with all of his children or family, in slavery, or in chains, to be butchered by his *cruel enemies*". However, Walker did not use degrading language when he referred to his black brothers and sisters, as Nat Turner does. He addresses them as "men" and not as "animals".

Erikson's work on Martin Luther might have influenced Styron more than David Walker in making Turner despise his fellow slaves. Luther's father was of peasant origin. The heritage of peasantry began to disappear from Martin's life because he more and more often withdrew himself from the German peasant whom he criticized for being "vulgar, violent, and animal-like". In Luther's upbringing the peasantry had perhaps represented a negative feature of identity which the parents tried to root out.¹⁷³ Similarly, in Styron's novel, Nat Turner's mother Lou-Ann infects his son with her loathing towards the field slaves.

The young Luther's asceticism and celibacy may have inspired Styron in his portrayal of Nat Turner. During the years of celibacy Martin Luther was assailed by strong sexual temptations. He said that his sexual tension only became worse when he tried to control it and, for example, the fasting only added it. Later Luther granted that sexual energy is a "general life-force" and it should not be tried to suppress. Luther's solution to this problem was marriage, for in his view "chastity" was "a rare gift".¹⁷⁴ Nat Turner is an ascetic celibate who also tries to keep his natural sexual drive under control. However, Turner often has to make his "penitent prayers" in the matter of masturbation. In the latter part of the novel Turner has been fasting for several days and is suddenly attacked by extremely strong sexual

¹⁷² Walker, 2001, 15

¹⁷³ Erikson, 1962, 52-3

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 158-162

fantasies and desires. When he controls himself again he says to himself¹⁷⁵: “Lord, after this mission is done I will have to get me a wife”.

One of the ten black critics, Bennet¹⁷⁶ criticizes Styron for portraying Turner a celibate and ignoring the evidence which shows that he had a wife. In addition, he attacks Styron for characterizing Turner as a revolutionary whose sexual fantasies were directed at white women. One other work that influenced Styron was William S. Drewry’s *The Southampton Insurrection* that was published in 1900.¹⁷⁷ Drewry was a Southerner who believed in white supremacy and insisted that blacks had to “occupy an inferior position” if they were to stay in the United States.¹⁷⁸ Styron¹⁷⁹ commented on his use of Drewry’s prejudiced thesis: ““The Southampton Insurrection”, while obviously biased served me quite well... of course, I sieved out what I instinctively sensed was irrelevant, false or biased”. Herbert Aptheker mentions that it would have been much better if Drewry had never published his dissertation. Later he refers to it by writing that Drewry offers for the reader “some romantic nonsense” about Turner willing to rescue “a fair white damsel if she would but marry him”.¹⁸⁰ It is possible that Drewry’s “nonsense” influenced Styron to make white women Nat Turner’s obsession.

Moreover, in all probability Styron was familiar with the three white women writers’ popular Southern *Moonlight and Magnolias* romances of the 1880s and 1890s. One of them was Pauline Carrington Bouvé’s *Their Shadows Before: A Story of the Southampton Insurrection*, published in 1899.¹⁸¹ A Southerner living in Boston, Bouvé made her career as a journalist, novelist, and children’s writer. The novel’s protagonist is a young girl Penelope in Virginia who, like Bouvé, sympathizes with the situation of slaves and is against the white dominance and social inequality in the Old South. Penelope feels that she has ideologically

¹⁷⁵ Styron, 2004, 338

¹⁷⁶ Bennett, 1968, 11-12

¹⁷⁷ Casciato & West, 1981, 564-5

¹⁷⁸ Quoted in French, 2004, 168

¹⁷⁹ Quoted in Casciato & West., 1981, 565

¹⁸⁰ Aptheker, 1966, i, 4

¹⁸¹ French, 2004, 160-1

grown apart from her white family members. Therefore, she can express her real feelings only to Mammy and old Uncle Isham who live in the slave quarters. She confides to Isham her abolitionist thoughts: “If I were a slave, I would hate my master. Even if he were good to me, still, I think I would hate, yes, hate him. I could not help it”.¹⁸² Penelope becomes friends with Nat Turner who later saves her from the hands of insurgent slaves. Before his execution, Turner sends for Penelope to come and meet him in his jail cell, and then gives her the testimony of his prophetic mission.

Styron’s Margaret Whitehead resembles Bouvé’s Penelope in many ways. Among other things, Margaret sympathizes with slaves and finds his brother’s preaching to them “just folderol for the darkies”. She confesses Turner that he is the only person with whom she can really talk, and has abolitionist views like Penelope¹⁸³: “if I were a *man* and a darky and I was abused like that by that horrible old Nathaniel Francis, I’d just hit him right back. Wouldn’t you?” A little bit later she declares him that “the darkies should be free”. In his cell Nat Turner comes into the conclusion that he would have liked to spare her after all. However, he was only able to spare her from the hands of mad Will by murdering Margaret himself. Before his execution he sees Margaret Whitehead in his fantasies in the jail cell. Margaret becomes a Christ-like figure who shows him the real love of God and leads him back to his heavenly Father.

Styron seems to combine Bouvé’s *Moonlight and Magnolia* romance of Nat Turner and the Southern racist myth of the black rapist in his portrayal of Nat Turner. The mythical black rapist has its origin in the ideology of white superiority and black inferiority. The common assumption of the sexual association between Africans and apes sometime in the past served to explain the deep-rooted belief that blacks were more animal and hence more sexual than

¹⁸² Quoted in French, 2004, 160

¹⁸³ Styron, 2004, 355

whites.¹⁸⁴ Further, in whites' imagination black men were believed "to harbour irresistible and animal-like sexual urges" towards white women.¹⁸⁵ However, the myth of the black rapist was not invented until after the Civil War. Frederick Douglass, for instance, stresses that African American men were not indiscriminately branded as rapists during slavery.¹⁸⁶ Douglass points out that "not a single Black man was publicly accused of raping a white woman" during the whole Civil War. After the emancipation of slaves the lynching of black people substituted the institution of slavery in controlling black race and guaranteeing white supremacy. The charge of rape proved to be the most powerful of all attempts to justify the lynching of blacks.

Styron's Nat Turner fantasizes raping white women. For example, when Margaret Whitehead and Nat Turner stop on their way to the Vaughans to drink from a brook in the woods Turner is overpowered by the desire to take her by force¹⁸⁷ : "*Take her*, a voice said...*Without mercy take your pleasure upon her innocent round body until she is half mad with fright and pain. Forget your great mission. Abandon all for these hours of terror and bliss*". Nat Turner never commits rape although he has recurrent thoughts of raping white women. He lives in his fantasy world and in it he has the identity of a stereotypical black rapist.

Will is the purest stereotype of the black rapist in the novel: he is "obsessed with the idea of raping white women".¹⁸⁸ Will also becomes an archetype of the degenerating effects of slavery according to Elkins's theories. He has deteriorated to this state of bestiality and savagery at the hands of a cruel and sadistic slave master. When Turner sees the "demented, murderous, hate-ravaged, mashed-in face of Will" he thinks¹⁸⁹: "he had lived like an animal and now, streaked with mud, stinking, fangs bared beneath a nose stepped upon and bent like

¹⁸⁴ Jordan, 1977, 491

¹⁸⁵ Davis, 1983, 182

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Davis, 1983, 184-5

¹⁸⁷ Styron, 2004, 362-3

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*, 353

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 366-7

a flattened spoon, it seemed to me that he was an animal- a wicked little weasel or maddened fox – and the blood ran chill in my veins”. Will is the embodiment of the Southern stereotype of the black male; the half human, half animal rapist.

Curiously enough, Nat Turner’s calling as a preacher never becomes an essential element in the novel. The readers have to wait quite a while before they read about his first experience of preaching. Turner delivers only one sermon in the novel. However, every now and then he refers to his ministry as a preacher¹⁹⁰: “Yet I must say that those same years were in certain ways the most fruitful I ever spent, since they.... presented opportunities in the field of evangelism such as I had never known ...” Unfortunately, this does not convince the reader, for it is the same thing if someone claims to be a singer, yet he or she never performs songs, nobody believes it. Instead of preaching, Turner seems to spend most of his free time alone in prayer and contemplation of spiritual truths. In addition, Turner’s career as a preacher is not very successful, because he cannot convince his fellow-slaves that they need religion, and most of his followers continue to have “little religion” throughout the novel. However, despite Turner’s lack of efforts to preach, his only sermon provides some interesting elements to examine.

Nat Turner preaches to the gathered black men in Jerusalem on the market day after Nathaniel Francis had humiliated Will and Sam by putting them to fight each other. Turner sees that the blacks also laugh at their fight and therefore becomes full of rage. Interestingly, Turner’s sermon contains striking similarities to the most radical antislavery document in antebellum America. The document is David Walker’s *Appeal* which he published in September 1829 and in which he urged slaves to rise against their oppressors. The purpose of the *Appeal* was to instil pride in black folk and to encourage them to believe that their liberation was indeed possible. Walker¹⁹¹ writes in the pamphlet:

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 260

¹⁹¹ Walker, 2001, 19, 35, 70-1

Are we MEN!!—I ask you, O my brethren! Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? ... you have to prove to the Americans and the world, that we are MEN, and not *brutes*, as we have been represented, and by millions treated...we can help ourselves; for, if we lay aside abject servility, and be determined to act like men, and not brutes... tell me if we are not abject and servile enough, how long, O! How long my colour shall we be dupes and dogs to the cruel whites? ...When shall we arise from this death-like apathy?---and be men!!

The penetrating theme of the pamphlet is the black people's dignity; they are men and not "dogs" or other beasts of the field as whites labelled them. Turner's sermon has the same message as Walker's Appeal¹⁹²: "Ain't none of you no four-legged beasts what can be whupped an' hurt like some flea-bit cur dog. You is men! You is men, my dear brothers, look at yo'selves, look to yo' *pride*!" He tells the men about the old patriarchs Jacob, Joseph and Moses whom he says to be "men", and that the children of Israel could "live like *men*" in the Promised Land after their deliverance from Egypt's bondage. With the help of the characters of the Old Testament, Turner wants to build up their self-esteem and teach them respect for themselves.

It is easy to understand that most of the blacks in the United States rejected *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the late 1960s. Styron's black stereotypical characters are largely based on white racist thinking. The docile and childish Sambo type of a black slave does not correspond to the impression the African Americans have on their slave ancestors. In addition, portraying Nat Turner and Will as black rapists was an audacious choice by Styron, for with it he took the risk of hurting the feelings of blacks and upsetting them. Styron's portrayal of the blacks, on the other hand, provokes and challenges readers to think by themselves, because by questioning his depiction of the slaves readers have to create their own picture of them at the same time. His portrayal of African Americans also shows what the majority of whites thought about blacks and reveals the twisted thought patterns of them. In this sense Styron's way of dealing with the black stereotypes might have been intentional

¹⁹² Styron, 2004, 302

in order to raise questions and stir up debate on the issue. The novel, indeed, caused a fierce public debate in which the common history of blacks and whites was under discussion. It demonstrated, among other things, that African Americans can identify with courageous black men and women, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman who refused to live as slaves and actively fought against slavery. The black rapist was again showed to be what it is: a myth.

3. The Bible in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Next, I will focus on the biblical intertextuality in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The textual analysis follows Genette's definition of *intertextuality* which is the first type of *transtextual* relationships. Genette¹⁹³ defines *intertextuality* as "the actual presence of one text within another", which includes "the traditional practice of *quoting*" in its most explicit and literal form. Quotations can be in quotation marks, or with or without any specific references. In Styron's novel there are over eighty exact quotations from the Bible, most of which are in italics. All quotations are from the Authorized King James Version of the Bible that is written in Early Modern English. Despite its archaic language, the Authorized Version is largely comprehensible to the modern reader and is still considered a good translation. It well suits Styron's novel which is situated in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Another type of Genette's intertextuality, which I will investigate in the novel, is "the practice of *allusion*". Genette¹⁹⁴ defines it as "an enunciation whose full meaning presupposes the perception of a relationship between it and another text, to which it necessary refers by some inflections that would otherwise remain unintelligible". *The Confessions of Nat Turner* contains a large number of allusions to the different characters and events of the Bible. Without identifying and understanding them the reader will loose some of the depth and richness of the novel's spiritual thematic. In addition, I will employ Barthes's insights on intertextuality when looking at the Bible interpretation of the whites and also that of Nat Turner.

The first subchapter deals with the Bible citations of the whites, for example, the verses that they understood as proslavery in the antebellum South. The second subchapter explores

¹⁹³ Genette, 1997, 1-2

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 2

what Nat Turner recites from the Bible and what function the citations have in the novel. This will shed light on the questions, for example, what kind of role the Bible has in Turner's life in the context of slavery, and how its images and models help him to cope with the oppression he faces. The third subchapter discusses how the Old Testament Prophets and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament inspire Nat Turner in his bloody revolt against the white slaveholders. In addition, the novel's allusions to the different biblical figures and events will be studied in all three sub-chapters. Among other things, I will look at the similarities between the characters of the novel and the characters of the Bible.

3.1. The Bible Citations of the White Characters of the Novel

According to Jordan¹⁹⁵, the first encounters between English voyagers and the peoples of Africa took place after 1550 when the first Englishmen came to West Africa to trade goods. The earliest descriptions of Africans usually began with their black complexion and then moved on to their manners and clothing. Especially in England the concept of blackness was loaded with negative colour symbolism. Black was associated with evil and baseness and held as a sign of repulsion and danger. Whiteness, instead, was considered its direct opposite. Hence, white and black together denoted "purity and filthiness", "virginity and sin", "beauty and ugliness", "beneficence and evil", and "God and the devil". Further, Europeans strongly believed that there was a connection between the black complexion of Africans and their character which was considered flawed.

Europeans tried to find an explanation for the blackness of African peoples.¹⁹⁶ For example, naturalists were of the opinion that Africans had been getting too much sun which had scorched their skin. However, they later had to give up the theory, simply because the first blacks living in Europe and northern America did not whiten up. As the naturalistic

¹⁹⁵ Jordan, 1974, 4-7

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 7-10

theories proved to be unsatisfactory, an alternative explanation was provided from the field of theology. Therefore, Noah's curse on his son Ham and his descendants was believed to be a completely adequate explanation for the blackness of Africans. This was sustained by a common thought that blackness could hardly be anything but a curse. According to the original story in Genesis 9, Ham saw the "nakedness" of his father Noah when he was drunk and lay inside his tent and told about it to his two brothers Shem and Japhet. When Noah found out what Ham had done to him, he cursed Ham's offspring¹⁹⁷: "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren". Goldenberg¹⁹⁸ contends that the biblical account of Noah's curse has been "the single greatest justification for Black slavery" for centuries. This justification, however, is very strange indeed, because Genesis 9 does not even mention blacks. Despite the fact, white people in general, and especially in the antebellum American South, believed that these verses meant that God had cursed black Africans to be slaves forever. It was also thought that the enslavement of the descendants of Ham protected society "from the disorderly conduct that Ham had brought to the postdiluvian community", as Haynes¹⁹⁹ puts it. In other words, subordination restrained the revolting African character which was so accurately characterized in Genesis 9.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* Dr Ballard listens to Benjamin Turner who is the eldest brother and the plantation's owner. He then starts to interpret Marse Benjamin's words, and thus shows that he has paid attention to his insights on slavery and respects them. Finally, as a churchman Ballard also feels the need to quote the Bible in the issue of slavery²⁰⁰:

... and would it also be accurate to discern in what you have just said a conviction that perhaps the Negro lags so far behind the rest of us – I mean, the white race – in *moral* development, well, for his own welfare it might be best that he – well, be kept in a kind of benevolent subjection...*Cursed be Canaan. A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.* Genesis, ninth chapter, twenty-fifth verse.

¹⁹⁷ The Bible, Genesis 9:25

¹⁹⁸ Goldenberg, 2003, 1

¹⁹⁹ Haynes, 2002, 87-9

²⁰⁰ Styron, 2004, 159-160

With his words Ballard points to the supposed character defect in African Americans which would legitimate their keeping in bondage, and then quotes Genesis 9 to support his statement. By putting these words into the mouth of a doctor of Divinity Styron refers to how powerful Noah's curse was in justifying American slavery. With the Bible quotation about the patriarch Noah the author also hints at the patriarchal system of slavery. Haynes²⁰¹ explains that whites regarded Africans as permanent children who combined "adult strength and childlike judgement", and consequently showed a tendency to cause disorder in a variety of ways. Because of the infantilisation of blacks, whites believed that they had to take care and protect "the semisavages" in their midst. A slaveholding patriarchal family consisted of a master and a mistress, children, maybe other relatives, and slaves. The Bible verse about the patriarch Noah quoted in the presence of Marse Benjamin connects him with this biblical character. In addition to his position as the head of the family Marse Benjamin resembles Noah by his habit of drinking. Benjamin Turner drinks heavily and is also drunk in the presence of the clergymen. This comes clear when little Nathaniel thinks if Marse Benjamin would fell out of his chair also this evening.

Antislavery voices were not silent about religious racism. For example, George Bourne was a pastor who emigrated from England to the United States, and was appointed as a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Virginia in 1814. Faced with the dark realities of slavery he immediately became an abolitionist, but was soon forced to leave Virginia and move to the North because of his stand on slavery. In *A Condensed Antislavery Bible Argument*, published in 1845, Bourne point by point refutes the pro-slavery theology and interpretation of the Bible. For example, Bourne²⁰² contends that neither the Bible nor any other historical record mention that any of Canaan's descendants had ever settled in Africa. In his opinion, Noah's curse had been fulfilled in the Israelite conquest of "the Land of Canaan" after the

²⁰¹ Haynes, 2002, 89

²⁰² Bourne, 1999, 24-5

Egyptian bondage. Frederick Douglass²⁰³ for his part disproves the curse of Ham with sound logic:

...a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase will do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.

The Epistles of the Apostle Paul were another important source for proslavery argument. Styron quotes two verses from Paul's letters and one from Peter's letter that were commonly used to argue that slavery was acceptable, and also to exhort slaves to be docile and obedient. First, Miss Maria Pope, a hysterical half sister of Travis, forces Hark to repeat the following verse from First Timothy six until he has committed it to his memory²⁰⁴: "*Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.*" She does not own the slaves in the house, but she nevertheless feels obliged to keep them in their subordinate position, and also eagerly employs the Scriptures in her task. Secondly, the drunken Jeremiah Cobb cites the Holy Script in order to test Nat Turner's reaction²⁰⁵:

Theology must answer theology. Speak you of liberty? Speak you of the yoke of bondage? How then, country magistrate, do you answer this? Ephesians Six, Five: *Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.* Or this, my hayseed colleague, how answer you this? One Peter, Two, Eighteen: *Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear: not only to the good and gentle, but also to the forward.* There friend – there – is not that divine sanction for the bondage of which you rave and prattle?

Although Cobb himself does not believe that the Bible authorizes the enslavement of blacks, his words reveal that many others in the South do believe. Indeed, pro-slavery Southerners interpreted the Apostle Paul's writings so that Paul was for slavery, because the word "servant" in the New Testament actually meant "a slave", and because Paul exhorted servants

²⁰³ Douglass, 1995, 3

²⁰⁴ Styron, 2004, 43

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 64-5

to subdue themselves to their masters' will it indicated that he was not against slavery. Abolitionist voices, however, had a different interpretation of the same Bible passages. For example, in his antislavery writing Bourne²⁰⁶ first brings out numerous Bible references that doom slavery. One of them is Exodus 21:16: "And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death." Bourne points out that American slavery is described and condemned under the name of "man-stealing" in the Scriptures. The "kidnapping" and selling of a person is such a great crime that it deserves the punishment of death. Bourne²⁰⁷ further explains that the Greek word for "servant" is "*dulos*" in the New Testament. Like the English word "servant" it never means a slave, unless "the context and subject-matter" indicate it. For instance, the apostles were not slaves in any sense, although they labelled themselves as the "servants" of Jesus Christ, who surely was not a slaveholder. Further, if American slaveholders would obey the directions given to them by the apostles it would destroy the master-slave relation for good. For example, in Philemon Paul directs the Christian master to receive his christianised servant "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved".

The former slave Lunsford Lane²⁰⁸ remembers how ministers often reminded slaves of how good God had been in bringing them over to America "from dark and benighted Africa", and allowing them to listen to the Good News. Lane, among other things, became quite acquainted with the texts, such as "servants be obedient to your masters" and "he that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes". These texts formed the content of public instructions to slaves. Lane continues that there was one white minister who was very popular among the blacks. But when he delivered a sermon in which he showed from the Bible that it was "the will of heaven from all eternity" that blacks should be slaves, and white masters be their owners, most of the slaves left him. The blacks felt that

²⁰⁶ Bourne, 1999, 9-15

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 77-8

²⁰⁸ Lane, 1999, 21

they were like “the faint hearted disciples” in the Gospel of John who said “this is a hard saying, who can bear it?” Lane’s example shows that African American slaves were critical of what was preached to them. For example, they did not agree with whites that God had meant them to be slaves.

Richard Whitehead’s sermon contains similar exhortations to slaves that Lane was also used to hear. Whitehead concludes his sermon with the following warning²⁰⁹: “*what a dreadful thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God, who is able to cast both soul and body into hell...*” Whitehead’s words are from Bishop Meade’s sermon in which he combines two Bible verses; Hebrews 10:31 and Matthew 10:28. In Hebrews 10 the Messianic Jews are warned not to rely on the works of their own for salvation, that is, to try to fulfil the Mosaic Law instead of relying on the completed work of Christ. In Matthew 10 Jesus tells his disciples that they should not fear people who can “kill the body but not the soul” and that they should instead fear God. Meade, and in Styron’s novel *Whitehead*, disconnects these verses from their original context and purpose, and uses them to keep the slaves in a docile and submissive mental state. In Whitehead’s congregation the slaves should know that fearing God means to be in awe of their masters. He shepherds his black flock by frightening them with the terrible prospects of Hell and damnation in the next life, if they fail in deference and obedience to their masters in this life. Nat Turner hears some of the blacks murmuring soft “*Amens*” and sees them making “silent vows of eternal obedience” to their masters. Henry Bibb²¹⁰, a former slave, writes in his narrative that slaves, with few exceptions, did not in the least have confidence in slaveholders’ preaching, because their doctrine was proslavery. When they, for example, proclaimed that “he that knoweth his masters will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes”, they meant that God would send disobedient slaves to

²⁰⁹ Styron, 2004, 94-100

²¹⁰ Bibb, 2000, 24

Hell. In fact, for African Americans slavery itself was a hell on earth which becomes evident in Frederick Douglass's²¹¹ work *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery...a slaveholder never appears to me so completely an agent of hell, as when I think of and look upon my dear children... the fettered bondman... torn away from wife and children and sold like a beast in the market... He who with unbiassed [sic] mind sits down to the perusal of this book, will arise perfectly satisfied that American slavery is a hell of torments yet untold...

Margaret Whitehead likes to recite the Bible, and most often passages that speak about love. Usually Nat Turner has to help her, for she cannot remember them as well as Turner can. Therefore, they recall Bible verses together, for example, from the Song of Songs²¹²:
"Take us the foxes, the little foxes that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes. My beloved is mine and I am his: he feedeth among the lilies." Solomon's Song can be interpreted both as describing a love relationship between a man and a woman and as a religious allegory about God's love towards his people.²¹³ Margaret mentions Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on the same occasion which shows that the romantic interpretation of the biblical text is in her mind. Nat Turner for his part nurses feelings of hatred and lust for Margaret. As a matter of fact, when Turner recites the verses from the most romantic book of the Bible to Margaret Whitehead and, at the same time, harbors feelings of hatred and aggression for her, it emphasizes his special relationship to her that is a combination of Nat Turner in Bouvé's Southern romance and black rapist, as already demonstrated in chapter 2.3.

On the way to the Vaughans Margaret criticizes her proslavery friends and family to Turner. She thinks that they give an impression of being very religious persons and loving Christians, but in reality they have not a faintest idea what real love is. For Margaret the core of love is expressed in the Apostle John's epistles which she recites with the help of

²¹¹ Douglass, 2000, 220, 426, 467

²¹² Styron, 2004, 330

²¹³ The NIV Study Bible, 1987, 985-6

Turner²¹⁴: “*Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God... God is love... and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him...*” This quotation is from First John 4 in which the Apostle writes about the mutual love of Christians.²¹⁵ The epistle was written for the purpose that believers may distinguish Christian love from its counterfeits.²¹⁶ God who is love has two commandments to His children; to believe in the name of his Son, and to love one another. Loving one another is simple: those who have material possessions should put their love into practice by helping brothers and sisters in need. Accordingly, faith without practical love is hypocrisy and self-delusion. Margaret laments the conditions of slaves whose owners do not feed or clothe them properly. She hopes that there would be a solution to their poor situation, and so that they “could live decently and work for themselves”. She talks about her family who are religious people, and yet hold “such views” on slavery. Indeed, these well-to-do whites would be able to change the conditions of blacks; however, they do nothing, because they are only interested in maintaining their own well-being by exploiting slaves. Therefore, because they do not serve their least brothers and sisters, that is, black slaves with compassion, God’s love cannot abide in them. The Bible verses from First John give support to Margaret’s abolitionist views. This again relates her to Penelope who also has similar thoughts in Bouvé’s *Moonlight and Magnolia* romance.

The author separates Margaret from the other figures of the novel with the colour symbolism of whiteness that relates to her innocence and stainless character. Nat Turner depicts her in the following way²¹⁷: “...the cheekbone’s lovely swerve and the fine white skin, milky, transparent... wearing a white bonnet... her demure and virginal beauty...

²¹⁴ Styron, 2004, 358

²¹⁵ The Greek word for “love” is here “agape” which denotes the love of God. It differs from “eros” and “filia” which are used for human love. “Agape” is unconditional and self-sacrificing love which does not expect anything in return, as “eros” and “filia” often do. Iso-Raamatun Tietosanakirja, 1991, Vol. 5, 204, 206

²¹⁶ Baxter, 1966, Vol. 6, 321-8

²¹⁷ Styron, 2004, 88

sheathed in white Sunday linen..." Turner mentions the adjective "white" three times when describing Margaret Whitehead and her name also includes the adjective. In western thinking the word "white" has always had meanings like "morally or spiritually pure or stainless; spotless, unstained, innocent" when applied to individuals.²¹⁸ Margaret thus becomes a representative of purity, virginity, virtue, and beauty in the novel; she is everything that whiteness symbolizes. She is the opposite of what the colour black denotes, for example, sin and evil.

Margaret's innocent and pure nature, which is strengthened by colour symbolism, also makes her a type of Christ in the novel, as already mentioned. She is most strongly associated with him in her death. When Nat Turner reached her in the hayfield Margaret "made no sound, uttered no word, did not turn to plead or contend or resist or even wonder".²¹⁹ The narrator's words about her last moments resemble those of Isaiah who describes the Lord's Servant in chapter 53: "...he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." According to Acts 8 Isaiah's prophetic Scripture refers to the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth who remains silent before his accusers: the chief priests, Pilate and Herod. Jesus makes no resistance in the hands of those who place him on the cross, instead he prays for his enemies. Similarly, Margaret offers no resistance when Turner kills her. She remains silent before her murderer and looks at him with a "grave and drowsy tenderness" in her eyes, which could mean that she does not blame Turner for his deed. An additional explanation for Margaret's inability to fight for her life is of course that she is in a state of shock. According to Lang²²⁰, Nat Turner for his part aligns himself with the antichrist when he commits himself to hatred and murder. The antichrist is the main enemy of Christ whose spirit inspired Judas

²¹⁸ Taylor, 2005, 241

²¹⁹ Styron, 2004, 402-3

²²⁰ Lang, 1981, 501

to betray Jesus to the chief priests.²²¹ The members of Sanhedrin²²², for their part, demanded the crucifixion of Jesus from Pilate. By committing murder Turner also becomes a representative of what blackness symbolized in the antebellum South, such as the Devil.

Finally, I will close this section by briefly examining if the Bible reading of the whites can be understood in the light of Barthes's insights on intertextuality. In his essay "From Work to Text" Barthes²²³ explains that "the work" belongs to the field "of a hermeneutics, of an interpretation". It tries to find and interpret the ultimate meaning the author has delivered. "The text" instead is plural, with infinity of meaning. Monistic philosophies are not disturbed by "the work", for they regard plurality as Evil. Therefore, in opposition to "the work" "the text could well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by demons (Mark 5:9): 'My name is Legion: for we are many.'" "The plural of demoniacal texture" can change reading fundamentally, and exactly in fields where monologism seems to be the Law: "certain of the 'texts' of Holy Scripture traditionally recuperated by theological monism will perhaps offer themselves to a diffraction of meanings". As already indicated in chapter 1.3., Barthes's theories conflict with the traditional hermeneutic approaches to literature which search for fixed meanings in literary works.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* the textual plurality can be seen in the Bible citations of the whites, for example, as Dr. Ballard and Jeremiah Cobb cite the most central passages of the Bible that were employed to justify slavery. The quotations show what meanings proslavery whites created from the biblical texts. For example, a new interpretation of Ham's curse was introduced which corresponded to the beliefs and ideas that whites had on Africans. Also, the economical interests to exploit black race made whites to produce meanings which would allow the enslavement of blacks. In addition to Genesis 9, the Apostle Paul's writings were especially harnessed to justify the institution of slavery. In addition, Kristeva's view on

²²¹ The Bible, Luke 22:3

²²² The Jewish supreme council and tribunal that was headed by a High Priest in the New Testament times.

²²³ Barthes, 1989, 157-160

the ideological structures and struggles of society in all texts expressed through discourse can be noted in Styron's novel, too.²²⁴ For example, the society's conflict over the word "servant" is brought to light in Jeremiah Cobb's words. He first demands Turner to take a stand on the proslavery theologians' interpretation about the Bible's servant references and then finally says²²⁵: "will such casuistry never end!"

3.2. Biblical Types, Images and Models in Nat Turner's Life

According to Williams²²⁶, the Bible became the most important source for the articulation of liberation in the experience of African Americans, for it spoke about the intrinsic humanity and equality of all people before God. Blacks embraced the biblical faith and witness also because they felt that their own experiences were depicted in the Bible. Various biblical models, such as the Exodus story, served as paradigms for them in their own social and religious history. In slave societies black preachers were the persons who helped people to find faith and hope through the Word of God. In his essay on African American preaching and the interpretation of the Bible Liburd approaches the subject from the standpoint of a theory of hermeneutics²²⁷ that takes as essential the role of human existence in interpretation and understanding of biblical texts. Liburd²²⁸ investigates black preaching as "a hermeneutical exercise in which the socio-political experience" of African Americans' forms the starting point. Liburd finds that preachers as interpreters rely less on "the language and context" of the biblical text, "and more on the experience of an oppressed people as the event that generates

²²⁴ cf. p. 21

²²⁵ Styron, 2004, 64

²²⁶ Williams, 2003, 33

²²⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher (1786-1834) is the father of modern hermeneutics. Schleiermacher believed that a determinate meaning according to the authorial intention, and objectivity were possible to achieve in interpretation. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), one of the most significant philosophers of the 20th century, instead, did not believe in objective knowledge. He inaugurated the insight of hermeneutics that embraced "the whole of man's existence". Heidegger made the shift from the primacy of the text to the primacy of the interpreter. Rudolf Bultman (1884-1976) introduced Heidegger's philosophical existentialism into the biblical studies. Allen & Vines, 1987, 311-312.

²²⁸ Liburd, 2003, 94-8

religious meaning”. An important part of preaching is a typology which functions “as a hermeneutical tool” to connect biblical types and figures with postbiblical persons, events and places.

In Styron’s novel Nat Turner’s experience of slavery becomes a guiding factor in his reading and interpretation of the biblical texts. It means that he examines the Bible passages from the perspective of slavery, for example, by relating black bondage to the two important events in Israel’s history which are the slavery in Egypt and the Jews’ captivity in Babylonia. Turner proclaims in his sermon²²⁹: “... the same smoke of pestilence an’ death that hanged over them Jews in Egypt hangs over all black folk, all men whose skin is black...” This shows how the Israelites’ experience of slavery becomes a model through which Turner handles the experience of black people held in bondage in the Old South, and through which he tries to create hope for liberation and social change. Turner adds “the smoke of pestilence” to his sermon which is not mentioned in the original Exodus story. By this the author, perhaps influenced by Elkins’s theories, refers to smoke from the ovens of Nazi death camps, and in a way also alludes to Turner’s prophetic charisma. It is worth noting that in *Sophie’s Choice* (1979) Styron explored the analogies and parallels between the oppression of blacks in the U.S. and that of the Jews in Poland under the Nazi regime.

The adoption of the Exodus story about Israel’s delivery from slavery under the leadership of Moses was a way to articulate African Americans’ “sense of historical identity as a people”.²³⁰ In his sermon Nat Turner quotes Genesis 46 with the same intention²³¹:

‘God spoke to Jacob an’ He said, “I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt, for I will there make of thee a great nation.” An’ Jacob went down into Egypt an’ the peoples of Israel multiplied an’ Moses was born... he delivered the Jews out of Egypt an’ into the Promised Land.

²²⁹ Styron, 2004, 300-301

²³⁰ Raboteau, 1980, 311

²³¹ Styron, 2004, 302

Raboteau²³² writes that while “white Christians saw themselves as a new Israel; slaves identified themselves as the old”. The exodus from Egypt was an archetypal event for American slaves, for as God had liberated Israel, so he would also liberate black slaves in the American South. The Promised Land was for them racial equality and full citizenship in the United States where they could “live like *men*”, in Turner’s words. Turner also links the growing number of blacks in the South to the increase of Israelites in Egypt. In this way he attempts to find purpose and meaning for their own bondage. In other words, Turner believes that African Americans will also become a strong people when they grow in number in their land of slavery. The former bondsman Aaron had a great knowledge of the Scriptures although he could not read a word. Aaron’s interpretation is a good example of how blacks adopted the Exodus story and how they viewed their own experiences in its light²³³:

Did not the Lord say that he would bring out the Israelites, and bring the Egyptians to judgement. ... and it seemed that Pharaoh was determined to hold the Israelites in bonds, the devil made a complete fool of Pharaoh, so that he was swallowed up in water and woke in hell. Pharaoh, he bound the chains tighter and tighter around the Israelites. The poor wicked slaveholder that is living now upon the face of the earth, does not know his right hand from his left in bringing the chains tighter and tighter upon the poor slave at the south, and Aaron is afraid that they will not hearken to justice until the Lord sinks them in sin and folly in the same way he did the wicked Pharaoh.

Like Aaron, Turner relates Pharaoh to a slaveholder by calling him “that white man” in his sermon. In addition to the Exodus story, Turner connects black bondage in America with the Jews’ captivity in Babylon in the 5th century BC by quoting parts from Psalm 137²³⁴: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion...they that carried us away captive required of us a song. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” The cruel Babylonians demanded the exiles to entertain them with the joyful songs of distant Zion, however, under those hard conditions the singing of the exiled Jews was turned

²³² Raboteau, 1980, 251, 311

²³³ Aaron, 2000, 25

²³⁴ Styron, 2004, 302

into mourning.²³⁵ Nat Turner relates this event in Israel's history to the cruelties of slavery. When the drunken Nathaniel Francis wanted to have some entertainment by putting Sam and Will to fight each other, Turner urged his fellow slaves not to laugh at such monstrosity. Instead, it is "time fo' weeping an' rage an' lamentation", as he freely cites Ecclesiastes 3, because the black folk is in such a degrading and abused state.

Nat Turner cites the first verse from Isaiah 60 at the end of his sermon to the slaves²³⁶: "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. Amen." The Prophet Isaiah writes about the future Messianic Age when the Lord's kingdom is on earth and He reigns all nations in righteousness. At that time wicked rulers will no longer oppress God's people. The messianic theme on God's kingdom of peace was transformed in slave theology into the demolition of slavery and an era of freedom. The former slave Uncle Solomon provides an example of this when he tells Williams about his hope in a better future after his inhuman treatment by the sadistic overseer²³⁷: "He said it would not always be so – that slavery was to come to an end, for the Bible said so – that there would then be no whippings and fightings, but the lion and the lamb would lie down together, and all would be love". This shows clearly how the words in Isaiah 11 about the coming Messianic kingdom were interpreted to mean the end of slavery and the beginning of a new age of peace and safety for blacks in America. Nat Turner has the same idea in his mind when he quotes Isaiah 60. The future phase of the Messianic kingdom dawns when slavery is demolished and all white oppressors are destroyed. "The glory of the Lord" will be manifested in black freedom.

Nat Turner's mind overflows with the characters and events of the Bible. Different biblical persons and occurrences help him understand and explain his life and experiences in the cultural context of slavery. He, among other things, converts biblical types into symbols of postbiblical persons in order to define the nature and character of the persons. For example,

²³⁵ The NIV Study Bible, 1987, 913

²³⁶ Styron, 2004, 303

²³⁷ Williams, 1997, 74

Thomas Moore and the other slaveholders with him are related to the Pharisees in the New Testament who Jesus rebukes²³⁸: “People whose skins were black would never find true liberty – never, never so long as men like Moore dwelt on God’s earth. ... *O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*” Turner’s thought involves that the slaveholders’ wickedness will also meet God’s wrath some day. On another occasion he associates Moore with King Solomon when contrasting him with the white idlers of the town²³⁹: “They made my present owner by comparison appear to possess the wisdom and dignity of King Solomon”. Turner observes Moore and the other white men in the light of the Scriptures and defines them according to the characteristics of biblical figures. Jeremiah Cobb for his part is linked to the patriarch Job in Turner’s mind, because he has suffered great losses in his life. He draws a parallel between Cobb’s unfortunate life and Job’s tormented life; the men whose names even resemble each other. When Turner reflects on Cobb’s unhappy life he recalls some verses from Job 3²⁴⁰: “*For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me, and that which I was afraid of is come unto me*”.

Turner also characterizes blacks through biblical types and models, for instance, when he thinks about Arnold who has been freed by his owner²⁴¹: “Surely even the poor lepers of Galilee, and all the outcasts to whom Jesus ministered in those awful times, lived no worse than such a free Negro in Virginia”. He lives in devastating poverty, is held in contempt and ridiculed by all. By referring Arnold to lepers and outcasts of Judea Turner defines him as one of those lowest of lowest people in Virginian society. The brutal Will for his part is associated two times with the beast in the Prophet Daniel²⁴²: “*After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a beast dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; it devoured and brake in pieces...*” In the New Testament Daniel’s beast is related to the antichrist, and for example,

²³⁸ Styron, 2004, 291

²³⁹ *ibid.*, 297

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 59

²⁴¹ *ibid.*, 256

²⁴² *ibid.*, 38-9, 368

Paul's doctrine of the coming Man of Sin obviously reflects Daniel's prophecies.²⁴³ The visions in John's Revelation, however, are most strongly bound up with those of Daniel, for in Revelation the antichrist is even called the beast. In Turner's mind Will becomes the antichrist, the son of Satan. Like the antichrist, Will hates everything: "all men, all things, all creation".²⁴⁴ And, like the apocalyptic harlot who sits upon the beast and is drunken with the blood of saints, Will is thirsty for blood of white people. For example, in the woods he threatens Turner if he is not allowed to take part in the revolt: "I gwine git me some *meat*. I gwine git me some *blood*". During the insurrection he "devours" every living white person on his path in his mad hatred like Daniel's beast devours everything around him.

Nat Turner also reflects on the events and occurrences in his life in the light of the Bible. For example, when Willis makes good progress in learning to read, Turner thinks²⁴⁵: "It would not be long before he knew the alphabet and would be able to see the connection between the letters and the words in such a simple line as the third verse of the entire Bible, which of course goes: *And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.*" The author beautifully draws a metaphor between light and literacy. Willis's literacy would be like light to him; it would expel all the darkness in his mind. Another time when he recites Genesis he is all alone in the Big House and waits for the Reverend Eppes to come. During the night a heavy storm comes, and after the thunder and rain have stopped he recollects the Flood: "*The fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the rain from heaven was restrained.*" Like Noah he gives thanks to the Lord for being saved from the violent storm. The biblical account of the Flood creates feelings of security in him, because even nature's powerful forces must obey God's commandments.

²⁴³ Baxter, 1966, Vol. 4, 70

²⁴⁴ Styron, 2004, 294, 367, 396-8

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 204-5

The friendship of David and Jonathan, the son of King Saul, described in I Samuel 18 and 21 becomes a model for Turner in his friendship with Willis²⁴⁶: “‘*The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.*’ ... *They kissed one another, and wept one with another... until David exceeded. And he rose and departed. And Jonathan went into the city...*” These verses depict David’s and Jonathan’s last meeting, for Jonathan was soon to be killed in the war between the Israelites and Philistines. Styron makes these Bible words prophetic for Turner, for the friends will soon be separated for the rest of their lives, because Marse Samuel sells Willis away from the farm. In addition, this biblical image helps Turner understand his homoerotic experience with Willis, although the Bible does not tell us that David’s and Jonathan’s relationship was such in nature. In the Middle East it is a custom that men kiss each other on the cheek to show brotherly love; however, in Turner’s mind it also refers to physical love.²⁴⁷

Nat Turner draws parallels between the places where he lives and the places depicted in the Bible. For example, when Samuel Turner sells his slaves, and the plantation becomes a quiet and deserted place, Turner describes it²⁴⁸: “At night, where once glowing hearths lit each cabin down the slope, now all lay in suffocating dark like the departure of the campfires of some army on the plains of Israel”. Another time when Turner returns to Moore’s from his sanctuary in the woods he compares the farm which stinks of slops and offal to “a hateful encampment of lepers in Judea”.²⁴⁹ He forms an opinion of what he sees by finding a fitting counterpart for it in the New Testament. When Turner later rides into Jerusalem in Moore’s wagon he sees the devastating results of the long drought in Virginia. The land is parched and the crops are dried out, the leaves on the trees are yellow and forest fires ravage the

²⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 200

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 199-200

²⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 220

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 286

countryside. Turner wonders²⁵⁰: "...if this countryside might not in a strange manner resemble Israel in the days of Elias, and this barren road the way to some place like Jerusalem". In the process of understanding and explaining the world Turner, in a sense, recreates the world by finding new meanings for it from the Bible. The new meanings, for example, for the places in which he lives, emerge as he constantly views the world through the Bible.

In *The Confessions of Nat Turner* the most frequently quoted single book of the Bible is the Psalms. Nat Turner identifies himself with the Psalmist, who most often is David, especially in times of trouble. He knows almost all of the Psalms by heart and recites them in his mind. Turner seems to find consolation and strength in them, for instance, when he labours for Moore in hard boring work year after year. One example is when Hark and Nat Turner unload wood at different places in Jerusalem, and Turner feels sick and fatigued after his long fast in the woods, he gets the work done while repeating Psalm 69 over and over²⁵¹: *"Deliver me out of the mire, and let me not sink, let not the deep swallow me up, hear me O Lord, turn unto me according to the multitude of thy tender mercies..."* Nat Turner thinks that it must be the blacks' Christian faith that makes them abandon the thought of self-destruction in their destitute and deplorable condition. Faith is the power that sustains them in their suffering, and the knowledge of the everlasting life makes them patient and forbearing. Their hope is based on David's experience in 1 Samuel 22 of how God intervenes in the moments of darkness²⁵²: *"And the afflicted people thou wilt save, for thou art my lamp, O Lord; and the Lord will lighten my darkness"*. David expresses this same trust in God also in Psalm 18. The Bible quotation in the novel brings out the central affirmation of black theology, namely that the God of the Bible is the liberator of the oppressed.²⁵³ An illuminating example of this

²⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 287-8

²⁵¹ *ibid.*, 295

²⁵² *ibid.*, 28-9

²⁵³ Douglas, 1995/1996, 1

confidence can be found in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Uncle Lawson, the former slave, had a great influence on Douglass's character and life and he assured Douglass that he would be "a useful man in the world". When Frederick said to him that how could this be, for he was a slave for life, the good old man Lawson answered²⁵⁴: "The Lord can make you free, my dear. All things are possible with him, only *have faith in God*... Ask, and it shall be given... if you want liberty, ask the Lord for it, *in faith*, AND HE WILL GIVE IT TO YOU".

Nat Turner also recites the Psalms in moments of happiness. For example, when he hears from Marse Samuel about his plans to liberate him, Turner feels that he should give thanks to the Lord. He expresses his gratitude and joy with David's words in Psalm 63²⁵⁵: "*O God, thou art my God; early will I seek Thee... because thy loving kindness is better than life, my lips shall praise thee...*" Turner believes that God operates in his life through Marse Samuel, in other words, God works in Marse Samuel so that he wills and acts according to His good purpose.²⁵⁶ Turner still has high hopes for the future as a free man when he remains alone in the Big House while the others are gone and he waits for Eppes. His feelings are a mixture of sadness and joy, for Turner has to leave the plantation that has been his home and the separation from its people aches his heart. On the other hand, he is very excited to start his new life that would finally lead to freedom. Turner's inner thoughts and feelings are best described in Psalm 90 in which "the sorrow and exaltation" are joined²⁵⁷: "*Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.... A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night...*". Nat Turner associates the Psalm's "dwelling place" in his mind with the Turner's place that has been a home for its inhabitants

²⁵⁴ Douglass, 2000, 169

²⁵⁵ Styron, 2004, 190

²⁵⁶ The Bible, Philippians 2:13

²⁵⁷ Styron, 2004, 224

for many generations, and when thinking about all those years he realizes how fast time has passed there.

In Josiah Henson's narrative we can find an example of how the Psalms were consolation to African Americans and how they joined in the words of the Psalmists expressing gratitude to God. Henson who was a slave for forty-two years escaped slavery to Canada and became a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. Later Josiah Henson's good and self-sacrificing nature served as a model for Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Henson learnt to read when he was almost fifty years old. In his own narrative Henson²⁵⁸ recalls how his son Tom read him the Bible before he could read:

He opened upon Psalm ciii., "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name;" and as he read this beautiful outpouring of gratitude, which I now first heard, my heart melted within me. I recalled, with all the rapidity of which thought is capable, the whole current of my life; and, as I remembered the dangers and afflictions from which the Lord had delivered me... The words, "Bless the Lord, O my soul" with which the Psalm begins and ends, were all I needed, or could use, to express the fullness of my thankful heart.

Turner again turns to David's Psalms when he seeks God's favour for his battle against the whites. David was a soldier who later became a king after God's own heart.²⁵⁹ Nat Turner identifies with the soldier David who confidently prays to God to deliver him from all his enemies. David had trust that God was on his side against all his adversaries. Turner also feels that because his revolt is justified God would give him victory over his oppressors. He further imagines how legions of black men will join him in the battle like the tribes of Israel gradually joined David, and recites David's prayer in Psalm 144²⁶⁰: "*Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight; My goodness, and my fortress; my high tower and my deliverer; my shield...*" Turner studies Joshua's strategies of war several times as he plans his own war, for example, in Mrs Whitehead's library. He believes that God teaches him in this way to fight like Joshua who beat the five Amorite kings

²⁵⁸ Henson, 2000, 99-100

²⁵⁹ The NIV Study Bible, 1987, 413, 794,

²⁶⁰ Styron, 2004, 352

and defeated their cities Lachish and Eglon.²⁶¹ On Sunday before the insurrection Nat Turner spends time alone in prayer in his sanctuary in the woods and reads his Bible. Turner's final prayer before the rebellion is again from David's Psalm 27: "*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*" This quotation in the novel reveals that Turner is afraid, and by reciting the Psalm he tries to convince himself that God will help him in the battle.

The last context where Nat Turner meditates on the Psalms is his stay in the jail. In the morning while Turner waits for Gray, he is absorbed in thought. He tries to recollect when his ability to pray has left him and the feelings of alienation from God emerged. Instead of praying Turner begins to whisper Psalm 92 aloud²⁶²: "*It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High. To show forth thy loving kindness in the morning...*" This psalm was originally sung at the time of the morning sacrifice in the temple, and therefore it appropriately fits the situation in the jail. Another time when Turner seeks hope from the Psalmist's words is when Gray attacks his faith by claiming that Christianity is just "rapine, blunder and butchery", and that God is just a lie. Turner is plagued by strong doubts about God's existence, and starts to think that maybe Gray was right and "God is dead and gone" and what he did was wrong after all. In his agony he clings to Psalm 42 that describes his inner longing to be in a relationship with God²⁶³: "*As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me...*" Instead of believing Gray's infidel opinions, Turner longs to identify with the Psalmist to whom God is a living God. Further, when Hark tells Nat Turner about the devastating effects of the insurrection and how the whites take revenge on the innocent blacks in the area, Turner cannot stand to hear about it anymore. David's plea to the

²⁶¹ *ibid.*, 321

²⁶² *ibid.*, 12

²⁶³ *ibid.*, 112-114

Lord in Psalm 39 projects his inner state²⁶⁴: “...*O spare me, that I may recover strength. Before I go hence. And be no more*”. Turner prays with these words that he would be spared to hear no more news about white people’s violence against black population, so that he would gain strength to overcome the coming trial, before he is executed. Right after this short prayer Gray, the representative of the court which sentences him to death, enters his cell.

I have limited the investigation of the Bible in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to Genette’s intertextuality (the practice of quotation and allusion) and paratextuality, the latter of which will be studied in the next subchapter. The Bible quotations show what meanings the Bible had for blacks, among other things, that they could identify with the people of Israel in their oppression. These different meanings can be found when examining Nat Turner’s way of reading the Scriptures. The Bible quotations also often serve to clarify biblical allusions. For example, the character of Will alludes to the antichrist and this impression is strengthened with the verses from the Book of Daniel. Another example is the friendship of Nat Turner and Willis which alludes to that of David and Jonathan described in the Book of Samuel. Clearly, the Bible quotations play more important role in this study than the allusions which can be identified and understood with the help of the quotations.

3.3. The Prophets and the Apocalypse

In the Bible the Prophetical Books and the Book of Revelation influence Turner most in his violent attack against the whites. Already as a child Turner is captured into the world of the great Prophets under the supervision of Miss Nell. From Miss Nell’s lips he first hears the words of Isaiah 65 that he later associates with his project of vengeance²⁶⁵: “*Therefore will I number you to the sword, and ye shall all bow down to the slaughter, because when I called*

²⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 108

²⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 164

ye did not answer...” The Prophet Isaiah addressed these words of the Lord to the obstinate people of Israel who provoked God by worshipping pagan idols, and did what was wrong in His eyes. Nat Turner applies these words to the whites who refuse to emancipate slaves, and thus also remain obstinate in their evil ways. Therefore, God will pay them for their sin of slavery. When Turner is sold to Moore he becomes more intensively absorbed in the Prophetic Books, mainly “Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah and Jeremiah”.²⁶⁶ The Prophets seem to be of most relevance to his future that includes some divine mission ordained for him. In his secluded sanctuary in the woods he communes with the Spirit and reflects on the teachings of the great Prophets. His calling as a liberator of the black folk becomes clearer to him when he reads the words in Isaiah 58 during the fast in his secret tabernacle²⁶⁷: *“Is not this the fast I have chosen? To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?”* These words were attributed to the Israelites who fasted before the Lord to get their prayers heard, but at the same time exploited their workers and refused to release their Hebrew slaves. The prayers of the Israelites were not to be heard, because their praying was mere lip service. For Turner this verse, instead, speaks about his own fast that should turn into activity of force and violence to liberate the oppressed black people.

Once when Turner traps rabbits in the woods he feels that the Spirit of God hovers very close to him and is speaking to him through Ezekiel’s prophecy²⁶⁸: *“Son of man, prophesy, and say, Thus saith the Lord; Say, a sword, a sword is sharpened, and also furbished: it is sharpened to make a sore slaughter...”* It is ironic that in the actual insurrection Turner fails to strike the first lethal blow, because his sword is too dull. In the meantime, however, Turner feels closest with the prophet Ezekiel who predicts the destruction of Jerusalem by the

²⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 253

²⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 268

²⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 52

Babylonian armies in 587 B.C. and calls the inhabitants of the city to repentance.²⁶⁹ In Ezekiel's vision a man clothed in linen is instructed to put a mark upon the foreheads of people who will be spared and the six other men of the vision are ordered to kill the rest of the people. Turner feels that God advises him with the prophet's words²⁷⁰:

... Go through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof... Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark...

Turner later decides to spare Jeremiah Cobb who laments the evils of slavery in Virginia, and therefore marks him as a man who will be saved from the slaughter. In his espousal of the violent messages of the Old Testament Prophets Nat Turner resembles Denmark Vesey²⁷¹ whom Du Bois²⁷² depicts in *The Negro Church* as follows:

He ransacked the Bible for apposite and terrible texts whose commands in the olden times were no less imperative upon the new times and the new people. This new people was also commanded to arise and to destroy their enemies and the city in which they dwelt, 'both man and woman, young and old, with the edge of the sword'... He felt, I doubt not, something peculiarly applicable to his enterprise and intensely personal to himself in the stern and exultant prophesy of Zachariah, fierce and sanguinary words, which were constantly in his mouth...

Nat Turner, like Vesey, takes the writings of the Prophets and directly applies them to his own violent venture. In other words, he transfers the prophetic writings of the Bible from their original context to the social context of slavery which also affects his interpretation of them. The biblical texts begin to live in a new context in a way that corresponds to Turner's own experience of slavery and oppression. When this shift of context takes place Turner has a strong feeling that the texts authorize him to take bloody revenge, and believes that it is the Lord who wants him to obliterate the whites. This phenomenon can be further explained with Roland Barthes's theories. Barthes²⁷³ writes in his essay "The Theory of Text" that in the

²⁶⁹ Baxter, 1968, Vol. 4, 9-11

²⁷⁰ Styron, 2004, 52

²⁷¹ cf. p. 7

²⁷² Du Bois, 2001, 23

²⁷³ Barthes, 1987, 36-42

text's productivity the producer and reader of the text meet each other. In this process the text "works" at each moment. For Barthes "full reading", which he distinguishes from the reading that is "mere acts of consumption", is the kind of reading in which "the reader is nothing less than the one who desires to write". Nat Turner "re-writes" the Bible texts so that they articulate his experience of slavery and his hopes to exact revenge on white community. In this process of "re-writing" we can see, in Barthes's terms, how the text "explodes", that is, loses its ultimate meaning.²⁷⁴ The biblical text becomes plural, as Turner activates its meaning from his own context of life that is most strongly affected by the institution of slavery. Du Bois²⁷⁵ writes that Vesey had harboured many years the bitter wrongdoings against him and his race, and a mad spirit of vengeance had filled him and instilled in him a fondness for shedding the blood of white oppressors. In Styron's novel Nat Turner is filled with a similar repressed hatred for the whites, and therefore becomes inspired by the violent images of the Old Testament. Thus, his hatred also triggers the text's explosion, that is, the textual plurality.

Nat Turner first anticipates "the coming apocalypse"; the destruction he would bring upon white population, in the signs of nature. For example, when a deer crashes off into the bushes it sounds like an apocalyptic booming in his ears. The heavy smoke from the distant wildfires caused by drought covers the sun, and makes it look like a red ball. Therefore, also stars lose their glimmer in the night. Turner links these phenomena of nature to the cosmic events depicted in the Book of Joel, chapter 3²⁷⁶: "*the sun and the moon shall be darkened and the stars shall withdraw their shining*". Joel sees the immense plague of locusts, which in multitudes darken the sky, and also a severe drought that ravages Judah as a harbinger of "the great and dreadful day of the Lord".²⁷⁷ In Joel 3 God announces judgement against the nations hostile to Israel. These enemies, such as the Babylonian invaders, treated Jews as mere

²⁷⁴ cf. p. 22-3

²⁷⁵ Du Bois, 2001, 23

²⁷⁶ Styron, 2004, 281

²⁷⁷ The NIV Study Bible, 1987, 1317-1323

chattels, for they “sold the people of Judah and Jerusalem to the Greeks, ... to send them far from homeland”. When Turner reads the Prophet Joel he discovers how similar destiny the ancient Israelites and American slaves share; it is like blacks’ experiences are depicted in Joel. Turner’s identification with Joel goes so far that his spirit also trembles like that of the prophet when he interprets the effects of drought as “premonitions and auguries of a terrible war”. The author finely combines the Book of Joel and the Book of Revelation in Turner’s vision. The prophecies are closely linked with each other also in the Bible, for example, in Revelation the sun and the moon are darkened by the smoke from the Abyss out of where come swarms of locusts upon the earth.

Late in the summer of 1825 Turner has his first vision in his secret sanctuary. The air is filled with sulphurous smoke that almost completely hides the sun. Turner is mentally and physically tired after a long fast. Tiredness like at the onset of death starts to invade his bones and he feels like his spirit would depart his body and leave it lifeless. On the brink of his vision Turner resembles the Apostle John who falls as dead at the feet of the Son of Man at the beginning of Revelation. Suddenly the heavens seem to tear open with a roaring sound, and Turner sees a mighty black angel who thunders²⁷⁸: “*Fear God and give glory to Him for the hour of His judgement is come, and worship Him that made heaven and earth and the sea and the fountains of waters*”. These words are taken from Revelation 14:7 where one of the angels says these words in a loud voice. Turner’s vision differs from the Apocalypse in that it mentions the colour of the angels which points to a battle between blacks and whites. The vision continues as he sees another black armoured angel who shouts the words in Revelation 14:9-10²⁷⁹:

If any man worship the beast and his image and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever.

²⁷⁸ Styron, 2004, 283

²⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 284

After this the celestial battle between the white and black angel begins high above the forest. The battle clearly refers to the war in heaven in Revelation 12 where Michael and his angels fight against the dragon and his angels. According to verse nine, the dragon is “that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan”. The beast for its part is the antichrist, that is, Satan who has come into flesh. The white angel in Turner’s vision symbolizes the forces of evil, for it is defeated like the dragon and his angels in the Apocalypse. In short, in Turner’s mind the white slaveholders are of the evil one, that is, the Devil. The war, therefore, would not just be against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual powers of evil and darkness in the heavens whose invention slavery is. When Turner gazes upward and wonders what he sees, the black angel says to him the angel’s words to John in Revelation 17:

Wherefore didst thou marvel? These shall make war with the Lamb and the Lamb shall overcome them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful. Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth you must surely bear it.

“The Lamb” is mentioned twenty-seven times in the Apocalypse in reference to Christ who is God’s Lamb sacrificed for mankind. In Styron’s novel Nat Turner’s vision is a combination of John’s Revelation and Turner’s vision in Gray’s *Confessions*. The parts from Revelation highlight Turner’s religious character; he knows the Bible, which also greatly influences his subconscious mind. The last sentence is not taken from the Bible, but it is from Gray’s *Confessions*.

In Styron’s novel Nat Turner receives his final authorization for the insurrection during his fast and prayer in the winter of 1831. On the third day of his fast he feels that the atmosphere in the woods changes; it suddenly becomes silent and Turner sees the sun vanishing behind the moon. The dark surrounds him, and he starts to recite Psalm 94²⁸⁰: “‘*Oh Lord God to whom vengeance belongeth,... show thyself. Lift up thyself, thou judge of the*

²⁸⁰ Styron, 2004, 339-340

earth: render a reward to the proud...” The full eclipse of the sun creates anticipation and excitement in Turner who feels that the seal is now removed from his lips. He believes that God has showed himself in this rare and striking phenomenon of nature. Later he tells his nearest men that the Spirit had appeared to him in the form of the eclipse of the sun, and that “the Serpent was loosened and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men”. Turner “should take the yoke and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when ‘the first shall be last and the last shall be first’”. Turner’s words to his companions follow closely Gray’s *Confessions*. The heavenly battle and fight against “the Serpent” reveals that the historical Nat Turner was influenced by the Book of Revelation, and had obviously studied it. He also quotes the words of Jesus in Matthew 19 and 20 by which he expresses his confidence and hope that the black insurrectionists would conquer the dominant whites, and in this way “the last” would soon “be first”.

In Styron’s novel Turner takes the role of God’s avenging Scourge against the slaveholders. In Isaiah 10 God says that the Israelites should not be afraid of the Assyrian invaders who beat them with the rod and lift a club against them, as Egypt did, for His wrath will soon be directed to their destruction. The Lord will raise up a scourge for Him that passes divine judgment on the enemy. The burden of Assyria will soon be taken away from off Israel’s shoulder, and its yoke will be destroyed.²⁸¹ Nat Turner clearly sees himself as the Scourge of God, for he considers himself “black as the blackest vengeance, the illimitable, devastating instrument of God’s wrath”.²⁸² In light of Isaiah the yoke in Turner’s vision refers to the yoke of slavery that he should take and fight against. As God’s Scourge Turner at the same time becomes a Messiah figure. God provided in the Messiah a saviour who broke the shackles of sin and liberated the slaves of sin. The black Messiah would similarly liberate his folk from the shackles of earthly slavery. In the Book of Revelation the Messiah fights with

²⁸¹ The Bible, Isaiah 10:24-7

²⁸² Styron, 2004, 53

his heavenly armies against Satan and his hosts in his second coming and delivers retribution to the evil. Nat Turner is the black Messiah who fights against the system of slavery and its advocates with his “majestic black army”.

The approaching collapse of the Confederacy inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe to reflect on Nat Turner’s prophetic visions. She felt that the horrible punishment in the form of civil war was necessary for the nation, because in the war God had subdued the slaveholding republic to a “purifying chastening”. Stowe²⁸³ wrote: “The prophetic visions of Nat Turner, who saw the leaves drop blood and the land darkened, have been fulfilled. The work of justice which he predicted is being executed to the uttermost”. Stowe transformed Turner’s prophecies of the bloody race battle into “a divinely sanctioned civil war” that would purge the nation from its sin of slavery. The Civil War thus became a scourge on white Americans. Similarly, David Walker²⁸⁴ refers to God’s Scourge against racist slaveholders when he announces that God will give blacks “a Hannibal” through whom He will deliver them from their “deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America”. Hannibal, the famous general of Carthage had defeated and cut off thousands of “the white Romans and murderers”.

The novel’s first part is entitled “Judgment Day” and the last, that is, the fourth part “It Is Done”. We remember that in Genette’s *transtextuality* the chapter headings and titles belong to *paratextual* relations. In Part I Turner reflects his insurrection and is immersed in spiritual trial in the jail. The Judgement Day has many references; firstly, it refers to Turner who carries out judgement on the slaveholders in his revolt, secondly, to Turner standing before a bar of judgement, and thirdly, to the final Judgement Day of God. The fourth part of the novel is very short and describes Nat Turner’s last moments in the jail before his execution. The title “It Is Done” is a quotation from Revelation 21 and alludes to Jesus’ words on the cross

²⁸³ Quoted in French, 2004, 133-4

²⁸⁴ Walker, 2001, 23

when he before giving up his spirit says “it is finished”.²⁸⁵ Christ the Messiah had fulfilled his mission to set free the captives of sin through his atoning death. Turner has now also finished his mission and will soon be executed. In Gray’s *Confessions* Turner’s identification with Christ and his certainty that the revolt was ordained by God becomes more evident when Gray asks him, if Turner now considers himself mistaken. His answer to Gray is: “Was not Christ crucified?”²⁸⁶

The Confessions of Nat Turner opens and closes with the words of Revelation 21. The epigraph at the beginning of the novel is a direct quotation from verse four: “*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away*”. This paratextual element already anticipates Nat Turner’s death that follows at the end of the novel. At the same time it points to the horrors of slavery that are depicted in the novel. However, it also contains hope, for God shall make all things new in “a new heaven and a new earth” where there will be neither slaves nor masters any more. It is remarkable that the last pages of the novel resemble the end of the Apocalypse structurally. On the closing pages Turner’s execution is nearing and the certainty of his approaching death is intensified with the quotations from Revelation 22 which are iterated again and again²⁸⁷: “*Then behold I come quickly... Surely I come quickly...*” At the moment of his death Turner will immediately meet Christ and in this sense Christ returns “quickly” to him. These two phrases open the paragraphs four times on the last pages of the novel. In Revelation these same phrases appear also four times in its closing chapter, as John is reminded of the imminent return of Christ.

In black theology the eschatological Judgement Day and Christ’s second advent were closely related to the liberation of African American slaves. Du Bois, for instance, uses the phrase “the coming of the Lord” metaphorically to mean the emancipation of slaves three

²⁸⁵ The Bible, John 19:30

²⁸⁶ Gray, 1999, 11

²⁸⁷ Styron, 2004, 412-16

times in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois²⁸⁸ provides an example when he describes the black leaders of the abolition movement: “The free Negro leader early arose and his chief characteristic was intense earnestness and deep feeling on the slavery question. Freedom became to him a real thing and not a dream...” “The coming of the Lord” swept this side of Death, and came to be a thing to be hoped for...”

“The morning star” is mentioned five times in the novel’s closing paragraphs. According to Revelation 22:16 Jesus Christ is “the bright and morning star”. Looking out of the window of his jail and seeing the morning star shining brightly Turner realizes that soon he will see the true “Morning Star” face to face and is liberated from his chains for all eternity. The morning star also referred to the emancipation of African American slaves in black Christianity. For example, Frederick Douglass²⁸⁹ writes in his antislavery newspaper *North Star* during the Civil War: “The day dawns; the morning star is bright upon the horizon. The iron gate of our prison stands half open. One gallant rush from the North will fling it wide open, while four million of our brothers and sisters shall march out into liberty”. Later Douglass states that the emancipation in the West Indies “was the first bright star in a stormy sky”. Perhaps Turner hopes that his insurrection will help the cause of liberation although it now seems a lost cause. In the morning star he also sees the liberation of black folk that is sure to come in the future.

In the closing paragraph of *Sophie’s Choice*, which is Styron’s other famous novel, Stingo similarly observes “*the bright, the morning star*”.²⁹⁰ The night before, he had been thinking about Sophie and Nathan, and also Nat Turner and other victims of cruelties. In his novel Styron connects the two peoples; the Jewish people in the character of Nathan and African Americans in the person of Nat Turner. These two men whose names are almost alike, belong both to a people that has suffered deeply at the hands of nations. The Star of David, that is, the

²⁸⁸ Du Bois, 2001, 68, 200-201

²⁸⁹ Douglass, 1999, 346, 504

²⁹⁰ Styron, 1979, 515

morning star generally symbolizes hope for the Jews, as it also did for African Americans in the era of slavery.

Styron concludes *The Confessions of Nat Turner* with the Apocalypse 21:6-7: “*And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things: and I will be his God and he shall be my son*”. Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This means that God is the beginning and ending; the first and the last of all that has been, is and will be. In Revelation 22:13 Christ applies this same metaphor to himself. The first edition, and all subsequent clothbound editions of Styron’s novel had a symbol of alpha and omega preceding “the Author’s note”. It has been left out of the paperback editions, although Styron had designed it himself and wanted it to be an integral part of the novel.²⁹¹ The alpha and omega at the beginning and end again makes the novel’s structure to bear resemblance to the Apocalypse where it appears two times in the first chapter and once in the last two chapters.

As Christ is the Alpha and Omega of the Book of Revelation, so he also is the beginning and end of the whole Bible. This comes out in John’s gospel in which he explains how Jesus is the Word of God, and how God created the whole world through him.²⁹² The Book of Genesis depicts the beginning of all, and Revelation reveals the end and goal of all. Furthermore, there are contrasts between Genesis and Revelation. For example, “in Genesis we see the beginning of sorrow and death; in Revelation we read there shall be no more death, neither sorrow”, as Baxter²⁹³ puts it. In Styron’s novel there are quotations from, or allusions to, all sections of the Bible; the Law, historical books, poetical books, prophetic books, Gospels, Epistles and Revelation. The Bible citations run through the whole novel and they close the novel with the Book of Revelation where all ends. In fact, I would argue that the

²⁹¹ Lang, 1981, 1-2

²⁹² The Bible, John 1

²⁹³ Baxter, 1966, Vol. 6, 334, Vol. 1, 25

novel can also be thematically related to the Bible, in some aspects. This impression is produced by the plot which involves Nat Turner's confession of his life; how it begins and what leads to his revolt. The novel's culmination is the battle against the white slaveholders that has an explicit connection with the battle against Satan and his forces in Revelation. In Nat Turner's confession the beginning of sorrow and death is slavery and at the end all these things are passed, and Turner is free at last. Nat Turner's last thought in the novel follows John's next to last words in the Apocalypse: "Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus". Turner is like John who yearns to see the Alpha and Omega: the God who has watched over Turner's life from its beginning to end, and who also is his true Father.

In the textual analysis the Bible quotations serve to explain how Turner applies violent images of both the Old Testament and the New Testament to his own venture of vengeance. They inspire him and give him authorization to attack white population in Southampton County. The author alludes to different biblical characters through the character of Nat Turner. For example, when the author quotes the Book of Revelation, Nat Turner resembles the Apostle John in his behaviour. The paratextual elements allude to biblical events and characters; the title "Judgement Day", for instance, to the Great Day of Judgement. They also, such as the novel's epigraph that is a quotation from Revelation, help the reader anticipate the novel's themes. Perhaps surprisingly, Barthes's insights on intertextuality have contributed to explaining Nat Turner's way of reading the Bible in the social context of slavery.

4. Conclusion

One of the most important public intellectuals in the United States, Cornel West²⁹⁴ contends that “evangelical and pietistic Christianity” is the most influential intellectual tradition in African American experience. African slaves started the tradition when they sought “to understand their lives and servitude in the light of biblical texts, Protestant hymns, and Christian testimonies”. The African American church that gradually came into being took many forms. In one of its forms, the church’s prophetic stream became the source for African American critical thought. The prophetic Christian gospel contributes that “every individual regardless of class, country, caste, race, or sex should have the opportunity to fulfil his or her potentialities”. This is because all people are equal before God, who bestows “the well-being and ultimate salvation” of all persons with equal value and significance.

Further, the dignity and depravity of persons are important elements of Christian gospel. West explains them as follows: “The dignity of persons is their ability to contradict what is, to change and be changed, and to act in the light of that which is not-yet. The depravity of persons is their proclivity to cling to the moment, to refuse to transform and to be transformed.” The pitiable are those “who remain objects of history, victims manipulated by evil forces”; whereas the tragic are those who turn into “subjects of history, aggressive antagonists of evil forces”. The prophetic Christian thought as a source for African American critical thought has a positive attitude towards the tragic character of human history and promotes the idea of struggle to the highest precedence. To be a prophetic African American Christian is to negate what is and change existing realities against the backcloth of the current historical limits. West²⁹⁵ regards as prophetic Christians such black leaders as Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

²⁹⁴ West, 1982, 15-19

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 102-103

In my thesis I have, in fact, dealt with the prophetic Christianity of African Americans in the history of American slavery. As I approached the subject of slave religion and the Bible's intertextuality in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, I was astonished how important role the Christian faith played in the black struggle for freedom and justice. This became evident when I examined the novel in the light of other literary sources, such as the narratives of former slaves. The slave narratives show how biblical faith empowered African Americans to fight against slavery and racial discrimination. The most influential black leaders, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were at the same time courageous believers and fervent opponents of slavery, and therefore can be considered the prophetic Christians of their time. In Styron's novel Nat Turner represents the prophetic Christianity in which one is ready to pay high price for God-inspired fight for liberty, and thus also becomes a tragic figure in history.

The other black characters of the novel, instead, provide a contrast to Turner in their inability to resist slavery. They become objects in history who cannot negate and transform the prevailing status quo. For example, Styron represents black women and men as victims of the institution of slavery that damages their psyche, which again makes them the stereotypical Sambo characters. The blacks are characterized as morally and spiritually weak persons who accept their lot passively. Transforming prophetic Christianity occupies no place in their lives. Styron's choice to follow Elkins's theories on the psychologically damaged slave influences his portrayal of black women and men in this way. In addition, Styron included in his depiction of blacks other racist elements. For instance, black women are portrayed as morally questionable, and men, such as Nat Turner and Will as black rapists. Styron's motive to show African Americans in a negative light could have been that he wanted to spark off discussion on these stereotypes.

Nat Turner is the only black person in the novel who stands for prophetic Christianity. He turns into a subject in history by rejecting the realities of life in the slaveholding South and by fighting to transform them. In the characterization of Nat Turner Styron meditates on Turner's motives for taking bloody revenge on the whites, and his main reason for shedding blood seems to be hatred and bitterness towards the white slaveholders. Styron's Turner and the young Martin Luther in Erikson's psychoanalytical study have similar characteristics which is interesting because Luther was a white European. As a reformer he can also be regarded as a representative of prophetic Christianity.

Styron portrays the whites in the Old South convincingly, for the white characters of the novel have similar views on slavery like the persons in the antebellum South described in different historical records and studies. For example, Thomas Jefferson's racist views are brought out through Benjamin Turner and the clergy's opinions on the institution of slavery also agree with theological propaganda of that time. Further, the white women are portrayed more closely than the black women. The white women are active subjects who can fulfil their potentialities, among other things, Margaret Whitehead studies in a seminary. This all gives the impression that Styron is more credible in his portrayal of whites than blacks, and perhaps because he himself is white and a child of the segregated South. In his depiction of blacks Styron relies much on Elkins's theories and white stereotypical images which affect the reliability of his characterisation of African Americans.

Styron was heavily criticized for his representation of blacks that probably drew the attention away from his skilful way of quoting the Bible in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Consequently, it was difficult to find any articles on this subject, which also shows that critics have paid little attention to the Bible's intertextuality on account of other issues, such as race or psychological questions. A closer investigation shows many interesting aspects in the way Styron quotes the Scriptures in his work. Perhaps expectedly, he makes the white characters

to cite those central passages of the Bible that proslavery Southerners used to legitimise the “peculiar” institution. Styron’s novel indeed becomes “a meditation of history” when he imagines the situations where these passages were used to argue for slavery, for example, in discussions between powerful and wealthy white men, like the Turner brothers and clergymen. The fact that abolitionists refuted slavery with the Bible, is brought to light in Margaret Whitehead’s way of reading it. In the Apostle John’s letters the core of Christianity is love which comes visible in practical deeds. White Southerners could have taken practical action, if they had wanted to, by emancipating and educating their slaves.

Of the characters Nat Turner recites the Bible most in the novel. As a matter of fact, he views all things in his life in the light of the Scriptures, he explains his growth and understands his experiences by means of the Bible. His way of viewing the Word of God can be investigated at least from two different angles. Firstly, it can be understood from the viewpoint of Liburd’s study on black preaching that bases on the theory of hermeneutics about the reader’s experience that generates a religious meaning for biblical texts. Slavery becomes the experience that affects Turner most in his reading of the Scriptures. He, among other things, searches for biblical models in the history of Israel which help him handle black slavery. In addition, the Prophets who fought against bondage and other wickedness in their own time become types that Turner can identify with. From the prophetic Scriptures Turner finally concludes that he is God’s chosen instrument to deliver His wrath against the slaveholding South.

It was new to me how African Americans understood the Bible. Similarly, as they created their spirituals “double-voiced” they also read biblical texts in a “two-toned” mode. For example, “the coming of the Lord” meant both the literal coming of the Lord and the emancipation of slaves. In this way the Bible became their very own and valuable to them, for it spoke directly to their situation and their experiences.

Secondly, I have employed Roland Barthes's theories on intertextuality to explain Nat Turner's way of reading the Bible. The biblical text "explodes", that is, has many meanings, as Turner views it from his own context of enslavement. For instance, the prophecies of the Book of Revelation mean a bloody battle between whites and blacks. From this standpoint, Turner's way of dealing with the biblical texts resembles that of Denmark Vesey who applied the Old Testament prophecies to American slavery. All in all, we can find many of those different meanings the Bible had for blacks when examining Styron's Nat Turner. Above all, it was a consolation and comfort to them in their subjugated state.

With Genette's structuralist methods of literary analysis I restricted the investigation of the Bible in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to intertextuality that includes quotations and allusions, and to paratextual elements, such as the titles and epigraphs. As a result, I found over eighty exact quotations from the Bible, and have introduced and analysed half of them. Arguably, this is enough to show their main function in the novel and in Turner's life. However, the Bible quotations could still offer some additional insights if they were examined. Also, the novel's allusions to the different biblical characters have not been studied exhaustively, in order to keep this study suitable in length for a pro gradu thesis. The examples of allusions demonstrate that many biblical figures, or some features of them can be found in the characters of Styron's novel. In addition, it was exciting to find out how Styron has built his novel structurally to resemble the Book of Revelation, and perhaps a more profound structural analysis would yield further interesting results. It would also have been possible to write this thesis solely on biblical intertextuality, but arguably the section on slave religion provides a solid context and framework for the study of the Bible in the novel that is concerned with such a religious person as Nat Turner in the Old South.

In addition, "North American Slave Narratives" were an interesting and a helpful find for me. The University of North Carolina has digitised the original autobiographies of fugitive

and former slaves, which can be read and studied on the Internet. If I had written my thesis on this same subject five years earlier it would have become quite different, since the first digitised narratives are from the year 1999, and most of them from the years 2000 and 2001. As I was able to use the authentic slave narratives, I could go to the origins of the textual material and information on slave religion, that is, to read about the experiences of African Americans in their own voices. No doubt, the availability of “North American Slave Narratives” on the Internet offers new possibilities for the study of literature that deals with American slavery.

In conclusion, Nat Turner becomes a tragic figure as he makes decisions about how he reacts against tyranny and repression in the American South. He chooses violence as the only option in the fight for freedom. Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. did not choose to be a bystander and remain passive as he was faced with racial discrimination and segregation that were obstacles to real freedom, and figuratively kept blacks in chains in the United States. However, in contrast to Nat Turner, in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King warned African Americans of hatred and bitterness that would lead to physical violence. He was of the opinion that instead of using physical force blacks should fight against injustices with the force of soul. Dr. King represents a prophetic Christian whose thoughts and method of action is easy to embrace. Nat Turner’s prophetic Christianity instead makes one consider its morality, just because of the violence. On the other hand, it is evident that the Southampton Insurrection helped the cause of liberty. It was a clear sign that uprisings would continue and increase if slavery was not demolished and abolitionist voices grew stronger after the revolt. Besides, the cause of Nat Turner’s revolt was well-grounded, for the fundamental right of equality is written in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America as follows: “All men are created equal”.

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