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**CRITICS' RECEPTION AND READERS' RESPONSE TO WILLIAM FAULKNER'S  
*ABSALOM, ABSALOM!* AND MARGARET MITCHELL'S *GONE WITH THE WIND*****Abstract**

This paper goes back to the first half of the twentieth century aiming to trace the novelistic representations of one of America's most memorable wars: the Civil War. In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, the antebellum south is depicted domestically, culturally and historically in ways that simultaneously evoke and contradict each other. By contrasting the two novels' conceptualizations of the Old South, the present research examines how this factor contributed\_ if not determined\_ their dissimilar receptions by critics and readers as well. Thus, it is concerned with the literary history of the two works and it namely relies on Hans Robert Jauss' concepts of "horizon of expectations" and "horizontal change" in its interpretation of readers' and critics' reactions towards the two novels.

**Keywords:** Antebellum South, Margaret Mitchell, Reader-response, Reception, William Faulkner.

**1. Introduction**

The South, with its visions, tales and myths, was \_and still is\_ a dominant subject in the American culture. Southern literature, standing in equal height to history, contributed in shaping and maintaining this mystic preoccupation with a region that has arguably claimed an up-high stature along the centuries. The year 1936 is a monumental mark in the history of regional\_ and maybe universal\_ literature thanks to the publishing of two distinguished novels. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* is one of the most popular novels that came out of the South. It was published in June and it immediately became the public's favorite, selling over a million copies by the end of the year. A few months later, William Faulkner witnessed the release of his *Absalom, Absalom!* which was to become one of the most critically-acclaimed literary creations of the whole renaissance. Astoundingly, both novels position the Antebellum South and the Civil War at the very core of their concerns; yet, the responses they evoked seem to suggest the very opposite. Their receptions could not be more different.

While *Gone With the Wind* enjoyed unparalleled boosting popularity that broke many sale records, *Absalom, Absalom!* went out of print. But while renowned critics (with their essays appearing in famous literary journals such as New York Review of Books, American Literature, etc.) were attempting to come up with satisfactory analyses of Faulkner's much-discussed work, these same critics would not even stop to credit Mitchell the honor of producing a highbrow literature. One novel received thick analytical volumes in response the other was

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welcomed with heated public applause. Mitchell's epic novel is one of "the country's most celebrated and widely adored—and, in some cases, thoroughly reviled—literary phenomena" but *Absalom, Absalom!* is considered as Faulkner's "most brilliant achievement" whereby he was proved "a master of the tragic" (Ryan, 2008, p. 1; Brooks, 1978, p. 265; Jacobs, 1973, p. 318). On the one hand, Richard H. King when asked to name "the leading Southern historian", though he had read W. J. Cash and C. Vann Woodward, his immediate reply was "William Faulkner" (King, 1980, p.vii). This denotes Faulkner's renowned position as a novelist who contributed to the shaping and preserving of the Southern collective memory. On the other hand, Don H. Doyle asserts that "against a mountain of journals, books, conference papers, and courses on the history of the American South, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, has arguably done far more to shape popular understanding, or misunderstanding, of the South and its past" (Doyle, 2015, p.79). So obviously, both productions have a huge impact on the perception of the Southern history and the understanding of its past. However, their standings are not identical. In this regard, Malcolm Cowley denotes *Gone With the Wind* as "an encyclopedia of the plantation legend" (Cowley, 1999, p. 314). Mitchell's work is "regarded as the undisputed Ur-text"; in other words, it is hard to evade because it "has influenced the form, the conventions, the archetypes, and the themes" of many subsequent portrayals of the Old South (Ryan, 2008, p. 186). Equally, Douglas L. Mitchell states that "Faulkner challenged the plantation legend by creating a different sort of planter archetype" (Mitchell D. 2008, p.140). This leads one to assume, as Hobson did, that the two works had a "dramatically different" fate though they were "set in the same time period, and treating many of the same subjects, including the Civil War, the plantation South, and decline and fall" (Hobson, 2003, p. 5). Carolyn Porter's article, which is a landmark commentary on the reception of the two novels, considers this paradox. In her concluding words, she states: "whereas Mitchell's popularity reflects how she turned her story of the South into an American romance, Faulkner's novel turned the American success story of Sutpen into a racial tragedy that few foresaw in 1936 as a national dilemma" (Porter, 2009, p. 710). This encapsulates the stark contrast between the two novels. Though many studies were devoted to compare the two texts, none contrasted their reception with reference to their different conceptualizations of the Antebellum South. The case being so opens a wide gate for investigating the hows and whys behind such problematic.

The present research deals with the reception of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* by critics and readers. It analyses the responses of readers and critics in the light of Hans Robert Jauss' Aesthetics of Reception. It begins with a synoptic overview of the literary context in which the two novels have been received *i.e.* the horizon of expectations. So, it provides an account of the conventions and norms that prevailed literary works and established the so-called "myth of the Old South" or "Plantation Legend". Besides, it relates this "horizon of expectations" to the public's response towards the two novels. Then it examines critics' reception in relation to the concept of "horizontal change" and how the two works in question either confirmed expectations or broke them.

## 2. The Horizon of Expectations

Since the backbone of the study is Jauss' theory "Aesthetics of Reception" and since *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* are primarily preoccupied with the conception of the Antebellum South; analyzing the novels' reception implies a careful examination of the literary context in which readers received the two works. In other words, studying these novels' reception requires a profound scrutiny of the way the Antebellum South was seen and portrayed in preceding and contemporary literary works.

A literary work, according to Jauss, predisposes "its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions"; this means that a literary work is never read in "an informational vacuum" and is often conceived vis-à-vis former experiences and familiarity with other works (Jauss, 1982, p. 22). Once the text is situated within its literary context, the odds of its reception become clear. So, the way readers react to a given text is relatively bound to their prior experiences with other texts. He asserts that a text "awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the 'middle and end' " (Jauss, 1982, p. 22). As a given text is placed within a certain literary realm or an artistic rubric, it accumulates its meaning for readers in relationship with other texts that share the same concerns or similar features. So, the public readers who received *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* at their immediate publication were certainly influenced by some "specific rules of the genre or type of text" (Jauss, 1982, p. 22). In this regard, we shall begin with a synoptic overview about the conception of the Old South in the collective consciousness *i.e.* the Plantation Tradition in order to pave the way for an accurate understanding and contextualization of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind*.

The South "occupies a central place in the American imagination" through a range of mythological representations of the region (Wilson, 2006, p. xvii). That is why the field of Southern studies is rich with various myths that shape the southerners' conception of the South. Some of these are: the Southern Frontier, the Old South, the Solid South, the Sun Belt, the Benighted South, etc. These are but a few of the many "souths" that southerners believe in. In this paper, following suit of the novels' content, we are concerned with the myth of the Old South or "the Plantation Legend". The antebellum history of the South banked on cotton plantations and so the generations that came after the war were nurtured on the myth of the Lost Cause which looked beyond the defeat to "the ol' good days" in nostalgia. The Old South with all its mythical qualities and archetypes remains a central component in many southerners' self-identification since it became part of their collective consciousness. The image, more or less, corresponds to the following: in a beautiful white mansion, on the skirts of a beautiful bygone time, there lived an unfailingly graceful gentleman under the noble shelter of whom swayed a delicate wife in her fragranced hoofs softly tending kids and watching over happy darkies who joyfully work the blooming fields. The entire image is one of idyllic sanctuary into which nothing intrude but grand balls, moonlight and magnolia. Honor, loyalty, and truth are the moral

guidelines that the Old South lived by, guidelines that “Yankees” were unable to understand, future generations unable to picture and Southerners unable to let go of. A much-lamented brought-to-dust civilization that shines still even amidst the ashes.

In the field of Southern studies, scholars have generally regarded Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia* as the epitome of plantation fiction. It has been read as the recreation of a dead civilization generating mythical qualities and along with the works of Joel Chandler Harris and others it made up the core of the Plantation Tradition. In 1887 Page published his landmark collection of stories which gathered in them the most significant characteristics and features of Plantation Literature. Eliza Andrews’ book *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864-1865* provides a synoptic overview of the myth of the Old South which can be summarized in the following points:

- The Antebellum South was a place of great peace and beauty inhabited by very proud and loyal southerners.
- The plantation life was like a hierarchal patriarchal system in which the benevolent aristocracy possessed the wealth and wisely exercised the political power (white males over blacks and females).
- Southern women were the epitome of womanhood; Southern men were the knights of 19th-century America.
- The African Americans led a happier and better life under slavery than as freed men.
- The South would have prospered more if not for Northern aggression and so ironically their defeat is a triumph and vindication of their lifestyle. (Andrews, 1997)

Consequently, 1936-readers approached *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* with a set of expectations based on prior familiarity with other texts basically and essentially the Plantation Tradition which had a paramount role in the shaping of collective conception of the South. Along similar lines, Richard H. King explains that:

The writers and intellectuals of the South after the late 1920s were engaged in an attempt to come to terms not only with the inherited values of the southern tradition but also with a certain way of perceiving and dealing with the past, what Nietzsche called ‘monumental’ historical consciousness” (King,1980, p.7)

Put differently, authors of Southern Renaissance tended to scrutinize the influx of the “modern” world upon their Old South; some struggling to keep it intact and others challenging its creeds out-rightly. Yet, both were well-aware of the constellation of myths, archetypes and dogmas that made up the historical consciousness of southerners and its indelible ramifications upon the present.

### **2.1. *Gone With the Wind* Meeting Expectations**

Broadly speaking, a novel is deemed popular through a set of criteria: the number of copies sold, movie adaptations, translations, a remarkable presence in social media and in some cases its continuation through sequels. By analogy,

*Gone With the Wind* is undoubtedly a rare bestseller that confoundingly keeps selling. Its cinematic adaptation by David O. Selznick hyper-boosted its popularity until it squarely deserved to be described as “an odyssey from Atlanta to Hollywood”. Moreover, this blockbuster was translated into more than 40 languages and made into a number of sequels and parodies such as *Scarlett*, *Rhett Butler’s People* and *The Wind Done Gone*.

In analyzing the conceptualization of the Antebellum South, one notices that *Gone with the Wind*’s major concern is its picturing of the Old South. The painstaking portrayal of the southern belle, the careful sketching of southern masculinity with all its debonair premises, the mesmerizing documentation of the war and its zealous gore, and above all its depiction of a quasi-perfect relationship between blacks and whites are all distinctive features leisurely found throughout plantation literature. Consequently, what appealed to readers was not the language or the style\_ readers were not even discouraged by the lengthy narrative\_ it was simply the content. What drew readers, by millions, to the novel was its content which is so familiar and yet unfailingly enchanting. Evelyn Scott commented that the novel gave people their story “through Southern eyes exclusively...with the bias of passionate regionalism” (Scott, 1999, p. 314). Readers longed to know about their past and most probably to know what they carve to know and so Mitchell’s epic struck a chord. Besides, as Fox-Genovese remarks, “the Southern stories of fathers and lullabies of mothers” fed the public enthusiasm for tales of heroism and gentility in an age that offered little possibility for heroism, honor, and respectability. During the Great Depression, many suffered mental breakdown because they could not cope in a world of insolent materialism; so they found refuge in their ancestors’ glorious old days. Life in the Antebellum South, the ideals of resistance and courage against adversity, offered a stark contrast to the situation that most Americans knew during the Great Depression (Fox-Genovese, 1981, p. 397). Perpetuating an old tradition, *Gone With the Wind* satisfied and nurtured their desire to believe in a romantic past that is so much better than their capitalist greedy present. The public which was “a little surfeited with wistful reminiscence of the cape-Jessamine side of it” found a pleasant sanctuary in the novel’s gloriously-appealing tone (Benét, 1999, p. 314).

At large, *Gone With the Wind* though not a magnum opus in the literary realm it remains one of the major works in Southern American literature and even universal one as far as readability is concerned. The old tradition that was initiated around 1830s with Thomas Nelson Page, John Pendleton Kennedy, William A. Caruthers, William Gilmore Simms and others “grew in fulsome hyperbole until” it reached “the culmination and zenith with *Gone With the Wind*” (Bohner, 1961, p. 58). The works of these authors revolved around both historical and domestic events that took place in the Deep South sometime in the ceaselessly-born-back past; being romances by definition they established gradually \_and buoyantly\_ a number of myths and archetypes.

This sort of “boosterism” that many southerners engaged in became an “entity” that saliently manifests itself through renaissance literature as the tradition “loomed distressingly distant and overpoweringly strong, insupportable

yet inescapable” (King, 1980, p. 16). So Mitchell’s saga was but a reincarnation of those patterns and creeds that made up the constellation. Bohner’s rehashing words are certainly a good explanation in here. He says:

The flirtations and courtships, the duels and dances, which fill the idle days of these charming men and women seem always to be set against a scene of manorial splendor dominated by a mansion with a glistening white portico overlooking green lawns sloping down to a placid river. In the cotton fields, the darkies, too numerous even to be counted, sing contentedly at their work. This tableau is familiar to everyone today, owing chiefly to the phenomenal popularity of Margaret Mitchell’s ‘Gone With the Wind’ and the motion picture made from the novel – certainly the apogee of the plantation tradition (Bohner, 1961, p. 73-74).

If we apply Jauss’ concept of “horizon of expectations” *i.e.* placing *Gone With the Wind*’s conceptualization of the Antebellum South within the Plantation Tradition we see that the former perfectly meets readers’ expectations since as Stephen Vincent Benét notes: “Mitchell knows her period, her people, and the red hill country of North Georgia—she knows the clothes and the codes and the little distinctions that make for authenticity” (Benét, 1999, p. 313). Put succinctly, Mitchell’s novel conformed readers’ expectations, it simply did not disappoint them or oddly intrude on their horizon. So they in turn favored it with their support. The novel’s collective reception profoundly demonstrate that the sheer popularity and the unbridled enthusiasm with which Mitchell’s work was embraced has given it credence far beyond what any revisionist critic can denote as a flawed or flabby.

## **2.2. *Absalom, Absalom!* Disappointing Expectations**

The conceptualization of the Antebellum South in *Absalom, Absalom!* is clearly very different if not contradictory to that of *Gone With the Wind* and the Plantation Tradition at large. Faulkner’s narrative negates and questions all of the archetypes and notions that readers are accustomed to. The way it portrays the plantation system, its code of conduct and its social mores was very unfamiliar to them. In this regard, Don H. Doyle asserts that Faulkner “seemed intent on subverting much of the romanticism and self-serving justifications of southern history as it had been formulated in popular narratives, novels, and film, and also as it had been embedded in school text books and scholarly journals since the Civil War” (Doyle, 2015, p. 80).

Viewing his account against the background of the Plantation Literature makes a stark contrast between what readers expected and the completely unfamiliar content that the novel offers. The “south” where Thomas Sutpen, Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon live seem to be a peculiar setting that readers have never come across in their previous readings. A renowned historian, C. Vann Woodward credits Faulkner and other writers of Southern Renaissance, for leading the attack on stubborn myths that enshrouded the region’s past and, thereby, helping clear the way for historians like W. J. Cash to take up the task of revising the traditional dogmas about Southern antebellum history (Woodward, 2008, p. 38). This denotes the radical vision that Faulkner draw for the

Antebellum South which essentially shocked readers whose horizon of expectation does not allow such non-conformist ground-breaking notions. Correspondingly, at its initial reception *Absalom, Absalom!* was no match for *Gone With the Wind*. It went out of print; Faulkner could not make it into a movie and readers complained endlessly of its desperately unintelligible content. At the historical moment of its appearance, it was discarded as a whole and Faulkner received a scathing disapproval from the crowd. In his seminal book *the Mind of the South* (1956) W. J. Cash explains some particularities in the Southern society which led to such reactions to wards given literary works by saying that:

among those who read if a few greeted such writers as Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, with tolerance and even sympathetic understanding, the prevailing attitude toward them was likely to be one of squeamish distaste and shock, of denial that they told the essential truth or any part of it\_ in many cases\_ of bitter resentment against them on the ground that they had libeled and misrepresented the South with malicious intent (Cash, 1956, p. 419)

Apparently, readers have been for so long accustomed to the “traditional” conception of the Antebellum South that their reflex was that of disdain and denial. The plantation legend was deeply etched in collective memory of readers so works such as *Absalom, Absalom!* that daringly question and subvert this conception were regarded as villainous.

Viewing both cases, it is clear that what determined the two novels’ success or failure among public readers was their conceptualization of the South. While *Gone With the Wind* satisfied readers through conforming the established notions and creeds of the Plantation Legend, *Absalom, Absalom!* shocked readers through negating and altering the established image of the Old South. And so the first was successful in gaining their approval whereas the second was rejected.

### 2.2.1. A Horizontal Change

Jauss clearly states that there exists a distance between the work and its addressee which plays a significant role in deciding the aesthetic value of the work. The latter he characterizes as “the disparity between the given horizon of expectations and the appearance of a new work, whose reception can result in a ‘change of horizons’” (Jauss 24). In other words, if a literary work is so close to the unskilled readers *i.e.* it meets their expectations then the aesthetic distance is easily bridgeable. Hence, the larger the distance the more valuable the work is because it breaks their expectations to establish new ones “through negation of familiar experiences or through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness” (Jauss, 1982, p. 24). Such works are not mere reproductions of worn-out and used up clichés, they rather introduce novel elements in the actual horizon. The case being so explains why critics who have a broader understanding and sharper insights into literary works have a slight regard for works that appeal to larger audience; they simply situate the work within its larger context and see that it does not bring forth any outstanding creativity. Likewise, they appreciate all works that break familiar norms and raise “newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness”. These are deemed as

holding an aesthetic charm which the public readers are unable or unprepared to see.

Moreover, it is worth noting that a work may probably gain its significance after an initial rejection *i.e.* its aesthetic value is well-appreciated once the horizons change so readers could receive it differently. As Jauss explains “this aesthetic distance can be objectified historically along the spectrum of the audience’s reactions and criticism’s judgment” (Jauss, 1982, p. 24). A gradual or belated understanding unravels the author’s genius which his contemporaries might be blind to. Accordingly, a work that “alters” the readers’ horizon generating a “horizontal change” is the one that exhibits a powerful stance in the history of literature because of its timeless and universal value.

### 2.2.2. *Gone With the Wind* : A Copious Novel

Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind* though it completely charmed its readers, it only made a number of critics pose the question whether it is a literature in the first place. It was\_ and still is\_ considered by many as a vulgar literature of gore that seriously distorts historical realities and feeds readers prejudicial misconceptions with tons of propagandist inflammatory cliff-hangers about a mythical Old South. It is almost no use mentioning the scathing disapproval it up heaved; Lillian Smith may not have spoken for everyone but she certainly did for many when she wrote that *Gone With the Wind* “wobbles badly like an enormous house on shaky underpinnings...it was slick, successful but essentially mediocre fiction” (as cited in King, 1980, p. 177). Because it only reproduced worn-out dogmas and brought no innovative change to the scene, critics discard it as a trifling novel that can be easily and sluggishly copied by any. As if to say that “other novelists by the hundreds have helped to shape this legend, but each of them has presented only part of it” this one-hundred-page novel does nothing but repeating it “as a whole, with all its episodes and all its characters and all its stage setting” (Cowley, 1999, p. 314). Hence, Mitchell’s work is ostensibly stale bread heated for refreshment only.

Historian Willie Lee Rose described *Gone with the Wind* as “the greatest publishing-viewing extravaganza of all time” which not only admits its unequalled position among American denizens’ preferences but it rather admits its entertaining and somewhat soothing presence in the collective memory (Rose, 1982, p. 130). It soothed the wounded egos of war veterans; fed the unquenched thirst of post-bellum generations and merely covered up the inadequacies of a controversial history and a marred past. So it comes to nobody’s surprise\_ but to many’s disdain\_ that *Gone With the Wind* received scathing criticism from critics who mostly shared a common disregard for its literary merits: it was a mere reproduction and reaffirmation of an old unquestioned set of dogmas. Like many, Bernard DeVoto dismisses it as “wish-fulfillment literature” (DeVoto, 1995, p. 327). In view of the Plantation tradition that prevailed Southern literature for centuries, Mitchell’s novel could not conquer a distinguished position as a unique piece of literature because what it brought was only expectable. Therefore, the reason why *Gone With the Wind* gained public approval is its closeness to their expectations, yet the closer a text is to its readers’ expectations the smaller the aesthetic distance is. The closer it gets to

“culinary” art the further it goes from canonical literature. *Gone With the Wind* ‘s unmatched closeness to its readers made of it a prey to an enclosed sphere of which it could never escape so it could never be admitted among grand narratives.

### 2.3. Absalom, Absalom! : A Masterpiece

Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* though it had been discarded by readers as an infuriating read that is impregnably inapt for tangibility, it nonetheless impressed critics and gained their admiration. Apart from the novel’s tough-to-grasp style which Bernd describes as an “impetuous violence” because the author “boldly throws grammar overboard and follows his own private rules of syntax”, the content of the novel poses an even greater hardship (Bernd, 1995, p. 119).

In view of the permeating conception of the Antebellum South and the Plantation Legend, Faulkner’s narrative is nothing but seismic. He “challenged the plantation legend by creating a different sort of planter archetype, one who enters the wilderness seeking to will an embodiment of an idea into existence in the midst of wilderness” (Douglas L. Mitchell 140). The romantic picture of the Old South that is indelibly etched in the minds of most Americans was morbidly shaken. In a befuddling doubtful tone the story of the Old South is unfolded. The gentle master turns into a demon, the chivalrous code freezes over to a rigid immoral racism and the romance reveals a gothic tale beneath. “The drama of *Absalom, Absalom!* is clearly diabolism, a "miasmatic distillate" of horror” (DeVoto, 1995, p. 144). The unfamiliar\_ if not upsetting\_ vision of the Old South that Faulkner draws in his novel was the main reason behind its initial failure among readers or unpopularity among the public yet paradoxically it ensured for him a distinguished position among critics and reviewers for his work was undoubtedly a puzzling breakthrough. It is marked with a heavy ceaseless flow of enigmatic description that is so trying in its form and substance. Critics by dozens rejoiced in its modernist richness; Faulkner’s fiction rose above and beyond his contemporaries’ because:

with all of its minor stylistic and formal defects, *Absalom, Absalom!* is fiction of a high order of excellence, strong from its roots in the life of a people and in a land and in a time, rich from the experience of that people, and beautiful from its sincere telling by one of that very race, who has mastered his art as have few of his contemporaries (O’Donnell, 1995, p. 144).

However, *Absalom, Absalom!*’s worth was not immediately and wholly appreciated even by some critics who joined the public chorus of dissatisfaction. One such critic is Miller who openly expressed his slight regard for the novel through asserting that it is” built exclusively on tricky confusion” and so “if in the great show-down of years, *Absalom, Absalom!* does prove to be a great book then the joke is on [him]” (Miller, 1995, p. 152). Time proved him wrong.

In effect, the novel came to unveil the inherent inconsistencies of the myth and flout its dogmas. *Absalom, Absalom!* simply shocked the readers of 1936 who were not acquainted with such conception of the Antebellum South yet \_as already noted\_ critics could see its aesthetic value and ability to alter

horizons so that successive generations could regard it more accurately. This seems to equally match Jauss' illustration with *Madame Bovary's* worldwide success after it got understood and appreciated not only by "a small circle of connoisseurs" but by a large audience (Jauss, 1982, p. 28). In a twist of fate, the very same reason that led public readers to reject *Absalom, Absalom!*, i.e. its conceptualization of the Antebellum South which was seemingly so much far away and beyond their horizons, led critics to place it on top of canonical works that are able to create an aesthetic distance. This "horizontal change" ensured a belated success for the novel. In such a way Faulkner took risks of "offending" a public with whom so much quixoticism lingers; he "flirted with failure" to conjure a magnum opus (O'Donnell, 1995, p. 142).

*Gone With the Wind's* conceptualization of the Antebellum South was so close to readers' expectations henceforth it brought no striking creativity at the level of artistry. *Absalom, Absalom!* on the contrary broadened the gap between readers' expectations and its conceptualization; the distance was so large that it took readers off guard. This aesthetic distance was the reason critics mused over Faulkner's literary breakthrough.

### 3. Conclusion

The field of Southern literary study has long been a subject of much controversy and one might dare describe it as an arena of literary heated debates that accumulates loads of heavy weaponry used at full blast. Historians, authors, critics and laymen alike have been mercilessly caught up in the chasm of understanding, defining and judging the region, its history, and culture. Two of the most eminent literary works that came out of the South have been discussed and analyzed in the present research. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* stand for two opposite poles in the field of Southern studies.

As shown through previous analyses both novels meet at their genuine concern to portray the region especially its antebellum history yet *there* ends their resemblance since their portraits rest at a stone's throw from refuting one another. The former draws a cubist portrait that\_ more or less\_ revises, questions, and even condemns the region, its past and its doomed future. In its intransigent and almost appalling preoccupation with the past, the narrative moves against the current with which the latter smoothly flows. The Plantation Legend serves as a background against which the two works have been received and assessed. This old tradition that is carved in the collective memory of most Southerners pictures the Old South as a region "dominated by a country gentry that was learned, landed, chivalric, [and] paternal" which has often been "enshrined in the concept that Southerners were cavaliers, gentlemen like the monarchical-supporting class in 17th century Britain (Richter, 1982, p. 3). These were the prevalent notions about the Antebellum South which through this research we deemed as the cornerstone and backbone of the readers' "horizon of expectations".

Since this study is based primarily on the guidelines of Reception Theory namely: Hans Robert Jauss' Aesthetics of Reception, it contrasted the reception

of the two novels. In an endeavor to explain and demystify the reasons behind their dissimilar reception, we could ascertain that the “horizon of expectations” is a paramount element in the understanding and evaluation of any literary work. Jauss asserts that a literary work “is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes even new resonances among its readers” (Jauss, 1982, p. 21). Therefore, *Gone With the Wind* being a thrilling romance that tells the story of Old Deep South just as grandmas and war veterans did, it passionately documented the lives of those who “suffered crushing misfortunes and had not been crushed. They had not been broken by the crash of empires, the machetes of revolting slaves, war, rebellion, proscription, confiscation. Malign fate had broken their necks, perhaps, but never their hearts” (Mitchell, 1999, p. 349). It not only met their expectations but fed their eagerness and need to believe in the goodness of the old bygone days. Readers all over the world could relate to Scarlett’s story; they could identify with Rhett and long for Tara especially with the destruction and desperation of the WI. Simply, that is how *Gone With the Wind* found its way to millions of hearts and secured an unshakable place among worldwide bestsellers.

Directly related to the concept of “horizon of expectations”, is “horizontal change” which indicates an alteration at the level of horizons that allows for a different\_ arguably more accurate\_ viewing of literary works. Through analyses we found that what prevented *Absalom, Absalom!* from gaining a worldwide success at its immediate release was its opposition to the established dogmas about the Old South. The unfamiliarity of readers with Faulkner’s vision of Yoknapatawpha, a miniature of the south, led to an “unjust” evaluation of its worth. Though it “contains some of Faulkner’s most demanding prose”, it could only “frustrate and fascinate readers” who can barely come close at an adequate understanding of its plot let alone a square appreciation of its aesthetic value (Towner, 2008, p. 40). Hence, *Absalom, Absalom!* acquired a belated appreciation once critics exhibited its uniqueness and ground-breaking creativity. Faulkner’s narrative originated a “horizontal change” that few foresaw in 1936.

To sum up, the present research explores a very decisive side of literary criticism i.e. reception. its major contribution touches upon three disciplines namely: literature, history and sociology since it analyses *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Gone With the Wind* as literary works which are important thanks to their historical content and to their standing in the history of literature beside its examination of the social function of literature that is part and parcel of its aesthetic value.

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