



Race and gender: A study of the artistic corruption of Perceval Gibbon's *Souls in Bondage*

Jenny de Reuck

To cite this article: Jenny de Reuck (1988) Race and gender: A study of the artistic corruption of Perceval Gibbon's *Souls in Bondage* , Journal of Literary Studies, 4:1, 38-48, DOI: [10.1080/02564718808529850](https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718808529850)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718808529850>



Published online: 06 Jul 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)

Race and gender: a study of the artistic corruption of Perceval Gibbon's *Souls in Bondage*

Jenny de Reuck

Summary

The paper analyses the informing "work-ideology" of *Souls in Bondage*, engaging especially with its sexist and racist cast, and argues in effect that, within the context of reception, the necessary co-operation required of the reader for the presentational process to render adequately the drama of its presented world is vitiated.

Opsomming

In hierdie referaat word die "werk-ideologie" wat *Souls in Bondage* struktureer, ondersoek met besondere verwysing na die seksistiese en rassistiese aard daarvan. Daar word aangevoer dat – binne die konteks van resepsie – die noodsaaklike samewerking van die lesers ten einde dit moontlik te maak dat die drama in die aangebode wêreld van die werk in die "presentasieproses" voldoende gerealiseer word, ondermyn word.

In the Introduction to Perceval Gibbon's *Margaret Harding* (1911: repr. 1983), P.D. Williams makes a number of extravagant claims for the writer; claims which cannot be allowed to stand uncontested. In this article which deals with the earlier novel, *Souls in Bondage* (1904), I grapple (explicitly to refute them) with some of the more damaging perceptions into which the critic might be lulled should there be easy acquiescence to Williams's point of view. Statements of the kind:

... Perceval Gibbon spent not more than six years in South Africa (1898–1902), yet he saw through the surface appearance of colonial Africa at the turn of the century, and perceived some of its essence, its wholeness, its "ground beneath ground". (p. iii)

and

The time is ripe ... for Perceval Gibbon to take his place as a significant writer on Africa. (p. iii)

are of a general nature and appear to embrace the writer's entire African oeuvre. They should be made with hesitancy, though, with regard to *Souls in Bondage* which, far from revealing a "significant writer" ready to "take his place" in the canon of Colonial Literature, is a literary work with value, perhaps, as a sociological curiosity, but which fails signally on any assessment of its worth as Literature or even literature.

Souls in Bondage is a curious narrative, not least because of its unabashedly racist and sexist cast. To exonerate its author on the grounds that it is a narrative of its time and place is, in effect, to condemn him as an author of mediocre ability, incapable of the transcendent qualities that a less bigoted

writer might have aspired to. The critical point, here, though, is not the fact of Gibbon's racist/sexist orientation, but, rather, that the twin poles between which his narrative is strung undermine his creativity, distorting, particularly, the conception of character that, within the framework of the narrative itself, it would appear he is at some pains to establish.

The town in which the narrative is set is Dopfontein,¹ a rural community, linked by rail "to the great world beyond" (p. 1), and it lies somewhere "between the capital and the coast" (p. 2). Physical isolation or spatial location at a remove from an urban-industrial complex has been a conventional technique of the writer of South African fiction: the landscape of Africa, automatically conferring "local colour" without a great deal, perhaps, of invention being required of the author. Nevertheless, it is certain that Gibbon intends his fictional Dopfontein to be immediately recognisable as a microcosm of the human relationships or group relationships that make up the macrocosm from within which he writes. The authorial narrator establishes, emphatically, in spatial terms, within the first few pages, the three groups that provide the narrative with its focus. First there is the town itself, "undefiled by the merely specious in architecture . . . Only the *kerk* exceed[ing] one storey" (p. 3). This is the domain of the white man and the narrator contrives to establish a dominantly positive impression of it:

The gardens glowed with banked flowers, gentians and pansies and roses, and many held tulips from an ancestral and wonderful stock. All within the town was of a solid, African langour, the listlessness of exterior that betokens a well-to-do community, with everything handsome about it. (p. 3)

Essential to the reception of this area of the presented world is the notion of order, of aesthetic imposition (borne witness to by the European flowers that colour the gardens and their borders) that comes with a higher order of consciousness. A stark and significant contrast is drawn between the town and the location, where live the other extreme of the social "equation": the "Kafirs". The town ends, says the narrator, at the spruit:

The well-kept road dipped into it and died, and was reincarnated upon the other sides as a trodden and rutted path. Half a mile along it lay the location, a town of brown huts, orderly set, and of that toy-like neatness and suavity of outline which hall-marks all Kafir work. (p. 4)

The narrator's evaluative stance is clearly delineated: the social ordering of this community involves "easily defined extremes" (p. 4) with Dopfontein being "an appreciable quantity in any equation" (p. 4) and the location, ". . . also a thing established. The Kafirs lived in the location, and everyone knows what Kafirs are" (p. 4). The tone here is overtly dismissive of the "Kafirs" and their natural context but it is in the description of the median area, that which bridges these two discrete factors in the social equation of the presented world, that dismissal gives way to a more actively experienced revulsion. The narrator's evocative descriptive powers are given full rein as the realm of the "off-coloured" is conjured:

But on the bare earth between the town and the location dwelt yet another community, whose status and rank were matters rather of construction than of acknowledged precedent.

Here were no white houses of stone, and scarcely any domed brown huts. Unsightly sheds of corrugated iron defaced the earth, and square houses that strove in vain, with glass windows and painted doors, to escape an Oriental flavour. The ground underfoot was littered with old tins and unnameable rubbish, and mean overcautious domestic beasts, fowls in reason, goats in astonishing number, and an occasional vicious lean pig, rooted and chewed among the offal . . . The place crawled with the fevered activity of hell, and all the fuss and business was to no end. The people that went up and down . . . carried the Sisyphus curse; for these were the "off-coloured", the half-castes, the outcome of white supremacy in a black country. (p. 5)

These, then, are the three areas that the presented world comprises and the narrator, within a couple of pages, has limned in their parameters. More significantly, by means of the spatial imagery, he has implicitly suggested to the alert reader, the nature of the narrative's architectonic; that is, as will be demonstrated, one which is imbued with an essentially racist hatred.

The three spatial loci have corresponding groups of characters that inhabit them and Gibbon's intention appears to be to examine the implications, for individuals as well as for societal structures, of miscegenation. This he does by means of two narrative strands: one devoted to the "off-coloureds", represented by Cecilia du Plessis, Bantam, Mrs. Vorster, her daughter Minnie, and Mrs. Du Plessis and the curiously underdeveloped Katrina; the other focusing upon the transport rider, Joyce, the alcoholic farmer, Graham, and his daughter, Peggy, with minor roles being played by the Van der Merwe family for whom Joyce works. Precariously balanced between these two clusters of characters, is Martin Thwaites, "Attorney and Notary Public", who is of the latter cluster, but interacts most extensively with the former. In chapters 2 and 8 of the novel, the two ostensibly discrete strands cross briefly, but they are kept strategically separate throughout the greater part of the novel and appear to function contrapuntally, enhancing and/or highlighting certain features of one thread of the narrative, or providing, by means of contrasts, insights into dimensions of the other. They remain essentially discontinuous, however, two self-contained "stories" whose plots overlap, but barely.

In the characters of Cecilia du Plessis and Peggy Graham, the female interests of the separate plots of his narrative, Gibbon has wrought oddly complementary and contrasting qualities. Cecilia enters the presented world, in the words of Charlie Bateman (the unaccountable partner in Thwaites's practice), as ". . . that Du Plessis thing" (p. 20). The narrator then describes her as ". . . a thin girl of some eighteen hard winters, hardly formed yet", and as having "the beauty of a wild animal . . .". But, despite the superficial appeal of the girl, the narrator posts this caveat about her, hinting at the blemish that condemns her to a life of misery, neither of one cluster nor the other: "Something out of the common accented her voice, the plaintive undertone of the African born." (p. 21). Cecilia is presented as both a victim

and the product of miscegenation. She functions as the passive, almost martyr-like recipient of random blows, metaphoric and literal, dealt out to her by a Fate that, however Thwaites may try to shield her from its excesses, the narrator reveals is the inevitable result when the blood of the "master" race is "polluted" by that of the "bestial" African. There are, however, degrees of pollution, and on the continuum projected by the narrator, Bantam and Mrs Du Plessis occupy one pole, Mrs Vorster in her "pink turban and a man's white jacket" (p. 37) occupies the middle, and Cecilia the furthest pole.

Cecilia's role at the centre of the one plot is contrasted with that of Peggy in the other. Where Cecilia is presented as a shrinking victim, scarcely mistress of her fate, Peggy is presented as capable, in control, initially, of the domain she moves through. The idea is extended in the images of her astride her horse:

A girl rode up on a shaggy pony, sitting sideways on a man's saddle with the off-stirrup crossed sideways for her foot. She was a little thing, with brown hair under a battered felt hat, a round, freckled face and little brown hands. She sat well and easily, and as she broke the pony's canter into a walk, and came within the range of Joyce's preoccupied vision, she swayed easily to the change of gait, but never faltered in her seat. (pp. 133-134)

In perhaps consciously avoiding one stereotype, Gibbon has replaced it with another – that of the boyish heroine, game, spunky, the girl-scout, who copes with adversity by bravely confronting it until her resources are depleted. Neither Peggy nor Cecilia ever achieves more than a one-dimensional quality as a character: and the reason inheres in a complex matrix of relationships between reader, narrator and author that involves an orientation by the hypostatized reader which is sympathetic to gender stereotypes of this kind. The touchstone for our approval of the female stereotypes that Gibbon is creating proves to be unambiguous in the second of the two narrative strands. It is supplied by the wholesomely rugged Joyce (himself a stereotypical male figure). It is certainly significant that Peggy's appeal is to Joyce, whose nonsense approach to Bateman in chapter 2 is an indicator, early in the narrative, of his potential hero-status: he summarily, even brutally, propels home the drunken Charlie Bateman (he has been at the party thrown by Mrs Vorster) thereby relieving a nevertheless concerned Thwaites of an onerous burden. From the outset Joyce receives a positive evaluation at the hands of the narrator: it is there in the first description of him, which places him, not without significance, in the position, vis-a-vis Bateman and Thwaites, of an observer; that is, removed from the drunken and demeaning mess in which Thwaites has become embroiled:

[Thwaites] was still pulling at Charlie, when he was aware that there was yet another spectator of his shame. A tall, well-knit young man, big-hatted and coatless, had come out of the night, and was watching his efforts with great interest.

"Is that you, Mr Joyce?" panted Thwaites, desisting from his ridiculous task. "Yes," drawled the other, without moving.

"I should be so much obliged, Mr Joyce," begged the old man hurriedly, "if you would help me to take Mr Bateman home. I ask you as between one gentleman and another" (p. 64)

Thwaites has been contrasted, starkly, with Charlie Bateman, his doubtful partner in the "practice", and his credentials as a gentleman (if by "gentleman" is meant courtesy, consideration and loyalty among other things) are clearly established. His coupling, therefore, of Joyce to himself as a gentleman is a weighty one, and lends credibility to the narrator's overt approval of the hero of the second narrative strand. It is very important for the objectives which Gibbon has set himself in *Souls in Bondage* that both Thwaites and Joyce be received warmly by the reader. Without such reception the thematic point that Gibbon is attempting to make would be radically undermined; and it is precisely at the level of characterization that it seems to me that Gibbon fails in his purpose. For, to take merely one example, for a contemporary readership, the ediface of gentlemanliness projected by Joyce is no longer able to disguise the qualities of brutality which an earlier age might have described peri-phrastically as "a proper show of strength" to be associated with manliness, but which can, now, only be received by the sensitized reader, in the context of this novel, as a form of degradation. This is an early manifestation in the text of a disjunction between the narrator's projected reception by the hypostatized reader of details of the presented world and the "actual" reception of such details of the narrative by the reader. What follows, then, is an inversion of the character as hero, and Joyce's reception by a contemporary readership is, in places, cast in a hue which is diametrically opposed to that in which the narrator is apparently at pains to paint him.

I should emphasise, here, that the conception of character which I am utilizing in this argument predates postmodernist "characterization": that is, with theorists in the Aristotelian/Jamesian mould, I am presupposing in Gibbon's characterization "... some kind of teleological explication of the character's existence in the 'plotted' time of the fiction ...; a meaningful explication of the self of a character in all its unity" (Docherty, 1983: 129).² Unity of character, then, in the Aristotelian or Jamesian "realist" sense is regarded as fundamental and Gibbon stands accused at a primary level of inconsistency, given the discrepancy, in his depiction of his hero, between gentlemanly projected qualities and their reception by the contemporary reader as brutal.

The intention of this paper, however, is not merely to accuse Gibbon of the structural inadequacies of his enterprise. It is to demonstrate and analyse the scope and nature of his artistic failure. This, it seems to me derives from two areas, namely the ideological underpinning of the novel and the novelist's uneasy rendering of character. Obviously there is an element of overlapping between the two areas, but I shall examine what I regard to be the shortcomings as they are manifested in the presentational process of the novel.

If we are to accept, as the narrator appears to demand of us, that in the character of Joyce we have something of a moral touchstone, then there are several instances at least where either statements or actions made by Joyce

cause the reader a measure of unease. These are occasions when a disjunction occurs between the present reception of textual variables and their reception, then, by the hypostatized reader. Such an instance occurs on pp. 155-157 where Joyce responds with contempt to Graham's querulous inquiry about the disciplining of an insolent "boy". Graham is a liberal Englishman, with a humanistic bent (it seems significant that the narrator presents him as a degraded alcoholic, a move which appears to imply a metacritical comment upon such liberal tendencies) which the narrator is at pains to establish as out of keeping when dealing with creatures the like of the "Kafirs".

"What would you do with a boy like that?" Graham asked plaintively.

"Would you like to know?" queried Joyce. "Well, I'll tell you. I'd sjambok him till he couldn't stand on his feet, and then I'd load a gun and give him sixty seconds to get out of range."

To Graham's rejoinder (his inflection is conveyed as, invariably, "nearly a whine" so that his comments are deprived of any validity whatsoever) that he "[does not] believe in treating human beings like beasts. A Kafir isn't a brute, you know, Mr Joyce," Joyce responds "quietly and politely": "Well, I think I'd grant him so much myself – not that I'm a negrophilist by any means" (p. 157).

It is apparent from the juxtaposition of Joyce's manly, heroic and concerned qualities ("... I think you'll need a friend some day – a man friend," he says to Peggy as they part), and the weak, ignoble and egocentric qualities of the alcoholic Mr Graham, that the orientation of values must be towards Joyce. But Joyce presents the reader with enormous problems if orientation and alignment are to be consistent with a transcendent moral framework.

Providing the narrative with a contrast of a different kind, that is, throwing into relief the characterization of the second "story", is Bantam, the anti-hero of the first of the narrative strands. Here Gibbon establishes an inversion of the qualities to be found in Joyce; yet, providing a point of conflict, is his portrayal of the curious similarity of their tendency towards brutality. Where Joyce is presented as Aryan, heroic, noble, Bantam is portrayed as polluted, brutal, perverted. The apparent intention to illuminate by means of a stark, simplistic contrast, is undermined by a current readership's reception of these two ostensibly antagonistic characters, as inherently similar in their tendency toward violence. Thus an unwonted conflation of their attributes occurs when Joyce's treatment of the "Kafirs" on the Graham farm ("Then the Sjambok got to work, coldly, remorselessly, with the rapidity of a maxim gun and much of its effect. Joyce worked calmly, without hurry or delay, with no show of passion. He was just a white man exercising his right. . . . The Kafirs knew they were in for it and had to go through with it . . . a slash or two with the black cow-hide that bit like a sword where it fell At last he was done, and stood with arms akimbo and legs wide apart watching the rubbing and whimpering Kafirs . . . he was their *baas*, their master and lord by strength as well as right" p. 204) is read in conjunction with Bantam's brutalizing of Cecilia ("There was no need, after all, for the cutting-whip he found so easily and

used so ill. He held her down, screaming, and beat her till his arms wearied. She lay moaning and writhing on the floor the night through. . .” p. 295). Hero and anti-hero merge in action despite the narrator’s manifest attempt at depicting them as members of discrete moral orders: “[Bantam] was a creature of bestial and criminal tendencies, non-moral by nature, immoral by inclination, sensual, violent and fickle” (p. 289), whereas Joyce, like a medieval knight, rides to the rescue of a damsel in distress, fulfilling the function of the hero stereotype to the clichéd letter. The inconsistency of the portrayal of Joyce which accommodates heroic action and brutality derives from the underlying architectonic of racial hatred. For Bantam is brutal in the true sense of the word: “a splendid young animal” (p. 241) is how the narrator describes him at his wedding to Cecilia. Any suggestion, however, of approval is eliminated by subsequent narratorial comment which leaves the reader in no doubt as to the evaluation of this character: “In him the grossness and evil fire of the half-blood were typified; the axiom anent ‘the vices of both with the virtues of neither’ was borne out to its last letter” (p. 289) and, “With a yellow wrath, excellently done, he revealed to Cecilia depths she would never have been capable of exploring” (p. 292).

Compounding the difficulty for the reader of receiving this text, is the narrator’s sexist bias in his evocation of his female characters. The process extends beyond a merely inadequate realist rendering of the women in this presented world (the use, as suggested above, of stereotypes such as the virginal victim of masculine malevolence that Cecilia is, or the boyishly brave heroine embodied in Peggy Graham) to encompass a *Weltanschauung* that is inherently pornographic. Peggy Graham is utilized somewhat simplistically as an emblem of virginal purity, submissive, finally, and supportive of the dominant male in a chauvinist dream-world which coalesces around the marriage:

And accordingly, within a fortnight of her arrival in Dopfontein, she was married to Joyce, and Katje, smiling rosily and maternally, was bridesmaid. “Cheer up, little chum,” whispered Joyce as he led her from the church, “we’re chums for ever now.” (p. 279-80)

Peggy functions as a variable in a chivalric narrative, where the knight, quite literally, rides to rescue her from the dragons that destroyed her father. Her ready acquiescence to the protective male concretized in Joyce (“He waited for nothing, said no word, but took her straightway into his arms. She clung close to him, her brown head bowed to his breast, her little rough hands against his shoulders” p. 263) serves to reinforce his status as hero, her tacit anointing of him as the god of her idolatry, sanctifying as it were, though, the essentially racist centre of the novel. At best there occurs in this strand of the novel a very uneasy alliance of chivalry and violence (there is the repeated suggestion of blood on his person implying a particularly brutal handling of the “troublesome ‘Kafirs’” by Joyce) which must be problematic for a contemporary reader.

Cecilia du Plessis, however, serves a more complex and ultimately more

contemptible narrative end. From the outset the narrator has described her in terms that suggest her vulnerability and attractiveness simultaneously: Thwaites sees her as having a “pretty face”, having, as was suggested above, “the beauty of a wild animal” (p. 20) and she is variously presented as “rather skinny” and “pretty and small” (p. 34), “shrinking” (p. 49) submissive and self-sacrificing (pp. 124-125). Her self-effacement and, indeed, nobility of character are emphasised in her refusal to accept Thwaites’ offer of marriage:

... She knew his careful self-respect, his pride in his profession; knew, too, that he could not but realise the descent involved in a marriage with a coloured girl. Not for the first time in her life she had encountered the barrier that excluded her from the fold of the sheep; but this time it wounded her deeply, yet thrilled her with joy at the depth of affection and sacrifice the old lawyer displayed ... “No”, she replied. “No; I will not marry you. I’m not so wicked, I think”, ... “A Cape girl! a half-caste! No Mr Thwaites.” (pp. 124-125)

Her refusal, based upon the informing normative evaluation of miscegenation, is hypostatized as a noble sacrifice for a higher order of values.

The narrator then condemns her inexplicably to a marriage with Bantam whose “recklessness” and “unbridled savagery when angered were bywords in the village. Among women too he had an evil name, and Cecilia was full of horror for him. But he had some strength she could not withstand; he governed and dominated her as by a charm, and she was powerless to resist” (pp. 54-55). This sort of thing unequivocally establishes the gender distortion at the core of the presentational process, and curiously fails on its own terms. Given the portrayal of Cecilia as a devout, inherently good creature, the attraction she experiences for this savage male is only partially explicable against the racist architectonic (that is, as the attraction of the base, “Kafir” element in her psyche for dominance by the master/Bantam). There is, further, no serious, overt suggestion by the narrator of masochism as the impulse behind Cecilia’s alliance with Bantam, although their liaison is presented, subsequently, in a manner that demands of the reader its reception as clinically sado-masochistic.

Characterization is given short shrift by the narrator in the scene that depicts the marriage of Bantam to Cecilia. Bantam, the “splendid young animal”, “the best figure there” (p. 241) rapidly reverts to type as the feast devolves into a drunken orgy. Kissing her violently, he admonishes his resisting, incredulous wife, “‘Yo’ married now. Don’ start yo’ foolin’, I tell yo’ straight’. And twice, thrice, he pressed her lips” (p. 243). The consummation of the marriage leaves Cecilia “barren of all emotion, all colour ... ‘I am satisfied’, she said again” (p. 245). The implied brutality of her first sexual encounter lingers in the reader’s mind to be contrasted explicitly with the restrained and gentle relationship which develops between Joyce and Peggy: his care and concern for her are meant to highlight Bantam’s physical and emotional degradation of Cecilia.

Nevertheless, when we next encounter Cecilia, she is cast in a position of madonna-like submissiveness to her fate: “... She was still graceful, pretty,

pathetic, suggesting something undefined and significant, as though an announcement were yet due to her. Framed in the black entrance of the hovel, with her pale face in high relief among her coiling hair, she made a picture to dwell on and remember" (p. 282). The narrator's account of this submission to the vagaries of Bantam's violent temper is overtly sexist:

Cecilia suffered and survived, realising all her fears and conquering them. In her there was that instinct of conjugal loyalty that makes the wife the firmest adherent of the wife-beater. (p. 290)

Sexual jealousy – in this narrative given its "proper place" in the lives of the half-castes – and neglect at the hands of the promiscuous man she has married ("... His infidelities were open and brazen; he brought his companions and paramours to his dwelling, flaunted them before her face, made her sit among them and serve them" p. 289) deplete Cecilia's resources in the last chapters of the novel. For receiving a letter from Thwaites, assuring her of his support should she ever require it, she is savagely beaten by Bantam, the first clear instance of a pornographic enjoyment of violence on the part of the narrator:

... Cecilia lay huddled on the ground, her right arm stretched out, her left before her face. Her clothes were a quag of blood. There was blood everywhere, – on the tumbled bed, on the whip that lay beside her, with its heavy metal head coated and greasy with the horror, on the walls and in the fireplace. Around her head, and soaking her loose hair, it gathered and oozed, and the flies were busy with it. Blood cried ... she moaned ... the old man kneeled down in the horrible foulness of the blood From eye to mouth the whip had cut [her face], gashed it, torn it; the eyes ran blood as he raised her. Her gown was rent at the breast from neck to waistband, and the tender skin was lashed out of all semblance to itself. (pp. 311–312)

The graphic nature of the description, the almost tangible relish discernible in the attention to detail, suffuse the presentational process itself – and not merely Bantam's action as a character in the presented world of the narrative – with a quality that can only be described as sadistic. There occurs a narrowing of the ontological gap that separates authorial narrator and fictional character as the qualities of the one become discernible in the other. Such a transfusion of sadistic delight in the physical violation of Cecilia, from Bantam to the narrator, has a peculiar effect upon the reader who is coerced into the submissive position of the masochist vis-a-vis the sadistic narrator; a position whose primary gain is sexual but whose secondary gains are to be found in a complex matrix involving dominance and submission (an essentially paternalistic relationship such as that between a father and a child); a concomitant and reassuring security where there might otherwise be flux and insecurity (pain, here, representing a paradoxically comforting constant); and guilt (involving Freudian elements such as the sublimated sexual attraction felt by the child for its parent) which, again paradoxically, is expiated through the reception of pain.

In order, therefore, to accommodate the demands of the narrative situation

of *Souls in Bondage* the reader must adjust herself to the grid of reception that the narrator supplies; and as this relationship of the narrator to the hypostatized reader/receiver is inherently sado-masochistic, recognition must be given to the eroticism at the core of the relationship, in accounting for the “pleasure” experienced as the narrator dwells upon the physical damage that is the result of Bantam’s beating of Cecilia. Naturally, and this, I suggest, is what happens when the perversion and sexism of the narrator’s orientation are exposed, the receiver can decline to make the necessary adjustments, and then the tyrannical subordination of the reader in the narrative situation of this novel will have been circumvented. It is certain, however, that something of Gibbon’s original intention will have been lost.

That “the time is ripe . . . for Perceval Gibbon to take his place” as a writer who has made a significant contribution to South African letters is a statement that requires a great deal of qualification. In *Souls in Bondage* the contribution is essentially morally corrupt and involves the interaction of both presented fictional world and presentational process; for as has been shown, the reader of this narrative, fitting herself to the grid projected for the hypostatized reader, must necessarily engage in a perverted relationship. Such perversion is not merely sexual, with erotic arousal its gain, but is, in fact, a more seriously complicit one that involves the reader in the tacit acceptance of the narrator’s racist categories when evaluating character and interaction between characters.

Gibbon’s is a “cautionary tale” of a kind he in all probability never intended. The narrative is, in effect, the embodiment of the mental landscape of the white racist South African who cast his/her own subjective distortions as the objective feature of the world around him/her. These distortions extend from the apprehension of physical features as objectively degraded (as in the following excerpt):

A child came forward and censed priest and congregation, – a small negro morsel with the pathetic and comical face of black childhood, which maturer growth too soon changes to mere brutality. (p. 69)

to the alignment, by the narrator, of impacting patterns of degradation (such as are to be found in the geographical landscape of the novel; in the racial groupings and their ranking in a tightly controlled hierarchy of relationships; in the portrayal of character and the juxtapositioning of complementary and contrasting elements of the character-groupings; and in the presentation of language and culture). These “objective” patterns of degradation are meant to anneal the imagination of the reader, to draw her into the position of the hypostatized reader.

The spatialization of racial categories in *Souls in Bondage* calls for psychological deconstruction,³ because the informing values that pervade the novel’s racial geography can only be grounded in fear. For Gibbon, the black/white distinction is an unthreatening one, marking the divide – in his frame of reference – between man and brute, with the latter apparently devoid of any desire to emulate the *Übermensch*. The “off-coloured”, the brute/man (con-

cretized by Bantam) embodies the desire for racial encroachment. Such “polluting” cross-categorical transfusions imply the closure of the gulf which Gibbon takes to hold between black and white. The “unthinkable” becomes thinkable in virtue of the corporeal testimony of the “off-coloured”. Not only are they tangible evidence of the sexual consummation of black and white, but they constitute the biological corroboration for the fundamental unity of black and white. The architectonic of hatred, with its sexist and racist complexion, thus focuses down upon the “off-coloured” for they are the middle term in an equation that Gibbon, at this juncture in his literary career could not, it appears, imaginatively encompass.

Notes

1. Dopfontein becomes something of a generic locale for Gibbon. There are references to it in *Margaret Harding* (see, for example, p. 8) but it receives a more substantial evocation in *Souls in Bondage*.
2. My assumption about Gibbon's pre-postmodernist approach to characterization is by no means evaluative or normative; and I am not attempting, here, anything like a conclusive definition of “realist” characterization. However, it is salient to the argument that some decision be reached about the nature of Gibbon's fictional characterization and – broadly speaking – this can be said to fall into the “realist” category where, as in many 19th century novels, “. . . the character within the micro-cosmos of the novel is allowed to exist like a person in the macro-cosmos of the world. . .” (Docherty 1983: 28; and Maltz 1986: 7-8).
3. An explanation of Gibbon's treatment of the subject of miscegenation may perhaps be provided by Freud's theory of taboo (1913) which handled within the framework of his metapsychological theories such problems as inhere in cross-categorical forays. For Freud, taboos could be accounted for by a notion such as ambivalence: which could be explained on the model of desire for the object, guilt at the experiencing of the desire, repression of the guilt, and the reconciliation of conflicting, unconscious emotions in the conscious emotion of revulsion. While some such theory as that outlined above may give us a degree of insight into the psychopathology of the author of *Souls in Bondage* it is not, of course, intended as a justification of such psychological attitudes in his narrative situation.

References

- Docherty, Thomas. 1983. *Reading (absent) character: towards a theory of characterization*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1953 (1913–1914). Totem and taboo. In: James Strachey (ed.). *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. XIII. The Hogarth Press: London, pp. 1–161.
- Gibbon, Perceval. 1904. *Souls in bondage*. London: Methuen.
- Gibbon, Perceval. 1983 (1911). *Margaret Harding*. London: Methuen. Reprinted Cape Town: David Philip.
- Maltz, Harold. 1986. *Character and action: the problem of subordination*. A.U.E.T.S.A. paper (unpublished).
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. 1983. *Narrative fiction: contemporary poetics*. London: Methuen.
- Ruthrof, H.G. 1981. *The reader's construction of narrative*. London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul.