Outraged and Amazed

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Transgressing the South in Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!

By

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INTRODUCTION

> "Now I want you to tell me just one thing more. Why do you hate the South?"
>
> "I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I dont hate it," he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it! —Absalom, Absalom!*[1]

Considering the force of this passage and its placement at the conclusion of *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is not surprising that so many critics have explored the southern nature of this novel, in particular the question of whether or not Quentin really hates the South. What is somewhat surprising is that many other critics—as well as the author himself—have resisted explicitly identifying the southern aspect of the novel as the most appropriate lens for understanding the work. Dirk Kuyk, Jr., for example, has this to say about Quentin's response:

> Shouldn't that many denials convince critics that he means what he says? Or does he protest too much? That debate continues because *Absalom, Absalom!* offers insufficient evidence to settle the issue. The book lacks the evidence because the issue is irrelevant. What matters is not what Quentin feels about the South but what he feels about the Sutpens.[2]

To an extent, Kuyk is correct in that Shreve has missed the point of Quentin's search for meaning, has not understood it. But Kuyk is not simply saying that Quentin's hatred of the South is irrelevant, he is arguing that Quentin's *feelings* about the South are irrelevant. And he is trying to drive a wedge between Quentin's personal concerns and his social concerns, suggesting that this character's feelings about the Sutpens can be separated from how he feels about the South. And Kuyk is not alone. Faulkner, in fact, often resisted readings of any of his novels in this light, stating that "sociological qualities are only, in my opinion, coincidental to the story—the story is still the story of the human being, the human heart struggling."[3] Concerning *Absalom, Absalom!* in particular, he argues that it is only "incidentally the story of Quentin Compson's hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves."[4]

Much of Faulkner's apparent resistance to looking at *Absalom, Absalom!* as a southern novel can be explained by any writer's resistance to the label of "regional author"—a designation that automatically marginalizes the writer's work, locating and limiting not only the setting of the novel but also its relevance. This is no minor concern. If a novelist cannot reach beyond the borders of a particular locale, the work loses its relevance to the rest of the world. And Floyd Watkins is correct when he writes that "Good fiction cannot be so limited. It does not care for the South, one must be reminded, except as it provides images of the concrete world and of the heart of mankind."[5] But when he argues further "[a]rtistically and religiously, one may care very much for Adam and Eve, but geographically they matter very little at all,"[6] Watkins employs a dangerously misleading analogy. At issue is not the geographical nature of Sutpen and Judith, Henry and Bon, or Quentin or Shreve (or even Adam and Eve) but the sociological and cultural context that binds them and surrounds them—out of which they emerged, and for and against which they struggle. Adam and Eve as characters in a narrative *did* arise out of a culture, a history, and a matrix of social codes and values; and their power as literary and religious figures arises out of, and in response to, that context. They and their story exist to support a particular belief system, cultural heritage, code of behavior, and sociological dynamic. Much the same can be said, in fact, for all cultural mythologies. As Dennis K. Mumby has argued in *Narrative and Social Control*, "narrative is a socially symbolic act in the double sense that (a) it takes on meaning only in a social context and (b) it plays a role in the construction of that social context as a site of meaning within which social actors are implicated."[7] To ignore this point is to read naively, submissively, and ultimately, uncritically. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the story of the human heart struggling, certainly, but also of the heart struggling consciously and unconsciously against a particular set of oppressive and restrictive forces that existed in the South in the late 19th and early 20th century. To say this is not to limit the text but rather to begin to explain its power and to point the way to understanding how the text functions—indeed how all narrative functions—not as a monolithic, totalizing superstructure but as a vehicle through which social order is represented, challenged, and renegotiated, as a vital force in the very human "struggle for meaning." *Absalom, Absalom!* stands as a powerful narrative representation of and challenge to the cultural values and codes that engendered it.

We cannot escape that final, hovering, lingering outburst, then; and any rereading of the text (and this is a text that insists on rereading, that enacts

the process of rereading) will necessarily be shaped and guided by what we understand to be the psychological disposition of the narrators and subject of narration in this novel.

With Quentin's vehement denials, however, comes a caution. If his reaction to Shreve's question arises in part because of some terrible recognition of his own hatred for certain "bad" qualities in the South, it is also a reaction against Shreve's horrible oversimplification of this conflicted, complex, and fierce narrative intent. He does not hate the South, he loves it—and hates it. He was born out of it and is contained by it. More importantly, the question for understanding the text is not whether or not Quentin hates the South, but rather how his connection to the South and the culture of the South itself create the formal and contextual forces that both contain and empower his narration and indeed all narration within this text. For Quentin, personally, there is little separation between his identity and the tale that emerges through his active and passive participation in its telling. He becomes the story as he tells it and listens to it, as he and Shreve fabricate it out of their needs and fears. And this leads to perhaps the most important question of all: can he, and can anyone, escape the trap of the stories we are told and tell Can we be released from them if we find in them the truth about ourselves, if we achieve consciousness of our place in time and culture?

William Faulkner's fiction and *Absalom, Absalom!* in particular were shaped by an eccentric and complex reaction to southern culture that was at least as conflicted as Quentin's—even if Faulkner seems less terrified by its contradictions. His perspective rejected both the northern demonization of the South and the southern glorification of the lost cause as equally dangerous myths—false, oversimplified, totalizing narratives. As Joel Williamson has written,

> Faulkner demurred from the great consensus on the unflawed South. His work was, essentially, an exhaustive critique of Southern society and a thorough cataloguing of its failure to bring the human values inherent in man, evident in the natural setting, into the modern world. . . . His objective as critic was, of course, not to damn the South but to save it. Faulkner argued that the modern Southern order was not natural or harmonious, either in slave times or since. Values had been diminished, obscured, and all but lost: sex roles, race roles and – to use a convenient term he wisely never used—"class" roles had been misconstrued. Institutions had been created (religious, economic, social, and political) that were incongruent with or even hostile to the 'eternal verities.' The result was that individual Southerners often found themselves off balance

> and at war within themselves between their concern for what Is and what Ought To Be.[8]

Indeed, it is the unnaturalness of the social code inflicted on all southerners that generates Faulkner's most vehement moral statements. About the Jim Crow South Faulkner has argued, "this is an obsolescence that simply ain't going to work any longer, something must be done about it."[9] What exactly Faulkner wanted done is unclear—though he was not really an Agrarian, he was no progressive either and late in life argued against the social mixing of the races and against any political or social action designed to improve the rights of African Americans. About race in particular Faulkner was morally ambiguous and, at times, his statements on the subject of race in general and segregation in particular could be astonishingly reactionary. In "A Letter to the North" published in the March 5th, 1956 issue of *Life Magazine*, Faulkner advocated against forced integration and for gradualism, writing that

> [f]rom the beginning of this present phase of the race problem in the South, I have been on record as opposing the forces in my native country which would keep the condition out of which this present evil and trouble has grown. Now I must go on record as opposing the forces outside the South which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate that evil overnight. I was against compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against compulsory integration.[10]

And in a more unguarded moment in an interview with the *London Sunday Times*, he said that "As long as there is a middle road, all right, I'll be on it. But if it came to fighting I'd fight for Mississippi against the United States even if it meant going out into the street and shooting Negroes."[11] These statements reflect a mind at odds with itself and a man torn between his individual morality and his fierce loyalty to the South. Certainly, as Thadious M. Davis points out in *Faulkner's Negro*, Faulkner's racial awareness was "shaped by a traditional society known more for its solidarity than its mavericks" and "[t]he 'solid South' had one clearly defined conception of what 'the Negro' was: he was *not white.*"[12] In that culture, African Americans were "considered inferior to whites in every area of consequence."[13] Therefore, "Faulkner inherently shares this traditional view of blacks."[14] What Davis sees as important, however, is not Faulkner's personal view of the "Negro," but how his "Negro" functions in the narrative as a mysterious and dangerous other. About *Absalom, Absalom!* in particular she writes, "[n]owhere else is it so apparent that the Negro is an abstract force confounding southern life both past and present even while, paradoxically, stimulating much of that life and art."[15]

When it comes to women, Faulkner's views seem equally abstract, equally traditional, and mostly uninformed. As Doreen Fowler points out in her introduction to *Faulkner and Women*, his "attitude toward women is heatedly contested by critics" who "praise Faulkner's sympathetic portrayals of women characters" or who "locate a deep-seated strain of misogyny in Faulkner's fiction."[16] Faulkner's feelings about women are complex and contradictory. Ellen Douglas goes so far as to connect Faulkner's feelings about women directly to his feelings about the South:

> Quentin, of course, does hate the South that he loves, just as Faulkner hates the South that he loves and hates, *as symbol*, the women who universally symbolize the South. Faulkner says to us that man is filled with fear and outrage and bafflement by women, that he blames them for his predicament, that he yearns for a world in which they are sinless and he is noble, that his heart is filled both with the need for love and the aspiration toward perfection, with guilt and hatred for his own failures and the need to blame somebody else for his own predicament. In this sense, woman is wilderness, is South, is lost innocence, is failed and sinful humanity. Of course, Faulkner hates women. Of course, Quentin hates the South.[17]

It is possible that Faulkner's conception of women was mostly ruled by his perception of them as mysterious others and as ambiguous, uninterpretable symbols. By Faulkner's own admission, he knew "very little about them," though he considered them "marvelous" and "wonderful."[18] That mystery may be at the heart of their narrative function. Philip Weinstein writes that Faulkner's women characters are "[s]een for the most part from outside, deprived both vertically in time and horizontally in space of their own subjective history."[19] Thus, they "move through their world as 'wonderful' creatures, but considerably handicapped, from a narrative perspective, when compared with his men" since their interior lives remain hidden or radically suppressed.[20]

The mysterious and destabilizing "other" in Faulkner's work is also present in his perception of the lower classes—in particular in the figure of poor and working-class whites. Here again, Faulkner's personal attitudes do not reveal empathy with or sympathy for the oppressed. Kevin Railey is correct when he argues that "Faulkner always held fast to paternalistic notions," "that his authorial ideology and his social vision" were "deeply influenced" by those notions and that his work revealed a "continuing, deep distrust of liberalism" and the ideological and social consequences such liberalism would have on the South.[21] Moreover, his lower-class whites are often portrayed as amoral if not immoral, violent, selfish, unintelligent, and dangerously lacking in any consciousness of how their

individual actions affect the lives of others. His loathing for the Snopeses in particular and his refusal to grant them any true moral purpose other than an irrational urge to destruction reflects his deep-seated fear of what might happen were such people able to gain power. Still, the lower classes of Faulkner's fiction are not depicted entirely unsympathetically in his fiction and, again, the question at hand is less about Faulkner's personal sympathies and more about how he perceives the inherent instability of unnatural and unjust social constraints. As Myra Jehlen writes in *Class and Character in Faulkner's South,* his people are made of the stuff of class distinctions: they are planter or poor white (some few in between and defined by that too) and become individual by being a variant of their type. Moreover, their motivations and the plots of their stories most often have to do with maintaining, resenting, or refurbishing a social situation."[22] She may have added "challenging" to her list of verbs as well, for it is the characters who refuse to remain in place who most fundamentally push the plot of Faulkner's novels.

These mysterious others—women, poor whites, *and* "negroes"—are dangerous because, despite his personal feelings about them, Faulkner recognizes that they are human and therefore must resist the social prisons that seek to contain them. The "other" is mysterious because we make him or her mysterious. We refuse to look too closely, to pay attention, because if we do, we will see not only our own faces staring back, but also the immorality of our own neglect and suppression of what we find there. Moreover, "the other" will be ignored for only so long. Place a human being in a box and he or she will attempt to find a way out of it. Silence them and they will rattle the bars. These lives are not merely suppressed but subject to repression—that is, they function almost as a textual and social uncanny. They are the familiar/unfamiliar that wells up and confronts the ego, threatening, like Poe's Madeline escaping from the tomb, to bring down the very house she and her brother, Roderick occupy. That Faulkner seemed terrified of what such social collapse would mean and how that fear shaped his political agenda and social conservatism is not as important to this study as is his recognition that the unjust, unnatural, inhuman condition of the South was "an obsolescence"—that it could not be maintained. So much of Faulkner's narrative force is derived from this sense of the inevitability of social collapse. Whatever his political views or personal prejudices may have been, Faulkner seemed to understand the inherent volatility of the "other" and the destabilizing effect of "othering" on society. The dehumanization, disenfranchisement, neglect, and oppression of groups of people who live and work among their

oppressors can only be sustained through the complicity of the oppressed. And desire—all desire—works continually against the complacency such willingness to remain a victim requires. Faulkner's understanding of this dynamic in southern culture forms and informs the structure and content of his work. Much of *Absalom, Absalom!'s* narrative intensity derives from how the narration and narrators struggle against conceptions of restrictive formal and social boundaries that prevent natural relationships from developing and that breed psychological and social disease.

Though Quentin's concerns about the South and how this story reflects his complicated feelings about it are essential to the text, this study does not argue, as many readings of *Absalom, Absalom!* do, for a primary cultural lens through which one might best understand the work. Issues of race, gender, and class are equally at play here as they reflect the forces of social control that define the culture and story being told. There are no characters and no speakers in *Absalom, Absalom!* whose stories are untouched by the social code that contains and forms them. To the extent that a culture's story must be told, who gets to do the telling and who is listened to—given credence and thus, power—is also of crucial importance. And it is important which characters do *not* speak—as their silence and absence is in itself destabilizing to a narrative. Nor does this study seek to argue that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a "true" reflection of southern social conditions—only for how those perceived conditions provide the tension in the work. In that regard, it is also fairly unconcerned with the many studies that have sought to derive a "true" narrative from the tangled threads with which Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve seek to construct a story—because to look at *Absalom, Absalom!* as a detective story is to diminish its effect and miss the point of the detective work being done. What is compelling is less what the final, authorized, story is or what clues are used to form it, but how and why these authors read and project meaning onto the mysteries at the heart of their story—constructing myths that explain their own lives to themselves and to (and through) others. This means examining not only what each speaker thought or imagined of Sutpen, Bon, Henry, Judith, Ellen or Rosa but how they are influenced to read them and their actions the way that they do. It is to consider *why* they are speaking, *to whom* they are speaking, and *for what purpose*. It is to consider how their words are transmitted through time and through secondary narration and it is to examine how they struggle not only to find but make meaning and to control the stories that they tell.

Absalom, Absalom!'s complex narrative functions as a vehicle through which social order in the South is represented, challenged, and renegotiated. Exploring Quentin Compson's attempt to understand his own identity through the complicated and incomplete story of Thomas Sutpen as a representation of and challenge to the cultural values and codes which engendered it, I attempt to demonstrate how the poetics, structure and central conflicts of the novel derive from a combination of its characters' intense resistance to their prescribed social limitations and their desire to wrest control of their identities through and from the act of storytelling. In so doing, I employ various critical methodologies such as narratology, discourse analysis, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, gender studies, etc. The most consistent critical concern, however, is with the ideas of Bakhtin, Kristeva, Barthes and Duyfhuizen regarding the often-explosive relationship between narrative and the cultural dynamics it represents, defines, and ultimately disrupts.

Two complementary theoretical threads inform this approach: Kristevan psychoanalysis and Narratology. I am particularly concerned with the Kristevan concept of the "abject" as defined and explored in *The Powers of Horror* as a presence that "disturbs identity, system, order;" a presence that "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[23] This abject figure represented by Charles Bon, Thomas Sutpen, Rosa Coldfield, and Quentin Compson and their relationship to the novel's essential indeterminacy is intrinsic to understanding the explosive and eruptive thrust of the work.

Equally important is the complex process of transmission that Faulkner employs as he manipulates narrative frames to mediate the plot and characters—a structure that not only emphasizes the relationship between identity, history and story, but the inherent instability of that relationship. Referencing Bernard Duyfhuizen's *Narratives of Transmission*, I examine how the speakers, intending to present a narrative that could explain the past in a way that stabilizes their identities, are instead confronted with their limitations and the inadequacy of their knowledge. These narrators speak in an attempt to understand and take possession of a past that seems inexplicable—even impossible—given each speaker's world-view. In response to the implausibility of the story elements that have redounded to them, they manipulate the unknown elements of the tale by investing the main characters with desires and designs that reflect their own. Gradually the narrative, even as it moves away from the narrator, succumbs to the pressure of various destabilizing presences—the complex narrative frame,

the indirect authorial voice, the absence of cause and effect relationships, etc. And the reader, the listener, is bewildered, dislocated, confused, and thus, prepared for a new understanding—one that relies on a blurring of social taboos and the abrogation of social codes. The power of this effect is that the listener's understanding of and sympathy—even empathy—for the characters increases at the same time and with the same intensity as that listener's horror regarding the actions of those characters. The story we are left with, then, is plausible but unverifiable, at once self-reflexively fictive and true. In a sense, then, Faulkner is not only telling the story of Thomas Sutpen and his heirs, not only critiquing the social codes that resulted in the implosion of that family, he is telling the story of the "Old South" caught in the painful process of becoming the new—its citizens looking back in outrage and amazement, longing and horror as they try to make sense of their personal and communal past. In the process Faulkner examines history itself, how we tell that story, how we read it, and why it matters.

CHAPTER ONE

"I DO NOT KNOW" NARRATIVE INTENT: ROSA AND SUTPEN

In *S/Z* Roland Barthes describes exactly the kind of antithetical rhetorics on which southern society was based and the pressures under which those rhetorics break down:

> The several hundred figures propounded by the art of rhetoric down through the centuries constitute a labor of classification intended to name, to lay the foundations for, the world. Among these figures, one of the most stable is the Antithesis; its apparent function is to consecrate (and domesticate) by a name, by a metalinguistic object, the division between opposites and the very irreducibility of this division. The antithesis separates for eternity; it thus refers to a nature of opposites, and this nature is untamed . . . . Every joining of two antithetical terms, every mixture, every conciliation—in short every passage through the wall of the Antithesis thus constitutes a transgression.[24]

The cultural implications of this rhetorical dynamic should be evident. Feudal social structures were formed on the basis of maintaining similar antithetical distinctions. In the South these could be enumerated as Black and White, Master and Slave, Man and Woman, etc. According to Williamson,

> a slave society had to be a tight society, with roles very clearly prescribed and stringently enforced as to race, sex, and place in the social hierarchy. Any deviation became a horrendous problem, and Southerners were often driven to explaining away difficulties in ways that might have seemed strange to a candid world.[25]

But deviations appear to have been abundant both in history and in Faulkner's fiction. The fierce social taboo against racial mixing existed in ironic hypocritical contradiction to the reality of racial/sexual relations

throughout the South. Not only was evidence of racial mixing literally written on the faces of the progeny of such illicit relationships, but the strict chivalric codes governing sexual relations between upper-class whites and the even stricter virginal ideal of the pure southern belle seemed to rely for its existence on the sexual availability of African-American women. As Williamson writes, "slavery provided a possible sexual solution for Southern white men; it provided everywhere a class of women who were theirs for the buying."[26] And the mixing of the races, sexually, inevitably lead to the widespread proliferation of illegitimate children literally owned by fathers who, for the most part, denied the very obvious parentage of their slaves. The tension between ideology and reality created a world in which transgression was tolerated as long as it remained below the surface. Society could only be maintained in the face of what Faulkner would call "natural verities" if idyllic southern life floated serenely above the hypocrisy and corruption at its core.

In order for social structures to maintain their coherence, these binary oppositions needed to be maintained at all costs in the public sphere and the transgressors and products of transgression needed to be obscured or ignored—delegitimized. It is therefore not surprising to find, during slave times and afterward, such a public fear of, as well as denial of and furor over, any mixing of these opposites in any socially sanctioned manner. This is why we find southern sociologist Henry Hughes claiming in his *Treatise on Sociology*,

> Hybridism is heinous. Impurity of races is against the law of nature. Mulattos are monsters. The law of nature is the law of God. The same law which forbids consanguinous amalgamation forbids ethical amalgamation. Both are incestuous. Amalgamation is incest.[27]

Therefore the dichotomies, not only between races, but also between classes and genders, had to be maintained—religiously and legally sanctified. The doors were barred—and open at the same time.

Absalom, Absalom! is nothing if not a narrative of barriers and their transgression. If we are to believe the heavily mediated account that Thomas Sutpen gives of his own design, the source and origin of all action in the novel, everything that occurs in *Absalom, Absalom!*, originates out of one man being turned away from a door that represented both class and racial taboos, and told him who he was and how much his life was valued. To understand Sutpen's design, one must first understand Sutpen himself and who he was both before and after the moment that set him on his

course. Of Sutpen as boy, Quentin tells Shreve "His trouble was innocence. All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life" (274-275). By innocence, Quentin means that Sutpen had never been exposed to the rules, customs, and codes that governed the society in which he found himself. Sutpen had little experience with social conventions of any kind:

> what few other people he knew lived in log cabins boiling with children like the one he was born in—men and grown boys who hunted or lay before the fire on the floor while the women and older girls stepped back and forth across them to reach the fire to cook, where the only colored people were Indians and you only looked down at them over your rifle sights, where he had never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them . . . . (275-276)

He had no understanding or respect for property or any sense of how owning something increased a man's value "[b]ecause where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say 'This is mine' was crazy; and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep" (276). Sutpen isn't even really from anywhere because, as Shreve points out to Quentin, the land Sutpen grew up in, West Virginia, was not recognized as a state when he lived there. Further, he had no sense of himself or his origins:

> the moment when he last could have said exactly where he had been born now weeks and months (maybe a year, the year, since that was when he became confused about his age and was never able to straighten it out again, so that he told Grandfather that he did not know within a year on either side just how old he was) behind him. So he knew neither where he had come from nor where he was nor why. He was just there . . . . (283)

Like so many of Faulkner's principal characters, he is unsettled—a poor fit in the world in which he finds himself, an abject presence, one who does not respect property or borders because he remains ignorant of those ideas. Moreover, as an outsider, he cannot own property or establish borders. Still, at this point, Sutpen has not realized a sense of purpose or the kind of resentment that could drive him to act out against those rules and borders.

Sutpen's design has its origins in a feeling of impotence born of a terrible realization that he didn't matter or even exist to the people who ran the world. Thomas is sent by his father to deliver a message to the master of the plantation. And there he is ridiculed and turned away by a house slave. What is most galling to the boy is not that he has been turned away by a "negro," or that he is told to enter from the back of the house, but that he came there as a service to the owner of the plantation—to deliver a message—and was rebuked:

> It was like he might have been sent with a lump of lead or even a few molded bullets so that the man who owned the fine rifle could shoot it, and the man came to the door and told him to leave the bullets on a stump at the edge of the woods, not even letting him come close enough to look at the rifle. (291-292)

The analogy in which the message is a compared to a bullet is at least partly false—in Sutpen's narrative, the owner of the gun did not come to the door at all. And unlike the man with the bullets, though he *is* met at the door by *someone*, that someone is a "negro." For Sutpen this is more insulting and frustrating than simply being ignored. For to him that slave was just as inhuman as any stump, only more vexing, ghostlike and evanescent—the member of a race of unreal puppets, figures whose heads float above them like balloons, mocking him with smiles that cannot be destroyed because they are without substance. "Negroes" were not men to Sutpen but instruments and symbols of aristocratic power. So the "negro" acts as the ultimate barrier between him and his object of retribution. He can't reach the man, can't speak to him because his slave blocks the door. Worse, the "negro" prevents him from accomplishing his task; the owner of the rifle did not even receive the bullet—the message. The boy never had a chance to deliver it.

At first the boy's recognition of the fact that the owner did not receive the message gives him some satisfaction because at least the loss of the information might do the owner some harm. But as he arrives at the awareness that the unsent message has no effect, either, he comes to the ultimate realization of his own impotence:

> I went up to that door for that nigger to tell me never to come to that front door again and I not only wasn't doing any good to him by telling it or any harm to him by not telling it, there aint any good or harm either in the living world that I can do to him. (296-297)

In the context of the "living world," the boy that Sutpen once was made no difference at all—no impression—and was no better than the ghostly "negroes" who mocked him with their laughter. In fact, he was less than they were, since he could not even get himself heard: "*He never even give me a chance to say it. Not even to tell it"* (296). It is here where Sutpen is forced to come to terms with his abject condition:

> one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself.[28]

Sutpen becomes haunted by his abjection, his being "radically excluded," and from that point on "he does not cease challenging his master" (2). Out of this incident the source and fuel of Sutpen's primary emotional drive, outrage, emerges—he wants to be heard, to complete the transmission of the message, to have some actual effect on this world, to exist and in existing, deliver his own story—with himself as author, hero, and villain if need be—to an audience he has forced to listen. One thinks of Frankenstein's monster educating himself so that he might confront the doctor who made him. In this case, however, it is an entire culture that has rejected and in rejecting has made Sutpen. This is why Sutpen desires to become the owner of a great plantation. He wants to prove to the rest of society that he matters and the only way to do that is to make himself impossible to ignore. He has to become them and in so doing, harm them. "To combat them," he explains to Colonel Compson, "you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You see?" (297). And the operative word here is "combat."

Whenever Faulkner was asked about who the central character was in *Absalom, Absalom!,* he stated that it was essentially a book about Thomas Sutpen, who

> was trying to say in his blundering way that, why should a man be better than me because he is richer than me, that if I had had the chance I might

> be just as good as he thinks he is, so I'll make myself as good as he thinks he is by getting the same outward trappings which he has, which was a big house and servants in it. He *didn't* say, I'm going to be braver or more compassionate or more honest than he—he just said, I'm going to be as rich as he was, as big as he was on the outside.[29]

Faulkner's disdain for Sutpen comes through clearly here in his suggestion that Sutpen is "blundering," empty of any larger purpose greater than revenge. He is amoral, and dangerous—in this regard Sutpen builds his dynasty with little more purpose than the driving and anarchic revenge impulse that drives Abner Snopes to burn barns. Obviously Sutpen sees that there is a destructive element to his design. But he never indicates how he will go about combating the rich plantation owner who will be long dead before his own design could possibly come to fruition. It's not until much later in life, after discovering that Bon is his son, that Sutpen reveals, and perhaps comes to understand, that there is a larger, sociological purpose to his design, telling Quentin's grandfather that now he would

> take that boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it: and not at all for mere shelter but so that that boy, that whatever nameless stranger, could shut that door himself forever behind him on all that he had ever known, and look ahead along the still undivulged light rays in which his descendants who might not even ever hear his (the boy's) name, waited to be born without even having to know that they had once been riven forever free from brutehood just as [Sutpen's] own children were. (326)

What Sutpen also seems to desire (if we are to trust Quentin's rendering of his father's—and by line of transmission, his grandfather's—restating of Sutpen's design) is the exposure of an unnatural social code that denies life to those who exist on its margins. To expose for a fraud the code that argues, "*[b]ecause I own this rifle, my arms and legs and blood and bones are superior to yours*" (285). It is unclear if Sutpen is aware of just how destructive such a design could be to southern society. He does not really seem to understand the outrage he generates in the local townspeople—though he does seem to enjoy it (he seems to smile menacingly at every confrontation with a representative of Jefferson). The American dream of upward mobility that Sutpen might be said to represent is an utter threat to patriarchal society and the role of benevolent patriarch that he seeks to appropriate. He also seems unaware of the contradictory nature of his desire or that he doesn't even remember what the message was he was trying to send in the first place. If he wants to become the rich plantation

owner so that he can liberate his sons from his own past, he can accomplish his goal. But if he desires to liberate all sons, to deconstruct the social structure completely by revealing it as an empty hypocrisy, he will level the structure itself, and nothing will be left for him to pass on. This conflict as much as any other explains much of Sutpen's seemingly inexplicable behavior. Like so many of the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*, he is always acting out of cross purposes.

Sutpen's abject nature conditions him to unconsciously subvert his own design because he doesn't so much want to *be* an aristocrat but to defy and mock the aristocracy in becoming one. He wants their outrage and revels in their derision and horror. Perhaps this is why he continually needs to position and present himself in ways that send shocks to the system. He is driven to acts that openly defy social convention. Even his appearance in Jefferson is a shocking and public event. Sutpen appears out of nowhere and comes from nowhere.

> He was already halfway across the square when they saw him, on a big hard-ridden roan horse, man and beast looking as though they had been created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer sabbath sunshine in the middle of a tired foxtrot—face and horse that none of them had ever seen before, name that none of them had ever heard, and origin and purpose which some them were never to learn. (35)

Of course his continual flouting of convention keeps him from achieving his design. Being an aristocrat is an identity that is as dependent upon social convention as it is by wealth—perhaps more so. A bankrupt aristocrat, buried in debt, will still be recognized as a member of the elite class if he or she is able to maintain appearances. But a wealthy man who cannot adopt or adapt to the conventions of that class will never be recognized or accepted as a member of it. Rosa seems to think that Sutpen fights with the slaves to prove that he is more powerful than they are and indeed that may be his intent, but in effect fighting with them suggests that he is on an even field with those slaves and inherently places him not above but among them. As such, it is an expression of his true nature. No southern aristocrat would lower himself to compete with slaves in organized fistfights because that would suggest class equivalency. Those in power order the peasants and slaves to fight for their entertainment; they don't lower themselves by stepping into the ring. There is no need to prove or earn privilege. It is by nature unearned. It is assumed. And *that* is power. Sutpen's need to prove himself at all levels speaks to his origins and to a life lived without the safety net of culture and privilege. Sutpen

wants to build that house simply to prove that he can, but he never really knew how to live in it and doesn't seem to believe that he really belongs there.

This becomes very obvious in the three-year period when he "seemed to quit" (46). After taking two years to drag the "house and gardens out of virgin swamp," he didn't seem to know what to do next. He "lived in the spartan shell of the largest edifice in the county, not excepting the courthouse" but he had no furniture, no wife and treated it rather like a saloon and flophouse, inviting "parties of men . . . out to Sutpen's Hundred to camp in blankets in the naked rooms of his embryonic formal opulence" (45). There, in mockery of that opulence, those men "hunted, and at night played cards and drank" (45). Everything he does seems to say, *behind the big façade and the columns and the white paint, inside, where it matters, there is only savagery*. And so, Mr. Compson has little doubt that Sutpen "pitted his negroes against one another and perhaps even at this time participated now and then himself" (45). It is all part of his revenge—to force the man who would not come to see him at the door to receive the ancient and eternal message of the lower and uneducated classes, its threat barely disguised as a question: *You think you're better than me?*

It isn't enough, though—if anything could be. For Sutpen needs to believe the message and answer the question himself and to do that he must become like his adversary in every way. If what he wanted was simply to offend and horrify, he need never have "put aside" his first wife and child. In fact, their African heritage may have even served those purposes—their blood being the ultimate outrage. In any case, as he points out to Quentin's grandfather, no one would have ever known about his wife and son's "mixed" blood if he didn't want them to. He could "do nothing . . . and see [his] design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye" (342). But then he would not prove to himself that he was as good as the man who refused to see him. He would know that his legacy was tainted and therefore "a mockery and a betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried forward" (342). To exact revenge on the aristocrat he must prove to himself that he is every bit as good and thus must become a mirror of the man he hates.

So the big white house was never a place he wanted to live in but a box in which he might place his legacy. It is for Ellen, Judith, and Henry and the grandchildren he hopes will come next. Thus, it is not surprising at all that when it all falls apart, with one son dead and another lost, he tries to start again on the project with Rosa. Though it is doubtful that Sutpen is aware of it, he embodies the novel's historical conception of characters locked in a cyclical loop from which they cannot escape because they cannot perceive the errors in judgment, purpose, and values that drive them.

Sutpen's design, then, is faulty—built of contradictory purposes: to rise up from the dirt as a rebuke to the southern aristocracy that shunned him as a means of proving its inherent hypocrisy. It is built to fail, to fall under the weight of its fraudulence. It is perhaps ironic that Sutpen's story of the commoner who builds a castle should not have outraged anyone in the town of Jefferson since it is, at its root, a fairly representative tale. Whether or not Sutpen knew it, his rise was part of a pattern. For the "Old South" was never really that old and its aristocracy mostly made of the nouveau riche, separated from the rugged woodsmen and pioneers who tore plantations from the land by time and luck. Indeed, the great wealth of the "Old South" was built in little more than a single generation. The cotton gin, the great catalyst responsible for creating both the aristocracy and the slave trade it was built on, was not even patented until 1794, and the land required to grow the cotton in any kind of quantity was not secured from Native Americans until the early 1800s.[30] So in 1817, when the servant meets Sutpen at the door, Sutpen was encountering this culture in its infancy and by the time it was brought low by the Civil War and Reconstruction, it had only existed for a little over five decades. Sutpen almost certainly had more in common with the master of the house than that master would wish to admit. It is likely, in fact, that the man who lived in that house would have seen in Sutpen a mirror of himself or at least his father. The adoption of the dress, mores, and style of European aristocrats came not from family tradition but from an aspirational desire to not only be wealthy but refined. But beneath the veneer of refinement, very little separated that boy at the door from the man who refused to see him. What Sutpen doesn't seem to recognize is that to become "as good" as he is, he must wear the same false masks, the same ill-fitting clothes, and make the same ethically bankrupt decisions, that doomed the "Old South" at its inception.

I examine Sutpen's highly conflicted identity and his doomed "design" at such length here because he represents the conflicted nature of all of the characters, narrators and narratees in *Absalom, Absalom!* None of them seek the destruction of southern society, but in their efforts to separate what they desire as citizens within the community from the aspects of community that contain them, they find themselves locked in a series of complex contradictions that drive many of them out of their minds and nearly all of them toward violent, self-destructive behavior. They are caught in the telling and in the making of stories through which they hope to not simply understand their worlds and themselves but to construct those selves in relationship to a world they both love and hate, which they would both defend and destroy, and in which they are both outsiders and insiders. For characters that do not fit comfortably within the larger narrative of society, characters that both want their stories told but who understand that their stories won't be listened to or accepted, that process of identity construction is fraught. Though Sutpen is not a primary narrator in the story and is more text than author, his inherent antagonism toward the social code of the South coupled with his aspiration to rise to be a southern gentleman makes him both the protagonist and antagonist of his own very complicated tragedy. He cannot matter in this culture unless he does so on its terms and according to its standards, but on a fundamental, instinctive level, he cannot play by those rules because he doesn't accept their validity.

It is also important here to call attention to Sutpen's failure as an author and his failure to therefore authorize or legitimize himself in the world. He tells his story to Quentin's grandfather in hopes to both understand it and to have it affirmed, granted approval by a man he likes and respects. He may also hope that Quentin's grandfather will pass on that story in a way that is sympathetic to him. But like every character other than Shreve and Quentin, Sutpen's account of himself must travel through a complex transmission process to reach us and, further, is only one account of his life that must compete for legitimacy with many others. The reader "hears" or receives an account of Sutpen's life and motivations pieced together and mediated through multiple sources: Quentin, Shreve, Quentin's father and grandfather (both mediated through Quentin himself) and Rosa (also mediated through Quentin). Each of these accounts is subject to the intentions, worldview, and life experiences of both the teller of the tale and the listener as their telling undergoes a process of "narrativization."

In *Toward a Natural Narratology* Monika Fludernik writes of the narrative frames of telling and reflecting: "Whereas the TELLING frame invokes a situation of enunciation and hence an addressee persona, REFLECTING tends to project a reflecting consciousness in the process of rumination."[31] Often the storytellers seem to be caught between both processes, attempting to make a point to a listener while also attempting to understand the story that they are telling, commenting on it and analyzing it as they go—attributing intentions, filling in gaps, justifying their own actions and interpretations and casting judgment on those of others. Complicating matters further is the way in which those interpretations and judgments are bound up in their need to explain matters in terms that make sense to them and resonate in their personal lives. Fludernik explores "the interpretative abilities by which people link unknown and unfamiliar material with what they are already familiar with, thereby rendering the unfamiliar interpretable and 'readable.'"[32] In the process they not only grasp the story, they fundamentally transform it, continually attempting to render the inexplicable in terms "natural" to them.

But Sutpen is unnatural, an outsider and an outcast who acts in ways that seem inconceivable to both the storyteller and the listener alike. So even Quentin's relatively sympathetic "reading" of Sutpen is shaped by his need to place him within a story comprehensible to him and to his listener. Sutpen's "innocence" is a good example of this process—an example of the author interpreting the character for the listener in terms that the author can process and that can also serve as a rebuke to that listener's assumptions. Quentin is also an innocent, suddenly overwhelmed by what he is finding out about his world and desperately attempting to deal with the cognitive dissonance the story is causing. In his telling, he unwittingly projects his own values into the narrative while reflecting on its meaning to his own life. Like Sutpen, he is terribly conflicted in his purposes because those purposes are driven both by his needs and by his listener's. And though much has been made of Shreve's objectivity as a Canadian, Shreve does have an agenda—to hear a story "about the South" (218). Far from a perfect listener, Shreve is constantly asserting and imposing his own rather cartoonish vision of "the South" onto the story. As such, Quentin begins to recognize that Shreve is also reading him, and that as a southerner he is implicated by the characters and the story that he tells of them. This becomes immediately apparent when Shreve interrupts Quentin's telling of Sutpen's early life by using Rosa's name for Sutpen—"The demon, hey"—and Quentin only does not respond, but returns a look full of "sullen bemusement" and "smoldering outrage" (272). He then

proceeds to narrate Sutpen's story in terms that make Sutpen an innocent victim of the world (at least as a child). So Quentin's telling is inhabited almost parasitically by all of the narrators and listeners and all of the value systems and worldviews that they represent.

Rosa Coldfield mirrors both Sutpen and Quentin in her need to tell her tale, her need to understand it, and her resentment of anyone who might wrest control of it from her. Though one of the text's main narrators, Rosa is also the most subject to being "read" as a text and also the one most clearly conscious of that. In some ways she is the quintessential embodiment of what is understood to be southern womanhood. She is virginal, silent for most of her life concerning her own frustrations and fears, and utterly supportive of the myth of the glorious South. At the same time, however, she proves to be one of the most abject presences in the text—one whose entire identity becomes dependent upon acts of refusal. A refusal to simply be labeled a jilted lover, an old maid, a fool, and most significantly her refusal to be silent and to have her story told by others. In this regard, she is akin but anomalous to most of the women who inhabit Faulkner's universe. She is seen from the outside, certainly, but speaks from her confinement. Her desperate attempt to rhetorically and lyrically wrest control of her history by using Quentin as a kind of flaming arrow shot into the future is clearly a rebellious act.

Rosa is somewhat of a surprising rebel in many respects. If there is a representative Agrarian in *Absalom, Absalom!,* it is Rosa. The pure, virginal poet writing elegies for the honored Confederate dead, Rosa seems to act as town laureate—the spokeswoman for southern ideological correctness. As such she is the one most offended by Sutpen's appearance in Jefferson, the one most appalled by the fact that he comes from nowhere, with no established name, and seemingly no history: "He wasn't a gentleman" she says. "He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own anymore than the horse was his own or even the pistols" (13). Sutpen's chief crime, it seems, is his affront to proper southern society. His existence and presence is an insult to it. And Rosa's chief motivation for hating Sutpen seems to arise out of his failure to live up to the role of southern gentleman on any level. He is a war hero with no sense of honor, a patriarch who destroys his son, and a man who has no concept of—or respect for—the chivalric code of behavior meant to govern gender relations. He does not court her sister out of love but out of his will to appear respectable while refusing to act respectably. Sutpen's

anti-social attributes are what most offend Rosa, and his anti-social affront to her femininity in suggesting that they first conceive a child (to see if she produces a son) before they marry is what finally causes her to reject him.

So Quentin is both right and wrong when he thinks that she has sent for him

> *because she wants it told . . . so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this Demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth.* (8)

Rosa does hate Sutpen because of what he has done to her beloved society—exposing it as an illusion and an absurdist farce. She certainly hates him for the affront that he has given her. And she does want "it" told. But Quentin fails to fully comprehend the nature and complexity of her story and her motivations for telling it. In fact, the mockery implicit in his adoption of Rosa's florid prose seems to be another attempt to dismiss and contain it rather than introduce it. He doesn't understand Rosa and doesn't want to. He seems frightened of her—as if her kind of insanity—one that will not let the past stay buried—might be transmittable. So he doesn't see (or is deliberately suppressing his recognition of) the rebellious qualities of her story and her way of telling it. The extent of her anger certainly runs counter to her position as porte-parole for Jefferson society. Her desperation and fury cannot simply be explained by "the Demon" Sutpen's failure to be a gentleman. Rather the insult he gives and the insult he *is* occurs in the context of a complicated web of cultural forces that conspire to create and frustrate her conflicting desires.

As a narrator and character Rosa is unreliable and unstable partly because she is caught in a marginal position that both entraps and empowers her. Like Faulkner himself, she is an uncomfortable Agrarian and an unsuccessful poet whose aspirations to social standing are complicated by feelings of rejection and isolation that she both resents and claims as part of her identity. Her Romantic ideological purity—in which chivalric, self-sacrificing cavaliers act with courtly deference toward the women they love—cannot conform to the realities of the world around her. That world is gone—if it ever really existed at all. Life is not a Sir Walter Scott novel. And in response, she acts completely outside the character of the silent, self-effacing, and suffering women of those novels. As a result she finds herself as much an outcast as Sutpen ever was.

Diane Roberts has argued that Rosa's anger and her power derive not from her support of southern social constructs, but her victimization by those constructs.

> Miss Rosa—like Emily Grierson and Zilphia Gant—is a dangerous body. The community constructs the stories of 'repression,' 'disappointment,' and 'virginity' to circumscribe them; ironically enough, their overflowing, insistent desire empowers them. Miss Rosa's very marginalization becomes a means to challenge masculine stories about the South, about history, and about her own 'embattled virginity.'[33]

And she makes a strong case. Rosa's ferocious desire is in fact one of the major narrative drives in the text. The men are willing to speculate from a distance. But it is Rosa's powerful will that pushes Quentin toward Sutpen's Hundred. Without it Quentin never becomes introduced to the story as an audience, never achieves a position as author and never becomes part of the story. Without Rosa's intervention there is no confrontation between Rosa, Henry, and Clytie at the end of the novel and no epiphanic realization for Quentin. Without Rosa there really is no causal progression of events, no narrative line to push the tragedy to its climactic scene.

So Rosa possesses a powerful will. But a will to what? Considering the many ways in which Rosa supports the social hierarchy, it is very difficult to imagine her as a feminist or indeed a progressive in any sense. As with all the characters in the text, it is dangerous to insist on a conscious social intent. This is because none of them—Quentin, Shreve, Mr. Compson, Sutpen, Judith, Bon, Henry, Wash Jones, or Rosa—seems to understand the motivations for their own actions. They act seemingly against their own purposes or even without purpose at all—chasing down their desires with only an instinctive and extremely myopic level of awareness to guide them. They pursue their designs as they pursue their stories, with no "regard for cause and effect" because they are not capable of anticipating the consequences of their actions and therefore cannot apprehend cause and effect relationships (308). Like Sutpen they regard their own stories with the understanding of someone hearing them for the first time, as if they did not author those stories themselves: "he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced" (308-309). When the characters do try to explain their motivations, they drift into long, convoluted, quasi-lyrical passages that never seem to explain anything. When Rosa confronts Clytie at the door to the mansion after Bon has been killed, for example, she admits to being outraged by Clytie's