

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

**WILLIAM FAULKNER'S 'ABSALOM, ABSALOM!' –
AN INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN FAMILY HISTORY AND SOCIAL HISTORY**

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ABSTRACT

William Faulkner is a Southern writer who, in work after work, has gone back to the same inexhaustible source; the American South, its disturbed present and its tormenting past. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, his greatest and most rewarding literary work, he devotes his mature powers to a full spectrum examination of man's reliance on the past and of the extent to which man is responsible for the past. His strong condemnation of the values of the south emanates from the actual story which Quentin tells in response to a Northerner's question what is the South like. Quentin then tells the story of the Sutpen family, whose history must be seen as analogous to the history of the South. The father, Thomas Sutpen, stands for all the great and noble qualities, found in the South and at the same time represents the failures of the South. Sutpen's basic belief that he could build a system of morals in the same manner as he would build anything else caused him and the South to overlook certain humanitarian values since the wealth of both Sutpen and the old South was built upon the enslavement of another race. The present paper attempts to view the novel from the point of view of the moral basis upon which the old South was built and to inquire into the amount of responsibility the man should feel for the past thereby establishing a connection between the story of the South and the story of the Sutpen.

Key Words: Southern Values, Moral Basis, Interconnection, Basic Belief, Reliance on past

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William Faulkner has generally been regarded as one of the major American novelists of the present century. He belongs to that era which witnessed historical upheavals leaving deep marks on the nation's lives. He is a Southern writer who, in work after work, has gone back to the same inexhaustible source; the American South, its disturbed present and its tormenting past. His fiction conveys 'the entire complex of his southern revolt against society'. Faulkner's significance as a

writer lies in his rejection of the southern society not only of the 1920s but also in his repudiation of total cultural rejection so characteristic of the American artists of this period. He loves his South and at the same time fears for its safety. He reveals a tragic awareness of the fact that the South is slowly being destroyed by the stupidity of its natives, and by the rapacious greed of the outsiders. This uniquely regional nature of Faulkner's work makes it universal.

The present Research paper will focus on William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* as an intensive exercise in oral history. General Compson passes the Sutpen story onto his son, who passes it on to Quentin; Miss Rosa, determined that the story shall not die, also passes it on to Quentin. When Quentin goes to Harvard, he takes the story with him as his inheritance. That inheritance is not simply the Sutpen story, analogy for the story of the whole South, but also the state of mind which cannot break the fixation with the past and so cannot enter into life. Faulkner suggests that this backward-looking vision has many repercussions. Reality is what is past, not what is present. So the basic story of Sutpen is a key which unlocks the door to the interior worlds of a number of characters. These interior worlds owe much of their shape to the South, both past and present. Thus the story opens the door to the South itself or at least to Faulkner's vision of the South. The story of Sutpen, of course, acts as a basis for the novel. It also engages us by exposing, through the particular story of Sutpen, the depth and complexity of Faulkner's vision of the South.

The opening paragraph of *Absalom, Absalom!* introduces us to one of the principal narrators in the novel, Rosa Coldfield certain details about her and her home immediately reveal how unusual a person she is. Rosa Coldfield is in mourning but for whom it is not clear: but she has been in mourning for a long time. Here is a character to whom something had happened forty-three years ago and the character is still living in that remote past as suggested by the physical setting, a dusty and musty room with its blinds all closed and fastened for forty- three years. This highlights one of the major preoccupations of Faulkner as a novelist, the continuing influence of the past on the present, a past so powerful in terms of its impact on the mind and the hearts of some characters that for them the past seems more real than the present. The question that inevitably arises is what or who it is from the past that has affected Rosa Coldfield so much that compulsively she has to go back to the past, in memory, in conversation, and even in her actions. To Quentin Compson, the helpless and captive listener, these recapitulated figures of the

past appear to be 'quiet inattentive harmless' because he is the member of a later generation to whom the passions and the rages of an earlier generation do not mean anything. But for Rosa Coldfield dreamy and victorious dust of the past is very real. Thus the very first paragraph sets the scene as it were: the time is the present, the year 1909, the season summer, and there is an old virgin who describes melodramatically and with intense passion the events and persons of 1867 and of an even earlier time to a not fully comprehending Quentin Compson who is about to go to college at Harvard. Rosa speaks with impotent rage of a 'ghost' from the past, of Thomas Sutpen, the man who had married her elder sister and later, proposed to Rosa herself, and later imposed such an insulting condition to their marriage that even forty-three years after the death of Thomas Sutpen Rosa has neither forgotten nor forgiven him. From the angry outpourings of Rosa Coldfield there emerges a picture of Thomas Sutpen, a highly subjective picture, colored by the melodramatic memory of Ross Coldfield. From her and later from his father, Quentin learns of the sensational first appearance of Sutpen in the town of Jefferson in 1833, a stranger on horse back. Rosa was not even born then but, in terms of the association of her father and his family with Sutpen, Rosa Coldfield reconstructs in a melodramatically imaginative manner the first appearance of Thomas Sutpen in Jefferson. She visualizes him as a mysteriously sinister figure, 'a man-horse-demon' with the 'faint sulphur reek still in hair and clothes'. Thomas Sutpen thus makes his appearance 'out of quiet thunderclap'. And then cheats an Indian chief of his land and builds on it, with his assistants and servants captive and with the SUTPEN'S HUNDRED (Sutpen had obtained hundred acres of land from the Indian chief), This highly emotive description of the character including the actions, of Thomas Sutpen narrated by Rosa Coldfield is heard by two Quentins, as Faulkner puts it. There is the young Quentin Compson for whom the deep old South is dead and its people are merely 'garrulous and outraged ghosts' recreated out of the past by an old woman who herself appears like a ghost from the past. Then there is the other Quentin, a Southerner, himself 'one of the ghosts',

born and bred in the same South in which Sutpen, the Coldfields and the ancestors of Compson had lived. She tells Quentin that she would like her story to be written about recorded for posterity by Quentin Compson, so that future generations would be able to 'read 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. Her enraged imagination is convinced that the South lost the war because it had to depend on such monsters as Sutpen to fight for its cause, and Rosa believe that Sutpen and his family were wiped out from the earth because of His curse. Here we find Faulkner's method of interlinking the history of the sins, the crimes, the shames and the defeat of the old South with those of the Sutpens or the Compsons, Families which are doomed to die out. The sources of Sutpen's wealth are unknown and suspect. Jefferson knew that Sutpen had cheated the Indian to obtain land, that his negroes were wild and spoke a strange language and that his architect was a captive, and it also suspected that Sutpen earned much needed hard cash by cheating at cards on steamboats; and all this is destroyed in the Civil War Sutpen and the South both emerge out of the Civil War, strangely enough through defeat. Rosa Coldfield concedes that Sutpen was a man of valor who never surrendered his sword to the enemy. In the mind of Rosa there is a connection between the fate of the South and that of Sutpen "she believes that the South lost the War because it had to depend on the valor of man without honour, men like Sutpen. "But that our cruse, our very life should have been thrown into the balance with men like that to buttress it- men with valor find strength but without pity or honour'. (16) The same curse and fate affect the affect the South and Sutpen himself, through because some ancestor of ours had elected to establish his descent in a land primed for fatality and already cursed with it, even if it had not rather been our family, our father's progenitors, who had incurred the curse long years before and had been corrected by Heaven into establishing itself in the land and the time already coursed." (16-17) Here we have a sense of Southern history as the slow working out of a fatality and curse on the South and

on some representative Southern families so that, in a literate sense, the sins of the fathers are visited on the heads of their children.

The narration of Rosa Coldfield is not chronological. Rosa retains in her memory vivid impressions of the inexplicable and morally reprehensible actions of Sutpen, and every incident she narrates acquires added significance in retrospect. She reports from her memories of childhood of the scene in which Thomas Sutpen, Ellen, and the two children come to church in a carriage ridden with the speed of horses in a race by a wild negro, this incident having taken place in 1848 when Rosa was hardly three years old. The first section of the novel is thus primarily concerned with the presentation of Rosa Coldfield's view of Sutpen in particular and Southern history in general. The first person narrative is sometimes heard and commented upon for the benefit of the readers by Quentin Compson, the not-so-passive recipient of this unsolicited and unexpected act of confidentiality on the part of Rosa. Rosa's memories are dominated by the figure of Thomas Sutpen who appears to her as a monster and a curse, a symptom and a cause, of the tragedy of the South. He is a symptom and a sign of the curse on this sad and violent land by God himself and Sutpen is himself the cause of the destruction of many of those whom he uses and dominates.

The second section gives another view of Sutpen. The same September evening in 1909, while waiting for the appointed time to go back to Rosa Coldfield's house, Quentin Compson hears from his father who heard from his father. General Compson, the grandfather of Quentin alone knew or realized that when Sutpen first came to Jefferson and stayed in hotel he had no money and hence could not offer drinks to others and hence did not accept their offers of drink. As told by General Compson to his son, Sutpen at that time had no time for friendships because he was "the slave of his secret and furious impatience... of a used for haste, of time fleeing beneath him, which was to drive him for the next years" (27). Here is another picture or view of Thomas Sutpen, silent and secretive, not sinister and demoniac, a man in a hurry to build and to establish his dynasty. He buys 100 acres of land from the

Indian chief, disappears for two months and again returns, passing through the streets of Jefferson on his way to his land, with a wagon driven by a negro with the captive French architect and under the wagon hood, a bunch of negroes "in a black tunnel filled with still eyeballs and smelling like a Wolf". What characterized all the activities of Sutpen then was not that there was something sinister about them it was rather 'that quality of gaunt and tireless driving, that conviction of haste and of fleeting time'. And all this hastened desperation at the age of 25. There is also General Compson's description of Sutpen naked (he was saving his only suit of clothes for the time when he could go courting) and his equally naked negroes building the SUTPEN'S HUNDRED brick, while a whole crowd of people who had ridden from Jefferson stand and watch the silent and secretive stranger build the mansion of his dreams. A house, and then a wife, and children constituted vital elements of his dream. Sutpen appears in a new light not as the devil incarnate, but merely as a restless human being in a hurry to incarnate his dreams in brick and mortar, and in his wife and children.

Section Three of the novel partly explains why Rosa Coldfield came to look upon Thomas Sutpen as a monster. These feelings of animosity and irrational hatred are inculcated in Rosa by her aunt. The aunt's hatred of every male is partly due to the insult showered upon her niece Ellen by the town on her wedding day. Certain gruesome details are unobtrusively given by Quentin's father to suggest the changes in the characters in the story of the decline and fall of the Sutpen dynasty, Mr. Coldfield one day during the civil war climbs to the attic and nails the door behind him and throws the hammer out of the window and so starves to death in the attic. Then Ellen suddenly changes into a woman who has not only reconciled herself to her life and marriage but has actually become proud of it. She 'evacuates' not only her Puritan heritage but reality itself. She changes into a woman living a world of pure illusion in which she moves 'gracious and assured and talking the most complete nonsense' (56), Judith, her daughter, grows up into a young woman "dreaming, not living in her complete detachment and imperviousness to actuality almost

like physical deafness"(57). And by then Sutpen had prospered becoming the biggest landowner and cotton-planter in the country, not liked but feared by all, and accepted by the hypocritical society because 'he obviously had too much money now to be rejected or even seriously annoyed any more' (59). But again fate intervenes, as Quentin's father puts it, to destroy all that he had built. "He (Sutpen) was unaware that his flowering was a forced blooming too and that while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony- the stage manager, call him what you will- was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic and spurious shadows and shapes of the next one" (59-60). This is the Civil War, "the gorge which would be the land's catastrophe too" (60), "the doom and knell of her beloved land" (64). The 'black foundation' on which the Sutpen dynasty has been built is also 'scattered' in the same year when Henry Sutpen, the son, and Thomas Sutpen quarrel and the son 'formally abjures his father and renounces his birthright and the roof under which he was born. 'Fatal mischance' affecting the family, and knell and doom' affecting the land -there is once again the interlinking of the fates of the two. Once the master leaves the house to follow Colonel Sartoris to fight for the South, SUTPEN'S HUNDRED collapses, Ellen "the butterfly, the moth caught in a gale" dies. Sutpen's negroes desert to follow the Yankee troops away and it appears that in this house there is "an incontrovertible affirmation for emptiness, desertion" (70). The narrator in this section, as in the second section is Quentin's father. He too sees a relationship between Sutpen and the South but he interprets the disintegration of Sutpen's family in terms of Sutpen's character.

Mr. Compson's narration continues into the fourth section of the novel. More information about the Suptens is given. There is a detailed analysis of the character of Henry Sutpen and his friendship with Bon, of the close relationship between the brother and the sister, Charles Bon's first visit to SUTPEN'S HUNDRED, his later 'understanding' with Judith that he would marry her. Thomas Sutpen's unexpected visits to New Orleans to discover the secret that Charles Bon has already been married to an octoroon and that he

has a son by her, the four year probation during which Henry Sutpen hopes against hope that Charles Bon would give up his octoroon wife, the Civil War Henry and Charles Bon and Sutpen himself enlisting in the army, the death of Ellen Coldfield and the killing of Charles Bon by Henry Sutpen after the two young men have ridden together to the gates of SUTPEN'S HUNDRED. This part of the story of the family of the Sutpens involves certain themes which are of continuing concern to Faulkner as a novelist. And finally there is also the story of the South during the Civil War. In this sense the narrative in the fourth section is equally complicated, the action to be interpreted at more than one level. The South is defeated. Charles Bon is killed, and the disintegration of the Sutpen family has begun. Thus the story of the South and of the Sutpens is interlinked.

The fifth section deals mostly with the same incidents regarding which Mr. Compson had earlier given his own interpretation. The sixty-three years old woman, embattled in her virginity, gives her own prejudiced and passionate version of the events of the past. This section is a remarkable example of rare capacity for self-analysis that Rosa Coldfield reveals. Thomas Sutpen, who returns from the war, is a changed man, an old man of fifty nine who realizes that all that he had done to establish a dynasty has led to nothing. He was not there at Sutpen's Hundred. This condition of Thomas Sutpen symbolizes the South after its defeat in the Civil war. Rosa's narration in this section is an unusual mixture of the melodramatic and the objective. She reveals a capacity for rare self-analysis when she probes into her own motives and describes the chaotic conditions prevailing in the South after its defeat in the War. She talks of marauding soldiers of the defeated Confederacy returning home to threaten, to look, to rape and to kill even, and of her own life after she returns home when Sutpen makes the 'infamous' suggestion what exactly it was we learn much later and also objectively describes her becoming a laughing stock of the whole of Jefferson which talks with obvious sadistic enjoyment of her brief engagement and the breaking off of the engagement. The section is all through Rosa's narrative, mainly in the first person, but sometimes

Rosa speaks of herself in the third person. In the earlier sections we only hear of Sutpen from others. But in this section for the first time we hear Sutpen himself speaking.

Section six introduces a wholly new character, an outsider, the Canadian Shreve who like many others at Cambridge, is curious to know all about the South. He asks questions which are difficult to answer for a Southerner, "Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?"(143). This section is a mixture of Shreve's and Quentin's narration and of Mr. Compson's letter which informs Quentin Compson that Rosa Coldfield had died in the beginning of 1910, and of Mr. Compson's narrative. The section begins with a reading of the letter of Mr. Compson informing Quentin of the passing away of Rosa Coldfield; then there is a brief flashback and then Quentin's memory moves forward in time to recapitulate the last ride of Rosa Coldfield in his company at midnight in a buggy to SUTPEN'S HUNDRED to discover that "something living in it". Shreve tries to understand the story of Rosa by going over it again and again. It is from him that we at last hear the details regarding the infamous proposal of Thomas Sutpen to Rosa Coldfield. We learn from Shreve's summing up of the story that Sutpen made yet another desperate attempt to rebuild the ruined plantation. There is another flashback, Quentin remembers the day when he and his father, while riding together, accidentally discovered the grave of Thomas Sutpen, Ellen Sutpen, Charles Bon, and Charles Etienne at Saint Valery Bon. The sixth chapter begins and ends with the question still remaining unanswered: What did Quentin and Miss Rosa discover at SUTPEN'S HUNDRED when they made their last trip together at midnight, a buggy to Sutpen's house.

Section Seven begins with the comment of the outsider Shreve, that the story of Sutpen and the South is even better than the theatre. Faulkner as a writer is thus able to understand the South very clearly in spite of his deep love for it. This section at last gives the relevant details concerning the origins of Thomas Sutpen who was not really a Southerner by birth. The story about the childhood of Sutpen is

narrated by Quentin Compson as he had heard it from his father. For the first time, we hear at a factual level of Sutpen's existence prior to his appearance in Jefferson. He belonged to a poor white family. Sutpen's awakening to certain facts of life when a Negro servant, richly dressed had turned the young Sutpen away from the front door of a large house. Sutpen had told Quentin's grandfather this story. Later, his family had moved to the coast where Sutpen had become even more strongly aware of social difference. He realized that not only were white men superior to Negroes but that certain white men were superior to others of the same colour. Eventually, haunted by the poverty and degradation of his own family, he ran away from home and took ship for the West Indies. There he had become the trusted employee of the owner of a large plantation who, when Sutpen saved his life, allowed Sutpen to marry his daughter. So, at the age of twenty, Sutpen had seemed on the verge of fulfilling his ambition of becoming as good as the best of white men, rich and successful. He moved to Jefferson at the age of twenty five, hoping to achieve his ambition there.

Section eight has two narrators who jointly reconstruct the past. Shreve and Quentin Compson attempt to imaginatively reconstruct or 'create' events and character of the 1850s and 1860s. The nineteen years old Quentin Compson and Shreve, in the year 1910, try to imagine the emotional conflicts and moral dilemmas of two young men, Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon. There is an imaginative recreation of the four years of Civil War, of assaults and retreats, the South steadily being beaten by the Northern forces. Then, Shreve and Quentin Compson, the joint creators of these ghosts of the past, imagine the scene in which somewhere in the South during the last days of the Civil War, Henry Sutpen tells that Charles Bon cannot marry Judith, not because he is her brother-in-law is condoned by the Sutpens-but because there is Negro blood in Bon's veins. Henry and Charles Bon ride all the way to Sutpen's plantation in Mississippi, dodging Yankee patrol parties, only for Sutpen to shoot Charles Bon. Although Shreve gives credit to Charles for his concern for Judith, he will use 'racial abuse' in relation to a man who dies forty four years ago.

The last section, section nine, begins with Shreve trying to find out what it means to be a Southerner, a Bayard, or a Compson. Is it because in the South there are still alive people who live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves? Shreve asks, 'What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wrath-like and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son of never forgiving general Sherman so that forevermore as long as your children's children produce children you won't be anything but a descendent of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?' (297). Shreve appears to believe that because she was a Southerner Rosa Coldfield did not forget the past but in 1909 remembered it enough to go to Sutpen's house because "instinct or something told her it was not finished yet." (298). Rosa and Quentin discover Henry Sutpen, "the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse" (307) who has come home to die. The novel ends with a description of the SUTPEN'S HUNDRED burnt to ashes in a fire started by Clytie, the negress, when she mistakes the ambulance brought: by Miss Rosa to take Henry to the town for treatment for a police van and so destroys herself, Henry and the house itself. And so finally all that is left of the grand design of Thomas Sutpen is Jim Bond, the negro idiot, the great-grandson of Thomas Sutpen. The last paragraph is very significant in terms of what Quentin says about his attitude towards the South. When Shreve asks him 'Why do you hate the South?' Quentin Compson replies: 'I don't hate it: Quentin said, quickly, at once immediately: 'I don't hate it'. He said I don't hate it, he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: I don't, I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!' (311). This compulsive and repeated denial emphasizes the important truth that Quentin hates the South, if not wholly, at least partly. Thus, the ending of the novel once again establishes in a very clear manner the connection between the story of the South and the story of the Sutpens. The rise and fall of the Sutpen dynasty

parallels the rise and fall of the South. In this sense family history and social history are interconnected.

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