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The South Syndrome in William Faulkner's Absolam, Absolam!.

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Abstract

The aim of this abstract is to show the image of South in *Absalom, Absalom!* which is surely very important aspect of Faulkner's fiction. It shows that how William Faulkner represents the life of modern man in both conscious and subconscious way. The paper also deals with the impact of Southern Protestantism on general life of man which is best depicted in the behaviour of Mr. Coldfield. The other aspect of South on which the novel concentrates is the racial conflict i.e, Negro-white tension. The other important aspect of this paper is to discuss the presentness of the past and the pastness of the present which means its timeless moral significance. This abstract also unfolds the psychological aspect by using the stream-of-consciousness technique which is a very important and recurring in twentieth century novel.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner also represents the image of modern society as a wasteland. The other important aspect of the southern society which this paper aims to depict is the impact of mechanized and industrialized society that forces man to cultivate false values. It also marks that how modern man lost his natural "feelings", response to life; his religious an empty formalism; he is uncapable of love. It exposes the numberous threats to individualism, pused by the modern society, by moral rigidity by taboos and traditions.

INRODUCTION

Absalom, Absalom! is a unique fictional experiment-unique in relation to Faulkner's other novels and to modern fiction generally. Indeed, it is not too much to claim that in point of technique it constitutes the last racial innovation in fictional method since Joyee. A "difficult" work, its difficulties to not inhere in verbal subtleties or in excessive

refinement of perception, but in the strain imposed upon attention and sensibility in comprehending its monumental design.

Broadly stated, the intention of *Absalom, Absalom!* is to create, through the utilization of all the resouces of fiction, a grand tragic vision of heroic dimension. As in the tragedies of the ancients and in the great myths of the Old Testament, the action represent issues of timeless moral significance. That Faulkner here links the decline of a social order to an infraction fundamental morality cannot be doubted.

Now, Faulkner's theme: unless, he says, the immanence of the writer's lot is transcended by the spirit or until it is his work is ephemeral and doomed and the turiter 'labors under a curse'. He writes not love but of lust... He writes not of the heart but of the glands.

Sutpen falls through innate deficiency of moral insight, but the error which he commits is also socially derived and thus illustrates the flaw which dooms with equal finality the aspirations of a whole culture. Event of modern history, here viewed as classic tragedy, are elevated through conscious artistry to the status of a new myth.

Every reader of the novel is struck by its curiously heightened pitch, its brooding intensity, its poetic language, and the endless recapitulations which have the effect almost of incantation. What has not yet been studied is the relation of style and structure to the larger plan of execution? An exploration of unprecedented depth and scope into the meaning of history, the novel possesses throughout techniques proportionate to its ends. Only by considering form and meaning in organic interrelationship can we hope to discover the conception underlying this vast and strangely compelling tragic vision.

Picturing the post-bellum fate of the South and southerners, Faulkner seems to adumbrate what Rosa Coldfield calls:

> That justice which presides over human
> events which, incept in the individual, runs
> smooth, less class than velvet but which, by
> man or woman flouted, drives on like fiery
> steel and overrides both weakly just and
> unjust strong, both vanquisher and innocent
> victimized, ruthless for appointed right and
> truth[1]!

REPRESENTATION OF SOUTH IN ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

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The characters themselves are projected on a larger scale than life. As Mr. Compson puts in, musing on the differences between them and now, we see "in this shadowy attenuation of time [people] possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable." Sutpen "abrupt" into the scene as "demon," devil, with "faint sulphur-reek still in hair, clothes and beard," "ogre shape," "fiend," "blackguard." His stature is heroic: the town's people feel that, "given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything." His face is "like the mask in Greek tragedy." He is the chief actor on the stage, 'still playing the scene to the audience, [while] behind him fate, destiny, retribution, irony - the stage manager... was already striking the set and dragging on the synthetic spurious shadows and shapes of the next one." Community opinion chants the chorus to his actions: "...in steady strophe and anti-strophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen.*"

Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon exist only to perform the parts assigned to them - Bon to pursue the acknowledgement which can never be his; Henry to commit, under circumstances which convey its poignancy to the fullest, the inevitable fratricide. They are the Biblical Absalom and Ammon in mortal conflict over a sister, they are Polyneices and Eteocles, sons of the cursed family of Oedipus, separated by their claims to power and doomed to mutually inflicted extinction.

What endows the novels as a whole with a sense of overpowering urgency is its surcharged atmosphere of doom. This pressure derives in part from the blind psychological forces by which all the characters are driven. But fate itself is felt to be the agent of personal and historical doom. The Greek sense of fate, specifically, is invoked, Slavery goes against the will of the gods; or, as it is stated in more exact terms, slavery goes against nature. In Haiti, where the earliest instance of this moral violation takes place, it is "as if nature helf a balance and kept a book and offered recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not." Buried in the soil, the bones and blood of the first Haitian slaves "still cried out for vengeance." The undoing of Sutpen's false ambition illustrates the operation of retributive justice in the human drama; the fall of the South is its larger social representation.

> that day when the South would realized that it
> was now paying the price for having erected
> its economic edifice not on the rack of stern
> morality but on the shifting sends of

opportunism and moral brigandage (AA,81)[2].

The Sutpen tragedy as communicated in the novel has no 'objective' existence. It is the collective product of the workings of the minds of three major narrators, abetted by the collaboration of a fourth. The Sutpen tragedy is the novel's center of dramatic interest, but the narrators are the center of the novel. In the execution of this double focus Faulkner exercisers the full play of his genius.

The story of Sutpen exists in local recollection. The four narrators take the local story and transmit it through what they are and through their relation to it. The Sutpen tragedy, with its magnitude, power and, intensity, is thus synthesized by Faulkner from the psychic bias of each narrator. Projecting their distortion in the manner of Miss Rosa's presentation of the story, but we cannot measure its degree because he knows as yet so little about her. As the legend grows through the narrator's successive contributions, his capacity to estimate the various degrees of distortion increases. However, such is the ordering of the narrative that the magnification of events occurs always in advance of an understanding of the distortions which cause it. The reader is consequently affected sensibly before he can react intellectually.

It is Quentin tragedy, above all, which the Sutpen tragedy must finally illuminate. "Too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South," he is doomed through some cause antecedent to his own existence, the victim of some larger fatality marked for the deep South itself.

All of the major narrators are born and bred in South. Their relationship to the Sutpen tragedy is immediate: their own ancestors appear in the background. Mr. Compson and Quentin are descended from the general Compson of the tale, whose independence and humanity set him apart from his fellow citizens of aristocratic status. In the Sutpen story, he transcends the narrowness of his class, accepting Sutpen into the community, attending his wedding, and befriending him in crisis. He comprehends the limitations of Sutpen's nature, yet he is not alienated from him in human affection. To Charles Etienne Bon, Sutpen's Negro grandson, he accords equal sympathy. He knows the hopelessness of his plight, yet intercedes for him with the law and attempts personal assistance. In him the best of the old South, as opposed to the "minimum of logic and morality," which governed the aspirations of the class of men represented by Sutpen, is symbolized.

Quentin and Mr. Compson are general Compson's heirs, the inheritors not only of his broad intelligence and conscience, but also of the altered social status which the Civil War brought about. Retaining and refinements of culture and sensibility perpetuated in family tradition, but deprived through historical circumstances of a proper field in which they may be exercised, Mr. Compson and Quentin are both rendered incapable of action. Their feelings towares Negroes are, like their ancestor's, personal and humane; no trace of prejudice or condescension is to be found in their narrations or conversational interchanges. They lack aggressive completely. Mr. Compson's manner of coping with life is through intellectual analysis undertaken from the refuge of personal retreat; Quentin, as the unfortunate heir of his spiritual bankruptcy and further decline status, is equipped only with excessive sensibility and illusion.

The part played by southern Protestantism in lending support to caste ambitions is depicted in the behaviour of Mr. Coldfield. Denying slavery in principle, abetting it in practice, and in general substituting morbid righteousness for warm humanity, Mr. Coldfield religiosity - and its contribution to Negro-white tensions - is a representation, in condensed form, of all that was set forth on this theme in *light in August.* He lends money to Sutpen's dubious financial speculations (symbolizing the involvement of South planters with northern finance), while detaching himself from the consequent moral responsibility. His impossible stand on the issue involved in the war leads to his complete withdrawl and ultimate self-annihilation.

The thematic link between the created tragedy and the narrators who project it is reinforced by many interspersed observations about the presentness of the past and the pastness of the present. There is, to begin with, the identity of place: "Quentin breathed the same air in which those church bells had rung on the Sunday morning in 1833." There is continuity of blood: Mr. Compson recognizes, in these figures from an earlier era, "people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting." Most binding of all the past have never been served. Struggling futilely to free himself. Quentin succumbs in a hopeless concession to interrelatedness in which no individual identify remains: "Maybe nothing ever happens and is finished...maybe it took father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us."

But even this will not wholly serve. Assuming that both Henry and Bon guess their blood relationship, Quentin explores the incest theory with an intensity of interest possible only to one of his morbid sensibility and finds it still insufficient. Suppose Bon and

Henry surmised the incestuous objection, Quentin considers, how would Henry react? He would oppose the sin at first, but he would reconsider. His identification with both Bon and Judith would cause him to over ride the objections of conscience. He would sanction the unlawful union between his idolized older brother and his adored female counterpart. Thus, the basis of Sutpen's objection must have exceeded even this, to account for Henry's strange and abrupt reversal. Quentin and Shreve continue their conjuring.

For Quentin, a third style, stream-of-consciousness, is also maintained. Miss Rosa's decorum as a southern maiden lady is conveyed in her initial address to Quentin: "Because you are going away to attend the college at Harvard...maybe you will enter the literary profession as so many southern gentlemen and gentle women too are doing now and maybe someday we will remember this and write about it."

The declining vitality of much realistic writing of the twenties and thirties - of Farell's fiction, for example, which was also intended to convey the power of relentless forces - is in part a reflection of the inadequacy of realism for tragic themes.

Through the reciprocal interplay of narrators and the story they tell, the issues created by racial subordination are considered in many aspects and driven home through the working out of numerous parallels and recapitulations. For purposes of analysis, two coordinate levels of the theme may be differentiated: the problem of blood as it figures in the Sutpen tragedy, and the issue of slavery as it affected the history of the South.

In their attitudes towards Negro-white marriages, Sutpen's children reflect the views of the class in which they have been reared. At least so Mr. Compson, reasoning from the axioms of southern upper-class mores, offers for conjecture. His mythologizing completes the symmetry of the marriage pattern. According to him, the puritanical Henry was less offended by the voluptuousness of Bon's erotic tie to the octoroon mistress than by the implied insult to Judith of even a "morganatic" ceremony. Judith herself is pictured years later as reminding Etienne Bon that the "paper...between you and one who is inescapably Negro...can be put aside." The point is clear: where caste rules prevail, affection and intimate relationships between "whites" and those of "tainted" blood cannot be recognized or sanctioned. The effect of such denial to those involved is, of course, vicious. Arbitrary rejection from those most binding of all ties, familial and marital love, breeds psychic outrage breeds personal revolt. The human psyche has its own mechanics of vengeance.

The exclusion of the Negro from another fundamental relation, participation as an accepted member in the social community with his fellows, adds further impetus to

negative compulsions. The variation of the theme is also elaborately patterned. All the Sutpens accept the doctrines of racial supremacy as such, with no thought as to their origins, tightness, or possibility of modification under special circumstances. When Sutpen learns of his wife's part-Spanish, part-Negro ancestry, he ousts her without entertaining even momentarily the possibility of suppressing the knowledge of her origin, the traces of which were so invisible as to have successfully deceived him.

Judith, Clytie, Henry, and Miss Rosa similarly perpetuate the race assumptions derived from plantation culture. Clytie and Judith keep yound Charles Etienne Bon scrupulously isolated from Negro companions, in an excess of good intention which has dire results. Clytie is depicted as trying literally to scrub the faint ivory tinge from his young skin. Henry, for all his delicacy of conscience, succumbs ironically at the last to the simple murderous reflexes of his class: his brother may marry his sister, but a "nigger" must be shot dead. Miss Rosa's prejudice are rabid, as has already been shown.

The plight of slavery is rendered with supreme effectiveness in terms of another pattern which appears recurrently in the Sutpen legend - the effect of race division upon the "common man" in the South - the poor white. Sutpen and his father were of class; so too were Wash and Milly. The power of caste aspiration to bolt the true ties of human kinship from recognition is brought fully home when it is remembered that Sutpen, who was incapable of according to Milly the accommodations provided even for a beast, had himself a sister whose illegitimate child was born in an outbuilding. In Sutpen's sister's case, however, no vengeance was sougth upon the defaulting male; the girl simply climbed back into the wagon with her child and rejoined the family.

But the mountain society from which the Sutpens descended lacked the conditions which fostered perpetual tensions of social status. A primitive community, men within it were judged on the basis of individual strength and courage, not upon the ownership of goods or upon spurious differentiate between the quality of their blood and that of certain of their fellows. In the mountain where young Sutpen 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."

The Sutpen tragedy is the means of conveying the larger social tragedy. In its broader outlines, the Sutpen tragedy is in many ways analogous to the social. Sutpen had two sons: one white, the other Negro. He denied the Negro; fratricide resulted. The Civil War,

too, was a fratricidal conflict caused by denial of the Negro. In the passage which designates the Mississippi River as the "geological umbilicus" of the continent, uniting Quentin and Shreve in a "sort of geographical substantiation," the brotherhood of North and South is established explicitly.

Sutpen's sin, his failure of humanity, is the equivalent in personal terms of the sin of plantation culture, its failure to accept the brotherhood of all mankind. Both failures are provided with the suggestion of an ancestry. Sutpen's progenitors go back to the criminal element in England; slavery, when first introduced into the West Indies, was gegun by men "whom the civilized land and people had expelled": "whose thinking and desires had become too crass to be faced and born longer," and who had been set, "homeless and desperate upon the lonely ocean."

The social tragedy is conveyed through the Sutpen's tragedy concretely as well as abstractly. As the biggest single plantation owner in the country, Sutpen is the very incarnation of the old South. In describing the conception, attainment, and destruction of Sutpen's design, Faulkner shows the tragedy of that society in terms of the presiding theme.

The social panorama which first unfolds itself to young Sutpen's eye when he descends the mountain is of "a country all divided and fixed and neat with people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own." The division upon which the plantation system rests is seen as already established. He sees "niggers working in the fields...while fine men sat on fine horses and watched them. Poor whites find miscellaneous work in connection with the plantations, getting their overalls and calico dresses from the "plantation commissary," or on store credit, and taking shelter in cabins "not quite as well kept up and preserved as the ones the nigger slaves lived in." The poor whites are physically less well provided for that the Negros, but there dwellings are "numbuses with freedoms bright aura." In the theoretical concession towards which freedom implies lies their torment.

CONCLUSION

The image of southern society is captured in briefly-sketched word pictures which are as conventional and set as old-time calendar prints. The slave belongs in this picture, and he is never omitted. There are the ladies going to church "with house neuroses to carry the parasols and fly swishes... moving in hoops among the miniature broadcloth of the... little boys and panelists of the little girls." There is the evocation of Southern Chritmas in a view of the plantation houses "with ...holly thrust beneath the knockers.

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The extent to which the entire social superstructure is set upon treacherous foundations is hinted at repeatedly. Graciousness prevails, but at too great a remove from the elementary facts of life. The slave girls and women upon whom that first caste rested and to whom in certain cases it doubtless owed the very fact of its virginity." He describe the simple commandeering of the slave girls from the field; no more respect was accorded the well kept octroon mistresses, like Bon's who for all their loyalty and careful nurturing were valuable only as "commodities."

References:

1. "Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel", *in Lion in the Garden,* P.253.
2. Ibid.p.81