

Reflection of History in *Absalom, Absalom!*

William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* can be described as an attempt to face and understand the problem of race. Retelling Sutpen's story, introduced at the very beginning, is not the purpose of Faulkner's novel. Instead, Faulkner uses Quentin and the multiple narrations to uncover the motives and effects behind the incomprehensible events in Sutpen's story. By delving back in time to rediscover Sutpen's life, Faulkner effectively also explores the history of the South when slavery was thriving before the Civil War. The simultaneous discovery of the nature of Sutpen's eventual fall and the demise of the antebellum South is no mere coincidence. The tragic events of Sutpen's life are representative of the South. Faulkner's exploration of the history of Sutpen's fall and the tragedy of the South contributes to the reflection of both Sutpen's and the South's histories, eventually leading to the discovery of their shared tragic flaw: an ignorance of racial prejudice. Faulkner uses the novel's complex narrative structure and Sutpen's design to reflect on the past and emphasize the unexpected influence, knowledge, and perspective that history provides to the present.

The historical context in *Absalom, Absalom!*, sets up the framework for the rest of Faulkner's novel. In a sense, history is being told over and over again by way of Sutpen's story, passed down many generations. Quentin claims that Rosa wants the story 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," (6). This quote directly connects Sutpen's story to the history of the South. Rosa seems to want Sutpen's story to survive so that readers in the future can learn from his fatal flaw of dividing people based on class and race that resulted in Sutpen's fall and

the loss of slavery. To explore the cause of this fall, Faulkner uses multiple narrations of the same story to instigate emotions in the readers so they are more involved in the conflict and are part of the hunt for answers as the novel deciphers the history of Sutpen, and at the same time, the history of the South. Along with the details that are uncovered comes unreliability as the narrators interpret the story each in a different way. Because of this, the story of Sutpen is not completely known, nor will it ever be because Sutpen is not alive to tell it himself. The nature of Sutpen's history can be generalized to the South. Stories from the South about slavery and aristocracy cannot be completely understood because no matter how many perspectives we see through, our view is still limited, just as we are with Faulkner's novel. Thus, Faulkner seems to use Sutpen's story and the structure of his novel to suggest that though history can provide explanations for present events, our knowledge of the past is limited, and we can only try to learn more by recreating the missing history ourselves, just as the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* do.

Faulkner further strengthens the connection between Sutpen and the South when he reconstructs Sutpen's past through the narration of Quentin's father, Mr. Compson. The motive behind Sutpen's desire to become rich and well settled comes from his sudden exposure to the "country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed neat because of what color their skin happened to be and what they happened to own," (179). In his childhood, living in the territory, which eventually will become West Virginia, Sutpen is surrounded by a community in which "the land belong[s] to anybody and everybody" (179), and where "the only colored people [are] Indians," (179). The Indians are only looked at "over rifle sights" (179), already creating a barrier between classes of people. Sutpen's early life points to the earliest South that

initially instilled racial bias and prejudice. After Sutpen is turned away from the front door of a rich white family's mansion, he discovers his innocence about class differences and stays "quite calm" (189), thinking about what he can do to fix his living and compete against his innocence. He concludes that he needs "land and niggers and a fine house to combat [the other whites]," (192) thus beginning his life-long quest to achieve wealth and power of his own. By investigating Sutpen's past, readers also steal a glance at the early human bias and mentality that gradually grows into the Southern lifestyle ripe with racial and class prejudice. Faulkner's emphasis on the early history of the South seems to reiterate the point that this history and pattern of removal or separation of a race, such as the Indians, and class resentment arising from early communities creates characters like Sutpen. Sutpen is a mirror image of the South and is not only a portrayal of the Southern customs, but also is an actual product of the Southern principles.

Because Sutpen builds his plan upon the principles of the Southern aristocracy, by social division between humans, he is doomed to fail from the very beginning of his plan. However, Sutpen does not realize his mistake and repeats to himself that to accomplish his design, all he needed was "money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family— incidentally of course, a wife," (212). Sutpen does indeed attain all of what he set out to do, but falters at the end because of his tendency to overlook the racial prejudice that prevails throughout society just as class divisions do. Sutpen and the Southern community both underestimate the effect of racial injustice, leading to the falls of both Sutpen and the foundational principles of slavery in the South after the Civil War. Racial prejudice haunts Sutpen from the very beginning. The major turning point in the novel where this racial bias is brought to light is when Sutpen leaves his first wife and son

because they may have some negro blood, “a fact which [he] did not learn until after [his] son was born,” (212). Even though Sutpen now has a son to carry on his legacy, he does not consider it a fortune, but only considers “these wasted years” (212). Sutpen’s ease of betrayal of his son and wife as he “merely explain[s] how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in [his] design,” (212) is his crucial mistake. Sutpen’s hamartia of intolerance for mixed race triggers the inevitable domino effect of Sutpen’s fall, similar to that of a tragic hero. He willingly sacrifices his family, plantation, and heir all because of an unsuitable race. His grand design eventually fails because his plan is based on personal gain and is not considerate of any others, paralleling the mentality of the South. The ignorance of the racial divisions in society that produce reverberating effects is the cause of the South’s fall after the Civil War, and is also the cause of Sutpen’s demise. Sutpen’s past comes hunting when Henry, his second son, meets Bon. Once Bon decides to marry Judith, Sutpen takes drastic actions to destroy his past son, metaphorically trying to erase his history. Faulkner never allows his readers to forget Sutpen’s immoral act as the murder of Bon backfires and destroys Sutpen’s whole design; Sutpen never produces a son who lives and loses most of his plantation. From this, Faulkner’s emphatically suggests that history cannot be deleted, but rather serves as a constant reminder for the present.

This constant reminder is what tortures Quentin as he inherits the chaos of his past. Though he doesn’t realize it until the end when Shreve asks him why he hates the South, Quentin experiences a reflection on the South as he hears the multiple recounts of Sutpen’s story. Through these versions, his previous notion of his home in the south is effectively destroyed, and instead Quentin sees a new South that is strange to him. He

can't fathom the immoral and unjust acts that Sutpen and the South built their foundations on, and hence questions his love for his home. In reply to Shreve's question at the end of the novel, Quentin immediately replies and repeats to himself, "I don't hate it," (303) as if trying to remind himself that he can't hate the South because that is where his origins lie. However, Quentin really has come to question the South's principles by reflecting back on Sutpen's, and thereby the South's history. By ending with Quentin's reflective thoughts, Faulkner seems to pose an open challenge to readers to reflect back and reinterpret history so they can experience the unexpected and find the power to understand, learn from, and accept the past.

Works Cited

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Works Consulted

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