

Theatrical Resonance in the Making of Sutpen Legend in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the Sutpen legend in *Absalom, Absalom!* depends on the narrator, it is noticed that Sutpen's character is made in accordance with dramatic or theatrical terms. Sutpen's character can be compared to Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear, and the allusion to Macbeth is clear in the making of the character of Wash Jones. The settings of the narratives are analogous to the theatre or the stage. Many times in the novel, Sutpen insists on having the townspeople as audience and chorus for remarkable events in which Sutpen emerges as the leading actor and a stage manager.

• قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، كلية الآداب، جامعة مؤتة.

تاريخ تقديم البحث: 2018/1/7م. تاريخ قبول البحث: 2018/8/12م.

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أصداء مسرحية في تكوين شخصية سوبتن لجند في رواية "أبسلوم، أبسلوم" لوليام فوكنر

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ملخص

بالرغم من أن أسطورة شخصية ستنين في رواية ابسلوم، ابسلوم! للروائي الأمريكي ويليام فوكنر تعتمد بشكل كبير على الراوي، إلا أن هذه الشخصية تم بناؤها بالتوافق والانسجام مع الشخصيات والأعمال المسرحية. فهذه الشخصية تشبه إلى حد كبير شخصيات شكسبير المعروفة هاملت والملك لير، كما أن هناك إشارة واضحة إلى شخصية ماكبث في رسم فوكنر لشخصية واش جونز. إضافة إلى ذلك، تعتمد الرواية على استخدام وتوظيف أماكن الأحداث وكأنها خشبة المسرح. وفي العديد من المرات يصر ستنين على وجود السكان ليقوموا بدور الجمهور (المشاهدين) والكورس في الأحداث الهامة والتي يبرز خلالها ستنين كأنه الممثل الرئيسي ومديرا للمسرح.

The legend of Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* depends greatly on the multiple narrative viewpoints which differ in the rendering of the character. Faulkner's use of multiple narrative points view and unreliable narrators has rendered the novel difficult and the readers perplexed in their attempt to track Sutpen's storyline. Daniela Ruralia (2015) argues that "[t]he difficulties of his narrative techniques result both from his private nature and his being a Modernist" (96). Furthermore, the difficulties readers face when handling the Sutpen legend, as Eric Casero (2011) notes, arise due to the fact that "the four main narrators of the story, as well as the "nested" narrators who narrate from within the narratives of the primary narrators, present account of Thomas Sutpen's life that often include contradictory sets of detail and contrasting descriptive styles" (86).

Notwithstanding the multiple narrative points of view, there is a striking similarity in each reconstruction of the story that every narrator renders it in dramatic or theatrical terms: Quentin Compson compares Henry Sutpen to Shakespeare's brooding Hamlet. Moreover, Henry's tragic sin of fratricide has "doomed the family line because he became a fugitive from law and never married . . . Henry could only suffer; he was unable to get rid of the past or to provide any modern solution to inherited problems" (Chen 2105, 193). Furthermore, Jason Compson claims that Sutpen is driven by something he calls "a dramatic irony" (74); Quentin's grandfather calls Haiti a theater for "all satanic lusts of human cruelty" (312); and Rosa depicts Sutpen's combat with the "wild niggers" as a staged spectacle. Shreve goes so far as to insist that the Sutpen legend is "better than the theater, isn't it" (271). Furthermore, many characters, especially Rosa, relate through (interior) monologues; Daniela Ruralia (2015) notes that "the use of the interior monologue is a predominant method determining the narrative structure in Faulkner's novels . . . in *Absalom, Absalom!* many parts of the narrative are covered by the interior monologue" (108). The novel's many settings are reminiscent of "theatrical backgrounds," and the presence of audience becomes an integral part of Sutpen's design.

These analogies to the theater are not surprising given the grotesque quality of Sutpen's "design" and position in the book as a mythological artifact to be interpreted. The combined impact of the storyline's dramatic characteristics and the narrator's attention to those characteristics serve as a persistent reminder of Sutpen's artifice, and of the artifice of the institution of the Southern plantation in general. By extricating the plantation from its

usual context and relocating it linguistically upon a stage by rendering it in dramatic terms, Faulkner robs the myth of the grand Southern landowner of its mystique. By means of this linguistic remove, the landowner is refused the iconic identity of the glorified and generous patriarch who commands the plantation as if by divine right. Instead, he becomes vulnerable to multiple interpretations, as in the narrator's configurations. Denying Sutpen a singular signification, his chroniclers practice a "preferred reading" strategy as defined by Stuart Hall. This strategy allows a space for Sutpen's "readers" to negotiate meanings with the text of the Sutpen legend, which ultimately allows them to establish readings which are oppositional to its dominant ideology. In the context of the novel, then, the plantation and the plantation owner lose their iconic status in these readings and become the site of struggle upon which the various narrators, and even the participants in the legend, engage the dominant social order.

The events of the novel's historical saga depend upon the fact that, as the narrators understand the story, Sutpen values the way that he is perceived. To illustrate this point, Faulkner crafts the central moment of the novel, that in which Sutpen is turned from the plantation owner's door by a black slave, in such a way that it invokes the story of the fall of Adam and Eve from happiness and innocence to shame about their appearance. For example, Quentin tells us that, as Sutpen made his way to the plantation owner's house he was "no more conscious of his appearance [in his father's garments] or of the possibility that anyone else would be than he was of his skin" (286). Quentin, who, according to Ted Atkinson (2011), finds himself "confronting the demons of the past and the sins of his fathers" (67), even calls Sutpen "innocent" in this context. Immediately after the "monkey nigger" refuses to let Sutpen in the front door, however, Sutpen catalogues his own appearance and that of his friends and family as he now guesses others might see them:

"He told Grandfather how, before the monkey nigger who came to the door had finished saying what he did, he seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years they had lived there like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects in it and you turn and go back through the room again and look at all the objects from the other side and you find out

you had never seen them before, rushing back through those two years and seeing a dozen things that had happened and he hadn't even seen them before. . . .the sense, effluvium of its passing between the white women in the doors of the sagging cabins and the niggers in the road which was not quite explainable by the fact that the niggers had better clothes. . ." (287)

Sutpen moves from a state of innocence about his appearance to a state of shame, as Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness. The recognition of his own degraded appearance initiates Sutpen's desire to take control of the way that others perceive him, something which, ultimately, cannot be controlled.

Sutpen's design itself depends upon the careful reconstruction of a particular moment, much like playacting, and an audience to observe that moment. Neither the one hundred acres of land itself, nor the elaborate house, nor the children are the ends of Sutpen's design. Rather, it is by being observed throughout a drama of acquisition and social mobility. In fact, we often see Sutpen deliberately staging specific events for public viewing. For example, after the purchase of the one hundred acres and the erection of his house, Sutpen invites "parties of men" (45) to join him in sporting, where they can witness the "embryonic formal opulence" (45) of his property. In addition, the wrestling matches with his "wild niggers" are designed not to alleviate grievances, but to dramatize, again and again, his position of dominance. Finally, Sutpen wants a large audience for his wedding, the event that completes his movement toward securing all the trappings of a Southern gentleman. Faulkner makes it especially clear that we know that this desire was in fact genuinely Sutpen's, and not a projection onto Sutpen by one of the narrators. He makes special note that this information came directly from Sutpen himself to General Compson, which is the closest to Sutpen we ever get. It is important that this should come from Sutpen, because without an audience to observe these important moments, Sutpen would lack the satisfaction he desires, which can only come from a communal recognition of his position as a patriarch.

Being his own stage manager, Sutpen is also a leading actor, and we see him described as being "costumed" as one—especially as wearing an actor's mask. For instance, Jason Compson imagines that Rosa's imagination is fixed upon Sutpen's "ogre-face," which is

"Like the mask in Greek tragedy interchangeable not only from scene to scene but from actor to actor and behind which the events and occasions took place without chronology or sequence and leaving her actually incapable of saying how many separate times she had seen him..." (74)

For Rosa, Sutpen's persona is larger-than-life, so much so that he seems almost omnipresent, here represented by the indiscriminate use of the stylized masks of Greek drama. In another instance, special attention is given to the obscure quality of Sutpen's beard, which serves to "hide whatever his mouth might have shown" (54), much like an actor's mask hides his own identity. This obscurity of feeling or intent elicits the curiosity of the townspeople. Indeed, it demands the spectator's interpretive skills, much as the spectator of a play reasons to deduct a character's feeling, intent, or motive.

Hence the flaw in Sutpen's design. He directs and stars in his own drama as a way to ensure control over his identity as it is perceived by others. But in this effort to manipulate his audience's perception, he has overlooked the audience's ultimate autonomy. The way in which this autonomy comes to bear upon Sutpen's design might best be discussed by employing the vocabulary found in Stuart Hall's theory of "preferred reading" as outlined in "Encoding/Decoding." In this essay, Hall offers a method for talking about texts that accounts for the possible gap between the dominant ideology of a text and a reader's interpretation of that text. Though he uses this theory specifically to discuss audience reception of television programs, his ideas can be appropriately applied to other types of texts as well.

Hall proposes that any given text is relatively open and subject to wide range of readings. John Fiske (1996) describes Hall's theory in terms of a tension between the text and the viewer:

"[Hall] thus postulates a possible tension between the structure of the text, which necessarily bears the dominant ideology, and the social situations of the viewers, which may position them at odds with that ideology. Reading or viewing television, then, becomes a process of negotiation between the viewer and the text. Use of the word negotiation is significant, for it implies both that there is a conflict of interests that needs to be reconciled in some way and that the process

of reading television is one in which the reader is an active maker of the meanings from the text, not a passive recipient of already constructed ones." (121)

Faulkner foregrounds the autonomy of the audience as an "active maker of meanings" in attributing a voice to Sutpen's audience, who reads Sutpen as a text, rather than to Sutpen himself.

Hall outlines the specific ways which a reader might interpret a text: readers and readings can be dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. The dominant reader adopts the subject position the text constructs for him. In the context of Sutpen's design, we are never offered anyone who fits into this position, which would be a ready acceptance of Sutpen's self-assumed position as a grand Southern patriarch. The closest we come to finding dominant readers are the members of the unnamed collective who participate in Sutpen's evenings of hunting, gambling, and physical combat with the slaves. In their complicity with his generosity, these spectators of the Sutpen legend seem to accept Sutpen's self-mythologizing as a benevolent father who provides relief for the male townsmen in the form of recreation and male bonding.

Quite different from this kind of reading, many of the novel's characters practice a "negotiated reading" of Sutpen. Negotiated readings inflect the dominant ideology toward the personal experience of an individual. Miss Rosa offers the best example of "negotiated reading" of Sutpen. Miss Rosa, a romantic, essentially advocates the patriarchy inherent in the Southern plantation system, and believes that a benevolent patriarch can bring happiness to her family and to the South. Her insistence upon Sutpen's evil stems not from his identification with that patriarchal system, but from what is, in her eyes, his inability to fulfill his role as commanding patriarch. In Miss Rosa's view, the hopes of the South are placed in the hands of men in Sutpen's position, but are doomed to fail when these men fail to live up to the idealistic and romanticized requirements of a Southern gentleman. In this way, Miss Rosa aligns herself with the basic principles of the dominant ideology but inflects them to suit her personal situation.

The characters in the novel occasionally express an awareness of their ability to read appositionally, or at least of their own subjectivity. Jason Compson, for example, perhaps a "negotiated reader" like Miss Rosa, comments upon the subjectivity inherent in storytelling: he interprets his narrative to Quentin to observe that chroniclers often impose false motive:

"Have you ever noticed how so often when we try to reconstruct the causes which lead up to the actions of men and women, how with a sort of astonishment we find ourselves now and then reduced to the belief, the only possible belief, that they stemmed from some of the old virtues? The thief who steals not for greed but for love? The murderer who kills not out of lust but pity?" (150)

In addition, Jason's sensitivity to what the role of a storyteller entails, also makes him aware of the subjective role the Jefferson townspeople play as spectators of the Sutpen legend. In his rendering the townspeople, for example, they become a major factor in the narrative, functioning not only as an audience comprised of individual responses, but as a unified chorus of sorts. Jason describes them moving as a whole in their censure of Sutpen, and he describes them using the terminology that designates a Greek chorus: "the stranger's name went back and forth among the places of business and of idleness and among the residences in steady strophe and antistrophe: Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen" (35).

The central challenge to Sutpen's design is that his audience practices their ability to negotiate a reading of his behavior. Perhaps the most extravagant example of a character exercising this ability is Wash Jones, whose awakening to the violence of Sutpen's design incites Wash to kill him. This significant instance of oppositional reading is also expressed in theatrical terms, in a direct reference to Hamlet. Merle Williams (2013) points out that Quentin has to

"confront the unexorcised ghosts of the Southern past and to determine his relation to them. This predicament is partially mirrored in Hamlet's exchange with his father's ghost on the battlements of Elsinore. . . . Quentin too finds himself alienated from the oppressive familial and cultural traditions that disrupt his purchase on temporality. He cannot survive within the context of a mad and a disordered time that haunts him with inherited guilt and inadequacy in the face of his own fears or failures not to mention the unbelievable standards of a forfeited past." (53)

There are many references to Shakespearean plays in the novel. Often these references seem to have been employed simply to reinforce a theme. The "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech from Macbeth, for

example, is used in various degrees of distortion two separate times to reinforce a "sense of fate and futility" (210, 362). The reference to Hamlet's gravedigger, however, is more complicated and supports the book's insistence upon the authority of the reader. When Shreve takes over the narration from Quentin, he begins:

"Now, Wash. Him (the demon) standing there with the horse, the saddled charger, the sheathed sabre, the gray waiting to be laid peaceful away among the moths and all lost save dishonor: then the voice of the faithful grave-digger who opened the play would close it, coming out of the wings like Shakespeare's very self: 'Well Kernel, they mought have whupped us but they aint kilt us yit, air they?'" (349)

Shreve's comparison is perplexing: what does Wash Jones have in common with the gravedigger, much less with Shakespeare?

Both Wash and the gravedigger share a similar social standing: one is a "hanger-on" and the other is a "scutt-worker," both relatively low class occupations. Both are seemingly insignificant characters, one sharing the "stage" with a colonel, the other a prince. Yet both are also ultimately integral to the stories into which they have been scripted, as the gravedigger proclaims his occupation's importance in the saga of the human tragedy, and as Wash is the player who foils his master. But both share a timeless quality and a connection to the land that is integral to the comparison. The gravedigger clearly understands that the significance of his work is that of its timelessness. He emphasizes the historical tradition of his trade, noting that "There is no ancient gentleman but gard'ners, ditchers, and grave-makers" (5.1.29-30). He is also quick to point out that his handiwork will "last till doomsday" (5.1.59). Shreve, too, indicates that the gravedigger is associated with a sense of enduring performance: as he has buried King Hamlet before the opening of the play, so he will bury Hamlet after its close. Further, he is associated with the land, his work being marked upon and within it. This connection is emphasized in the song that he sings, which includes a verse about being "shipped" into the land:

"But Age with his stealing steps
Hath clawed me in his clutch,
And hath shipped me into the land
As if I had never been such [a lover]" (5.1.71-74).

Wash Jones shares these characteristics. Insofar as the genealogy included in the novel tells us that the date and the location of his birth is unknown, Faulkner has denied Wash a history that we can point to. In fact, Wash seems to exist beyond time, appearing out of nowhere to become a part of the Sutpen drama, and then retreating into obscurity. Wash is also associated with the land, living primitively as a squatter on Sutpen's property. His means of hunting reflects his primitive lifestyle, as he scares up small animals "with a little chunk of dried mud thrown by hand" (350). Both the gravedigger and Wash, therefore, appear to function almost entirely within the realm of the natural world. Their actions would not seem to impact the social realm at all, as even the gravedigger is social in his occupation is so closely tied with the life cycle as to appear more a function of this natural world. In fact, the gravedigger and Wash seem to be a background against which the primary actors might play out their social drama.

All of this might be true except for the fact that, as we know, Wash becomes a key player in *Absalom, Absalom!* He kills Sutpen. The juxtaposition of the gravedigger and Wash in part emphasizes the degree to which there has been an upheaval in Sutpen's order: his sins are so grave that a seeming force of nature rises up to destroy him. But further, Wash's relationship with Sutpen gives him a context within which he might reject the identity Sutpen offers for acceptance. So violently does Wash oppose the disregard Sutpen shows his granddaughter as part of his tyrannical attention to furthering his design, Wash becomes an agent in the story, rather than merely a reader. Becoming an agent in the story is for Wash like becoming its author, as Shreve's analogy with Shakespeare attests, as he alters the story in choosing to act. That his audience could in their own rights practice agency is what Sutpen had never accounted for, and it is what proves his tragic flaw. In this tragic flaw, Sutpen resembles *King Lear*. This likeness is perhaps Faulkner's final Shakespearean allusion, and one which shapes our reading of Sutpen.

The closest the text comes to linking the two directly is in Quentin's narration of the aftermath of the war. Upon Sutpen's return from the war, a "blasted heath" of sorts, Quentin notes that Sutpen "didn't even need to be a demon now but just a mad impotent old man who had realized at last that

his dream of restoring his Sutpen's Hundred was . . . vain" (226). Even more remarkable, he continues:

"Mad impotent old man who realized at last that there must be some limit even to the capabilities of a demon for doing harm. . . must have seen himself as the old wornout cannon which realizes that it can deliver just one more fierce shot and crumble to dust in its own furious blast and recoil, who looked upon the scene which was still within his scope and compass and saw son gone, vanished, more insuperable to him now than if the son were dead." (227-228)

If we replace "daughter" for "son" in this passage, it might very well be Lear that Quentin describes. But Lear reconciles himself with Cordelia and recognizes, at least to some degree, his error, while Sutpen is destroyed in a moment of grotesque inhumanity. In this way he remains a sort of static representation of evil, which Quentin is then left to attempt to reconcile, and which we, with our knowledge of Lear's tragedy, are left to condemn.

For all of Sutpen's attempts to manipulate the way in which he is perceived, he remains subject to an even greater director. "While he was still playing the scene to the audience," we are told, "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" (87-88). If Sutpen's mistake is that he disregards the humanity, as well as the agency, of others, he also disregards his own, and attempts to play god.

This likeness to Lear and the other dramatic elements in *Absalom, Absalom!* combine to reveal Sutpen's artifice and, in turn, the artifice of the Southern landowner in general. But they also work to reveal the instability of the notion of a unified identity. While a reader may feel that he has reached an essential meaning or "true" version of Sutpen's story through Quentin's narration, Quentin's own usurpation of the story casts doubts upon the possibility of the existence of an essential identity for Sutpen, or for what Quentin sees is his own history. In the end, the meaning of the Sutpen legend is not solely a product of Sutpen's desires, nor is it solely a product of Quentin's re-creation. Quentin himself even becomes a part of the narrative of the South; as he has been a reader, so is he also read and interpreted by Shreve.

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