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*"Decorous Ordering:"* The Hierarchy of Social Narrative and the Individual in William Faulkner's

*Absalom, Absalom!*

Senior Paper

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Language (that meagre and fragile thread, Grandfather said, by which the little surfaces corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either. (Faulkner 202)

In the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner, the reader is met with a handful of narrators attempting to tell the legend of Thomas Sutpen, a Mississippi patriarch. The reader is led to interpret a barrage of “facts,” alongside the narrators, in an attempt to find the “truth” behind the motivations of the individuals that populate the Sutpen legend. Each narrator tells the legend based on the information they have about the historical family of Yoknapatawpha County, the County in which the majority of the narrators live, and are informed by their specific cultural trainings. Through a close reading it becomes apparent that finding the objective truth of the legend is not the aim of the novel, that objective truth is perhaps irrecoverable, and that knowledge is subjective. By examining not just *what* is said, but *who* is saying it, and more importantly, to whom, this essay seeks to construct an argument that the novel's structure is one that uses story-telling to mirror the process of the perpetuation of a social hierarchy's ideology, where the ability to narrate represents social authority over cultural ideology. Further, as the character-narrators attempt to uncover the motivations of individuals in a social hierarchy, the individual's relation to social narrative is brought into question. In the novel, the word “love” recurs in different contexts as it relates to the relationships between individuals and the society they are a part of; however, as Quentin Compson repeatedly declares, existing explanations are “not love” (258). In my analysis of the text I will use the word “love” as a signifier of the

individual beyond the confines of social position in order to further examine the relationship between the individual and the greater society in a culture based on a distinct hierarchy.

The action of *Absalom, Absalom!* takes place within the narration of the character-narrators Mr. Compson, his son Quentin, Rosa Coldfield, and Shreve. The Sutpen legend, in its processes of narration, represents the creation of a historiography. Although it may appear that the focus of the novel is the characters being narrated about, those of the Sutpen legend—the story of an illusive patriarch, social love triangles, and the murders that arise out of them at the end of the Civil War—they are more accurately only the means the novel employs to create both the character-narrators of the present and the relationships between them. What this implies is that to focus upon the “facts” of the novel, to try to find the “truth” about the Sutpen legend, would be to rely on an unstable center. Instead, by zooming out the critical lens, focusing not on finding the “truth” of what is being said, but the patterns at work in the ways that information, whether true or false, is conveyed, establishes a more consistent center. As Peter Brooks states in his essay “Incredulous Narration: Absalom, Absalom!,” “If we are ever to be able to define the status of plot in this novel, we will first have to discover the motives of storytelling” (253). This essay will use the patterns of these narrations to examine the social hierarchy at work in American society, and further, to examine the effect it has on the individuals that exist within it.

In his essay “Designing Sutpen: Narrative and Its Relationship to Historical Consciousness in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Eric Casero states, that the novel is “the historically and ideologically determined processes by which narratives are created and disseminated among cultures and people” (86). Concurrently, a subtle hierarchy of the speaker-listener relationship is established that represents the social hierarchy of the society that the characters are a part of; because, culturally speaking, ideology is “disseminated” from cultural

authorities to the people positioned to receive them. This hierarchy exists on multiple levels between father and son; men and women; white and Black; and finally, North and South. The last binary suggests a criticism of the re-unified America as the North takes on the authority of writing the South's history, having won the War, and further exemplifying the resilience of power structures.

By looking at the distinctions in narrative mode between Rosa and Quentin, a relational dynamic of gender, class, and age is revealed. This relational dynamic is prompted by the "quaint, stiffly formal request which was actually a summons" for Quentin to visit Rosa at her house (5). The language used by the authorial narrator to describe the note Quentin received is telling of his social obligation to a woman of Rosa's age and social position despite her now being impoverished. The note was more than just a "formal request," it was a "summons," a word with legal connotations. While Rosa's current reality is that of an "orphan" and a "pauper," because of her family's social history in the town of Jefferson, she is entitled to privileges that would not be afforded to a man, such as Wash Jones, who had always been poor to the town (13). More than this, she still maintains ownership, or at least occupancy, of her father's house, which through property entitles her as a landowner, a gentlewoman. In fact, while "Quentin already knew" about the Sutpen legend, as "It was a part of his twenty years' heritage," Rosa's "summons" is the act that sets in motion the narrations for the rest of the novel, as it is the catalyst for Mr. Compson, Quentin's father, to tell his understanding of the story. Further, it brings it to the forefront of Quentin's mind as a means to "*tell about the South*" when teased by his northern peers at Harvard (7, 142). However, while Rosa has the authority to summon Quentin, and even to "speak" in the novel, the majority of her narrations are either ignored, as Quentin "was not even listening to her," or doubted, as when Quentin thinks "*she dont mean*

*that*" (140, 5). Further, the majority of her narration centers on her experiences at the Sutpen plantation at the end of the Civil War when the men were absent. These aspects of her narration, documenting the relationship among her, Clytie, and Judith, do not figure into the narratives of the other speakers, because they do not involve the men of the narrative. In this way, what is being narrated reflects what is happening at the level of narration; as what Rosa says, as a woman, is not privileged, despite her direct experiences with the Sutpen family. Despite the undermining of her authority, she still maintains the ability to inform the text. Her characterizations of Thomas Sutpen as a "*demon*" later affect the way Quentin and Shreve, and even Mr. Compson, narrate their versions of the legend (5). These aspects of Rosa's role as narrator in the novel represent the complex position of a gentlewoman in the social hierarchy, as she is able to affect the men's narrations, but not to claim narrative authority.

Rosa and Quentin occupy a similar place in the narrative hierarchy as they are both privileged and undermined relationally. This is visible in multiple ways, but for now, by looking beyond the distinctions of the speaker-listener relationship of who speaks and who listens in whose presence, I will examine the *way* in which they tell the Sutpen legend. In other words, by looking at the embellishments of the speakers, hierarchical distinctions are visible as well. Rosa and Quentin approach the "text" in a conservative manner, exhibiting a restraint of embellishment. Although Rosa's speech is characterized by her social training and her poetic tendency of "demonising," her story is told based on either her own experiences or what she has learned from "listening beyond closed doors" (225, 47). Though the "listening beyond closed doors" implies an element of speculation on her part, it is distinct from the character-narrator-authorities because her speculation is informed *by* the social authorities. In example, her view of Thomas Sutpen as a "demon" alludes to the fact that he "wasn't a gentleman... [and had] a name

which nobody ever heard before,” an aspect of his social position that places him beneath her family (135, 9). Through this, she enacts the hierarchy because she does not attempt to overstep her “place;” she listens to the knowledge of those superior to her, “demonises” those who do attempt to over step *their* “place,” Thomas Sutpen, and in doing so, upholds the hierarchy on either side of her position. To this extent, as a narrator, Rosa has social agency: to preserve the hierarchy of which she is a part.

Although Quentin is of the gentlemen class, and in that regard “superior” to Rosa, he is “still young enough to do what she wants,” which places him in a liminal space (8). Quentin remains in this liminal position throughout the novel, as he is first “made [to] spend a whole afternoon” listening to Rosa, while also subject to his father’s authority, and then at Harvard, through mockery, subject to the voice of northerners (5). This position is further expressed within the text through the way in which Quentin narrates to Shreve what he knows of the Sutpen legend. While Mr. Compson and Shreve center their narrations on what is not known, therefore enabling them to espouse their own ideas, Quentin’s narration pertains to what, like Rosa, he has either been told or experienced firsthand. During Quentin’s major narrative section, he is narrating the part of the Sutpen legend that his grandfather has told his father, and what Thomas Sutpen in turn had told his grandfather. While this section provides Quentin with narrative authority, through constantly stating “Grandfather said,” or “so he told Grandfather,” Quentin essentially defers his authority to figures of greater authority than his own (178). Further, throughout this narrative Shreve repeatedly interrupts Quentin’s narration, adding flourishes, or interjecting to correct Quentin, such as to say, of Thomas Sutpen’s birthplace, that “there wasn’t any West Virginia” (179). This style of narration is analogous to what is said of Quentin in the opening chapter, that “his body was an empty hall...he was not a being, an entity,

he was a commonwealth,” a description that, while being consistent with the narrative, has a greater significance in that it explicitly depicts Quentin as a character who lacks an independent identity (7). Aspects of Quentin’s narrative style are consistent in Mr. Compson’s as well, they each defer to previous authorities, such as “Grandfather;” however, Mr. Compson possesses distinct narrative abilities that position him as more privileged, narratologically speaking.

As a gentleman, although Mr. Compson isn’t physically present in the first chapter, he is enabled to enter the scene in a parenthetical statement in order to explain, *and* contradict, what Rosa told Quentin was her motivation for telling him the Sutpen story. Rosa says that she wanted Quentin to “write about it,” and “submit it to the magazines” (symbolically affecting the North’s discourse on the South), and to “remember kindly then the old woman” who told him; however, both Quentin and Mr. Compson suggest alternatives. First, Quentin (dis)qualifies it by thinking, “*she dont mean that...It’s because she wants it told;*” next, Mr. Compson rejects her statement completely by saying, “It’s because she will need [a man] to go with her... yet one still young enough to do what she wants” (5). This ability, coupled with stylistic markers, establishes Mr. Compson as the greatest authoritative voice in the novel, despite his being one of the least informed characters. These stylistic markers are many, and begin in his first narrative chapter as he picks up directly from the authorial narrator with only quotation marks, not signal phrases, to delineate speakers.

In Mr. Compson’s second narrative chapter, he is given the privilege of speaking without quotation marks and only italicized signal phrases to mark him as speaker. What this signifies is that Mr. Compson is an equally authoritative, socially speaking, narrator as the authorial narrator is presumed to be. Although the chapter narrated by Rosa is also free of quotation marks, it is italicized, and later revealed as not being listened to. Therefore, while it would appear that Rosa

is given a distinct narrative authority by being free of quotations, her narration is actually positioned as less than if it had quotation marks, because it is italicized. This is further evidenced in the way that Mr. Compson's narration plays into Shreve's narration later in the novel, because while Shreve may refute it, based on previously unknown facts, he cannot ignore it, it must be dealt with. Rosa's narration, on the other hand, remains contained within her chapter.

In Mr. Compson's final chapter of narration he is prompted by a letter that was written from Charles Bon to his fiancé Judith Sutpen near the end of the Civil War. Mr. Compson uses this letter as a justification of Bon's "love" for Judith, but before he allows Quentin to read the letter he narrates in order to explain to Quentin its significance (102). This narration effectively diminishes the authority of both Quentin and the characters of the past as Quentin must be told the significance of the letter, supposing that he would not be able to make sense of what the characters of the past were saying. Further, this chapter directly precedes Quentin's trip to the Sutpen plantation with Rosa. In this regard it acts as Mr. Compson's final opportunity to inform Quentin, before he is allowed to experience it directly for himself. In a similar way, the story of the Sutpen legend being told to Quentin as he is "preparing for Harvard" represents the Southern gentle-born characters of Rosa and Mr. Compson reinforcing his cultural heritage before departing to experience the North. This represents a final act of authority on their part before Quentin is enabled to gain his social authority by attending college. This assumption of authority is further displayed in the speaking relationship between Quentin and his father throughout. As Stephen Ross states in his book *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice: Speech and Writing in Faulkner*, "Quentin is not permitted to assume the oratorical voice in a speech scene with his father" (228). Quentin is able to ask questions and respond in brief affirmations, in other words he is allowed to



gain more information from his father, but the act of narrative construction is denied him, what Ross describes as a “debilitating role” (226).

Further, while Clytie Sutpen would be the most authoritative over the text, as she is the only Sutpen family member presumed to be alive, she not being allowed to narrate reveals her social position as a Presenting-Black woman in the South. Despite the fact that she is Thomas Sutpen’s daughter, and present for the majority of the events of the Sutpen legend, she is the daughter of a slave, and socially speaking, given no claim to the Sutpen legacy or the cultural narrative except through the narrations of white characters. Thus, like Rosa, she can affect narrative, but not “speak.” This is analogous to Mr. Compson’s reference to slaves carrying information from the Sutpen plantation to the town of Jefferson—they are allowed to inform the white citizens, but they are not allowed directly “narrate” (62).

Turning now to the scenes that take place at Harvard a more complicated layer of social authority is established as well. These scenes are almost entirely framed within a letter (divided in two) from Mr. Compson, “attenuating” Mr. Compson’s authority over Quentin (141). In this way, the narratives of Quentin and Shreve are framed within the narrative of Quentin’s father. Likewise, the first chapter at Harvard is contained, other than the authorial narrator’s speech and Mr. Compson’s letter, within a parenthetical statement. This further signifies the way in which Quentin’s narrations are subjugated to other speakers, first his father’s, then Shreve’s. Although the preceding chapters documented the social hierarchy of the South, the scenes at Harvard give rise to a vision of America in which the North is given narrative authority over the South. This can be attributed to the fact that the North won the Civil War and therefore gets to determine the historiography of the nation, including the South.

This is first implied by Bon's letter that Mr. Compson gives to Quentin at the conclusion of his narrative chapters. In it, Bon tells Judith of the story behind the letter's construction, saying:

*If I were a philosopher I should deduce and derive a curious and apt commentary on the times and augur of the future from this letter...a sheet of notepaper with, as you can see, the best of French watermarks dated seventy years ago, salvaged (stolen if you will) from the gutted mansion of a ruined aristocrat; and written upon in the best of stove polish manufactured not twelve months ago in a New England factory. (102)*

Directly, the letter represents the America that is to be at the end of the Civil War, because as Bon goes on to say, it is already clear that the North is going to win the war (104). Taken in this context the paper on which the letter is written represents the South, and the North, what is being written, is represented by the stove polish. As the South, then, is represented by a blank sheet (except for the "*French watermarks*") signifies that the South will become, in the losing of the War, a blank slate for history to be written upon. In this way, an authority through "*conquer[ing]*" is granted to the North (104). Further, that the letter contains "*French watermarks dated seventy years ago*" signifies that the structure of the South did not originate in the South, but was "*salvaged*." Elsewhere in the novel the Mississippi River is referred to as the "geological umbilical" that "not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature," a phrase that insinuates the South and North are ideologically connected, the one dependent upon the other (208). These statements create a significant historical connection not just between the North and the South in the United States of America, but also ties them back to the "*aristocrat[ic]*" society from which they originated.

In the first chapter, when Rosa states that “Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man,” she is affirming this idea as one typical in the South (5). This indictment establishes a direct criticism of the way in which the students at Harvard treat Quentin with mockery, saying, “*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*” (142). That these statements are constructed not as questions, which they are, but as declaratives, signifies that the statements are not meant in earnest, but as gestures of humiliation. Further, it sets up the narrative relationship that is to exist between Quentin and Shreve throughout the rest of the novel, in which Quentin tells what he knows of the Sutpen legend, punctuated by Shreve’s commentary, and is then followed by a narrative dominated by Shreve in which Quentin repeatedly says, “*He sounds just like Father*” (147). As “*Father*” is capitalized it can be taken to signify more than mere genealogical relation, because when Mr. Compson, Rosa, and Shreve use the word father it is demarcated by the lowercase. In that this occurs when Shreve begins speaking, as Shreve “*sounds just like Father*,” it can be taken as Ross states, that “*Father*” represents authority over the narrative in relation to Quentin (221). In this way, Mr. Compson’s narrative authority over Quentin, instead of only “attenuating” with the letter, is transferred to Shreve, due to Quentin’s (S)otherness. Although Quentin, like Clytie, should have more authority over the narrative than Shreve does, because “It was a part of his twenty years’ heritage,” he is given a lesser position of narrative authority. He is able to narrate to Shreve, to tell him his “heritage,” but Shreve in turn is able to reconstruct the narrative to suit his own beliefs.

These processes of narration establish first the hierarchy at work within the Southern society, but then transfer that hierarchy from the South to the North. Beyond unifying the North and South as a hierarchical society, it then positions the North as an authority over the South

making a criticism on the North's ability to "narrate" American history. This act of narrative historiography is further represented in the text by the ways in which different narrators assume authority over the Sutpen legend, using base historical fact to narrate the legend in their own image, meaning that the content of the narratives further signifies the speakers' social authority. That this ability is not granted to each character on an equal level represents the hierarchy of authority already established within the narrative structure; however, while certain characters are given the ability to narrate the legend as they choose there are limitations to what they are allowed to express.

While the ability to narrate represents social authority, and as the relationships between speakers and listeners represents the social hierarchy, the voice itself becomes synonymous with agency, as the way in which each narrator embellishes on what is known of the factual Sutpen history represents the identity of the specific narrator. While in the opening chapters these embellishments can be perceived as mere flourishes not effecting the "Truth" of the story—such as Rosa's perception of Thomas Sutpen as a demon—as the novel continues, the stories begin to contradict one another. In some instances, such as Shreve and Quentin's rebuttal of Mr. Compson's New Orleans narrative, it appears as if it is through newly recovered facts that the later speakers are able to more accurately portray the events. However, the authorial narrator's imposition that this story is "probably true enough" expresses the idea that while this story is "true enough," it is in the context of a novel that privileges subjectivity over objectivity, making it "true enough" but not True (268).

In the same part of the Sutpen legend, Bon and Henry's trip to New Orleans, Mr. Compson characterizes Bon as a fatalist lawyer, a "cerebral Don Juan," bent on corrupting Henry's "puritan heritage;" and while aspects of this characterization hold true in Shreve's

interpretation of the events, they are reinterpreted into a distinctly different narrative that includes a new character in Bon's history—a lawyer attempting to swindle Bon's mother of her money (86, 248). Further, Shreve characterizes Bon as a hedonist consumed by “horses and clothes and...champagne and gambling and women” which, while in keeping with Mr. Compson's vision of Bon, exaggerates what in Mr. Compson's tale is only of minimal concern. Later, as Shreve continues to narrate, he reveals his own obsessions with sex and drinking, a revelation that informs the reader of Shreve's personalization of Bon's character (242, 250, 258).

These characterizations supersede the original characters of the stories, because they determine how the characters interact with one another, affecting the plot of the Sutpen legend. However, as the events have already occurred, as the majority of the Sutpen family is already dead, the importance of this story-telling is not that it determines the factual past, but that it illuminates the present. As suggested by the “Now” of Shreve's genealogical description, the Sutpen legend continues to matter, although not as history (309). Instead, it matters in that it continues to effect the relationships between the character-narrators, symbolically representing the relationships in a social hierarchy. Eric Casero focuses on the act of the historical construction of consciousness in *Absalom, Absalom!*, stating that the novel “depicts consciousness as a historically and socially determined *system* of events and processes, not as the production of an individual mind or a set of individual minds” (87). However, in the context of a social hierarchy in which certain character-narrators are given more authority over the narrative, or “*system*,” which determines consciousness, that authority provides them with an agency distinct from the subjugated character-narrators. Further, while David H. Evans, in his book *William Faulkner, William James, and the American Pragmatic Tradition*, states that “The individual does not stand under the burden of history; the individual is, and should recognize

itself to be, that history's origin," this is a short sighted view of the practical application of "history" (144). Ultimately, as the individual's idea of history is forced into confrontation with the broader social history, if the voice of social history is enabled, as it is in *Absalom, Absalom!*, to overpower the individual's then the individual can feel overwhelmed. In order to better explain this dichotomy, I will turn to the philosopher Rahel Jaeggi's text *Alienation*, which examines the relationship between the individual and society, to explain how some individuals can become "alienated" while others are not.

Jaeggi's book attempts to define alienation in non-essentialist terms and in order to do so focuses on the act of "appropriation:" the relationship "between what is previously given and what is formable, between taking over and creating, between the subject's sovereignty and its dependence" (39). This relates to the novel in that the telling of the Sutpen legend is also the telling of the South's ideology. As Rosa and Mr. Compson first enact their positions of authority over Quentin by forcing him to listen to their telling, they then express the South's ideals through what they say and how they say it. Once Quentin is at Harvard this process shifts as Shreve begins to mock Quentin's (S)otherness, and then claims authority over what has become "Quentin's" narrative, in that the story represents his heritage. In this sense, while Mr. Compson and Shreve both claim authority over the narrative, in Jaeggi's terms "being the author of [their] own life," Quentin is alienated because he remains in the role of listener, or "appropriator," without gaining the "possibility of expression and action" (Jaeggi 39, 80). While Quentin is portrayed as an "alienated" character in these terms, he is also perhaps the most privileged of those alienated by the South's society. This complicates the way in which Quentin's alienation can be talked about because while women, Blacks, and the poor, are largely unable to escape their alienated position, what makes them alienated, Quentin is only alienated, while in the

South, because of his age. In other words, Quentin will (potentially) no longer be socially-alienated once he is an adult. However, that his position of alienation remains present at Harvard because of his (S)otherness, he adopts a fatalistic view, saying “*I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever,*” which in the context of his suicide before the year is over, reveals the detriment of his felt alienation (222).

“‘And now,’ Shreve said, ‘we’re going to talk about love,’” but it isn’t Shreve alone who talks about love; the word “love” is mentioned throughout the novel, by every narrator, in every chapter except the final. It is clearly an important subject in the novel, therefore, what occurs before the last chapter must contain a marked significance if it can cause love to be a “perfectly dead subject,” as it is not continued to the novel’s closing (253, 59).

In the scene of the novel prior to the last chapter, Quentin and Shreve have a shared vision of what took place leading up to Henry Sutpen’s murder of Bon. While this vision is “shared” by both boys, this is not to say that they both develop the vision through the same means. Shreve joyfully envisions Bon as a narcissistic ideal, a hedonist with all of New Orleans pleasures at his disposal. Quentin on the other hand, through his “hunched” posture that makes him look “somehow curiously smaller,” is disappearing into the story, his “*Father’s*” story, Shreve’s story. It is through this act that Quentin ultimately empathizes dispassionately with Henry Sutpen, and later with Bon as well (259, 267, 280). Though it would be faulty judgment to assume that what the boys envision is factually correct, the act in and of itself implies a higher meaning as it utilizes simultaneity to create a unified whole, “where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false,” the authorial narrator’s definition of love (253). An important concept at the time the vision occurs, because Quentin as repeatedly rejected Shreve’s attempts to define love. The vision, despite its faults, serves as a disruption to the narrative in the

same way that Clytie's touch upon Rosa's arm disrupts her social training. Although Clytie's touch reveals to Rosa the intimacy that can be shared between individuals beyond their social positions, the vision shared by Quentin and Shreve in essence does the opposite by ending in Shreve's reification of Bon's murder being caused simply by "*miscegenation*" (285).

There are further telling aspects of this scene that serve to reiterate the difference in the boys' approach to the vision, as there is a distinction created by the clothes they are wearing in the cold "tomblike" room (276). Shreve, portrayed as the "Canadian, the child of blizzards" is wearing a "bathrobe with an overcoat above it, the collar turned up about his ears;" while Quentin, "the Southerner, the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat" is "in the thin suitable clothing which he had brought from Mississippi, his overcoat...lying on the floor." The importance of this difference is exemplified by a previous statement in which the authorial narrator states that "They did not retreat from the cold. They both bore it as though in deliberate flagellant exaltation of physical misery transmogrified into the spirits' travail of [Henry and Bon]" (276). In this sense, as bearing the cold serves to unify the boys' at Harvard with the boys' in the Civil War, Shreve's shielding himself while Quentin remains exposed expresses the differences in the ways they relate to the tale. Shreve has a physiological padding between him and the story, while Quentin allows himself, his fatalism suggests resigns himself, to remain exposed to it exactly as he was in Mississippi. The change in setting only changes the voice of narration, not Quentin's relation to it. Shreve, a voice of power, is content with constructing a historiography that reflects social norms. However, for Quentin, a character that doesn't shield himself from the physical atmosphere, he is not satisfied by these simplifications because he still feels the visceral experience.



Beyond this difference in the boys' attire, there is also the complication of the vision's telling; and, as "speaking" in the novel is an act of power, how scenes are conveyed, by whom, has a marked significance. First the vision is narrated by the authorial narrator, a passage disrupted by Shreve beginning to speak again in order to justify the rationality of imagining it in this way, and followed by the authorial narrator again taking up the discourse. When the authorial narrator breaks off and the vision begins again it is expressed in non-quoted italics which while symbolizing an other-than-verbal discourse, potentially uniting the boys, is also informed by Shreve's diction, such as when he says "*Old Joe*" (Joseph Johnston) and "*Lee*" (Robert E. Lee) as he had referred to "Jeff Davis" and "General Lee," using informal nomenclature, or when he references "*Lorraine Duke*" as he had done for Henry's justification of incest, which continues to privilege Shreve's narrative over Quentin (277, 144, 277, 273). Afterwards, Shreve and the authorial narrator both have brief passages followed by the final vision, then Shreve again verbally narrates. That Quentin is not given any verbal narrative ability, despite the apparent unity of their envisioning, implies that Shreve still maintains an authority that Quentin doesn't possess. Further, that in Shreve's final passage of the chapter he repeatedly says "Aunt Rosa" and is not corrected by Quentin as he had been when their process of narration began, implies Quentin's passivity in the scene, further removing him from authority (286, 142-3). More than this, Shreve's mistaking Rosa for Quentin's "Aunt Rosa" further symbolizes the different ways in which the boys approach the people of the story. Shreve is content to mistake familial relations, as he has already said, "You mean...that there was actually one Southern Bayard or Guinevere who was no kin to you?" a question that is both mocking and telling of the lack of personal understanding Shreve approaches the story with (142). Shreve sees all the characters as more or less interchangeable, depersonalized; whereas Quentin, who has

lived with these people sees them as distinct from one another, as individuals with different experiences and relations to one another. These acts are telling of the historiography that Shreve creates as it satisfies social ideas, but ignores lived experience.

Nonetheless, what this vision offers is an attempt to subvert the speaker-listener relationship, symbolically, a flattening of the social hierarchy heretofore established. This occurs as both boys are allowed their visions, even if through different means and motivations, an act which engages both in simultaneous creation of the Sutpen narrative. This simultaneity of differing views is key in Faulkner's work, *Absalom, Absalom!* not the least among these, as oxymoron and paradox are central among the processes of the novel. Oxymoron is used to describe characters as early as the first page of the novel, and paradox, more importantly, is used to define "love" (3, 253). What the two terms offer as a connecting point is that they consist of simultaneous contradictions, what I propose to be the novel's means of defining the individual. This is important as throughout the novel the narrators have attempted to use "that best of ratiocination," their social understanding and trainings, to determine the motivations that caused the events of the past, inherently writing themselves into the characters, and failing to pin down the individuals, as it "just does not explain" (225, 80). The reason for this failure lies in their oversimplification of individuals' motivations as they do not acknowledge the possibility of these contradictions, that are not contradictions within the individual, but only the broader social context as they don't conform to the "simple" and rigid definitions hierarchy creates of individuals (91).

In Walter J. Slatoff's book *Quest for Failure*, Slatoff examines the many ways in which Faulkner uses oxymoron throughout his works. His conclusion of the function of oxymoron is as follows:

Both terms of an oxymoron are in a sense true. One's recognition that the contradiction is apparent rather than real does not eliminate the tension between the terms, for the conflicting elements remain. Neither negates the other. The oxymoron, on the one hand, achieves a kind of order, definiteness, and coherence by virtue of the clear and sharp antithesis it involves. On the other, it moves toward disorder and incoherence by virtues of its qualities of irresolution and self-contradiction. Its validity is usually intuitive and emotional rather than logical or intellectual. It does not so much explore or analyze a condition as render it forcefully. (86-7)

Oxymoron, in this view, explains what will ultimately be the dissent against the rigid logic of social ordering. As "Its validity is... intuitive and emotional," it serves as the counter argument to the simplification that reason based approaches have for understanding historical incidents. Further, greater significance can be drawn from what Slatoff proposes than from any one use of oxymoron. In that "Neither negates the other" it can be interpreted, within the novel, that although Quentin may contest the socially-minded resolution of the Sutpen legend, he doesn't reject it either. This fact stresses the point that whether or not Shreve's interpretation of the events is true or not, the place of affectation for Quentin remains. It is not understanding, or finding the truth, that Quentin is ultimately consumed by, but more so the struggle of an individual whose voice is overwhelmed by society. Quentin's (not)objection is not to factuality, but to simplicity. His approach to the story is personal and therefore struggling after something more than its social function.

While Rosa's narrative is ostensibly ignored by Quentin, she offers an analogy to the separation between Quentin and Shreve's approach to the narrative. When she arrives at the Sutpen plantation after Bon has been murdered by Henry, Clytie stops her upon the stairs with a

touch on the arm. Rosa is a character who is repeatedly defined by her “listening beyond closed doors,” an act which highlights the lack of intimacy that she has with the other characters throughout her youth (47). Coupled with the death of her mother in childbirth, an absentee conscientious objector father, and a married and estranged sister, Rosa is isolated with only the depersonalized social training of her class to define her as an individual. When Clytie, the presenting Black bi-racial “slave” Sutpen sister, touches her “*white woman’s flesh*,” it causes her to realize that “*there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both*” (111). It is a personalization that Rosa as heretofore been denied, and that Clytie is essentially the antithesis of her class, it causes Rosa to understand, if only by complicating the neatness of her social ideas, that there is more to the individual than “*body*,” there is the “*I*,” that “*deep existence which we lead, to which the movement of limbs is but a clumsy and belated accompaniment*” (sic 109). In the time that follows, in which Rosa, Clytie, and Judith live together on Sutpen’s Hundred, awaiting Thomas Sutpen’s return, they live “*with no distinction among the three of [them] of age or color but just as to who could build this fire or stir this pot or weed this bed*” (125). In essence, in the absence of the patriarchs the three of them are enabled to live as equals; however, in Rosa’s words, they all “*waited for him: because now he was... all that gave [them] any reason for continuing to exist*” (124). This is the complication of Rosa’s character, she is able to live outside of the confines of her social training, but she is unable to completely uproot its ideology from her consciousness. This fact of Rosa’s character, expressed through her narration, is an almost unresolvable contradiction, as she lives with Clytie and Judith in an egalitarian manner, and yet still awaits the return of the Southern Patriarch to reestablish order.

When Thomas Sutpen returns he sets out to revive his plantation from its ruined state, and as he now has no male heir, because Henry fled after killing Bon, he decides Rosa will be his new wife (132). This act occurs unceremoniously and only as it is necessary to reestablishing the Sutpen line, because “*there was that magic in unkin blood which we call by the pallid name of love*” (135). To say Rosa accepts his proposal would be to say that it was a proposal, which it was not; however, she does go along with it for two months, until the day he “*spoke the bald outrageous words exactly as if he were consulting with Jones or with some other man about a bitch dog or a cow or mare*” and she left (133, 136). Although Rosa never discloses *why* she left the Sutpen plantation, she states that “*there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them*” (134). While it would be speculation to attempt to decipher *what* Sutpen said from Rosa’s meandering speech, that she rejects him implies that she also rejects being the mother of the new-Old South he seeks to establish. Further, that it occurred after her egalitarian experience, suggests that her inability to express the event is the result of the contradiction of consciousness spurred by Clytie’s touch. In this regard, the reader can only assume that whatever it was that Sutpen said caused her to not necessarily resolve her internal contradiction, but to not be able to conscientiously go along with the return of the Old order. Rosa remains (not)-free of her social training, and yet unable to act on it; she remains suspended in the “static rage,” caused by “her impotent yet indomitable frustration,” which she speaks through her “grim haggard amazed voice,” the novel’s oxymoronic series used to describe Rosa (3). Further, that this aspect of the Sutpen legend remains outside of the narrative later constructed at Harvard, symbolizes that the complicated intimate relationships of people from different social classes do not fit within the explanations

that socially based reason provides. In this sense, their relationships don't fit within the process of historiography.

The other attempt to disrupt the South's social hierarchy occurs in Mr. Compson's narrative about Bon and Henry's trip to New Orleans. Although not historically accurate, this tale coincides with the novel's use of complicating the South's "simple and erstwhile untroubled code" as a means of revealing its inherent fallacy in regards to the individual (91). In Mr. Compson's version of this New Orleans trip, told before he knows that Bon and Henry are half-brothers, Mr. Compson assumes that the motivation for the trip, and for Thomas Sutpen's rejection of Bon as suitor for his daughter, was because Bon was married to an "eighth part negro mistress" (214, 80). Though the factual nature of this version of the story is later disproved, what Mr. Compson expresses *through* Bon to Quentin remains key to the text. For Bon, Mr. Compson says, the marriage to the mistress was merely a "morganatic ceremony—a situation which was as much a part of a wealthy young New Orleansian's social and fashionable equipment as his dancing slippers" (80). However, the triviality with which the specific marriage (social ceremony) is treated later becomes a means of fracturing the unity of social training and the individual. Mr. Compson explains this unity by saying that Henry thinks based on a "simple and erstwhile untroubled code in which females were ladies or whores or slaves" (91). Within this code Bon's mistress is not his legal wife, and has no legal relation to him. However, for Henry, who "had grown up with a negro half sister," Clytie, he is compelled to see beyond these legal distinctions even if, socially, he upholds them. This ability to see outside of the social position in which he exists is further reinforced because Bon is engaged to Henry's sister Judith. Henry then exposes the inherent fallacy in the social code by saying that "You give me two and two and you tell me it makes five and it does make five. But there is still the marriage" (94). Henry, in this

telling, cannot accept their ceremonial engagement as an individual, even though he is not immediately willing to reject it, because his social training, like Rosa's, tells him that it is not problematic.

A theme can be derived from the fact that these situations both arise in the context of marriage, a relationship that is supposedly founded on "love." In the South's society, marriage has more to do with "*the magic in unkin blood*," an idea that reveals the ways in which the individual (love) is a complication of the South's hierarchy (marriage), because the individual possesses experiences which do not fit neatly into the positions they occupy. In Mr. Compson's words, "love" is "the corruption itself;" an idea that manifests for Quentin as he is simultaneously overwhelmed by his heritage, and yet unable to reject it (91). This is further revealed symbolically through the narratives of Shreve and Mr. Compson, the novel's character-narrator authorities, as they attempt to resolve Henry's murder of Bon as an act with the sole purpose of upholding societal norms. They each provide a "probably true enough" explanation of this murder based on what they know of the historical "facts" of both the characters and the society they lived in. However, by seeing Quentin as a character unwilling to accept these simple societal explanations illuminates his disposition at the end of the novel and in turn further reveals societal explanations of the individual as insufficient.

Although Quentin "agrees" to Shreve's resolution of Bon's murder, he does so in the same brief affirmation that he used to "agree" with Mr. Compson, saying only "Yes" (287). Contextually then, his agreement does not signify what it otherwise would. While the story, the vision, is "resolved" for Shreve, Quentin continues to bear it, and in the opening paragraph of the following chapter Shreve begins again to mock the South (288). This distinction emphasizes the difference between their approach to the story. Quentin experiences it as an individual because it

is a part of his personal heritage. Shreve on the other hand sees the story as a mere anecdote of the South's culture, in this way he uses it not to gain a new understanding, but as a means of impressing his "preconceived" ideas (that race was the ultimate motivator in Southern relations) upon it, a process that reflects the hierarchy's "*decorous ordering*" (112).

However, that Quentin abandons his rebuttals of Shreve's discourse on "love," as he had done in correcting Shreve's Aunt Rosa statements, is further symbolic of Quentin's social place in regards to narrative construction (143, 175, 258). Quentin's abandoning of his attempts to add his perspective into Shreve's narrative is symbolic of Quentin allowing, reluctantly, his voice to be absent from the broader narrative's significance. Quentin's voice, his will to narrate and to correct Shreve's errors, is silenced by the repetition of dismissal on Shreve's part. Symbolically speaking, Quentin surrenders his agency to Shreve's ideas about the Southern narrative. In this regard, by the end of the novel Quentin has taken up Rosa's position; as his cry at the novel's conclusion, of "I don't hate [the South]" turns inward from a verbal utterance to a thought protestation, he mimics what he thinks was Rosa's development: "maybe it (the voice, the talking, the incredulous and unbearable amazement) had even been a cry aloud once... long ago when she was a girl" (303, 9). A similar aspect of Rosa's narrative is displayed at the end of her narrative chapter as she parrots what she has heard the town of Jefferson say about her: "*They will have told you how I came back home. Oh yes, I know: 'Rosie Coldfield, lose him, weep him,' 'warped bitter orphaned country stick,'*" etc. (136). Although she knows the truth of her experience, as to why she abandoned Thomas Sutpen's engagement she does not correct them, she merely continues her existence of "outrage" (9).

The town, within the novel, acts as a socially constructed narrative that creates rational ideas about its citizens; "Because the town now believed that it knew" (31). While this narrative



is not directly analogous with Mr. Compson and Shreve, the way they are with one another, it still acts as a more privileged voice than the individual. Further, the distinction created between Rosa and Quentin on one side of the spectrum, and Mr. Compson, Shreve, the town, and potentially the authorial narrator as well, on the other, is that while Rosa and Quentin speak to the personal and emotional, the other speakers rely on reason. That Henry Sutpen, Quentin's analogue in his and Shreve's vision, is portrayed as "a man who lived by instinct and not reason" by Mr. Compson further exemplifies both a potential reason for Quentin's association with him, and explicitly creates the dichotomy between "reason" and emotion ("instinct") (91). In that regard the authority of the social structure alienates the emotional perspective of the individual, as it would otherwise complicate the neat code by which people are ordered. In John W. Hunt's reading of the novel, "The Theological Center of Absalom, Absalom!," there is a tension between what he describes as the "Stoic" and "Christian" traditions, a conflict between "knowledge" and "love" (130, 128). However, Hunt's assertion that this love must rest upon the Christian tradition seems misguided, as love in the novel is never arrived at, it is meaning is deferred, and only the union of love and hate, is offered as resolution. What this implies is that "tradition is judged but not rejected," and instead, beyond any tradition, what remains is the individual's approach to understanding (Hunt 136). In this sense, the hierarchy can use historiography to further reproduce itself, as it would offer the social history as a proof for its own justification, but it perpetually falls short of understanding "*What it's like there.*"

Although love doesn't continue into the final chapter of the novel it is replaced by "hate" (303). Quentin, the first narrator of the novel to mention love, is also the first narrator to mention hate. In this first thought-utterance he joins the two, thinking "*Maybe you have to know anybody awful well to love them but when you have hated somebody for forty-three years you will know*

*them awful well*" (9). In this regard, "love" and "hate" are unified by the idea of "know[ing]." To break this statement down further "to know" precedes "love," but "hate" can enable "know[ing]," creating a spectrum of emotion based knowledge juxtaposed against the logic based knowledge that characterizes the speakers-of-authority. This functions further in the course of the novel as the concluding passage of the text is Shreve asking Quentin why he hates the South (303). That Quentin replies "I dont hate it" has a layered signification; first, it is a personal statement that both contrasts and rejects the ideology based narrative that has preceded it; second, it is a statement that protests Shreve's rational approach to understanding Quentin's relationship to the South. Quentin's relationship is one that is paradoxical in that he is overwhelmed by the structure that restricts his voice, but nonetheless connected to it on an emotional level. This is the unity of "love" and "hate," that they express a non-rational approach to knowing. That Quentin, in the final chapter, admits to Shreve that he "dont know" the South further explains this relation (*sic* 289). When Quentin later says "I dont hate it," he is merely reaffirming what he has already said, because while he can "know" it based on the rationality of social ideas, he doesn't claim to "know" its complexity on a personal, emotional, level. As Shreve's social narrative reduces the South to an abstract devoid of emotional nuance, Quentin's "I dont" represents a dissent at the personal level. Quentin's dissent is an affirmation of the individuals who populate *the South*, people whose complexity lies outside of, though they are informed by, societal ideas.

A similar paradox exists for Rosa as she describes herself as "*all polymath love's androgynous advocate*" as a way of expressing her understanding of love beyond the limitations of the social order (117). While her isolation as a child caused her to be depersonalized and socialized completely through Southern etiquette, it also enabled her to understand love outside of the context of familial interaction. In the novel, this means that she understood love first as an

abstract idea outside the limitation of social organization; more accurately, she created her own understanding of the word as she had no social point of reference to base it on. The Southern etiquette that originally taught her was limited to explaining the way in which people of different race, gender, and class were supposed to interact with one another, but it didn't teach her "love." When she later began interacting with Clytie and Judith on a personal level, her ideas of love were personalized because she finally experienced intimate interaction. When Thomas Sutpen returned and they became engaged to be married, Rosa's new personalization of love ultimately can be seen as causing her to reject his proposal that "*was not love*" (131). In this regard, although Rosa continues to celebrate the Confederates through her poetry, she symbolically rejects it, through her rejection of Thomas Sutpen, as it relates to the personal.

To continue explaining Quentin and Rosa as analogues, in the opening chapter Quentin is described as "chafing," and that Rosa has confined herself within her father's house for forty-three years because of a "grim and implacable unforgiving," represents the uncomfortable restriction they both find themselves in regarding the engagement with the broader social world (9). Further, that each narrates based on what they have heard from an authority's experience or experienced themselves, without altering narrative, symbolizes their social position in juxtaposition to the narrators-of-authority. The novel's character-narrators-of-authority, Mr. Compson and Shreve, instead, create the historiography of the Sutpen legend as they please. This act first rejects the idea of historiography as factual, and in turn, symbolically rejects the idea of a naturally formed social structure. Historiography is shown then to be directly functional and analogous to the social group creating it. In this sense, the "truth" of social organization is shown to be created by the "*Father's*" that narrate it, as the Confederate Generals were "generals not through training in contemporary methods or aptitude for learning them, but by the divine right,"

a right they have conveniently divined (Faulkner 276). Rosa and Quentin then serve to symbolize the individual in a society whose structure is “narrated” by those with cultural authority.

Although there are individuals with the ability to narrate the ideological structure of society, it cannot be overlooked that they are also deferring back to previous authorities, whether in acceptance or rejection. In this sense, the individual is always deferred, socially speaking, to their social position, and those who held it previously. What this amounts to is an oversimplification of even the empowered social “voices;” they can narrate the text through their image, but in doing so they surrender their emotional complexity. In other words, they become reduced to the simplicity of the ever-evolving social narrative. In example, Mr. Compson’s father was a lawyer, as he is now a lawyer; accordingly, Mr. Compson depicts Bon as a law student because “he would be, would almost have to, since only that could have made his residence bearable” (81). Also, in that both Bon and Henry went to his alma mater suggest a further connection between the men. In this way, Mr. Compson is more likely the “countrified” Henry Sutpen. As he depicts Bon with great intimacy and as the cultural tutor of Henry can suggest that he is not referring to Bon and Henry, but another man who occupied Bon’s role in his own experience. Likewise, that Shreve repeatedly characterizes Bon as a youth only wanting the approval of his father (an aspect unique to his telling), and as he further creates Bon through his own likeness, as previously stated, signifies that he too is using the ability to narrate to express his own desires (285). Thus, these two, the character-narrator-authorities, also struggle with the depersonalization of power. In that they, as opposed to Quentin, are not the focal or protagonist causes the reader to empathize with Quentin in a way that they are not led to empathize with the other males. Mr. Compson and Shreve are able to narrate, and to express themselves through their narrations, but their thoughts outside of their narrations are absent. In this way, the

authoritative voice is dispassionate. This is not to dismiss the clear authority they exert over both the text and the other narrators, but to further emphasize the inhumanity of the power structure they are a part of. Their personalization of the narrative then is complicated beyond mere social authority as they come to symbolize a longing, on the part of the socially empowered, for their own humanity in a culture that creates strict delineations without concern for the individual regardless of position. What this implies is that in a social hierarchy while the characters of power, the cultural narrators, have the ability to shape that culture, they do not have the power to directly express themselves in it. They become the disembodied voices of their respective social positions. In this regard, they are as confined to the voice of their social position as the disempowered characters; again, this is not to downplay the social power they have, but to express the complicated nature of hierarchy, as it functions through the depersonalization of all its members.

Although the socially ordained narrative authorities are able to narrate and recreate the events of the past, they are not qualified to narrate the motivations of the individual (“not love”), this creates a tension, visible in Quentin’s body language, as he listens over and over to the other character-narrators attempting to document these individuals. Through this, a distinct dichotomy arises between the power and limitation of social narrators, as they have the ability to shape, but not to contain the individual. The individual always exceeds what can be socially determined, and therefore, while still subjugated by society’s structure, remains something more, something perhaps ineffable. This is the function of oxymoron, as it creates a new meaning through the “tension between the terms” (Slatoff 86). Despite Quentin and Shreve’s moments of shared imagining, unifying themselves with Henry and Bon in the text, they are still limited to identifying with these characters, which isn’t quite understanding, but is still something more

than the distance created through mere narrative authority. This can be linked to the way in which Rosa, a socially conscious character, overcomes her social training in the absence of the gentlemen and interacts with Clytie in an egalitarian manner. However, at the end of the novel Shreve continues to limit his understanding by mocking the South, and trying to delineate Quentin's paradoxical relationship to it, by asking him why he hates it. In this view, Quentin's concluding utterance that he doesn't hate it, gives him an authority previous not granted as his verbal, and thought, statements end the novel expressing his subjective view. However, as his statement moves from verbal to thought, it can be taken symbolically to represent the continued repression of the individual. Quentin, ultimately, can utter to himself his feelings as an individual, but, like Rosa's narrative chapter, they go largely ignored by the overarching social narrative. Historiography has a social function; it serves to delineate power and place. In this sense, historiography always reflects the power structure that creates it while ostracizing the characters that experienced it. It is not a lived history, it is cold, "tomblike," and only capable of signifying the power structure it reflects. In this, the novel offers a grim view of post-Civil War, and twentieth century America, as not defeating the power structure that utilized slavery, but merely transferring it from one "*Father*" to the next. Suggesting further that, as these hierarchies are self-justifying through the process of socially-reasoned historiography, the personal relations between members of social groups will always be reduced to terms that serve to justify that society's structure.

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