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Equivocation through Narratology in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Abstract

This paper establishes a relationship between the uncertainty of the narrated past and narratology. It focuses on how narratology and vagueness illuminate each other, which is a characteristic of the modern and postmodern fiction. The paper examines how each narrator's version of the Sutpen legend leads to dubiousness. Of the four epistemic forms of narration, William Faulkner aims to present his epistemological belief that perfect knowledge is ultimately unobtainable, yet mankind continues to strive toward it.

Keywords: Faulkner, uncertain, narrator, the past, vague.

Introduction

Through the intentional creation of various narrators in *Absalom, Absalom,* Faulkner foregrounds his fundamental epistemological incertitude. In *Absalom, Absalom,* the truth is always ambivalent. In the novel, Faulkner foregrounds the problem of epistemology by intentionally creating equivocations in narrating history. In his approach to *Absalom, Absalom,* Cleanth Brooks (1963) writes that "the concept of *Absalom* must sooner or later confront methodological, ontological, and epistemological uncertainties about reading, about what is and is not in the book, and thus—more radically—uncertainties about how we are and are not in the world" (p. 226). *Absalom, Absalom* lays ostensive fact, informed guesswork, and unrestricted conjecture, with the inference that any and all reconstructions of the past stay irrecoverable and therefore imaginative. The work demonstrates that such an etymologizing of the past cannot be done with certitude, or even that there are factual and reasonable inconsistencies that cannot be vanquished. It shows that history is essentially an excogitated story. Any version of history includes a particular form of anagoge, fantasy and fictionalization. History, therefore, cannot be free from them as long as it has any agents that invent it. Occupied with the events of the past, the narrating characters in the novel do not simply gather information from the past and show a fact or a truth, but they channelize themselves imaginatively into the events and novelize history. The novel commemorates an element of fiction rather than that of fact in dealing with history. To put it in an extreme, any historical schema of the past is fiction though it confesses itself as delivering a truth. In fact, Faulkner uses four narrators who try to retrace the past shady story of the Sutpen family by their imagination. The use of various viewpoints enriches complication to a story that is full of complexities itself. Because each narrator infuses his/her personal opinions and bigotries into the story, none of them can

be considered reliable. Once Faulkner himself said that in *Absalom* he had made the multiplicity of the truth its central theme – that is, the truth varies according to the person who sees it or interprets it (Gwynn & Blotner, 1959, p. 273). As Richard H. Brodhead writes (1983):

> Keeping a book like *Absalom, Absalom!* in mind helps us toward a more interesting reading. It helps us see that each critical version of Faulkner is indeed a fabrication, someone's making, not bare truth; but that they are not for that reason incapable of yielding truth— since the "truth" of Faulkner can never be known anyway except as it is fashioned by his interpreters. (p. 15)

The plot of the novel certainly unfolds with the narrating characters fronting the mystery of why Thomas Sutpen prevents the marriage between his daughter and Charles Bon, and why Henry Sutpen murders Charles. Hugh M. Ruppersburg (1989) says that "unreliable narrating characters, narrative perspective which leave all facts in doubt, which indeed deny the possibility of ever discerning the reality of an individual or event- these define truth as illusory and unknowable, perhaps even as an ideal and perfect knowledge which simply does not exist (p. 28). The strategic ploy in the novel is especially set in its dramatization of the narrating characters' effort to claim factual veracity in their own interpretation while rebuffing others' statements and revising the previous answer several times. We might go back to Brooks' remark that "much of history is really a kind of imaginative construction" (Brooks, 1963, p. 53).

Main Text

Absalom, Absalom is a novel that chronicles the rise and fall of the Sutpen family in Yoknapatawpha County, an imaginary world designed by Faulkner to represent the American South. The novel consists of nine chapters, which can be approximately divided into two parts, each using two of the novel's four major narrators. The first part of the novel involves Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson as the two main characters, each subsequently telling Quentin a story of the Sutpen family, while the second part involves a synergetic narration of the Sutpen story by

Quentin and Shreve. It incarnates Faulkner's narrative pattern of incised circles to gain the incessant representation of reality and his cognizance of the hollowness in conveying truth through verbal communication. These narratives are similar to engraved circles each having own narrative cores and each capturing different compasses. In other words, each narrator endeavors to embellish the meager and jumbled set of facts through imagination and conjecture; thus, no one's narrative can avoid pleonastic circularity and all culminate with uncertainty. Polek (1977) notes that "as a novelist, Faulkner knew that nearly all significant problems are too large and complex to be contained by any single opinion or point of view" (p. 237). *Absalom, Absalom* is also one of Faulkner's endeavors to convey his consideration of the South. Faulkner focuses on the conjectural and the imaginative nature of historical rehabilitation, as he "rejects a cherished shibboleth of traditional historians and novelists: that 'facts,' 'data,' and 'documents' exist as objective givers" (Mellard, 1987, p. 91). Faulkner does not solely supersede history with prevarication, but he demands a re-evaluation of the very nature of history, disclosing that its core is found in the imaginative features and finding personal goals and emotional circumstances that stimulate events. Consequently, none of the narrators' versions of the Sutpen story is reliable.

The first chapter of *Absalom, Absalom* is narrated by Rosa Coldfield. Of the four main narrators in the novel, only Rosa's version is based on eyewitness proof. She is the only one who has been directly involved in Sutpen's story. Unlike the Compsons, she is a dynamic partaker in the events narrated; therefore, her approach, being the earliest and the most connected to the actual story, is more deformed than the other versions because she is unable to view the story with impartiality. Later in Rosa's life, because of her affinity to the Sutpen family, her story does not seem to be reliable. Of reliability, Rimmon-Kenan (1983) says that "the main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value-scheme" (p. 100). In fact, being far away from the narrated incidents gives the narrator objectivity while the affinity of the narrators to the narrated subject will dilute and even screen their vision. The first tale of *Absalom*, Miss Rosa's narrative, demonstrates a strong emotional attachment to Thomas Sutpen, who is the very core of her

narrative. Reed (1973), asserting the fact that Rosa is a partaker in the event of which she narrates, says she fictionalizes the whole event to make it sustainable for herself; therefore, her version is the remotest from reality (p. 162). Subsequently, she reminisces Sutpen as having some extraordinary and diabolic quality which preordained the destiny of everyone with whom he had dealings.

Later on, Miss Rosa's story appears to be like a dream. In chapter 5, the word "dream" is repeated many times. In regard to psychoanalysis, what is suppressed in the unconscious sometimes releases in dreams. The dreamy features in her reminiscences of the story may not be authentic. While speaking with Quentin, Rosa swings between conscious and unconscious. Therefore, her narrative turns out to be an "unspeakable monologue" (Parker, 1974, p. 63). In this chapter, Rosa is split into the one actually speaking with Quentin and the other talking unconsciously. The first chapter is regarded as a conscious dialogue between Rosa and Quentin, but the fifth chapter, especially Rosa's monologue that is italicized, reveals her unconscious narrative. At the end of the chapter, where Rosa rises from the dream, the italics vanish. This may be the writer's technique to differentiate between conscious and unconscious. In the last scene, Quentin is distracted from listening to her. This implies that Quentin also gets engaged in Rosa's unconscious monologue vacillating between conscious and unconscious. Taking everything into account, Rosa's narrative and her endeavor to disclose the truth is not reliable.

Chapters 3 and 4 are narrated by Mr. Compson, Quentin's father. Mr. Compson is different from Rosa Coldfield. He’s more univocal, more organized, and less passionate. In the beginning, the reader might be deceived into thinking Mr. Compson’s story of Thomas Sutpen is unbiased, but, as we know later, it is wrong. In some ways, Mr. Compson is just as fickle as Rosa is. Readers find difficulty understanding who Thomas Sutpen was, for Rosa Coldfield presents him as egocentric and homicidal while Mr. Compson portrays him in a positive way. Many critics believe that Compson's story is very judicious and impartial. However, he fictionalizes the story. Through the approach of mythologizing the Supten family by using stereotypical features of Greek tragedy, he dramatizes the story. In the beginning,

Compson tries to deliver a persuasive explanation on a rational basis, but he fails. He says it is not comprehensible (Faulkner, 1986, p. 88). So, his version transforms into a fragmented and confused one at the end. Mr. Compson demonstrates the futility of sticking all he knows together, looking for "something" to emerge. Visibly, what he looks for is the relation that ties Charles Bon, Henry Sutpen, and Judith Sutpen. He regards the relationship between Bon and Judith as "the pure and perfect incest" because it is not Charles Bon but Henry himself who tempts Judith (Faulkner, 1986, p. 77). According to Dirk Jr Kuyk, he uses the word *incest* "metaphorically to characterize Henry's feelings, not literally to describe Bon's relationship to Judith" (Faulkner, 1986, p. 74).

Rosa and Compson convey to us opposing feelings, so there is a discrepancy in their versions; they give opposing characteristics of the same person. For example, Miss Rosa represents Sutpen as a villain who has shattered his family and caused American South to demolish while Mr. Compson represents him as a martyr of "folly and mischance" (Faulkner, 1986, p. 81). The two characteristics of the same person stand antithetical to each other and may stand contradictory for the real character of Sutpen. Mr. Compson's narrative in chapter 2 is full of adverbial adjuncts, such as "perhaps" and "doubtless". By using such adjuncts, Faulkner asserts the hypothetical and unsubstantiated nature of Mr. Compson's story. This indicates that any story of a reality or a truth may detonate the issue of accuracy and certainty.

Both Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson fail to depict a real Sutpen. The variation between their versions leaves room for another story. Quentin is like a chronicler who collects all the stories together, and he endeavors to make a thorough story to transmit it to his companion, Shreve. Quentin's information of Sutpen's history, the goal of constructing his plantation, and the conspiracy Sutpen made to make Henry murder Bon is lacking and deficient because he does not have immediate data. On the contrary, he hears Sutpen's story from General Compson to Jason Compson and from Jason Compson to Quentin. Also, he receives information from Rosa and the villagers. The extra information added to the story to fill the gaps creates another version which is different from the original version. Not only Quentin but also all the other narrators add

extra information to their stories in order to make these narratives produce the wished and anticipated result they aspire to see. While Compson's narrative changes from being different to being similar to Rosa's narrative, the relation of the two young men's story to the prior narratives moves in a contradictory way – they begin the narrative by echoing the father's story. Or, more exactly, they start with the affirmation that they are already repeating the father's tale unconsciously. This is demonstrated when Quentin says: "Yes, we are both Father" (Faulkner, 1986, p. 210). In the earlier part of their story, Quentin conveys his sense of renunciation about the similitude of Shreve's speech with his father's, but he finds even his own speech is like his father's. However, when they recognize that their narrative is like the father's version, they start to instill some differences. Before he narrates the story to Shreve again, he says, “Quentin is in our position, trying to make sense of or interpret a tiny skein of facts that seems flimsily out of proportion to all that Rosa so melodramatically makes of them” (Parker, 1974, p. 29). Clearly, Quentin has always realized a great amount of information revolving around Sutpen’s story, such as the ostensive completion of Sutpen’s landed estate and the impact that is produced by his preoccupation of constructing a pure ancestry Lancaster. Based on the effects he has acquired, Quentin can make an assumption from which the consequences may be inferred. The back-ward approach is essential for Quentin to affirm that the assumption he has made that the cause of Henry’s murder of Bon is not to hinder incest but rather might be logically correct.

The story of Henry and Bon narrated by Quentin serves as "a dream-work" in Freudian psychoanalysis. By utilizing Henry as a character, Quentin conveys his suppressed unconscious emotional struggle in the form of story. Shreve takes the role of a psychiatrist and explains Quentin's version as a dream. In Chapter 8, Quentin and Shreve finally tell the Sutpens' secret by describing a speech between Henry and Bon 46 years ago (Faulkner, 1986, p. 285). In the conversation, Bon tells Henry that he (Bon) has Negro origin. However, as the thorough reader recognizes, the conversation has only been fancied by Quentin and Shreve. We are forced to accept Quentin's declaration that "if I had been there, I could not have seen it this plain" (Faulkner, 1986, p. 190). As Quentin imagines past events, the material

momentarily distanced becomes currently resonant and important. Quentin's insistence on telling this incident and the many adjunct adverbs attract observance to the act of invention. So, the events are narrated in a highly hypothetical manner by these adjunct phrases.

The next relevant part of the book starts when Shreve has his chance to tell the story. Shreve makes assumptions about Bon's innocence. It is here that Shreve discloses to the reader that Bon was a means of vengeance for his mother. Quentin and Shreve both start to think similarly at this point.

In addition to Quentin, Shreve is the one who bonds the gaps among those gathered pieces of information. For instance, Shreve boldly supposes that Bon's presence at the University of Mississippi and his contact with Henry is a plot made by Bon's mother to wrest a great amount of money from Sutpen and take revenge on him for leaving her and the child. Shreve makes this conjecture because it is quite a coincidence that Bon appears in the same place as Henry does. It also makes sense for the readers of the novel to doubt the logicalness and possibility that they should meet each other in college. Although there is no proof that Shreve's assumption about revenge is true, the third-person narrator with his cognizant insight tells the readers that it is "probably true enough" (Faulkner, 1986, p. 268).

Shreve, through his imagination, drags himself far away from the story of Sutpen. Recognizing that the ordinary way of making a lineage and a chronicle cannot sufficiently demonstrate truth upon the specious outcomes of the story of Sutpen and the cause for Henry's murdering Bon. Being compelled by strong forces of inquisitiveness and challenge to complete the whole story in a harmonious and thorough form, Shreve totally liberates his imagination. For Shreve, to complete the gaps that have been abandoned in Sutpen's enigma is a kind of amusement for the frigid winter nights in Harvard. Shreve is also the one who closes the holes in the account of incidents based on Quentin's version, in which the remarkable narrative of why Bon so accordantly showed up at the University of Mississippi was due to a plot set by Bon's mother and a wicked lawyer. Shreve lets his imagination run wild (Kuyk, 1990, p. 88) and hypothizes the most remarkable scene with the assumption that

Bon's mother and the lawyer had set out to extort Supten. Without Shreve's smart fantasy and his bold hypothesis that Bon's appearance is a plot, the appearance of Charles Bon would remain perplexing. Shreve's narrative is full of more adjuncts than any that have come before. Many sentences start with "may be". Shreve's hypothetical story is full of qualifying adverbs and phrases. For example, of Bon's mother's not informing him about his father, Shreve says that "maybe [she didn't] because the demon would believe she had"; "maybe she didn't get around to telling him (Faulkner, 1986, p. 296). These qualifying adverbs demonstrate how carefully Shreve lists all probable reasons and goals, but none is certain because all of them start with "may be".

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Absalom, Absalom!* suggests that historical truths are always dubious. It proves that by defying the authenticity of facts and by glorifying the imaginative and creative presentation of the narrators in the novel. The study indicates that every narration is a personal creation as well as any narration of historical story is subjective. *Absalom, Absalom!* leaves incertitude as it is. This feature is linked with the novel's perception of subjectivism and fictionalization as escort all narratives.

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is composed to present its story through different narrators to captivate its readers in a scramble of epistemic dilemmas. Each of the versions, which are anticipated to be illuminating and lucid for the perceiving of the Sutpen story, appears to be inadequate and vague. The nature of deficiency and uncertainty in the versions makes the reading of the Sutpen legend unreliable and dubious. In *Absalom, Absalom*, the author totally vanishes. Faulkner lets various narrators tell us the simple story. Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve tell the Sutpen legend. Their opinions of Sutpen controvert with one another. Even Rosa's viewpoints towards him are also incongruous. It seems that the basic feature of the postmodern fiction is the absurd and the haphazard writing technique. Postmodern fiction seems to turn in nothingness, but not without including mockery and black irony. At the end of the postmodern fiction, there is no real

information, no organization, no easy resolution, and no false or right ethical statement. There is only a work that presents itself as a kind of absurd delirium and the delirium of the language telling the story. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner doesn't clarify whose version about Sutpen is right and whose story is wrong. All the narrators' assumptions are logical. But whose are correct, whose are incorrect? These are all left to the readers to make their own decisions. So, there is no easy resolve. It is no longer a question of depicting or clarifying or even extenuating the reality, but it is a question of the idea of reproaching that reconstructing the past is always certain.

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