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Self-consciously ambitious and structurally complex (unintelligible, a subset of not unsophisticated readers has always maintained), “Absalom, Absalom!” partakes of what the critic Irving Howe called “a fearful impressiveness,” the sort that “comes when a writer has driven his vision to an extreme.” It may represent the closest American literature came to producing an analog for “Ulysses,” which influenced it deeply — each in its way is a provincial Modernist novel about a young man trying to awaken from history — and like “Ulysses,” it lives as a book more praised than read, or more esteemed than enjoyed.But good writers don’t look for impressiveness in their readers — it’s at best another layer of distortion — and “greatness” can leave a book isolated in much the way it can a human being. (Surely a reason so many have turned away from “Ulysses” over the last near-hundred years is that they can’t read it without a suffocating sense of each word’s cultural importance and their duty to respond, a shame in that case, given how often Joyce was trying to be amusing.) A good writer wants from us — or has no right to ask more than — intelligence, good faith and time. A legitimate question to ask is, What happens with “Absalom, Absalom!” if we set aside its laurels and apply those things instead? What has Faulkner left us?A prose of exceptional vividness, for one thing. The same few passages, in the very first pages, remind me of this — they’re markings on an entryway — sudden bursts of bristly adjective clusters. The September afternoon on which the book opens in a “dim hot airless” room is described as “long still hot weary dead.” If you’ve ever taken a creative-writing workshop, you’ve been warned never to do this, pile up adjectives, interpose descriptive terms between the reader’s imagination and the scene. But here something’s different. Faulkner’s choices are so precise, and his juxtaposition of the words so careful in conditioning our sense reception, that he doesn’t so much solve as overpower the problem. The sparrows flying into the window trellis beat their wings with a sound that’s “dry vivid dusty,” each syllable a note in a chord he’s forming. The Civil War ghosts that haunt the room are “garrulous outraged baffled.”The rules Faulkner doesn’t ignore in this novel he tends to obliterate. The plot, for instance. There is none. He tells us on the third page (in italics) pretty much everything that will happen in the book, actionwise. If you ever feel lost, you can refer back to it, a little not-even-paragraph that begins, “It seems that this demon — his name was Sutpen — “A fundamental law of storytelling is: withhold information. As the writer Paul Metcalf put it, “The only real work in creative endeavor is keeping things from falling together too soon.” What we discover, though, on advancing into the novel’s maze, is that Faulkner has given nothing away, not of the things he most values. He’s not concerned with holding us in suspense over the unearthing of events but in keeping us transfixed, as he goes about excavating the soil beneath them, and tracing their post-mortem effects (embodied, perhaps, by the worm that comes to light in a shovelful of dirt, “doubtless alive when the clod was thrown up though by afternoon it was frozen again”). The nightmare of the Southern past exists — an accomplished thing. To delve into the nature of the tragedy is the novel’s drama.For the same reason, we can gloss the book’s narrative without fear of spoiling anything. In 1909 a boy from the South named Quentin goes north to Harvard. A brooding, melancholy boy — if we had been following Faulkner’s work in 1936, when “Absalom, Absalom!” appeared, we would know that Quentin is preparing to kill himself (the act occurs in “The Sound and the Fury,” published several years before), and so he is, in a certain respect, already dead, a ghost narrator. But for now he remains somewhat ambiguously alive. (And who knows, the universe of imaginative fiction functions differently: in this incarnation, he may survive.)He has a Canadian roommate named Shreve — not an American Yankee, to whom the South might seem offensive (or worse, romantic), but a true foreigner, for whom it is appropriately bizarre. All of America is a South to Shreve. He is like us: he needs to have things explained. “What is it?” he asks Quentin about the South, “something you live and breathe in like air?” In a series of halting exchanges, Quentin tries to answer, about the South and what it does to people. “I am older at 20 than a lot of people who have died,” he deadpans.Quentin tells Shreve a story from his hometown in Mississippi, about a visit he paid earlier that year to an old woman he knows as Miss Rosa. She in turn had told him — indeed, had summoned him in order to entrust him with — another story, one from long ago, before the Civil War. The shape of the novel, then: a shifting frame (Quentin’s disintegrating mind) inside of which plays out a historical novel, with narrators of varying reliabilities, and some chronological jumping around, never violent.Quentin has gleaned parts of this tale from his father and grandfather, from letters and in-town gossip. This is what Quentin is, we start to see, and what Southerners are or used to be: walking concatenations of stories, drawn or more often inherited from the chaos of the past, and invested here with a special, doom-laden meaning, the nostalgia that borders on nausea — the quality that most truly sets the South apart from other regions, its sheer investment in the meaning of itself. In Quentin this condition has reached the level of pathology.Miss Rosa’s story, which she has gnawed on most of her life — “grim haggard amazed” — concerns a man named Thomas Sutpen, a shack-born Virginian who appeared in their county in 1833, peremptorily bought an enormous tract of land and set about trying to create a plantation dynasty. You can find readings of “Absalom, Absalom!” that identify Sutpen as the novel’s main character, but it’s not really even correct to call him a character. Quentin is a character: he’s conflicted. It’s what he can make of Sutpen that will come to absorb us. Sutpen himself inhabits the novel like a figure in an Egyptian frieze. His beard possesses greater reality than his mind and heart. He has no motives, or rather, he has only the uncomplicated motive of ambition. The novel speaks of his “innocence,” meaning in this case not that he is free from sin but that he knows only the sins of children, of wanting more and to be first. The sort of innocence that wreaks destruction.Faulkner makes a set of choices, in reconstructing Sutpen’s past, that ought to draw our attention. He tells us that Sutpen’s Ur-ancestor probably landed in Jamestown on a prisoner-transport ship, and that he grew up in a cabin in the backcountry (in what would become West Virginia), and that he spent time in Haiti. These details point back to the earliest South: the English coastal colonies, as an extension of the West Indian world (many of the first Virginians and Carolinians were born not in the Old World but on the islands). Sutpen arrives with a band of “wild” African slaves, most of whom are unfamiliar with any European tongue: they speak in an island Creole. In buying his land, which he calls “Sutpen’s Hundred” — the name itself a straining toward colonial affectation — he treats not with a white man but with a local Indian chief, a Chickasaw.What Faulkner gains from this bundle of references is a suggestion of cycles, of something ongoing. As the Southern frontier murders its way west over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries — a phase absent to the point of amnesia from our national memory, but which re-emerges here like a wriggling worm — the region keeps generating Sutpens, repeating its themes: Indian removal, class resentment and land hunger, as well as a stubborn race hatred that coexists with intense racial intimacy. Faulkner needed Sutpen’s story to be not just authentically but intrinsically Southern this way, less a symbol than an instance of the Southern principle. Only then does it make an adequate object for Quentin to fixate upon and go mad contemplating.No book that tries to dissect the South’s psyche like that can overlook its founding obsession: misceogation. There we reach the novel’s deepest concern, the fixed point around which the storm of its language revolves. After Sutpen ran off to Haiti as a young man — it emerges that a humiliating boyhood experience, of hearing a black slave tell him to use the back door of a big house (he wasn’t good enough for the front), had produced a shock that propelled him to flee — he married a girl there and fathered a son with her. Soon, however, he discovered that she had black blood, and that his son was therefore mixed, so he renounced them both. He sailed back to the South to become a planter. A plausible thing for a white Southern male to have done in the early 19th century. But what Faulkner doesn’t forget, and doesn’t want us to, is the radical amorality of the breach. On the basis of pure social abstraction, Sutpen has spurned his own child, his first son.He remarries in Mississippi, with Miss Rosa’s older sister. They have two children, a boy and a girl. Now Sutpen has land, a mansion and progeny. He is almost there, almost a baron. We’re not absurd to think of Gatsby here; one of the most perceptive recent statements on “Absalom, Absalom!” was made by the scholar Fred C. Hobson in 2003, a simple-seeming statement and somehow one of the strangest things a person could say about the book, that it is “a novel about the American dream.”As in any good book of that type, the past hunts Sutpen and finds him: His son, Henry, goes off to the fledgling University of Mississippi, where he befriends another man, Charles Bon. On a holiday visit to Sutpen’s Hundred, Bon meets Henry’s sister, Judith, and falls in love with her — or makes up his mind to possess her. What Henry and Judith don’t know is that Bon is Sutpen’s abandoned Haitian son, come to Mississippi via New Orleans, evidently in a sort of half-conscious, all but sleepwalking quest to find his father. Charles Bon is thus both half-black and Judith’s half-brother.Henry inevitably realizes the truth, and that he cannot allow Bon to marry his sister. At the same time, he loves Bon — they have a blood bond in more than one sense. When the war breaks out, they sign up together to fight against the North, suffering alongside each other. But the whole time they’re gone to war, Bon is thinking of Judith, and when the two young men at last ride back to Mississippi, Henry knows he must act.There follows what is arguably the climax of the novel, although by the time we get there, we’ve rehearsed its import more than once. Quentin recounts it to Shreve in a trance, there at Harvard, almost a half-century later, the two of them becoming through a form of transubstantiation not themselves but Henry and Bon. “Happen is never once,” Faulkner says, “— You shall not.” Henry tells Bon, meaning, you shall not marry my sister. — Who will stop me, Henry? — No, Henry says. — No. No. No.Now it is Bon who watches Henry: he can see the whites of Henry’s eyes again as he sits looking at Henry with that expression which might be called smiling. His hand vanishes beneath the blanket and reappears, holding his pistol by the barrel, the butt extended toward Henry. — Then do it now, he says.Henry looks at the pistol; now he is not only panting, he is trembling [. . .] — You are my brother. — No I’m not. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry.This is a novel that uses the word “nigger” many times. An unfortunate subject, but to talk about it in 2012 and not mention the fact hints at some kind of repression. Especially when you consider that the particular example I’ve quoted is atypically soft: Bon, the person saying it, is part black, and being mordantly ironic. Most of the time, it’s a white character using the word — or, most conspicuously, the novel itself, in its voice — with an uglier edge. The third page features the phrase “wild niggers”; elsewhere it’s “monkey nigger.”Faulkner wasn’t unique or even uncommon in using the word this way. Hemingway, Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein — all did so unapologetically. They were reflecting their country’s speech. They were also, if we are being frank, exploiting the word’s particular taboo charge, one only intensified when the writer is a white Southerner. Faulkner says “Negroes” in plenty of places here, also “blacks,” but when he wants a stronger effect, he says “niggers.” It isn’t a case, in short, of That’s just how they talked back then. The term was understood by the mid-30s (well before, in fact) to be nasty. A white person wouldn’t use it around a black person unless meaning to offend or assert superiority — except perhaps now and then in the context of an especially close humor.Even if we were to justify Faulkner’s overindulgence of the word on the grounds of historical context, I would find it unfortunate purely as a matter of style. It may be crass for a white reader to claim that as significant, but a writer with Faulkner’s sensitivity to verbal shading might have been better tuned to the ugliness of the word, and not a truth-revealing ugliness, but something more like gratuitousness, with an attendant queasy sense of rhetorical power misused. I count it a weakness, to be placed alongside Faulkner’s occasional showiness and his incessant “not” constructions, which come often several to a page: “and not this, nor that, nor even the other thing, but a fourth thing — adjective adjective adjective — made him lift the hoe” (where half the time those things would not have occurred to you in your natural life, but old Pappy takes his time chopping them down anyway).The defense to be mounted is not of Faulkner’s use of the word but of the novel in spite of it, or rather, in the face of it. “Absalom, Absalom!” has been well described as the most serious attempt by any white writer to confront the problem of race in America. There is bravery in Faulkner’s decision to dig into this wound. He knew that the effort would involve the exposure of his own mind, dark as it often was. You could make a case that to have written this book and left out that most awful of Southernisms would have constituted an act of falsity.Certainly we would not want to take the word away from Bon, in that scene in the woods, one of the most extraordinary moments in Southern literature. A white man and a black man look at each other and call each other brother. One does, anyway. Suddenly, thrillingly, the whole social edifice on which the novel is erected starts to teeter. All Henry has to do is repeat himself. Say it again, the reader thinks. Say, “No, you are my brother.” And all would be well, or could be well, the gothic farce of Sutpen’s dream redeemed with those words, remade into a hopeful or at least not-hope-denying human story. Charles Bon would live, and Judith would be his wife, and Sutpen would have descendants, and together they might begin rebuilding the South along new lines. Granted Bon would still be marrying his half-sister, but that doesn’t bother Henry very much (the book tells us so), and life is rarely perfect. There is nothing to keep Henry from saying it, to keep him from reaching out his hand to his black brother, nothing except the weight of the past, the fear of ridicule, his own weakness. Instead of his hand, Henry brings forth the pistol. The scene is one of the last things Quentin and Shreve speak of before the end, that is before Quentin tells us his final story — about the day his own destiny collided with that of the Sutpens. I haven’t really told you everything up front, you see — and neither does Faulkner.Even when he does tell you everything, you can’t entirely trust it. No surer sign exists of the book’s greatness than how it seems to reconfigure itself and assume a new dimension, once we feel we know it, and these shifting walls of ambiguity were designed by Faulkner himself. They allow the text a curious liquid quality, so that it can seem alive, as if it might be modified by recent history too. I found it fascinating to read the book with a president sitting in the White House who comes from a mixed-race marriage, and with the statistic having just been announced that for the first time in U.S. history, nonwhite births have surpassed white ones. Some of the myths out of which the novel weaves its upsetting dreams appear quite different, like walking by a familiar painting and finding that someone has altered it. This is a strange time to be alive in America, in that regard. Close one eye, and we can seem to be moving toward a one-race society: close the other and we seem as racially conflicted and stratified as ever. Racism is still our madness. The longer that remains the case, the more vital this book grows, for Faulkner is one of the great explorers of that madness.The novel is about even more than that in the end. It attempts something that had never been tried before in the art of fiction, and as far as I know has never been since, not in so pure a form — to dramatize historical consciousness itself, not just human lives but the forest of time in which the whole notion of human life must find its only meaning. Not to have failed completely at such a task is indistinguishable from triumph. The South escaped itself in this book and became universal.





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