



FAULKNERIAN TRAGEDIES AND UNPRODUCTIVE FRUSTRATIONS: LOVE AND DEATH IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN AUGUST* AND *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

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Abstract

William Faulkner presents the human predicament, sense of place, and the impact of historical, social, and racial paradigms on human relationships. Faulkner problematized racial segregation, white supremacy, North and South dichotomy, which were manifested in daily relations of the characters. He conflates racial confusion, with grotesque, sexual uncertainty, and homoerotic subtexts to display the impact of past, race, and region on love relations that lead to death in the examined cases.

Faulkner creates his fictional Yoknapatawpha¹ County where universal human relations and the commonality of human experience could be found. The reader can find love and desire in all its myriad strange manifestations, imbricated politics of sexuality and race, and how his men and women fail and, more rarely, succeed in love. Within this scope, this paper attempts to analyze how the legacy of the Old South and the traumatic impact of Puritanism complicate relations of love and desire through the concepts of love and death in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Keywords: Segregation, Old South, Sense of Place, Regionalism, Exceptionality, Misogyny.

INTRODUCTION

1-The South

Southern fiction, in *Other Souths: A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction* (2009), Sharon Monteith writes, "is increasingly noteworthy for its moral toughness about precisely those facets of society that have traditionally rendered " the South, " the nation's backward cousin" (10). An enduring "proto-Dorian bond², " as W. J. Cash described in *The Mind of the South* (1941), enabled the Southern whites huddled together producing multiple souths: the slave South, the segregated South, and the Gothic South among many others. Excess and sublimity are associated with the region; thus, "Southern Grotesque" as a form and style closely bound into a moral vision of the region. Within this context, imagined communities which is common in much American fiction, are used to map the place creating a paradoxical situation in the southern spaces representing dichotomies that we are used to hear: "as beloved but benighted, close but repressive, coercive and resistant, a complex constellation of class and racial clashes and collaborations" (Monteith, 2009, 16).

It is inevitable for the writers of the region to explore small southern towns to delineate southern sensibility love and death as a corollary of these relations. Among these writers are Faulkner with his fictional Yoknapatawpha County; Eudora Welty's provincial Morgana (1949); Randall Kenan's Tims Creek, North Carolina; Lewis Nordan's Arrow Catcher, Mississippi, and Cormac McCarthy's east Tennessee – each death- haunted as a result of the casual quotidian horrors depicted. Marilyn Michaud notes that "reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Gothic visions of decrepit family lines weighed down by past sins, or haunted by the legacy of slavery and the loss of past glory," Southern writers such as William Faulkner, Truman Capote (*Other voices, other rooms*), and Carson McCullers, and Flannery O' Connor (*A good man is Hard to Find*) "depict degeneracy as a form of spiritual, physical, or emotional crippling" (Michaud, 2009, 16). Termed "Southern Gothic," this subgenre combines traditional conventions of the Gothic with macabre and grotesque depictions of the Southern experience which the reader observe both in *Light In August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*"

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County novels, representing and challenging incest, suicide, racial violence, and miscegenation among many other problematic themes, manifest historical inactiveness and

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¹ Yoknapatawpha is a Chickasaw Indian word meaning water runs slowly through the flat land.

² "Proto-Dorian bond" by which the common white (like the Doric knight of Sparta) was elevated to the dominant class through the "vastly ego-warming and ego-expanding distinction between the white man and the black."].



decline. Due to its backwardness and remoteness, the region was isolated from its northern brother laying a burden on fictional characters of the southern gothic novel often long to resurrect history or struggle to repudiate a burdensome past³. It is contention of this paper that Faulkner aptly uses Gothic tropes in order to rejuvenate and resist America's racial and religious history by bringing the horrors of slavery, religious fanaticism, and white supremacy out from the margins of discourse and representation. His novels are set in Mississippi and often take place in older Southern towns and plantations. The stories are often grotesque involving death and loneliness and contain many Southern archetypes. Faulkner effectively applies the stream of consciousness technique to depict his suffering characters.

As one of the most influential writers of American Literature, William Faulkner, with his narrative structure, developed a difficult unorthodox style with the aim of depicting "the human heart in conflict with itself" (Nobel Prize 119). We encounter Faulkner in the twenty-first century as both most paradoxical and the greatest novelist America has yet produced. The fact that he grew up in the region with its problematic history and exceptional race and gender relations furnished him with real stories triggered his imaginative creativity. For John Matthews, "he was a foremost international modernist, yet his subjects and characters are unimaginable apart from the history and sociology of what was the most backward state in the Union" (Matthews, 2011, 1).

During Faulkner's lifetime, America experienced great changes in social, economic, and political life, which transformed the country to a modern economic empire and international political giant. Faulkner grew up listening about the battles of civil war, complicated and problematic history of the South⁴. In his select works, as "the novel is principally about man in life" (Metz, 2018, 61), Faulkner tells the eclipse of the South's landed gentry as a heartfelt tragedy, formation of southern bourgeoisie, painful history of the plantation, race and class relations. He organizes a lifelong creative project around the saga of an imaginary county, Yoknapatawpha which depicts obscure and hidden heritage of the past. In that sense, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, which did not simply represent a geographical setting, but a state of consciousness and a perspective on life, is a microcosm of the American South.

Matthews notes that "Faulkner's belief that the past conditioned every feature of human existence, from the most apparently instinctual of our feelings to the texture of the very soil we tread and the objects we handle, was indeed a principle of his descriptive imagination" (Matthews, 2011, 77). Both in *Light In August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner, through his descriptive imagination, addresses the devastating impact of racial division and tragic conflicts generated by the forces of puritan repression, sinister love, and sex experiences from which southern culture suffered, and he depicts how burden of the past impact relations in the South leading to tragedies and unproductive frustrations. In this sense, Joe Christmas in *Light In August* and Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!* are at the core of this paper with their love relations and racial backgrounds.

Joe Christmas is never categorized either as black or white. In *Faulkner, Race, and forms of American Fiction*, Eric J. Sundquist explains that "as the literature of passing that proliferates at the turn of the century indicates, the optical illusion of 'color' brought forth by psychic disturbances about identity that were grounded in, or took their analogic form from, sexuality" (Sundquist, 2007, 4). Charles Bon is admired and loved by almost everyone in his circle until his drop of black blood is discovered. The southern myth of blood, "with its combined racial, social and sexual significances," haunts and destroys people's relations (Sundquist, 2007, 13). To problematize the burden of the past and the blood myth, both Christmas and Bon are killed to probe the deeply repressed psychological dimensions of race, sex, and miscegenation.

2-Love and Death

In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie A. Fiedler defines love in literature as a "rationalization, a way of coming to terms with the relationship between man and woman that does justice, on the one hand, to certain biological drives and, on the other, to certain generally accepted conventions of tenderness and courtesy;" and literature, she continues, "expressing and defining those conventions, tends to influence 'real life' more than such life influences it" (Fiedler, 1966, 31). Although this seems a detailed and insightful definition, it is essentialist in itself and has some gaps. In the select work that this paper focuses, Faulkner creates tragic love and death stories based on real life experiences. *Love and death* are

³. "A Rose for Emily," for example, is a perfect fit for southern gothic story.

⁴ One of the characters, Gavin Stevens, in *Requiem for a nun* is a good example when he states that *The past is never dead; it's even not a past* (535)



conjoined in the contradiction that looms in the Faulknerian Cosmos in which we commonly come across religious and racial fanaticism.

In *Light In August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner intertextually challenges dominant religious and racial ideology and psychosexual dimensions of racial antagonism because the myths that the white south created took their genesis from the white South's biblical hermeneutic when Southern Protestantism turned to Bible to justify its racist practices. Julia Kristeva notes that "if one reads Faulkner without going back to Bible, the Old Testament, to the Gospels, to the American society of the period and his own hallucinatory experience, I believe one cannot reconstitute the complexity of the text itself" (qtd. in Caron, 2000, 52). William H. Rueckert argues that "*Light In August* is not primarily about history as such at all, but about different kinds of being, different ways of being in and out of time, different kinds of time, and different kinds of relationships between selves, being, and time" (Rueckert, 2004, 70). The different ways of being are presented through various complicated levels of relationships of love. These relations ultimately urge people to manifest anachronistic patterns of behavior that depict the impact of different times on different beings at present.⁵ To do so, the novel concentrates on some polarities such as dark and light, black and white, love and death.

3-Light in August: Religion and Racial Past

With Joe Christmas in *Light In August*, Faulkner explodes the "blood" myth by which the tragic mulatto figure in American literary and cultural history is trapped: the idea that people of mixed racial descent are part black, part white, and forced, therefore, to choose whether or not to "pass." It is not possible to know whether, according to this belief, people committed a sin. *Light in August*, in which Faulkner challenges southern puritan mentality and obsession with blood myth and white supremacy, is told chronologically over eleven days of present time, with long flashbacks. Lena Grove frames the story. She represents familial love and generative human purposefulness, love, tranquility, generation, regeneration and life. As Rueckert puts it "Lena Grove is best understood as some kind of life or light or familial principle" (Rueckert, 2004, 71). The novel opens with Lena along the road heading westward to Jefferson, Mississippi, in search of the father of her unborn child, Lucas Burch, who abandons her after he learns of her pregnancy. Through a similarity of surnames, she meets Byron Bunch, who works as a sawmill hand. Byron falls in love with Lena at once and looks after her until her child is born. As she approaches the town near midday of Saturday, smoke is visible on the horizon: she arrives some hours after Joanna Burden's murder and the burning of her house.

The core of the book is the story of Joanna Burden's killer, Joe Christmas who is, according to Timothy Caron "is fundamental to *Light in August's* critique of southern synthesis racism and religion" (Caron, 2000, 61). The extended flashback develops the story of Joe Christmas. Faulkner introduces him as a foundling left on the steps of a Memphis orphanage on Christmas night; hence his name. Faulkner carefully removes all clues pertaining to Joe's racial identity; Joe shares his belief with Joanna Burden and Lucas Burch that he may be of mixed racial ancestry. His mad grandfather, Eupheus (Doc) Hines, believing Joe's father is black, has placed him there. In the orphanage, Joe is introduced to sex in a vivid scene. He innocently eavesdrops on the dietician Miss Atkins's lovemaking with an intern. Dreading exposure, she tells the matron that Joe is black, figuring he will then be sent away to the "nigger orphanage." The matron instead arranges for Joe to live with a Yoknapatawpha county poor white farmer, Simon McEachern and his wife. Through strict and fanatic Calvinist McEachern who literally tries to beat his religion into the boy, the text depicts how religious fanaticism prevent people showing and sharing their love towards each other, at the absence of which serious dramatic and tragic events occur.

After fighting with McEachern, Joe runs from home and turns up in Jefferson, finds work in a saw mill, and becomes the lover of the spinster outcast Joanna Burden. Through this relationship Faulkner complicates devastating impact of religious and racial fanaticism that brings death not only to the marginal or marginalized characters but also to the community. The characters unite two extremism that Faulkner critiques, puritanism and the problem of racially divided South. Through this dichotomy, Faulkner implies that one can escape from religious fanaticism, which is epitomized by McEachern and Mrs. Burden, but it is hard to do so from racial fanaticism. For that reason, their lovemaking, if that is what it should be called, is savage. When Joe Christmas arrives Jefferson, he notices a "big house set in grove of trees; obviously" he

⁵ Real-life experiences are powerful in showing how the characters reflect on their struggle between their selves, relationships and time while they display such different patterns of behavior (Erdem Mete, 2018).



thinks “a place of some pretensions at one time” (Faulkner, 1985,170). He discovers that spinster Joanna Burden lives alone at the house. One night he breaks into the house through an open kitchen window. On the kitchen table, he finds some food; while he is eating the food, Joanna comes with a candle in her hand and says “if it is just food you want, you will find that.” The following two years, he frequently visits the house and eats what is left on the table for him. The narrator describes their two-year relation in three phases. Through each phase, Faulkner addresses a peculiar problem of the South.

Joe’s sexual experience with an anonymous black girl, waitress and the prostitute, Bobbie, involves violence which dominates his relationship with Joanna as well. We first hear Joe and Joanna’s tragic love story and Joe’s act of violence through a country man’s crude and grotesque account of his discovery of Joanna’s body: “Her head had been cut pretty near off; a lady with the beginning of gray hair... she was laying on her side; facing one way, and her head was turned clean around like she was looking behind her. And he said how if she could just have done that when she was alive, she might have not been doing it now” (Faulkner, 1985,85).

In the first phase, what Faulkner problematizes is the Old South practices of racial relations in a plantation house, which plays significant role in southern race relations as white gentry did not let either black or white trash use the front door to enter the house. In *Light In August*, Joe comes to Joanna’s house almost every night finding the kitchen table ready for him, yet one day he realizes that “he had never been further than the kitchen” and the way he entered the house for almost a year was the same way he entered the first night “like a thief, a robber, even while he mounted to the bedroom where she waited. Even after a year, it was as though he entered by stealth to despoil her virginity each time a new” (Faulkner, 1985,176). This challenges the old practices that kitchens is a space for house slaves and white trash and the house is accessible to them only through back door. By preparing food and just keeping Christmas in the kitchen reminds him of this painful history, which is a source for his anger. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the same thematic challenge is acted out through Sutpen’s childhood story which is the most important motive behind Sutpen’s Hundred. When his family moved from the mountains of today’s West Virginia to Mississippi, young Sutpen goes to a plantation house where he “received an affront from the black servant of a rich plantation owner. He was told that he could not come to the front door of the planter’s house but had to go around to the back because he was white trash, because he and his family were not as good as the plantation owner” (Irwin, 2003,49).

In modern literature sexual repression is often associated with religion and Puritanism. This connections is displayed through the sexual relation between Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas. New England Puritanism plays a significant role in Joanna Burden’s sexual abstinence and spinsterhood. Her situation is described by the narrator as follows: “the abject fury of the New England glacier exposed suddenly to the fire of the New England biblical hell” (Faulkner, 1985,194). There is a multilayered reference in her dominant behavior. One is that she reminds the lost cause bringing Northern dominancy into the light and wants to take control of their relationship which reaches to the zenith in the third phase when she wants to send Christmas to a Law school for negroes and design his future according to her own ambitions. The second is that she seemed to “attempt to compensate each night as if she believed that it would be the last night on earth by damning herself forever to the hell of her forefathers, by living not alone in sin but in filth” (Faulkner, 1985,194). Having a sexual relationship with a southern mulatto, who is legally considered to be an individual with mixed black and white blood, according to her, is not only a sin but a filth. Although puritanism is not the main motive in her relation with Joe Christmas, Joanna’s behaviors highlight the negative impact of religion in sexuality. She acknowledges that her act is a sinful act, yet the thrill of sexuality and having sex with Joe pushes her into the depth of pleasure and she begs God not to save her: “Don’t make me have to pray yet. Dear God let me be damned a little longer, a little while,” hoping to extend the relationship which she acknowledges as sinful (Faulkner, 1985,264).

Another Old South myth that is criticized in this phase is the association of rape with black body. Through the rape scene and the relation following it the text challenges two dominant beliefs: religious suppression and the idea that black male is a threat for white women. Through the following scene, the text highlights that there is a symbiotic relationship in which Joanna and Christmas consume each other. It all started one night when Joe thinks that she treats him like the way old gentry treated their slaves, which enraged him. With this haunting impact of the past, Christmas goes to Joanna’s house “not in eagerness, but in [an articulated] rage” when he said aloud “I will show her” (Faulkner, 1985,177). He first goes to the back porch and aims to go in, yet he figures out that the door was locked. He goes to the kitchen door expecting



that it would be locked either, surprisingly he finds it to be open because “when he found that it was not locked it was an insult and insufferable contempt,” thinking that the food at the table was “set out for the nigger. For the nigger” (emphasis in original) enraged him. In this phase, their love affair [going to her bedroom after dinner every time he visits the house,] began to wear off and become a habit” (Faulkner, 1985,193). He enters her bedroom thinking that she would escape but she was standing. The savage love relationship is described as follow:

He began to tear at her clothes. He was talking to her, in a tense, hard, low voice: I will show you! I will show you the bitch! She did not resist at all. It was almost as though she was helping him, with small changes of position of limbs when ultimate need for help arose. But beneath his hands the body might have been the body of a death woman not yet stiffened. But he did not desist; though his hands were hard and urgent it was with rage alone. ‘At least I have made a woman of her at last’ he thought. ‘Now she hates me. I have taught her that, at least.’ (Faulkner, 1985,179)

Their first love-making relationship, which was devoid of any emotional involvement, starts in a rape-like scene. Joanna’s religious past and Christmas’s racial past haunt both in their relation and prevent them fulfilling themselves. Here in this scene Joe also confronts with homoerotic fantasies and believes that he “made a woman of her at last.” In Faulkner’s cosmos it is important to read the other south(s) and their articulation of different experiences and perspectives. This difference was depicted through homosexual desires and analyze its destructive impact on suppressed individuals which prevent them fulfilling their desires. The relations between Joe and Joanna in *Light In August* and Henry and Charles Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!* represent Faulkner’s the recognition of repressed sexual identity in the community since in the south it is hard to express sexual identity, especially gay male identity, as the identity to be expressed is challenged by the demands of southern masculinity.

In that sense, it is interesting that In *Light in August*, the love story between Joanna and Joe is told from Joe’s perspective in which Joe constructs Joanna like a male figure in some cases. His rape and sexual encounters are depicted as, Lothar Hönnighausen explains, “male rape fantasies and, in a way, as homoerotic rape fantasies,” (Hönnighausen, 2007, 241): “remembering the hard, untearful and unselfpitying and almost manlike yielding of that surrender. A spiritual privacy so long intact that its own instinct for preservation had immolated it, its physical phase the strength and fortitude of a man” Faulkner, 1985c, 176). In another instance, Joe articulates this fantasy as “My God [...] it was like I was the woman and she was the man” (177) and their sexual encounter “was as if he struggled physically with another man” (177). The gay relation in *Absalom, Absalom!* represents triangulation of desire, defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick proposes that in the erotic triangle, the erotic rivalry is the bond that links the two rivals and it is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the love object: “The bond between the rivals is even a stronger determinant of their actions than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved” (Sedgwick, 1987: 21). The tragic erotic triangle involves Charles, Henry, and Judith. Mr. Compson’s description of the relationship between Henry and Bon suggests very much the same thing. He repeatedly emphasizes Henry’s love for Bon and argues that Bon “could not have wanted Judith without Henry” (Faulkner, 1990a, 95). In fact, according to Mr. Compson, Bon “loved Henry the better of the two” and saw Judith as “merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth” (86). Mr. Compson’s point of view embodies the triangulation of desire.

Henry’s position within this erotic triangle is characterized by a precarious negotiation between the demands of Southern masculinity and his own homosexual desires. Mathew Vaughn points out that “the homoerotic content in the story of Bon’s relationship with Henry can also be seen as a projection of Quentin Compson’s ambivalence toward his own sexuality” (Faulkner, 1990a, 78). As Noel Polk argues, “[r]ace is, in *Absalom* and in Faulkner generally, a mask for very serious matters of sexuality and gender” (Polk, 1985, 139). By making the openly reviled taboo of miscegenation stand in for and symbolize the unspeakable taboo of homosexuality, the creation of a black Charles Bon in this context is appropriate in that it makes a connection between two representative figures of the repressed South: the black male and the homosexual male (Vaughn, 2007, 524).

In the final phase, Joanna’s frigidity dissolves into nymphomania and finally into religious mania which ends up in death. Faulkner is often vocally critical of the role that religion, specifically Calvinism and the sects that have an origin in Calvinism, plays in the lives of Southerners; he deemed it a source of Southern evil and an agent that limited the potential of the region as “the absolutism, fatalism, and self-



righteousness" hindered its residents (Wilson, 2007, 57). Joanna Burden has three kinds of fanaticisms and lusts that bring her destruction: religion, race, and sex. She has all of them in one person, Joe Christmas. Joanna is both victimizer and the victim. Their love and desires are malign and destructive. But at least as important to the larger vision of race hatred that the novel anatomizes is the religious faith on which that race hatred feeds. Ruckert explain their situation as follow:

All of these people burn with violent and destructive psychic and / or physical lusts which displace value from the whole human person to a single and always exclusive idea. With some exceptions, their monomanias are derived from Protestant and puritanical religious sources and applied to racial, sexual, and social ends. The justifications are always derived from God and applied destructively and repressively to others, God's word becomes the means by which the self-represses, torments, and often destroys the other. (Rueckert, 2007, 77)

With her sudden religious conversion, or perhaps relapse, Joanna comes to believe that because Joe is part black she has sinned against the stern Calvinist God of her forebears in her sexual encounters with him. Joanna wants to convert him to her religion, which he rejects.

A fatalistic calm settles on Joe as he makes his way to the Burden house for the final scene. "So now it's all done, all finished," he thinks, enters the house through the kitchen, and mounts the stairs. Joanna demands that Joe kneel with her and pray for forgiveness. When he refuses, she threatens him with a "cap-and-ball revolver" (Faulkner, 1985, 212). When Joanna Burden tries to shoot Joe, her eyes are described as "calm and still as all pity and all despair, and all conviction" (247). Insensate with rage, Christmas slashes at her throat with a razor, nearly taking her head off. He then sets the house afire and runs away and deliberate, acts of violence mark starts.

The cost to women of the Protestant culture's repression of female sexuality is made painfully evident in Joanna Burden's brief escape from it. In addition to dramatizing the depth of the southern white woman's sexual repression—by means of describing graphically what happens when that repression is lifted—Faulkner's account of the Joe/Joanna episode underscores the major role played by religion in sustaining racist norms. The sexual politics of southern racism are clear enough. Joanna whispers "Negro, negro negro" as she makes love to Joe, seduced by the very image that haunts the southern white men who fear the black man's sexual power. (Faulkner, 1985, 260)

Southern negrophobia and fear of black blood caused a new metaphorical definition of blackness and the creation of a new category- *The white nigger*. In *Light In August*, after a member of the Mottstown crowd brand Christmas with this tittle, shouting, "Christmas, that white nigger that did that killing," the community's suspicions on Christmas's racial identity are confirmed (Faulkner, 1985, 326). With Joanna's death this labelling confirms the lynching and the death of Christmas. After Joe Christmas committed several crimes, he is caught and prisoned in Jefferson. He manages to escape but men hunted. His lunatic grandfather, Doc Hines, full of racial hatred and religious fervor, tries to whip up the townspeople into a lynch mob. Joe is escorted to Jefferson, where he briefly breaks free of his captors. The avenger Percy Grimm tracks him down for the final chilling scene in Hightower's kitchen and Joe is killed. Joe's death display hidden blackness of human soul and society. Joe is killed in Hightovers kitchen and in the scene the tainted blood of Joe Christmas:

Seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that *black blast* the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading, ...of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant. (Faulkner, 1985, 440 emphasis added)

With this final scene, Faulkner does not provide a neat solution to the society's race problem that has been graphically played out in Joe Christmas's life. Joe's death reinforces the white southerners' belief about the tainted blood. For Sundquist, "'blood' itself crosses the boundaries between the tangible and the fantastic , destroying the forms of racial order that mean to contain it" (Sundquist, 2007, 14). It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire beyond the aid of any man, swept him up to that ecstasy out of a black jungle where life has already ceased before the heart stops and death is desire and fulfillment. And then, the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all in his life... He merely...ran on and crouched



behind that table and defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying for the last thirty years. (425)

4-Absalom, Absalom!⁶

For Fred Hobson, *Absalom, Absalom!* "paints [...] a realistic picture of antebellum life in the Deep South and explores the origins and the meaning of "aristocracy" in that region" (Hobson, 2010, 4). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Thomas Sutpen and his design, Sutpen's Hundred, is at the core of the plot. Sutpen comes to Jefferson, MS with a French architect to design his mansion and brought in a wagonload of slaves. Following the construction and furnishing his house, Sutpen marries Ellen Coldfield to bring him recognition, consolidate his status and position in the community. Ellen gave birth to a son, Henry and a daughter, Judith. The complicated relations start when Henry goes off to university where he makes friend with Charles Bon who turns out to be his half-brother. Thomas Sutpen had been married before to a Western Indian woman, but had abandoned her after discovery of her Negro blood. Sutpen had two sons: one white, the other Negro. He denied the Negro which resulted in fratricide. This act problematizes the haunting impact of the Civil War' which was another sort of fratricidal conflict caused by denial of the Negro. Sutpen's sin, his failure of humanity, is the equivalent in personal terms of the sin of plantation culture, its failure to accept the brotherhood of all mankind.... The war is lost, and not merely because of the superior strategy and numbers of the enemy, but through the transposition into military terms of...'an absolute caste system'...

The myth of tainted blood and its destructive impact on social relations and love affairs is apparent in *Absalom, Absalom!* As the history haunts the southern spaces, the ghost of Sutpen's marriage haunts him with a destructive end. The coincidental friendship of Henry and Charles initiates the meeting and falling in love of Judith and Charles. The friendship also causes the revelation of Sutpen's source of wealth: the dowry of the first wife he had abandoned. However, Sutpen does not recognize Charles as his son due to the tainted blood he has. The Civil War intervenes and Sutpen leaves for the war. Charles was about to marry Judith when he was mysteriously killed by Henry. Henry disappears for many years. Meanwhile, Thomas Sutpen returned from the war to find his wife dead, and developed an obsessive desire to perpetuate his line. Since Charles was dead, Henry a fugitive, and Judith vowed to spinsterhood, he planned another marriage to Rosa Coldfield, his dead wife's little sister, if she could produce a son first. Rosa fled from him in indignation, and in 1867 Sutpen, still seeking an heir, entered into a liaison with Milly Jones, granddaughter of the tenant farmer Wash Jones. In 1869 Milly bore a girl child, and Wash killed Sutpen in a rage. Henry returned to Jefferson, and was hidden at Sutpen's Hundred by Clytemnestra, a Sutpen daughter by a Negro slave, and both died in the 1910 burning of the mansion to the ground.

Thomas Sutpen is typical of the southern planter class and that Sutpen's downfall and the death in the novel is emblematic of the downfall of the whole way of life in antebellum South. The text embodies many of the fundamental aspects of Southern storytelling: the institution of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, white supremacy; "the use of circular and ornate interior monologues and first - person narrations in which repetitions and revisions of past events occur; the depiction of an (interracial) Southern family haunted by history and legend" (Monteith, 2010, 90). The novel is, of course, focused on the South, but it is a South that is rooted in the larger history of America. Certainly, Faulkner wanted to explode what he called the "make believe region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds" (Faulkner, 1990a, 229).

The original working title of the book was "The Dark House," and Sutpen's Hundred used to be a plantation a forced site of labor and dehumanization through forbidden desires and murder. It is meaningful that the novel begins and ends in darkness, and its vision is entirely tragic within the binaries of love and death, past and present. The plantation is both the heart of Faulkner's Gothic darkness-it becomes a prison, it decays, and it is burned down-and the fulcrum through which economic factors determining a changing Southern culture are explored.

The love triangle between Judith, Henry, and Bon is one of the focal points of the novel that aims to problematize highly complicated love relations that was deeply influenced by race relations in the region.

⁶Absalom Absalom! (name comes from a biblical story of a son of King David. 2nd Samuel in Old Testament, Absalom, Tamar, Amon-Absalom rapes Tamar and Amon kills him)



However, he implies that it is not love that causes death and destruction in the novel, rather “code of honor.” When Henry meets Charles Bon, he lives recklessly and desperately; he admires Bon yet kills him not for any conceivable practical motive but for honor. Bon, too, is willing to be killed due to his honor.

The complicated love story and the final version of the overall story are presented through Harvard roommates Quentin and Shreve, casting Bon and Henry as half-brothers and thereby explaining not only Henry’s murder of Bon, but Sutpen’s motives for denying his suit as well. If Bon is understood to be Sutpen’s oldest son, born in Haiti of a wife Sutpen later discovers is part black, then his arrival at Sutpen’s door as Judith’s suitor threatens not just incest, which Henry is willing to tolerate, but miscegenation, which he is not. This is a surface level reason; on deeper levels as discussed above, there is homoerotic desire that was a great motive behind this murder.

Quentin later tells Shreve, “I am older at twenty than a lot of people who have died” (Faulkner, 1990a, 301). He is, then, “two separate Quentins,” one so absorbed by the stories of the past that he is virtually a ghost, the other struggling to live anew as a young man on the cusp of adulthood. The Quentin whose “very body [is] an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names” wants to shut his ears, but even when “listening would renege and hearing sense self-confound,” he remains trapped in the past, “too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that” (Faulkner, 1990a, 4). Ironically, it is only when he engages in conversation, participates with Shreve in the “happy marriage of speaking and hearing,” that Quentin gains the chance to free himself of the past (Faulkner, 1990a, 253). Remaining silent has only refueled the memories that make of him a “barracks, a commonwealth” rather than a single and autonomous person (Faulkner, 1990b, 7). Once the “two separate Quentins” converse and collude in telling the story, they not only uncover a bitter truth but enable a connection between past and present that recognizes rather than denies history.

Sutpen’s character radically undermines the nostalgic picture of the southern white planter whose paternalistic ideology ostensibly redeemed him from the sin of slave owning, but it does so by revealing that the would-be aristocratic planter figure was actually only a successful capitalist entrepreneur. Sutpen was eager to build a great dynasty which would protect his offspring from racism and white supremacy. If he took a Negro as his son, his design was doomed to be a failure. And we know from the story that it is Sutpen’s refusal which motivated Bon’s incestuous relationship with Judith and later forced Henry to murder Bon.

While Henry, believing Bon had abandoned his octoroon mistress, approved this marriage. The problem of incest foregrounds here, but the story goes farther than incest. As John T. Irwin explains, “the threat of miscegenation between Bon and Judith is also a threat of brother-sister incest.] This archetype of the brother who must kill to protect or avenge the honor of his sister pervades *Absalom, Absalom!* (Irwin, 2003, 47). In chapter 8, when Henry visited his father to tell his decision to realize the marriage of his brother and sister, he confronted a new fact that completely upset his plan: Bon was black. Henry oscillated between Bon as brother and as “nigger”, until Bon definitely identified himself as following: “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” (Faulkner, 1990a, 286). Henry really stopped Bon by taking radical action, killing Bon at the gate of their home. On the homoerotic relationship between Quentin and Shreve, Norman W. Jones argues that their shared reinvention of the Sutpen saga becomes, for them, “a mode of sexual expression” (Jones, 2004, 345). Faulkner describes Quentin and Shreve, and their looking at each other “not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself—a sort of hushed and naked searching” (Jones, 2004, 240). According to Duvall, “[t]he death of Charles Bon simultaneously consummates homoerotic desire at the level of both story and discourse. Henry’s trembling is paralleled just two pages later when Quentin, whom Shreve has finally succeeded in getting to bed, begins ‘to jerk all over, violently and uncontrollably’” (Faulkner, 1990a, 288). The implication of Quentin’s “orgasmic convulsions” at the beginning of chapter nine is that he and Shreve have consummated their desire by triangulating it through their joint narrative production (Jones, 2004, 345).

As the South was punished by the Civil War, Sutpen was destroyed because he ignored God’s will. Sutpen’s fall occurred because of the rapacity which is the sin of the South: Sutpen attempted to “hold for himself and his descendants’ inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth”, he failed to “hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood” (Faulkner, 1973, 13-14). *Absalom, Absalom!* presents no solution for the restoration of the Southern past that haunts modern day racial and gender relations because by killing Charles Bon, Henry doomed the family



line because he became a fugitive from law and never married. Like many other Faulkner protagonists, Henry could only suffer; he was unable to get rid of the past or to provide any modern solution to inherited problems. Irwin reads the act of killing as, "Charles Bon, who returns thirty years later seeking admittance to the rich plantation owner's "house" (and thereby represents the return of the repressed traumatic affront of Sutpen's boyhood), and to Henry, who, acting as his father's surrogate, delivers the final affront to Bon, killing him at the gates of the house to prevent him from entering" (Faulkner, 1990a, 50).

Henry at last falls victim, as Sutpen himself is a victim, of the ravages of this abstract 'design.' Incest with Judith or death at the hands of his brother become the only ways in which Bon can identify himself as Sutpen's son. Henry, after four years of painful indecision, kills his friend and brother at the gates of Sutpen's Hundred.... Henry acts not in obedience to his father, but to an inherent sense of a moral code which is stronger than his love for Bon. The act...is really a transcendence by Henry of the dehumanized quality of his father's 'design'.... What is important is that Quentin can see in the activity of Charles and Henry an active expression, however confused and frustrated, of human value responding to the inhumanity of Sutpen. The actions of Wash Jones and of Valery Bon suggest as clearly as the final actions of Bon and Henry a distorted but eloquent sense of moral revulsion at the corruption and inhumanity of Sutpen's 'design.' When there seems no hope of reinstating that 'design,' Sutpen perhaps consciously provokes Wash into killing him. In Wash's hearing, he crudely repudiates Milly, Wash's granddaughter, when she fails to bear him a son.... Like Milly and Wash, Valery Bon discovers that he, too, is a part of the rejected residue of his grandfather's career.... Having no family of his own, his real identity hidden from the town, Valery Bon seeks literally to make a name for himself by violent and extraordinary action. Though he could pass for a white man, he marries a woman who is an extremely dark Negress, and insists on being recognized as a Negro himself. Considering the social consequences, this is really a conscious form of self-degradation similar in its motivation to that of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*.

Conclusion

Through the stories of Joe Christmas and Bon and Henry, Faulkner challenges historical traumas of the past that continue to haunt the southerners at present. Love for power, white supremacy, and artificial standards or circumstances that made tragedies inevitable are presented grotesquely. Faulkner also problematizes that a quest for revenge and complicates the fact that blood myth might wreak havoc in society causing unproductive frustrations among the members of the selected southern fictitious community. Sutpen's position is paradoxical in that while he seeks to seize power to fight against discrimination, he maintains the same suppressive power when he owned the Sutpen's Hundred. Sutpen paradoxically wanted revenge as he saw it, but also he wanted to establish the fact that man is immortal, that man, if he is man, cannot be inferior to another man through artificial standards or circumstances. History is a process and that the past is consequently important to present and future. Faulkner, in that sense, aims to overturn some of the injustices blacks suffered. Through the characters, Joe Christmas and Charles Bon, Faulkner problematize the southern consciousness that, as Lillian Smith analyzed in *Killers of the Dream*: "Not only negroes but everything dark, dangerous, evil must be pushed to the rim of one's life," exiled to the dark town of our consciousness. Challenging and complicating the survival of ill logic of the plantation past, or what Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* states as "fatality and curse on the South," Faulkner depicts interracial and filial relations that complicate love, sexual, and power relations that brought destruction not only to the suppressed but also to the suppressor. Thus Faulkner profoundly interprets southern history and society that needs to be changed. In other words, Faulkner portrays consciousness of the tragic history of the region and its historical, social, and political dilemmas. This leads to dynamic tension that problematizes provincial illusions. Through the concepts of love and death, Faulkner depicts that the southerners' consciousness of the real history is painfully acute instilling destruction to love and filial relations. By presenting failed love relations, Faulkner might aimed to show that it is justice sometimes working for redress through man's destructive violence. Through his most implacable characters, Joe and Charles Bon, both are not Negroes but a mixture of black and white blood, surfaced the sharp dilemma on ancient inexplicable wrong that ruined their love relations and lives.

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