

Quentin Doomed as a Southerner
- A Study of Absalom, Absalom! -

by

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When we recollect the last scene of Absalom, Absalom! (1936), one of the ripest works of William Faulkner, we may be permitted to put 'a Southerner' instead of 'an American' in the comment which James Baldwin quoted in his essay as the words of Henry James: "It is a complex fate to be an American."¹⁾ What I mean here is that we cannot but feel intensely the agony and fatalism of Quentin Compson as a Southerner in his passionate reiteration that he does not hate the South. Where then does his agony and fatalism come from? What makes him utter a cry of despair like "Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore Nevermore"²⁾? The purpose of this essay is to find and consider the core of this novel by making an answer to these questions. Quentin in this novel, needless to say, is the same Quentin we know from The Sound and the Fury (1930).

The Sutpen dynasty was established by Thomas Sutpen through some sinful deeds of his violating the sanctity of the individual human heart: the divorce from his first wife by reason of her negro blood; the firm refusal to acknowledge Charles Bon as his son for the same reason;

the marriage with Ellen Coldfield only for the acquirement of respectability to adapt himself to the fixed society of the South; and so on. Ironically, however, the dynasty begins to fall on account of the problem of blood relationship as well as his moral deficiencies mentioned above. Charles Bon appears before Sutpen from his earnest desire to have himself acknowledged as Sutpen's son, and Henry, the son of Sutpen and Ellen, repudiates his blood birthright and material security. After these affairs, takes place the bloody event that is called the catastrophe of Absalom, Absalom! What, we may ask, is the mental state of Henry in getting toward that catastrophe?

Henry abandoned his birthright against his father's wish out of his loyalty for Bon, his half brother, and out of his love for Judith, his sister. To our regret, however, we have to see him encounter quite a difficult situation: that is, he comes to be confronted with the problem of incest between Bon and Judith. This problem of incest which is strictly prohibited to mankind puts him under a severe trial, because he is compelled to solve this problem without betraying them. Here we feel the need to recall the relationship between Henry and Judith, namely, his ardent love toward her, from the passages: "a relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of brother and sister even"³⁾ and "his [Henry's] fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity."⁴⁾ We may be convinced of his attachment for her by the passage:

In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother [Henry] realizing that the sister's

virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man [Bon] whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride.5)

By this we understand that Henry intends to give his consent to the incestuous marriage between Bon and Judith, but we cannot choose but feel that his justification of the consent is altogether insufficient and quite odd. We, however, have to pay attention to the fact that his intention stems from his ardent love for his sister. We can perceive likewise his love for Judith in his change of feeling, in which the problem of Bon's bigamy turns into the problem of the humiliation of Judith who will be made a mistress of Bon. Here, under these circumstances of a Southern youth's protective love for his sister, the Quentin Compson we know from The Sound and the Fury comes into our mind.

In The Sound and the Fury Quentin attempts in vain to negate not only the stern realities of the tawdry moral chaos in the South, but the social and moral collapse of the Compson family; for instance, his sister, Caddy's loss of virginity, his brother, Jason's moral deficiency under the seductions of modern capitalism, and so on. The vain protest against undeniable facts makes him cherish the delusion of incest between himself and Caddy so that he may escape the pressure of realities. He tries to take the fact of his sister's loss of virginity into the world of his fantasy, where he aims to deny it. His struggle,

however, is effective only in the world of his fantasy, for the fact of her ethical degradation can never be effaced, just as time can be neither removed nor stopped. Therefore the act of his breaking the watch so as to catch and stop time is the manifestation of his vain protest against the realities before his eyes. Mr. Compson says pitilessly to his son, Quentin, "I give it [watch] to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought"⁶⁾ These words wring Quentin's heart, because he knows too well that his attempt is nothing but a useless strife with time. The world of his fantasy is ruined completely by the stern realities produced by the current of time. The present condition of the Compson family is entirely corrupt, and it is hopeless for Quentin to try to stop the submergence of the Compson family for the sake of his honor and pride of his old family in the South.

As seen above, Quentin has an intense attachment for Caddy's virginity as well as a pride in it. The same, I think, is true of Henry who has an ardent love for Judith. It seems to be quite difficult for us to say what the difference is between Quentin and Henry. Like Quentin, Henry is endowed with a special quality of the young man of the South. The moment comes when that quality is revealed: that is, the moment when the romantic world of Henry, who made a decision to agree to the incestuous marriage between Bon and Judith, is destroyed by the problem peculiar to the

South. It is the problem of miscegenation.

Sutpen's confession that Bon has partial negro blood is strong enough to destroy the private world of Henry. His father's words that "his [Bon's] mother was part negro"⁷⁾ cause him to change his attitude suddenly and to oppose the marriage. Miscegenation is not to be agreed to even by the young student, Henry. Bon says in his simmering anger to Henry, "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear."⁸⁾ But he is at a loss what answer to make, for he cannot oppose the conventions of the South: He can never be other than Sutpen's son and the young man of the South. Bon's words that "I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister"⁹⁾ are unbearable for him, so he commits a fratricide in spite of himself by shooting his brother, Bon. About this, Olga W. Vickery makes noteworthy remarks as:

By his shot at the gate of Sutpen's Hundred, Henry commits himself and his sister to an affirmation of Sutpen's design. The lives of Charles Bon, of Judith and Henry are sacrificed to an abstract principle and a social tradition that proves stronger than the moral or religious. ¹⁰⁾

When he has to attach more importance to the regional problem of miscegenation peculiar to the South than to the moral problem of incest universal among mankind, Henry comes to give an unintentional approval to his father's design. This fact means, I think, that at last he succumbed to the concepts or conventions of the Southern society, in other words, the Southern myth which is the core of the mind of the Southerners and whose components are the concepts of

gallantry, respectability, honor, loyalty, justice, pride, and so forth. Irving Howe makes a similar comment of this: "His son, Henry, comes closer to a conventional Southern response."¹¹) Thus he is overcome not by his loyalty for Bon, but by his loyalty for his family and society. This volteface of Henry means his metamorphosis into the defender of the convention of the South.

Thus, Bon's earnest appeal for acknowledgment at the risk of his life was a failure. Bon's death, however, brought on Henry's flight from his father, and at the same time caused Judith to lead a spinster's life like her aunt, Miss Rosa. As a result of this, Sutpen's great design, that is, the Sutpen dynasty, starts to work its own ruin.

In the South, Charles Bon is destined to encounter insuperable difficulties merely owing to his negro blood. The agony of Bon, who has no right to be treated as a man not because of his own faults, but because of his incidental fate as a part-negro, is the terrible, unimaginable one brought about by the ethical deterioration of the South. He is also to undergo the same bitter experiences as his mother, and moreover, their agony is to be inherited by Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon born of Bon and his octo-noon wife. Their hard experiences are, on the whole, the expression of the corruption of the society which causes such tragedies as theirs. The crystallization of their agony is the idiotic, saddle-colored Jim Bond, Etienne's son. He is, we presume, worthy to be the last person of the cursed Sutpen family. Clytie seen at the window of Sutpen's Hundred just burning down seems to be Cassandra,

a prophetic of misfortune, as Mr. Compson comments ironically. Therefore it may safely be said that the story of the rise and fall of the four generations of the Sutpen family from Sutpen to Jim Bond is what we call the epitome of the South. Slavery in the South created the profound and awful problem of obstinate prejudices between the races, and the evil resulting from slavery and white supremacy corrupted the system of the society from within. So it may not be too much to say that the South which committed the fault of allowing a man to enslave another against humanity was doomed to produce miserable masses within itself and to collapse on account of being unable to solve its problems for itself.

Now that he has created so far the story of the Sutpen family, probably Quentin ought to say after the model of Dilsey, "I have seen the first and the last."¹²) what is pictured in his mind by facing up to the realities of the degraded South is only the deplorable state of his native place. Certainly at this moment the fatalistic idea has flashed into his mind. That idea is doubtlessly derived from his attributing the cause of the actual deterioration of the society to such evils and moral chaos as are found in this story. Indeed he has a good reason for being obsessed by fatalism, for he comes, as we know, of the Compson family, the old family in the South. The details of this case with him in The Sound and the Fury have already been considered. If these details are in our recollection, we can presumably understand how intensely fatalism wrings his

heart. What then did he divine in re-creating the story of the Sutpen family with Shreve, his Canadian roommate? It was, we suppose, the dark and hopeless future of the Southerners and the Compson family, so it is natural that he should be obsessed by fatalism.

We should realize that in the fact that Quentin at the present, 1910, cannot help considering the story of the Sutpen family as that of his present and future, lurks an important idea with which to understand Faulkner's novels. A careful reader could perceive it from the passages:

. . . ; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she [Miss Rosa] was---13)

. . . ; his [Quentin's] very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with the stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering, even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness,14)

What is meant by these passages is that Quentin is not only a momentary being in the stream of history, but the sum of the tradition or of the ancestors of his society. About this, the author makes a similar statement in his speech:

Also, to me, no man is himself, he is the sum of his past. There is no such thing really as was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment. All of his and her ancestry, background, is all part of himself and herself at any . . .

moment. And so a man, a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him;15)

What worries the author is his thought about the control of the past over the present; for the more he copes with the actual state, the more he is forced to notice that the present is inseparably connected with the past. Accordingly the past on which the present depends and which keeps on overtaking the present, second by second, seems to be an unavoidable incantation for him. As long as the past makes the qualities of everything in the present, it continues to be alive in the present. Thinking in this way, the author was seized with the idea that "the past is, not was." Then we can accept the following sentences as true and natural: "he was a commonwealth" and "he is the sum of his past."

If the past exercises its influence on the present, the curse on the ancestors ought to be inherited by their descendants. Besides, it is no wonder that consciousness of guilt having vexed the former is recalled in the minds of the latter. These ideas are already found in Light in August (1932), in which Joanna Burden recollects her father's words:

. . . , and he [Burden's father] said, 'remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it.'16)

Since "there is no such thing really as was because the past is," the present inevitably takes over the curse and fatality of the past; all of the past things are transferred as 'is' to the present things whether they are good or not, or whether we are willing or not. From the above arguments we can draw a conclusion that 'a sense of the presentness of the past and a sense of the pastness of the present' is the central idea in Absalom, Absalom!, one of the greatest works of the Yoknapatawpha Saga, and it is this idea that the author has been obliged to realize in the vexation of his mind. Another phrase that expresses the idea to a great extent is "a sense of simultaneity"¹⁷⁾ which Faulkner mentioned in his letter to Malcolm Cowley. Quentin's agony also comes out of this very sense.

If we give a thought to the circumstances stated above, we can perhaps understand the meaning of Quentin's passionate reiteration; at the last scene of the story, he repudiates Shreve's question as to why he hates the South:

"I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I dont hate it," he said. I dont hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!¹⁸⁾

At this moment, the fatalistic perception that he can never escape the doom and curse as a man of the South has certainly occurred to his mind, for now that he has searched after the realities of his birthplace, the South, and realized the evils and curse in them, he is driven to have a full understanding of his fate as a Southerner.

In his mind, however, there is something other than

a perception of his doom. Even if the South is loathsome to Shreve, Quentin can never say, "I hate it." Why can he not hate it without hesitation? What prevents him from having a hatred for it, we suppose, is his burning love for his birthplace, and this love of his mingles indistinguishably with his abomination and shame for it bound up with the keen realization of his own destiny. The South is nothing else but the land where he has been bred and where his ancestors once lived, even if it is cursed and filled with the evils inherent in slavery and prejudice. Why then can he not detest and leave it? He feels a pang at the thought of its actually rotten conditions, but nevertheless he remains true to his love for it. Thinking in this way, we suggest that Faulkner's mind is expressed eventually through the figure of Quentin. So it may safely be said that in this novel he is the mouthpiece of the author.

Faulkner was asked at an interview when he came to Japan in 1955, "Do you love the South?" He said, "Well I love it and hate it. Some of the things there I don't like at all, but I was born there, and that's my home, and I will still defend it even if I hate it."¹⁹⁾ In his essay we find a like statement:

Loving all of it [the South] even while he [the author] had to hate some of it because he knows now that you don't love because: you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults.²⁰⁾

This essay was written in his later days, and yet in these words we perceive the author's steadfast love for the South, which is the same love that we have seen in Quentin so far. When we think of his continuous love for his native place,

we cannot but exclaim like Shreve: "The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years."²¹) Quentin says loudly to Shreve who is the representative of us readers: "You cant understand it [the South]. You would have to be born there."²²)

Though Quentin has seen the evils and moral chaos in the South, he obstinately refuses to hate it against Shreve's, that is, our expectation. His attitude stems from the quality peculiar to the Southerners. He knows too well that his society has corruption in itself and has no bright future, and yet he cannot but love and try to defend it. It seems quite difficult for us outsiders to solve the problem as to what it means to be a Southerner. Thus we are greatly impressed with the deep meaning of the sentence seen at the beginning of this essay: "It is a complex fate to be a Southerner."

Notes:

1. James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dell Published Co., 1961), p. 17.
2. William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 373.
3. Ibid., p. 79.
4. Ibid., p. 96.
5. Loc. cit.
6. William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 74.
7. William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, p. 355.
8. Ibid., p. 356.
9. Ibid., p. 358.
10. Olga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation (Revised Ed., Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp. 78-79.
11. Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (2nd ed.; New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. 77.
12. William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury, p. 297.
13. William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, p. 9.
14. Ibid., p. 12.
15. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (eds.), Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences in the University of Virginia 1957 1958 (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 84.
16. William Faulkner, Light in August (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 239.
17. Malcolm Cowley, The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962 (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 112.
18. William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, p. 378.
19. Robert A. Jelliffe (ed.), Faulkner at Nagano (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1956), p. 26.

20. James B. Meriwether (ed.), William Faulkner: Essays, Speeches and Public Letters (New York: Random House, 1965), pp. 42-43.
21. William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, p. 377.
22. Ibid., p. 361.