



Racial prejudice and discrimination in Absalom, Absalom!

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Abstract

Most of Absalom, Absalom! is set in and around the America Civil War, so its no wonder there's a lot of talk about race. Mostly, its seems to be an issue for Sutpen . It's the wrench in his otherwise flawless plan. As a child , Sutpen is unaware of racial hierarchies, but he quickly learns about inferiority and adopts a racial interpretation for himself . The novel presents many combination of race from black to white and everything between. But there's one thing that's glaringly missing: no one wish black blood gets to tell their own version of events.

When Sutpen comes down out of the mountains of West Virginia as a young man, Sutpen realizes that not only are blacks considered inferior to whites, but poor whites are considered

inferior to rich ones. As he bitterly learns at the door of the white man's mansion, not all whites are created equal because Sutpen comes to Jefferson without any social connection or money, he must marry into them: he believes that having money and the right respects, and he gets his rags-to-riches story, but at what cost? *Absalom, Absalom!* Is clearly a story about the danger of racism. This strong sense of racial prejudice and discrimination aroused from the fact that the predisposition of the Southern societies are grounded in advocating to an explicit form of caste system or stratification in the society. Racial discrimination in the Southern society also originated to the lack of self motivation to uphold what is right and what is appropriate. This was shown in the novel by Thomas Sutpen that despite the fact that he knows all the right family values, he choose the path to his dynasty which utilized denying his own son's rights and giving more importance of his image.

Key words- Racial, blacks, whites, discrimination, prejudice.

William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* can be described as an attempt to face and understand the problem of race. Retelling Sutpen's story, introduced at the very beginning, is not the purpose of Faulkner's novel. Instead, Faulkner uses Quentin and the multiple narrations to uncover the motives and effects behind the incomprehensible events in Sutpen's story. By delving back in time to rediscover Sutpen's life, Faulkner effectively also explores the history of the South when slavery was thriving before the Civil War. The simultaneous discovery of the nature of Sutpen's eventual fall and the demise of the antebellum South is no mere coincidence. The tragic events of Sutpen's life are representative of the South. Faulkner's exploration of the history of Sutpen's fall and the tragedy of the South contributes to the reflection of both Sutpen's

and the South's histories, eventually leading to the discovery of their shared tragic flaw: an ignorance of racial prejudice. Faulkner uses the novel's complex narrative structure and Sutpen's design to reflect on the past and emphasize the unexpected influence, knowledge, and perspective that history provides to the present. Quentin claims that Rosa wants the story told "so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last "why God let us lose the War." This quote directly connects Sutpen's story to the history of the South. ' Rosa seems to want Sutpen's story to survive so that readers in the future can learn from his fatal flaw of dividing people based on class and race that resulted in Sutpen's fall and the loss of slavery.

The motive behind Sutpen's desire to become rich and well settled comes from his sudden exposure to the "country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed neat because of what color their skin happened to be and what they happened to own." In his childhood, living in the territory, which eventually will become West Virginia, Sutpen is surrounded by a community in which "the land belong[s] to anybody and everybody" (179), and where "the only colored people [are] Indians," (179). The Indians are only looked at "over rifle sights" (179), already creating a barrier between classes of people. Sutpen's early life points to the earliest South that initially instilled racial bias and prejudice. After Sutpen is turned away from the front door of a rich white family's mansion, he discovers his innocence about class differences and stays "quite calm" (189), thinking about what he can do to fix his living and compete against his innocence. He concludes that he needs "land and niggers and a fine house to combat [the other whites]," (192) thus beginning his life-long quest to achieve wealth and power of his own. By investigating Sutpen's past, readers also steal a glance at the early human bias and mentality that gradually grows into the Southern lifestyle ripe with racial and class prejudice.

Faulkner's emphasis on the early history of the South seems to reiterate the point that this history and pattern of removal or separation of a race, such as the Indians, and class resentment arising from early communities creates characters like Sutpen.

Because Sutpen builds his plan upon the principles of the Southern aristocracy, by social division between humans, he is doomed to fail from the very beginning of his plan. However, Sutpen does not realize his mistake and said "you see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside point the question is, where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or wrongly do in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate .I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a horse, a plantation, slaves, a family- incidentally of course, a wife," (212).) Sutpen does indeed attain all of what he set out to do, but falters at the end because of his tendency to overlook the racial prejudice that prevails throughout society just as class divisions do. Sutpen and the Southern community both underestimate the effect of racial injustice, leading to the falls of both Sutpen and the foundational principles of slavery in the South after the Civil War. Racial prejudice haunts Sutpen from the very beginning. The major turning point in the novel where this racial bias is brought to light is when Sutpen leaves his first wife and son because they may have some negro blood, "a fact which [he] did not learn until after [his] son was born," (212). Even though Sutpen now has a son to carry on his legacy, he does not consider it a fortune, but only considers "these wasted years" (212). Sutpen's ease of betrayal of his son and wife as he "merely explain[s] how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in [his] design," (212) is his crucial mistake. Sutpen's hamartia of intolerance for mixed race triggers the inevitable domino effect of Sutpen's fall, similar to that of a tragic hero. He willingly sacrifices his family, plantation, and heir all because of an unsuitable race. His grand design eventually fails because his plan is based

on personal gain and is not considerate of any others, paralleling the mentality of the South. The ignorance of the racial divisions in society that produce reverberating effects is the cause of the South's fall after the Civil War, and is also the cause of Sutpen's demise.

Sutpen aims for a perfect image with a perfect family and in doing so he upheld racial discrimination of people around him and even of his own son. Cruel treatment can be imagined easily upon reading the novel and the highlight of this cruelty is the straightforward denial and rejection of Sutpen of Charles Bon who is his son. This scenario is a direct metaphor to the denunciation of black in the South.

Compson pointed out that Sutpen's design ignore the social elements and only focuses on the requirements that he setup and of course the material things that he wants to achieve. In doing so Compson concluded that Sutpen follows that idea of Machiavelli which is the end, justifies the means. Sutpen's ignorance of the consequences like his disregard of his son, disregard of his family led to his greatest problems and eventually his death such an irony for a person who discriminates a black person when he himself came from a lower class family. The racial prejudice and discrimination showed by Sutpen eventually reveal his guilt about his origins, his shame of where he came from and ultimately his hunger for vengeance for all the suffering and shame he experienced. This constant reminder is what tortures Quentin as he inherits the chaos of his past. Though he doesn't realize it until the end when Shreve asks him why he hates the South, Quentin experiences a reflection on the South as he hears the multiple recounts of Sutpen's story. Through these versions, his previous notion of his home in the south is effectively destroyed, and instead Quentin sees a new South that is strange to him. He can't fathom the immoral and unjust acts that Sutpen and the South built their foundations on, and hence questions his love for his home. In reply to Shreve's question at the end of the novel, Quentin

immediately replies and repeats to himself, "I don't hate it," (303) as if trying to remind himself that he can't hate the South because that is where his origins lie.

So after a careful analysis about racial prejudice in *Absalom, Absalom* we can conclude it as a world renowned novel of William Faulkner that revolves around a family's unfortunate demise because of their patriarchs ambitions and mainly racial discrimination and prejudice. Faulkner also presented in this novel the steady decline of the south which is plagued by corruption and discrimination. The highlight of themes in the novel is the main character's outlook on racial discrimination and racial prejudice which is most often the center of all misfortunes of the family. The antagonist, Thomas Sutpen, wants a son to be his heir and the term son means- of pure white blood. He regards purity of race as a very important value particularly of a white race. The recurring issue of racial prejudice exhibited in Thomas Sutpen's character shows that interpretation of author of the current social situation in the South. The setting of the novel is also very important to the story as it gives a near real setup to the social and racial prejudice that is happening. In the novel, Sutpen's planned approach to reach his goals compels the reader to reexamine values and morals due to the debates that emanated from the slavery and discrimination of black people. These violation of human rights urged Faulkner, who is also against this harsh treatment of black people to showcase the rejection of morals of Southern people to this harsh reality.

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