



The Mythological Narrative of Southern Tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Abstract. William Faulkner's novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is set against the historical backdrop of American Southern society before and after the American Civil War. Eschewing traditional linear historical narrative, it employs stream-of-consciousness mythological narrative to depict the genesis and evolution of the Southern tragedy. Existing analyses of *Absalom, Absalom!* have focused on revealing racial issues and historical trauma within the novel, thereby overlooking the reconstructive role of mythological narrative in historical writing. This paper adopts a mythological narrative perspective to examine the novel's narrative mechanisms for constructing mythic archetypes and how history manifests as an unending, narrated form of experience. It further explores how William Faulkner shaped Southern society into an internally closed, perpetually self-repairing tragic pattern.

Keywords: *Absalom, Absalom!*; mythological narrative; mythic archetype; tragedy

1 Introduction

In traditional tragedy, protagonists endure repeated setbacks and tribulations under the influence of predetermined fate, even sacrificing their precious lives, yet their legitimate aspirations and passionate struggles ultimately foreshadow triumph. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner undertakes a modernist reconfiguration of traditional tragedy. Centered on the rise and fall of the Sudben family, he employs multiple narrative perspectives and repeated retellings to reconstruct Southern history within a fragmented timeline. This endeavor transcends a straightforward linear reconstruction of the social realities surrounding the American Civil War. Instead, it employs a complex, opaque narrative structure and mythic archetypes laden with multiple layers of metaphor to achieve a profound transformation. Rising from the individual narrator's account to a collective, weighty historical consciousness, it renders Southern history as an elusive, ever-reconstructed phantom—perpetually pursued yet forever beyond grasp. Thus, it accomplishes a shift from causal inevitability to narrative suspension.

2 The Mythic Archetype in Narrative Presentation

The mythic archetype of Absalom, Absalom! extends beyond its narrative structure; the novel's title itself establishes an interpretative framework imbued with archetypal significance. 'Absalom, Absalom!' is not an address to characters or scenes within the novel, but rather derives from the structural logic of origin, betrayal, and destruction born from the failed rebellion and death of Absalom, son of King David, as recounted in the *Books of Samuel*. By establishing the title on this foundation, the narrative's starting point is predetermined as a historical context that has already unfolded yet remains incomprehensible. Consequently, the principal characters "necessarily and exclusively exist in a mythical mode of being"[1]. thus establishes that the unfolding plot is not a complete historical event but rather a mythic archetype centered on the collapse of patriarchy and the severing of lineage, creating an emotional vortex characterized by hindsight and unstoppable momentum. The novel's title directly invokes mythic archetypes, and this mythological foreshadowing signifies that every step of Sutpen's rise deepens the inevitability of his downfall. It elevates the regional conflicts of Southern history to a broader dimension, transforming them into the fated conclusion of human civilization.

The myths within the novel are not interpreted as isolated cultural artifacts but rather are firmly embedded within the construction of Southern history through mythological narratives. Following the American Civil War, the American South entered a period of Reconstruction. Whilst embracing and assimilating modernity, it retained substantial elements of nostalgia, attempting to fashion the post-Reconstruction South into a garden where vestiges of aristocracy lingered. This endeavor sought to compensate for the South's undeniable societal shortcomings by relying on a cultural identity uniquely belonging to Southerners. In William Faulkner's early works, the profound influence of Southern culture is clearly discernible. It was only during the conception and writing of *Absalom, Absalom!* He undertook a thorough re-examination of the cultural identity and ideals of the Southern aristocracy. He realised that "the cultural identity of the South is an unceasing process of production"[2]. Whether it be cultural memory or historical trauma, both require continuous exploration and collective confrontation in the face of the passage of time. Thus, he began to seek a cultural path out of the existential predicament of Southern society. William Faulkner uses Thomas Sutpen as the entry point for dismantling the myth of the shattered Southern aristocracy, "subverting the conceptualised, stereotypical 'chivalrous aristocrat' image of the Southern plantation owner within a dualistic mindset"[3]. Thomas Sutpen's origins are obscure; in the narrator's account, he appears abruptly, with no clear indication of how he accumulated his wealth or ascended the social ladder. He seems like a forcibly inserted historical memory, rapidly taking root in Jefferson as a discordant outsider. Here, the myth does not provide a historically plausible explanation for his mysterious origins but instead becomes the structural condition for the unfolding tragedy.

3 Constructing the Narrative Field

Sutpen's Hundred stands as the material manifestation of his grandiose vision, serving as a power-driven enactment of creation myth. Through the coercive subjugation of untamed wilderness and the brutal exploitation of slaves, it formally accomplishes a process of creation *ex nihilo*. Perennially veiled in mist, Sutpen's Hundred exists within the townspeople's speculations and rumors, thereby suspending its factual causality while constructing its narrative space. Though Thomas Sutpen's material accumulation erased class distinctions, providing a flawless veneer for his identity's legitimacy, his achievements lacked foundational grounding, becoming a narrative node riddled with latent fissures.

Sutpen's Hundred is a dynamic, self-expanding yet self-excluding space, embodying the racial and hereditary paradoxes of Southern society. It functions as a bastion safeguarding Thomas Sutpen's pure bloodline, drawing both the Sutpen family and the narrators into its orbit. Precisely for this reason, it also becomes the starting point for the narrators' reconstruction of the narrative: Rosa Coldfield's recollections and Quentin Compson's imaginings both rely upon this foundation. Within this narrative terrain, power is spatialized, realizing the tangible possibility of constructing monarchical authority within the mythic archetype.

Sutpen's Hundred symbolizes the dynamic evolution of Southern American society from primitive savagery to gradual collapse. Its ultimate destruction marks the conclusion of the novel's mythological narrative.

4 Characters as Functional Nodes within the Mythological Narrative

As the entire novel is deliberately embedded within a highly mythologized narrative framework "myth is the imagined American story"[4] the characters do not form coherent, complete figures through consistent biographical trajectories. Instead, they exist as functional nodes sustaining the mythical narrative's operation. Under this narrative logic, the symbolic significance of characters does not derive from their characterization or moral choices but is determined by the functional roles they fulfill within the mythical framework. Consequently, this section's analysis of Charles Bon, Quentin Compson, and Rosa Coldfield provides interpretative legitimacy for subsequently examining the novel's mythological narrative mechanisms through the lenses of lineage, temporality, and affect.

Charles Bon, the denied narrative breakpoint. Bon cannot be incorporated into the narrative order, becoming the forbidden core within the Sade family mythological narrative. Readers never directly hear Bon's voice; everything concerning him is suffused with potent allure, leaving us only to engage in creative reconstruction alongside the narrator upon the ruins of Sutpen's Hundred. Throughout the novel, Bon never appears before the reader as a fully realized agent of action. Narrative descriptions of him primarily serve to embellish plot developments, while his origins and lineage remain perpetually hinted at and evaded. This narrative hesitation does not stem from

flaws in the author's plot design but rather constitutes a necessary condition for sustaining the mythical logic. Jeffersonville, "this physical space, became a symbol of American society during its transformative period and a microcosm of its historical and cultural fabric"[5]. As analyzed earlier regarding Sutpen's Hundred, the narrative field's self-exclusion necessitated a stance of rejection towards Bon to preserve the fortress of pure bloodlines. As the son of Sade Ben, his mixed-race identity precluded formal recognition and rendered his inheritance of Sutpen's Hundred both improbable and unjustifiable. This parallels Absalom, who, though equally entitled to succession, was purged in the pursuit of racial purity and the concealment of hereditary fissures. The narrative domain of Sutpen's Hundred was constructed through concealment, failing to establish a complete order at its inception. This resulted in Rosa Coldfield's narration, where "he was never seen alive"[6]. Bon's continued existence threatened to disrupt the mythical order of the Sadben lineage's purity and familial continuity, rendering him a necessary sacrifice within the mythical structure. His death serves to uphold the racial myth by obliterating the truth of bloodline, representing the mythological narrative's resolution of its inherent narrative peril. Yet this does not extinguish the conflict; rather, it transforms the narrative evasion centered on specific characters into an enduring curse, becoming the structural prerequisite that perpetually drives the Southern tragedy's cyclical restoration.

Quentin Compson, the piecer together of mythical time. Initially cast as an outsider, Quentin Compson did not directly engage in the internal affairs of the Sutpen family. Driven by a profound fascination with their history, he willingly embraced the cyclical mythological narrative as a listener and imaginator, immersing himself in an experience that blurred the boundaries of self. Quentin endeavors to fill the gaps in history through the tales he hears, piecing together the truth of the Sutpen lineage—"to discern the essence and vitality of myth within the complete chain of time"[7]. In his quest to reconstruct and comprehend this truth, he transforms into a piece of mythic time, gradually succumbing to a tragic pattern of perpetual repair—one marked by suspended origins, bloodline taboos, and an internally closed system. Quentin's active involvement places the South's past, present, and future on equal footing. Events and their repercussions expand beyond the narrative field, transforming into history that cannot be sealed away as past—presenting an unfinished, perpetually recurring state. Rosa sees him as a conduit for the voice of madness; his father regards him as a confidant for life's burdens. He is compelled to absorb the South's collective memories of guilt and negative emotions. As a Southerner, even after uncovering partial truths, he remains ensnared by the region's inescapable destiny. When individual endurance reaches its limit, the pessimism born of accepting inevitable decline perpetually clashes with reason and emotion, ultimately precipitating his mental collapse. This represents the inevitable consequence of an individual bearing the weight of a mythological narrative, demonstrating that the Southern historical tragedy cannot be interpreted or traced through linear historical perspectives. As his despair evolved from rational to emotional, Quentin's self-exile from history and self-identity resonated with the mythic theme of voluntary suffering and spiritual redemption.

Rosa Coldfield, the voice of mythical sentiment. Rosa Coldfield has played multiple roles, from initially observing the rise of the Sutpen family to being forced by cir-

cumstance to seek refuge with the Sutpens and finally, unable to endure the humiliation, voluntarily breaking away from the Sutpen sphere of influence. Her presence has helped to render the history of the Sutpen family more complete, while her entanglement with the family's fate grows ever more complex. In conventional mythic structures, the sanctification of heroes and demonization of villains are typically finalized through the testimony of others. Rosa, driven by her absolute hatred for Thomas Sutpen, emotionally strips him of his mythic status, thereby ushering in the 'divine punishment' that destroys the Sutpen family. At the story's outset, "her voice was dark, hoarse, and tinged with astonishment"[6], delivering an irrational narrative brimming with emotional tension and moral indictment. Her narration transcends everyday speech, adopting mythological rhetoric saturated with lengthy sentences, intricate adjectives, and Gothic metaphors. While creating a reading barrier, this style also conceals decades of pent-up anger. As the story unfolds, her survival becomes dependent on others' protection, significantly diminishing the initial aura of mystery. Lifting this veil reveals her as an ordinary, vulnerable woman. Yet in Quentin eyes, she retains an air of enigma, her narration essential to drawing nearer to the so-called 'truth'. Within this context, her storytelling functions like a demon's whisper, luring Quentin step by step into a narrative terrain already meticulously constructed. Her irrational narration, unfolding through a chaotic timeline, precisely constitutes the emotional dimension sustaining the mythological narrative. It resonates with King David's anguished lament in the *Books of Samuel* following Absalom's death. As a living, relatively lucid witness, her narration externalizes the myth's emotional core while proclaiming a new truth: any myth built upon humanity that extinguishes life force is ultimately doomed to ruin.

Analysis of Charles Bon, Quentin Compson, and Rosa Coldfield reveals that the novel's characters lose their agency to drive historical progress, becoming puppets driven and consumed by both history and myth. The denied narrative discontinuities, the patchworkers of mythic time, and the vocalisers of mythic sentiment collectively construct an internally closed, perpetually repairing narrative structure. This demonstrates the structural impact that emerges when mythic archetypes become embedded within historical narratives.

5 Conclusion

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the mythological narrative firmly embeds mythic archetypes within the construction of Southern history, revealing the South's predicament in processing post-American Civil War historical trauma through the prisms of bloodline, mythic temporality, and mythic affect. Through analyzing the mythic archetype embedded in the title, the narrative field analogous to historical existence, and the pivotal figures functioning as structural nodes within the mythic framework, it becomes evident that Faulkner, while lamenting the inevitability of historical progression, refines historical causality through mythic logic. This mode of historical writing, accomplished through a mythological narrative, resonates with irrational echoes and lingering effects when interpreting the Southern society's internally closed, perpetually repairing tragic pattern.

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