**Threatening the “Decorous Order:” Class Antagonisms in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!***

The story of the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, and his aspirations of a plantation dynasty, *Absalom, Absalom!* is as much concerned with the history of the South (as an object *and* also as its subjective retelling), as it is the class and racial divides that characterized its society. Faulkner places Sutpen at the center of his narrative; yet he constructs his story as a narrative retold in a recapitulative effort by narrators who are both inside and outside Sutpen’s story, indicating Faulkner’s authorial lens is also focused heavily on his supporting characters. The narrators Rosa, Jason Compson, Quentin, and Shreve all occupy different social positions and thus impart their own interpretive biases on the events that unfold. The slipperiness of the objective knowledge of the past, therefore, is something of primary concern for Faulkner. Despite this instability, the biases and anxieties by the character-narrators still reveal themselves through the very act of the story’s re-telling.. That the anxieties exist is enough critical leverage for inquiries about how the novel, and Faulkner, understand the antagonisms of the South. In close readings of three scenes involving Rosa Coldfield (Sutpen’s sister-in-law) and Wash (Sutpen’s handyman) are useful in teasing out Faulkner’s diagnosis of class antagonisms. The particular way in which they re-enact the politics at play in the “primal scene” of the novel – in which a young Sutpen is told to enter the plantation mansion through the back door because of his lower-class standing – show that Faulkner’s primary criticism is pointed the economic structure of the South as a system that produces racism rather than just a criticism of racist sentiment in general.

Once the War begins and the plantation is thrown into disarray by the enlistment of its leading men in the Confederate Army, Rosa decides to move in with her niece Judith, and Clytie, Judith’s slave. Though she never admits it outright, Rosa’s move to the plantation was a decision forced by economic hardship. The general store her father ran was short of supplies due to the war, and his ultimate suicide left her with little to get by. However, Rosa’s poverty was no secret to the rest of Jefferson. Jason Compson (relating the scene to Quentin) emphasizes Rosa’s poverty three times in the short episode. According to Compson, it was a “natural thing” for her to move in with Judith: “She would not have needed to be asked; no one would expect her to wait to be. Because that’s what a Southern lady is. Not the fact that, penniless and with no prospect of ever being otherwise…yet moving in with parasol and chamber pot and three trunks into your home” (86). By making mention of the particular objects Rosa brings with her in the move, Compson reveals the social limbo within which Rosa find herself. Despite having no way to support herself or the lifestyle she aspires to, Rosa owns the material signifiers appropriate to the capitalist class. By toting three trunks of clothing to the plantation, Rosa shows her determination to maintain her class standing. Moving to the plantation (without asking) was a way, as Richard Godden argues, for Rosa to have “claims on Sutpen’s goods and chattels”; i.e. to take ownership of the ultimate commodity-statement of social hierarchy: the plantation (90). The performance of aristocracy is made even clearer in the succeeding lines, where Compson mentions Rosa’s refusal to tip the servants (presumably, slaves liberated by the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862), “who know as well as the white folks that she will never have anything to tip them with” (86). Her failure to tip is both an ideological slip that reveals her impoverished social standing and a reflection of her desire to perpetuate the antebellum slave system.

Rosa’s commitment to the order of the Old South is exemplified in her expectations about the war: that it would end not in defeat of one side or the other, but that it “would stalemate from sheer exhaustion” (87). The “stalemate” she hopes for connotes the continuity of the political status quo, which would allow Sutpen’s project to resume its course. By effedtively claiming the plantation as her own, Rosa is able to preserve the sense of self-worth that she has built on material ownership. Furthermore, the act of claiming property becomes a re-enactment of Sutpen’s own decision to do the same. This ultimately implicates Rosa in the same ideological machinery and underlies her performance of social hierarchy. She is, like Sutpen, motivated by the fear of amalgamated class relations with the newly freed slaves, an amalgamation which would reveal her similar labor relationship with the aristocracy and the final erasure of an ideologically-defined notion self-worth.

In addition to her proprietary obsessions, Rosa’s overt racism makes her an important part of Faulkner’s depiction of class antagonisms in *Absalom, Absalom!* After hearing about Bon’s death, Rosa rushes to the plantation to see her family. The episode famously concludes with Clytie’s refusal to let Rosa upstairs to Judith and Henry. The scene is noteworthy in that it contains, arguably, the most overt racist outburst in the novel, which comes in three stages. It begins with Rosa’s outrage at Clytie for calling her by her first name. Rosa takes pains to make clear the offense taken from the patronizing tone, since, “to her of all who knew me I was no child” (Faulkner, 139). Rosa leaves unsaid the reason for her anger, but her revelation that they played together as children, allows us to infer it was the familiarity of tone, the equation of status, that incensed Rosa. The second moment, Clytie grabbing Rosa’s arm, provokes Rosa’s second outburst. Once touched, Rosa is irritated into running “blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile.” Rosa is unable to identify or articulate the deep-seeded anxieties which underlie her anger. Verbalizing what she previously left unsaid, she reflects, “there is something which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering…let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too” (139). Rosa’s word choice is interesting: “decorous ordering,” “shibboleth,” and “caste” are all structural terms. The pattern solidifies Rosa as a character obsessed with stratified societal hierarchy, superiority, and inferiority. The terminology is also reminiscent of Shreve’s language in his description of Sutpen earlier in the novel:

So he didn’t even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own. (295)

The words pattern of structural terminology betray material ownership and social hierarchy as a common obsession among the novel’s white characters. Taking the incident with what has been established as Rosa’s re-enactment of Sutpen’s mission, we finally have a clear example of this anxiety sliding into racism. And overt racism is indeed what we get: Rosa’s famous exclamation, “Take your hand off me, nigger!” (140).

Rosa’s racism even compels her to avoid any object Clytie touched (Faulkner, 140). As Godden points out, Rosa’s aversion is a manifestation of the “awkwardness of the interdependencies that typify slave production” (87). That is, in the act of production and use, slaves (should) have a claim to ownership of these objects, but the masters retain their legal ownership. Rosa is confronted with a problem: using objects associated with Clytie is tantamount to tearing her from her perceived social position and becoming equated with black slaves. In sliding in to racism, Rosa is betraying the same proletariat anxieties that plagued Sutpen at the plantation door; and she utilizes a sentimental mask of white superiority to defend herself from the ever-present threat of racial amalgamation.

Yet, this isn’t the end of Rosa’s struggle – nor the end of Faulkner’s skillful utilization of her position to portray a class-founded white anxiety. Where Sutpen’s position as a white patriarch can only show the interplay between class and racial ideology, Ros’s position exemplifies the female boy as a unit of production in the antebellum South. That women serve first and foremost a (re)productive purpose is specifically demonstrates the foregrounding of economic and class antagonisms in *Absalom, Absalom!* As J. Hillis Miller observes:

The novel ascribes to Sutpen an ugly analogy to express his conviction that women are valuable only as a means of producing sons. When he insults Miss Rosa, who would eagerly have married him, by suggesting that they mate first and then marry if she produces a son, this is described by Miss Rosa as “*the bald outrageous words* [spoken] *exactly as if he were consulting with Jones or with some other man about a bitch dog or a cow or a mare.*” (266)

The insult Rosa suffers in being specifically treated as productive capital. By making their marriage contingent upon the birth of a boy, Sutpen lays bare the true basis of Rosa’s value to the plantation dynasty. Rosa is thus relegated to the same situation as a slave. Her worth is derived from what her body can produce. After carefully manufacturing her social position, resisting the “blackened” status of the poor white by laying claim to Sutpen’s wealth, Rosa is met with the inescapable reality that as a female, her worth is as determined by her body’s productive output (measured in male children) just as a slave’s is determined by his or her productive capabilities. Like Sutpen, the sentimental mask Rosa erected to confer upon herself a social position that allowed her to look down on others was shattered by an insult which revealed the mask’s fabrication.

Sutpen’s murder is instigated by a similar offense against Wash Jones. Like Rosa, Wash’s socio economic position leaves him prone to sliding into amalgamation with the slaves. While he is blackened by his improper speech and thick accent, his poverty, and his complete dependence on the good graces of Sutpen who allows him to live and work on the plantation, he seems perfectly content in that his whiteness confers upon him at least some measure of respectability. His report to Rosa of Bon’s death is telling in that it shows that Wash is laden with similar class anxieties and employs similar tactics to allay them. In his report, Wash says, “Air you Rosie Coldfield? Then you better come on out yon. Henry has done shot that durn French Feller. Kilt him dead as a beef” (Faulkner, 133). Wash describes Bon’s dead body in the same commodified terms that Sutpen and General Compson regard the slaves, which “he probably chose with the same care and shrewdness with which he chose the other livestock – the horses and mules and cattle” (61). By equating Bon with livestock, Wash labels him in terms of productive capital rather than human terms. Since his whiteness means he is *not* productive capital, he thus elevates himself on the social ladder by articulating his freedom . That Wash uses linguistic association with commodities as his primary tool for personal social elevation exacerbates the insult dealt to him by Sutpen when Sutpen tells his granddaughter Milly (whom Sutpen impregnated), “Well, Milly, too bad you’re not a mare like Penelope. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable” (185). Sutpen uses the same language to commodify Wash (by the proxy of his granddaughter) that Wash used to commodify Bon. This pattern of figurative language – comparing subjected humans to commodified livestock – supports the assertion that it was their own commodification in the form of slavery that the poor whites feared most. Wash, who originally understood the most important class bifurcation to be along the divide between superior white and black slave, also understood that class hierarchy to be maintained and justified by superficial sentimental masks which basically held whites as human and blacks as sub-human units of capital.

The most interesting aspect of this episode is the way the socio-economic politics of Sutpen’s original scene are played out. If we recall that Sutpen justifies his designs for wealth with a quasi-benevolent mission to perpetuate the sentimental mask of white superiority and prevent other proto-Sutpens from suffering the same primal insult that he endured at the door, it is unclear why Sutpen inflicts upon Wash the very *same* commodifying social-position inversion that he so ardently sought to prevent in the first place. Sutpen until this point had been performing his quasi-benevolent mission quite well in allowing Wash to live off his land and perform miscellaneous tasks for the plantation. In a sense, he was letting Wash enter the house and “shut that front door behind him forever himself” (266). Wash, who (pathetically) is all-too-eager to let Sutpen utilize his granddaughter for (re)productive ends[[1]](#endnote-1), is utterly betrayed by Sutpen. What follows, then is that Sutpen committed an ideological slip. Not only does he betray Wash, but he fails his own plan and becomes exactly what he set out to prevent.

That Sutpen becomes the force he meant to ameliorate shows the pervasiveness of ideology. In committing the slip, Sutpen, who not only slips with Wash, but also with Rosa, reveals that he is ultimately governed by the capitalist ideologies of profit-motivation and commodity fetishism. As Brooks argues, Sutpen’s design is his ultimate priority. When his economic ideologies come in contact with sentimental ideologies of white male superiority, the economics always win out. Furthermore, when Sutpen’s insults become the lance that lacerate these sentimental masks, the masks are revealed to be defense mechanisms against an undergirding set of class antagonisms and anxieties that energize them (the masks). These incidents only confirm Marx’s assertions that ideology is “nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations” (Easthope and McGowan, 39). In other words, the ruling class of the South (the planters) are foremost concerned with economic dominance and material gain. Any sentimental prejudices that grow out of the material relationships inherent in the system are necessarily secondary.

The breaking of the ideological masks worn by both Rosa and Wash result in (respective) acts of resistance. For Rosa, resistance comes in breaking off the (already specious) marriage arrangement. Like a laborer who goes on strike, Rosa refuses the commodifying terms under which she is being asked to produce. Her subjected class status is revealed to her through Sutpen’s insult – the sentimental mask she carefully constructed had been shattered – and the only way for her to meaningfully resist was to abstain from the act which determines her status as productive capital – the reproduction of male heirs. For Wash, however, resistance is complicated. Because, in contrast to a woman who can produce children and a slave who can produce wealth, Wash’s productive capabilities are marginally slim. His insult comes by proxy of his granddaughter, who as a woman is more easily made into a unit of production. Wash’s resistance then comes through the murder-suicide of Sutpen, Milly and her daughter, and himself. The murder can be characterized as both blind rage and class revolution at the same time. Wash is thrown into a blind rage because he doesn’t really understand the commodifying ramifications of the insult– he only knows that his superiority as a white man has been exposed as a façade. Much like when Sutpen can’t locate the object of his aggression, Wash is also enraged by the ideology which has called him in to subjection. Wash is enraged to find out that not only has his perceived class standing and elevated notion of self-worth been revealed as a fabrication, but that he has been determined by the materialist ideology since the day he was born a poor Southern white. That the murder was committed with a rusty scythe lent to Wash by Sutpen – a delivery of productive capital from the capitalist to the proletariat – makes the murder a poetic rendering of class revolt.

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