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A performance analysis of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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The Ohio State University, 1987

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A PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM FAULKNER'S ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

Patricia Alice Madigan, B.A., M.A.

* * * *

The Ohio State University

1987

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INTRODUCTION

Performance Theory and Its Application to Literary Criticism

As expressions of human culture, folklore and literature have much in common. One sign of the symbiotic relationship between the two is the fact that in many major universities, folklorists are members of the English department. Traditionally, the two disciplines were most often integrated by way of the "lore-in-lit" approach; that is, folk tales, myths, beliefs and so forth were scrupulously identified in the works of particular authors, often those whose writings featured a rural or ethnic orientation. Folklore study itself, however, extended beyond mere identification of folklore items and included in its repertoire a variety of broader considerations—sociological, cultural, and ethnological, for example. Folklorists recognized the folk item per se as part of a larger universe, an integral component of the culture, lifestyle, and even mindset of the people (or folk) themselves.
A major new emphasis in the folklorists' discipline became apparent in the early 1970s, when scholars such as Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman began to call attention to the performance aspect of folklore as a viable object of study. In addition to collecting individual folk items, many of today's folklorists also attempt to capture a variety of performance features (such as the event during which the performance occurs, its setting, and the audience to which it is delivered) to help them better understand the folk item within its cultural setting. The result has been a richer and more inclusive treatment of many folk items.

Curiously, the study of folk performance has not been extended to literary criticism as readily as folk item identification had been. This is unfortunate, because just as performance theory offers fresh insights in folklore study, so too can it bring new understanding to literary studies, particularly with regard to the study of narrators. The intent of this paper is to demonstrate the fruitful application of performance theory to literary criticism by applying it to William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*. 
Faulkner's work has been the object of traditional "lore-in-lit" studies, and appropriately so. The regionalism of his cannon and the rural nature of his Yoknapatawpha County lend themselves well to this type of inquiry. Faulkner's work is equally well suited to the application of performance theory; storytelling (one type of performance) is a major element in much of Faulkner's writing. In fact, not only does storytelling occur frequently in Faulkner's stories, it is often among the subjects of his work. This is especially true of those novels in which the action is relayed to us by more than one narrator, novels such as *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* Of these, *Absalom, Absalom!* best lends itself to the application of performance theory because each of the novel's narrators has an internal audience within the story, as well as an external audience in the reader.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is among Faulkner's most difficult novels in several senses, including difficult to read. Its publication in 1936 was greeted with both enthusiastic acclaim and acid denunciation, but the balance fell clearly on the negative side. One contemporary reviewer branded the book "unreadable," while another characterized Faulkner's style
More recent criticism generally recognizes the novel as among Faulkner's most important works, but there remains little consensus about it, even with regard to its genre and subject matter. Claims have been set forth that *Absalom! Absalom!* is a Gothic novel, a fable, a historical novel, a historical myth, a prose tragedy, and a memory narrative, to name just a few. Similarly, various critics have perceived it as Sutpen's story, Quentin's story, and the story of the American South.

This disagreement may be due at least in part to the fact that the structure and style of *Absalom, Absalom!* are continually shifting, leaving the reader with no clear orientation. Just as we become convinced that we are immersed in a Gothic novel, the novel changes shape, and seems to be mythic or historical. While there are many clues to the novel's genre, they contradict one another. At the same time, we are forced to cope with three separate versions of the central story, each informed by its narrator's own prejudices and constrained by the limits of his or her knowledge. Little wonder there is confusion and disagreement about this novel. Perhaps Joseph Reed, Jr. has assessed the situation most accurately in saying,
"Telling and hearing are constant; treatment and focus shift. Could not telling and hearing be at the heart of the book?"

If Reed is correct, and I believe he is, then there is much to be gained from approaching *Absalom, Absalom!* via performance theory, treating each of the novel's versions of the Sutpen story as a separate performance. Doing so will give us insights into the ways in which they differ and the reasons for which they differ. It will help us to understand how Faulkner has, in juxtaposing the performances of three different narrators, placed the very process of narration at the center of the novel. Finally, it will enable us understand how we as readers are drawn into the effort to interlock the pieces of the puzzle that is *Absalom, Absalom!* so that we can see as a whole the picture it presents.

In the following paper, I will devote a chapter to each of the novel's major narrators: Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and Quentin. The final chapter will look at Faulkner's own performance as an artist, telling the Sutpen story through his fictional - narrators to us, his audience. Before delving into the novel itself, however, an explication of the
performance theory to be used in this paper is necessary.

To begin with, what is meant by the term "performance"? One might proceed without a rigorous definition, taking the approach that former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart took toward pornography: that he might not be able to define it, but he knew it when he saw it. This attitude is less cavalier than it may seem; most of us do know a performance when we see one, having been conditioned by our culture to recognize performances as varied as Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood and King Lear. In large measure, the attempt to define performance is really an attempt to define the elements of that conditioning.

Many of us would think of performance first as a dramatic presentation, a story "acted out" in a Broadway play, a film, a made-for-TV movie, even a school Christmas pageant. An early proponent of the importance of performance features to folklore study, William Hugh Jansen, reveals his own tendencies in this regard in writing, "One must employ the term performance in something like its theatrical or "dramatic definition." However, our culture does not limit performance to such events, or even to verbal renditions. For example, we call the members of a
symphony orchestra and of a ballet troupe "performers," indicating that we equate their presentations with performance as well. In other cultures, different types of events are considered performance, such as bride-price negotiations among the Malagasy or the curing ritual of the Cuna.7

Richard Bauman adopts the term "cultural performance" for events such as these, at which performance is integral to the event itself. He says of them, "Cultural performances tend to be the most prominent performance contexts within a community. They are, as a rule, scheduled events, restricted in setting, clearly bounded, and widely public, involving the most highly formalized performance forms and accomplished performers of the community." It is important to note, however, as Bauman does, that "as interesting as cultural performances are, performance occurs outside of them as well . . . ."8 Urban legends repeated by adolescent girls at a slumber party, proverbs told to young children by parents or grandparents, jokes told at a party—all are instances of performance that occurs outside the realm of what folklorists would call "cultural performance."
This complicates the situation somewhat, for it means that we cannot restrict our notion of performance to those events which could not take place without it. Therefore, we need a means of recognizing performance—when it occurs within the formal cultural contexts where we expect it and when it occurs in less clearly defined circumstances.

Bauman suggests that performance represents "an interpretive frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood," specifically a frame which tells us to interpret the message in a special sense, beyond what the words themselves literally convey. Whether the circumstances constitute a "cultural performance" or a situation where performance is optional, we are alerted to that frame by "keys" such as an appeal to tradition, special codes or formulae, figurative language, parallelism, special paralinguistic features, and a disclaimer of performance. Just as performance events themselves can differ between various cultures, so too can the keys to performance. But the function that the "keys" serve is constant; these elements tell us that a special kind of communication is intended, that the message being conveyed is more than informational in the literal sense.
It should be noted that the "frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood" is not a "frame" in the sense that it surrounds the message but remains essentially outside it. Many of the keys to performance, such as figurative language and parallelism, can and do occur within the performance itself. Barbara Babcock calls these elements "metanarration," and says that by drawing our attention to the fact that the communicative event is a performance, they remind us of our role as audience and our relationship to the performer as narrator.

We recognize performance, then, because there are culturally specific clues, or "keys" that tell us that this communication is different from literal information transmission and that we are to interpret it in a special way. But the keys only one aspect of performance; they are not the performance itself. To get a complete picture of performance, we must also look at the elements which comprise the performance situation: the performer, the audience, and the communicative event that takes place between them. These elements are indivisible from one another in the actual occurrence that is a performance, but clarity is best served by discussing them separately here.
THE PERFORMER

The performer is the controlling factor in the performance situation. More than any other component, it is the performer who determines, within his own cultural milieu, if a performance will take place, what kind of performance it will be, and how well it will be conducted. But the mere presence of a performer does not guarantee that a performance will occur. There are a number of other factors which contribute to the performance situation.

Self-conscious role-playing

Performance does not occur by accident; it is an intentional act. Folklorists study performances ranging from rhyming games to storytelling sessions to traditional ethnic dances, and despite the disparity among the types of activity involved, in each case the performer is aware that he is playing a role. Jansen, writing fifteen years before the performance approach became generally popular, expresses the self-conscious nature of performance well:
In folklore, the element I can find no term for except performance does not exist until the "doer," the speaker or reciter of a bit of folklore, steps outside himself as an individual and assumes a pose toward his audience, however small, that differs from his everyday, every-hour-in-the-day relationship to that same audience (pp. 112-13).

This is an important distinction, because it helps to distinguish performance from more routine kinds of social interaction, such as conversation. Recognizing the need for such a discrimination, Dell Hymes defines the differences between performance on the one hand and behavior and conduct on the other, saying that performance occurs when one or more people assume responsibility for a presentation to an audience. Hymes explores the idea—implicit in Jansen's phrase "however small"—that there can be varying degrees of role-playing, which he says can range from rote recitation to authentic performance. Only knowledge of the lore is necessary for the former, according to Hymes, while the latter requires the performer's identification with the material and a motivation to perform it.
Function

Because the performer must step outside himself into a role, performance requires him to expend a certain amount of effort; it is work, and when human beings work, they do so toward an end. A legitimate question that can be asked of each performance, therefore, is, "What purpose is this performance intended to serve?" or, put another way, "What is its goal?"

Jansen felt that the performer fulfilled one of three possible purposes: "The poser is as poser a teacher, a monitor, or an entertainer" (p. 113). While one of these functions may be paramount in any given performance, it is also possible for a single performance to achieve more than one of them. For example, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett illustrates the use of folklore performance as a teaching tool in recounting a parable told by a woman to her brother, by way of showing him why his family is annoyed at him. The brother may have been entertained by the performance, and it was also intended to persuade him to change the offending behavior.
Along the same lines, Abrahams has made the argument for a rhetorical theory of folk performance, arguing that expressive folklore solves social problems by persuading people of the traditional means of solution. In this theory, the performer's purpose is to re-establish social equilibrium by bringing about a solution to some problem that has arisen in the society. In keeping with this idea that performance is a tool for maintaining social harmony, Abrahams defines performance as "a demonstration of culture, a working out of expressive means of operating together."13

Some of the functions that a performance can serve may be closely related to genre. Because her purpose was to teach a lesson, the performer whom Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes made an appropriate choice in selecting a parable for her performance. A joke is an obvious choice when the performer's intent is to entertain, although it may serve other functions as well. Function may also be prescribed by the relationship between audience and performer; an older member of the social group might give a performance to teach cultural values or to monitor the behavior of a younger audience, for example.
Motivation

We can say with assurance that a performance does not take place unless the performer intentionally, consciously assumes the special role of performer. It stands to reason that there must be some motivating factor that predisposes him to make that choice. Therefore, in addition to assessing the purpose that the performer intends his performance to serve, we can learn a great deal by evaluating the personal interests that lead him to perform.

Some of the performer's motivation may be conscious; he may have, for example, a personal interest in maintaining—or changing—the status quo. Bauman cites, for example, Dick Gregory's autobiography, in which the black comedian relates that he learned to tell jokes to keep the other boys in the neighborhood from picking on him. Abrahams says that knowing the lore and being able to perform it gives the performer power, the power to persuade others to accept his solutions to social conflicts. By determining what values inform those solutions, we can attain a fuller understanding of both the performance and the performer.
There may also be psychological reasons for the performer's behavior of which he may or may not be aware. Does he crave applause, the accolades that may accrue to the successful entertainer, in support of his own ego? Is he more comfortable putting on a role, acting a part besides his own? Is the performance an attempt to justify, to himself or others, his actions or beliefs? Or is he committed to an unpopular or generally unfamiliar idea or a value, and courageous enough to promote it by way of performance, even at the risk of disapprobation? Is the performer confident of his own choices and trying to build a consensus for those choices in the community through his performance?

While some of these questions may not be relevant to a traditional folk performance, for which community support is a standard feature, they may certainly be asked of performances which present non-traditional material. Consider, for example, Shylock's soliloquy in *The Merchant of Venice*. Where the questions are appropriate, the answers will deepen our understanding of the performer, and in the application of performance theory to literary criticism, they will enhance our knowledge of the narrator about whom they are asked and thereby assist us in our interpretation of the novel itself.
Occasion

In addition to the function that a performance is intended to serve, we must be aware of the circumstance which occasions it. The two may be closely related; again, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has provided a good example in the man whose neglect of his family occasioned his sister's parable.

Sometimes a performance is initiated as the result of a direct request. This is often the case when a folklorist has identified and is working with an informant, or when a performer is known by reputation and is approached by an audience for a specific performance. A social situation itself may give rise to a performance, as Herminia G. Menez illustrates in "Filipino-American Erotica," in which she discusses the performances which take place during a party. Alan Dundes proposes an approach to folklore study which stresses the importance of what he calls "context," which he defines as "the specific social situation in which that particular item is actually employed."  

Often, the occasion will present the problem or conflict that engenders the performance. In Abrahams' theory, this would be the "social misalignment" which the performer seeks to rectify. In such cases, the
occasion is closely tied to the performer's purpose, motivation, and choice of material. This is the case both in the folk community and in the literary work, where the occasion for the performance may also be the conflict or problem at the heart of the work. Clearly, then, we must define the occasion before we can make much progress in assessing the resulting performance.

**Competence**

Thus far, we have seen that the performer makes a deliberate decision to perform, a decision based on the desire to serve a certain purpose within a specific social situation. Meshing those considerations alone requires a degree of skill, as does the conscious role-playing that goes into the performance itself. To what degree an individual performer demonstrates such skill is one of the most central judgements we make about performances.

Jansen addresses the issue of the performer's competence obliquely in his mention of the fact that a given performer may not be the ideal person to render a particular bit of lore (p. 117). Richard Bauman, in *Verbal Art as Performance*, is more direct, stating, "Fundamentally, performance as a mode of spoken communication consists in the assumption of
responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. . . . Performance involves on the part of the performer an assumption of accountability to an audience for the way in which communication is carried out, above and beyond its referential content."18

An immediate distinction should be made between the terms "performance" and "competence" as they are used by folklorists and as they are used by linguists. Noam Chomsky and his followers in the school of transformational-generative grammar see competence as the innate ability to produce perfectly grammatical utterances. Performance, on the other hand, is what people actually say, which in some instances may not be grammatical. For linguists, then, competence is the theoretically possible ideal; performance is the actual.

While the linguist considers every utterance performance, the folklorist will apply that label only to situations which meet specific criteria. As we have seen, to a folklorist, performance is the special kind of communicative event which takes place between a performer, consciously acting in that role, and an audience, when the various elements of performance (motivation and accountability on the part of the
performer, occasion, etc.) are present. The folklorist's idea of competence is simply, "How good a performance is it?" So in folklore studies, performance is the event, and competence is the skill of the performer.

But how is the degree of skill to be judged? One criterion, which bridges to a certain extent the gap between the folklorists' and the linguists' views of competence, is the measure of what Bauman calls "communicative competence." As defined by Gillian Sankoff in a collection of essays Bauman edited, communicative competence is a broader concept than linguistic competence. She writes:

Thus, competence has been extended from the notion of mastery of a set of grammatical rules to the mastery of a set of cultural rules which include the appropriate ways of applying grammatical rules in all speech situations possible for that society.19

This is in essence what Bauman, Hymes, Joel Sherzer and others refer to as the "ethnography of speaking," which Hymes defines as the "description and explanation of the use of language in a given culture."20 He notes that this theory takes into account not only what is grammatical, but also what is appropriate.
Taken one step further, the "communicative competence" or "ethnography of speaking" concepts evolve into an ethnography of performance. In the same sense that folklorists have narrowed the idea of performance from all utterances to only those that meet certain criteria, so too can the idea of "communicative competence" be narrowed, from inclusion of all speech acts in a given culture to inclusion of just performances. An ethnography of performance attempts to describe what is appropriate in all performance situations in a given culture. According to Herminia Menez, a performance ethnography:

... aims at a complete description of the performance in terms of the components of the folklore event: the setting, or time and place; the personnel or participants in the event; message item or that which is to be communicated; the emotional key or spirit in which an act is to be done; channels and codes of communication; norms of interaction regarding, for instance, to whom and by whom a joke may be told; and the interpretation and evaluation of the informants.21

One notable feature of an ethnography of performance is its recognition of the importance of context. Because each performance is unique, context is a critical variable, the description of which can aid us in evaluating other aspects of the performer's
competence such as his choice of material and how well the performer has adapted his material to the audience. For example, if a performance is given in the context of a youngster's bedtime story, the performer would do well to avoid scary or overly exciting material and to monitor the length of the performance—an hour-long ghost story would be inappropriate. On the other hand, if the context is a gathering around the campfire, ghost stories are in order and length is less of a consideration.

The ability to judge what is appropriate for a specific audience is an important part of the performer's competence. The performer is expected to recognize what limitations cultural attitudes place upon the material he may choose from. A joke that may be told in one group, for example, may be inappropriate in another. The performer who alienates or offends his audience with poorly chosen material is unlikely to achieve his purpose in giving the performance. As Barre Toelken points out, the performer must not stray too far from the audience's "value center" if he wants the performance to be accepted.22

Besides considerations of social acceptability, there is also the question of the best choice of material to achieve the performer's purpose. The
rhetoricians of ancient Greece were very much aware of
the need to suit the subject matter to the desired end,
and developed elaborate rationales for using certain
"arguments" to create an intended effect. The
performer must make a very similar sort of judgment,
keeping in mind both his reason for giving the
performance and the audience to which he is directing
it.

All of this is indicative of the extent to which
the performer and the audience are interdependent.
Each helps to determine what kind of performance will
take place: its content, its tone, its method of
presentation and so on. Having examined the
performer's contribution to this equation, let us look
at the role of the audience.

AUDIENCE

Although it may seem that the performer is the active
participant in the performance situation, the audience
has a number of responsibilities. In fact, the
audience may not be passive bystanders at all, but may
be drawn into the performance event as participants.
Audience participation

Jansen proposes a sort of sliding scale by which audience participation can be measured (p. 113). The two extremes of his scale are 100% individual performance (that is, with no audience participation), and 0% individual performance (with the audience in general taking a full performance role). Most folklorists, however, believe that an authentic performance demands at least some degree of audience participation. Abrahams, for example, in keeping with his rhetorical theory of folk performance, argues that audience participation is an essential component of a successful performance:

For a work of art to be effective, no matter what type of art with which we are concerned, it must not only communicate with an audience, but it must also excite its participation. . . . The idea behind performance is a remarkably simple one: to set up rhythms and expectancies which will permit, indeed insist upon, a synchronized audience reaction.23

This is clearly consistent with the view of performance as a rhetorical tool, for the audience becomes a party to the performance by accepting the performer's point, being persuaded of his position.
Toelken suggests that the traditional nature of folklore itself gives rise to audience participation:

The traditional mode . . . can be seen as a manner of looking at things that are communally based and culture-specific, that therefore include the audience as participant, communicant. When the traditional mode is used in literary expression, it causes readers to be participants whether they recognize the specific features of the myth or not, for they respond to a manner of seeing and feeling that they share with members of the culture, and that refuses to let them be spectators.24

This observation is of particular significance for Chapter 4, in which I will look at the reader's participation in creating meaning in this novel.

In a similar vein, Bauman maintains that the formal nature of many of the "keys" to performance inspires audience participation, because once the audience recognizes the pattern or symmetry of the form, it can anticipate the next element.25

Is there an ideal degree of audience participation? Of course not—each performance incident must be judged on its own, and the optimum degree of active audience participation will differ with the situation. This is, however, one more element
which must be considered as part of a complete evaluation of the performance event.

Critical evaluation

Another part of the audience's responsibility is its evaluation of the performance. This dovetails with the notion of the performer's competence; the ultimate judge of the quality of a performance is its audience. Abrahams, for example, maintains that in a creative performance, "the audience will be drawn, actively or vicariously, into the performance while at the same time judging the essential justness and profundity of the order and the process by which the ordering has been presented."26 (Emphasis mine.)

Bauman also stresses the audience's role as critic. He states:

From the point of view of the audience, the act of expression on the part of the performer is thus marked as subject to evaluation for the way it is done, for the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's display of competence."27

Jansen ties in the notion of audience expectation to the performance evaluation (p. 117). If for some reason the audience has high hopes for an outstanding performance, perhaps because of the performer's
reputation, it is likely to be disappointed by a less than sterling rendition. If, on the other hand, expectations are low, a less polished version may satisfy.

I submit that all of this is very much similar to the judgments we undertake as literary critics. For us, the part of the author is marked as subject to evaluation. While we may be drawn into the story itself, we simultaneously make judgments about style, structure, and technique. Even Jansen's point about audience expectations applies; the weakest work in a recognized artist's cannon may far surpass the best pulp novel, but we will find it more deficient simply because we expect more from the artist.

There may also be criteria apart from the audience's evaluation by which a performance can be judged. If the performance has been undertaken for a specific purpose, one measure of its success must be how well that purpose has been achieved. The woman who told her brother a parable intended to make him see that he was neglecting his family could hardly have counted her performance a success—however much he enjoyed it—if he failed to get the point.
Sometimes the performer's purpose is to instill or reinforce a certain attitude or way of looking at things. A common artistic means of manipulating the perspective in which people see things is metaphor. The skilled performer can use metaphor to trigger a sustained shared vision, a perception of deeper unities beneath surface incongruity which Roger Abrahams says helps to create a "shared and sharable world." However, a performer who attempts to change our perspective by introducing a new metaphor must choose one that is consistent with the audience's overall worldview, and therefore allows its audience to perceive its validity. People may be slow to accept new metaphors. Abrahams points out that we "cling to our base metaphors because they are both familiar and have proven their usefulness." The performer who can "radically reorient our experience by reordering our perceptions" is skillful indeed.

The issue of whether or not a performance presents a vision that the audience can accept, perhaps even find enlightening, is an important measure of its effectiveness. In addition, it influences the level of audience participation. If the performer, as an artist, presents a representative experience, the audience can relate to the commonalities in it, and may
be drawn by its recognition of shared experience into the performance.

PERFORMANCE

The final element of the performance situation is the performance itself. Unlike the performer and the audience, the performance does not exist in and of itself in a concrete dimension with verifiable physical reality. Rather, it is the ephemeral, intangible communicative interaction that takes place between performer and audience when the elements of the performance situation are present.

Uniqueness

A number of folklorists have noted the out-of-the-ordinary quality of the performance event. Dell Hymes calls it "a social event, quite likely with emergent properties," and says that folklorists' concern is with performance as something "creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events."30

Part of the "achievement" or "transcendence" of performance lies in the fact that although it is a communicative event, more than simple communication takes place; more is exchanged between performer and
audience than mere information. Bauman sums up quite well the special relationship between performer, audience, and performance, saying:

It is part of the essence or performance that it offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction which binds the audience to the performer in a way that is specific to performance as a mode of communication. 31

An important factor in creating this heightened level of communication is the quality of the performer's language. Alan Dundes refers to this as the "texture" of the piece. 32 Bauman terms it "artistic verbal performance," which he defines as:

... language usage which takes on special significance above and beyond its referential, informational dimension through the systematic elaboration of any component of verbal behavior in such a way that this component calls attention to itself and is perceived as uncommon or special in a particular context. 33

There is a direct correlation here with the self-conscious role of the performer. We might recall Kenneth Burke's argument that the more self-conscious the utterance, the more "word magic" is brought to bear. 34 Certainly that notion makes sense in the context of "metanarrational" elements that the skillful
performer intentionally builds into the performance by way of signaling to the audience his expectation that his message will be interpreted in a special way.

I noted earlier that most of us recognize a performance when we see one. We perceive it as an uncommon event, a special situation. In part, we are led to this recognition of performance by the stylized use of language that sets it apart from ordinary conversation. This is also one of the features that sets literature apart from, say, a car repair manual. In performance and in literature, when we study style, we study one of the integral components that distinguishes art from every day commerce.

Genre

There is a strong correlation between performance theory and Dundes' argument that text, texture, and context are essential considerations in the analysis of a folk item. I have indicated already the importance of studying the performance context, which is unique to each performance incident, and the texture of the performance, which helps to mark it as an extra-ordinary event. The performance ethnography also includes Dundes' concern with the text itself, and
in particular his insistence on the need for genre distinction.

We have seen that certain genres may lend themselves more readily than others to the purpose the performer has in mind. Distinguishing the genre of the performer's text, therefore, will lead us back into considerations such as the ability of the performer to suit his material to his purpose and his audience. In short, text, texture and context are as inextricable from one another in the performance situation as performer, audience, and communicative event.

SUMMARY

The telling is the tale; therefore, the narrator, his story, and his audience are all related to each other as components of a single continuum, which is the communicative event.35

If performance analysis adds depth and dimension to folklore studies, it is because it moves beyond the folk item alone to consider the totality of its presentation in a dynamic setting. Unlike a quilt or a wooden toy or other folk artifact, the artistic verbal performance leaves no tangible result. But it is no less real or significant for that. It has—if it is done well—an abiding effect on its audience and on their perception of their world.
Much of this is also true of literature. While a novel or a poem may have a physical form, may be printed on paper and bound between covers, it is not in that form that it has its meaning and significance. Only when someone reads it does a piece of literature live. And it is at precisely that point that a performance takes place, between the author as performer and the reader as audience. That is why performance analysis can be profitably applied to literary works as well as to folk performances. In the succeeding chapters, I will demonstrate how.
NOTES


3 Lionel Hale, "This Novel is Unreadable," *News Chronicle* 24 February, 1937, 4.


6 William Hugh Jansen, "Classifying Performance in the Study of Verbal Folklore," in Studies in Folklore in Honor of Distinguished Professor Stith Thompson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 112. Subsequent quotations from this work which appear in this chapter will be identified by page number in parentheses.

7 For a description of these events, see Richard Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1984), 12, 31-35.

8 Bauman, 28.
9 Bauman, 9, 16.


14 Bauman, 44.


18 Bauman, 11.


21 Menez, p. 132.


23 Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," 78.
24 Toelken, p. 342.

25 Bauman, 16.

26 Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," 78.

27 Bauman, 11.

28 Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," 78-79.

29 Abrahams, "Folklore and Literature as Performance," p. 78-79.

30 Hymes, "Breakthrough into Performance," 13.


32 Dundes, 253.

33 Bauman, "Verbal Art as Performance," American Anthropologist, 77 (1975), 305. This essay is an earlier version which is expanded upon in the 1984 book by the same title.
34 This argument is related to folklore performance in Roger Abrahams, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968), 142-158.

Chapter I

Rosa Coldfield’s Story:
That Air of Impotent and Static Rage

Absalom, Absalom! is built on at least three major versions of the story of Thomas Sutpen, so it is certainly accurate to say that the novel is, on one level anyway, "about" Sutpen and his failed dream. This is a work of many levels, however; it is just as much about the narrators themselves and about the very nature of narrative. To understand Absalom, Absalom!, therefore, we must understand not only Sutpen’s story but also those who tell the story: the performances they give and how those performances reflect their motivations, their biases, and their interpretive orientation toward their subject matter.
Faulkner opens with Rosa Coldfield’s rendition of the Sutpen saga. In Rosa’s performance, we can see clearly the correlation between personal prejudice and individual motivation on the one hand and the content and form of the story on the other. Rosa is a sixty-three year old spinster born late into her parents’ marriage, bereft of her mother at birth and raised by a fanatic aunt to regard her married sister as the prisoner of some terrible ogre. Younger than her niece and nephew, she is brought up in an atmosphere of Puritanical righteousness and frugality, and denied thereby any real childhood. She is orphaned at nineteen when her father nails himself into the attic and starves to death rather than support the Confederate cause. The aunt having eloped with a horse-trader, Rosa lives alone until her nephew commits murder, and then goes to live with the niece to await the return of the widowed ogre-brother-in-law from the War. When he does return, she promptly becomes engaged to him, but his indecent proposition sends her in a huff back to her own home, where she dwells in moral outrage for the next forty-three years. This is the woman who, at the outset of *Absalom Absalom!* summons Quentin Compson to hear her story.
That Rosa's tale is indeed a performance is made quite clear by a variety of factors. For example, she "keys" the performance for Quentin by telling him that someday he might want to write a story about what she is going to tell him and submit it to a magazine. Thus, she puts him on notice that what is happening here is a storytelling event, as opposed to a simple exchange of information.

Cleanth Brooks says of Rosa, "She is conscious of the fact that she is acting a part." Indeed, Rosa is a very self-conscious narrator, and her role-playing is yet another indication that a performance is taking place. At one point, Rosa's awareness of her role as a storyteller leads her to the extreme of referring to herself in the third person. Barbara Babcock, in her discussion of the metanarrational elements that "key" performance, suggests that pronouns function to "encode the relationship obtaining between sender and receiver and as such may be used . . . to shift one's attention from the narrative event to the speech event and vice versa." She maintains that "a shift in pronouns or tense implicitly comments on the story or the storytelling by effecting a transfer from an internal point of view to an external one . . . ." We can see how this happens when Rosa shifts to a third person
account of her own story; suddenly we are reminded that it is not the actual events of her life that we are witnessing, but her telling of those events. Her role as narrator takes precedence over her role as participant in the history she relates.

As with any narrator, the most important variables within Rosa's control are her audience, her setting, and her material. Of these, the first is primary, since a good performer will adjust other factors to the audience insofar as possible. But Rosa's choice of Quentin Compson as audience is puzzling. He is nearly fifty years her junior and Faulkner tells us that they have not previously exchanged a hundred words. Quentin himself is astonished at her request for his presence. That the "occasion" for this performance is contrived is clear from the fact that Quentin spends much of his visit wondering why he is there.

Initially, he decides that Miss Coldfield 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 or seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War . . . ." But he quickly rejects this notion, realizing that as the county's self-appointed poetess laureate, Rosa could
Just as well write it herself. So he returns home with
the question still nagging, "But why tell it to me?"
(p. 12). His father supplies the answer:

It's because she will need someone
to go with her—a man, a gentleman,
yet one still young enough to do
what she wants, do it the way she
wants it done. And she chose you
because your grandfather was the
nearest thing to a friend Sutpen
ever had in this county . . .
(p. 12).

Rosa's motivation for the performance, then, is
manipulation. Perhaps a more charitable view would be
that Rosa exemplifies the rhetorical use of
performance, telling Quentin her story as a persuasive
tool to obtain his help. There is certainly this
element present. But Faulkner leads us to see Rosa's
tactic as more than gentle persuasion by describing her
character as "cold, implacable, and even ruthless"
(p. 10). This authorial comment comes immediately
after Rosa tries to convince Quentin that her purpose
is to benefit him by providing him fodder for a future
literary career. Neither we nor Quentin can know her
real objective at this point, but we already have the
sense that it is not entirely unselfish, that Rosa has
an ulterior motive. She initiates her own performance
for her own reasons and completely controls it.
To succeed in her purpose, Rosa appeals to Quentin's chivalric impulses, while at the same time implying his obligation to help her because his grandfather helped Sutpen. Being who he is, Quentin can hardly refuse Rosa's request that he accompany her to the Sutpen mansion. However, his acquiescence is probably more due to his traditional Southern upbringing than to the strength of Rosa's performance, for as we will see, she is not skilled in this regard.

One indication of this fact is Rosa's choice of setting. She seats Quentin in what had been her father's office, a "dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed . . ." (p. 7). There are multiple indications that he is both uncomfortable and restless, but Rosa seems to notice none of this. Instead, she rambles on for hours. In fact, the very length of her performance is a sign of her ineptitude, for she recounts her tale with exasperating detail. Rosa knows that Quentin shares the community's general knowledge of at least the outline of Sutpen's story, but she repeats it anyway, causing him to think that whatever her reason for sending for him "the getting to it . . . was taking a long time" (p. 13). By not taking into account what information her listener already has, Rosa fails to adjust her material to her audience.
Perhaps one of the clearest indications we have of Rosa's lack of communicative competence is that she stops talking at frequent intervals, unable to maintain the narrative. Faulkner describes this narrative disruption as "the voice not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream, a trickle running from patch to patch of dried sand . . ." (p. 8). One can well imagine that these unpredictable and protracted silences contribute to Quentin's unease, his "passive chafing" (p. 14). Further, they allow his mind to wander, detracting from his ability to concentrate on Rosa's presentation.

This situation may contribute to the fact that Rosa's performance fails to inspire in Quentin any significant level of audience participation. Beyond a polite "yessum" and "no'me," he is almost completely passive. Rosa is unable to elicit Quentin's imaginative sympathy and thereby gain his participation in the performance. In fact, their perspectives are so different that each sees a different event as the central issue. For Rosa, the focus is on Sutpen and his evil, epitomized by his suggestion that she and he attempt to conceive a son without benefit of marriage. For Quentin, the real story is that of Henry and Judith. He is so engrossed in that plot line, that
when the account of Bon's death comes up he focuses exclusively on his vision of Henry telling Judith about the killing and opts out of Rosa's performance altogether, completely stops listening. Realizing with a start that he has "lost his place" in her story, he must ask her to repeat herself in order to learn that she believes someone or something is hiding in the old Sutpen mansion.

What we have here, then, is a highly self-conscious performance conducted in a very formal context. Although successful in its immediate end of securing Quentin's return with the buggy, the performance fails to elicit his participation or his acceptance of its central metaphor. Instead, he finds himself bored and impatient at times with the presentation, and confused as to its purpose. Though he never renders an overtly negative judgement of Rosa's performance (being a gentleman, how could he?), Quentin's lapses of concentration and lack of enthusiasm convey to us that Rosa's performance is not a success as far as her audience is concerned.

At this point, however, we must distinguish between Rosa's performance and Faulkner's, and between Quentin's reaction and our own. The setting, for example, while inappropriately chosen on Rosa's part,
is most appropriately chosen on Faulkner's. It mirrors Rosa's personality; her views admit as little light as her blinds; her mind is as tightly shuttered as her home. Similarly, Rosa's repetition of details that for Quentin were "part of his twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man Sutpen" is a faux pas for her as a performer, but it is Faulkner's way of telling us those details. At the same time, however, because Rosa's tale is somewhat disjointed and occasionally repetitive, we as an audience share some of Quentin's impatience and thereby come to sympathize with him—not because we already know the story, but because we are frustrated at having to piece it together from Rosa's bombastic ramblings.

Reed says that Rosa "gives us too much too soon, running from one point to the next in a frantic effort to get it all in."4 But she doesn't manage to get it all in—in some cases because she is not a coherent narrator and in others because she does not have complete information. From subsequent narratives, we will learn information that Rosa does not have, and come to question some of her assumptions.

These are techniques that Faulkner uses throughout the novel—delayed disclosure, layered
revelations. They are an important part of his narrative structure in this novel, at which I will look more closely in my concluding chapter. For the moment, I wish to turn to a more detailed discussion of Rosa's text and the texture of her narrative. Both are integral parts of her performance, like her setting skillfully chosen by Faulkner to complement his overall structure and at the same time elucidate some of his favorite themes.

Rosa's text is, in a word, Gothic. Those who would argue that Absalom, Absalom! is a Gothic novel have within her section plenty of evidence to support that claim. To read the entire novel this way is misleading, but there is much validity to Lynn Gartrell Levins' analysis that each narrative in the novel is structured after a different literary genre, with Rosa's as Gothic novel.

Levins points out that Rosa's story, like the classic Gothic tale, centers upon a "doomed castle" and that its central figure has a suspected connection with the devil.5 This is indeed the gist of Rosa's narrative; she repeatedly refers to Sutpen as a demon and an ogre, to her sister as his prisoner, and to their children, her father, herself, and even the entire South as his victims. She believes there is
some dark force in Sutpen that enables him to thrust himself without family or heritage upon a Southern town that prizes both, raise a magnificent plantation from a swampland, and ultimately survive the Civil War, for which his evil was supposedly the catalyst. It is Gothicism on a grand scale.

Another element of the Gothic in Rosa’s performance is the context in which she tells Quentin her tale. Her own home is somewhat mysterious and foreboding, a decrepit structure in which the owner had boarded himself in the attic to starve to death, and Rosa herself has lived a recluse for forty-three years after abruptly leaving the abode of her only living relatives. Imagine a painting of Rosa sitting in the dark, dusty office on a straight hard chair “so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles” (p. 7), grim and uncompromising in her black dress with just a touch of lace. It is a picture not at all at odds with the overall tone of Rosa’s narrative, and it could easily be a companion piece to Grant Woods’ "American Gothic."

At the same time though, as if to remind us not to take Rosa too seriously, Faulkner gives us the aunt’s elopement with a horse trader. Humorous in that it shows the human side of the Puritanical aunt, this
touch of levity helps to put Rosa's Gothicism in its proper perspective.

While much of Rosa's story is already known to Quentin, she does tell him some things he probably did not know before, and these, too, reinforce the Gothic tone of her narrative. Cleanth Brooks lists them as: (1) Sutpen's reason--respectability--for marrying Ellen, (2) the racing to church and Judith's instigating it, (3) Judith and Henry's reactions to seeing Sutpen fighting with the slaves, and (4) Ellen's asking Rosa to protect the children, especially Judith.6

Clearly, each contributes to the Gothicism of Rosa's tale. That Sutpen would choose a wife to provide him with a shield of respectability implies some dark doings that needed shielding. Judith's calmly watching the fighting that sickened her brother and provoking the racing to church are evidence, in Rosa's mind, of the extent to which Sutpen has corrupted his children. She believes that her suspicions are confirmed when she hears Ellen's dying request that she protect the children, to which Rosa answers, "He has already given them life; he does not need to harm them further. It is from themselves that they need protection" (p. 22).
This is a very ominous comment, and reflects Rosa's total absorption with Sutpen as the root of all evil. After all, it is quite natural for a dying woman to ask a family member to look out for her children. Granted that Rosa was younger than Henry and Judith, she was Ellen's sister and the only family Ellen had to ask, especially considering that Sutpen himself was at war and, despite Rosa's conviction otherwise, might not return. So Ellen's request in and of itself is not unusual, but Rosa automatically interprets it in the context of her Gothic vision of Sutpen as a demon.

Finally, there is what Quentin calls the "logic-and-reason-flouting quality" of Miss Rosa's tale. It is clear that there are some things that Rosa does not know, things Quentin will learn later that will help him (and us) to reevaluate her narrative. But already Quentin can sense the lack of cogent reasoning, of any attempt to be objective, in Rosa's tale. Knowing nothing of either Bon's parentage or the octoroon mistress, she insists that Judith's marriage was forbidden "without rhyme or reason" (p. 18). Since she has no idea where Sutpen came from, she automatically assumes it was some dark, heathen place, and having no knowledge of the vision that motivated him to build his dynasty, she puts his actions down to
his innate evil and God's curse upon the South. Levins points out that this attitude, too, is typical of the Gothic genre, in which events are interpreted in terms of their emotional effect on the character, rather than given logical explanation.

Also inherent in Rosa's "logic flouting" is the psychological reason for her performance. Although she repeatedly tells Quentin, "I hold no brief for myself" (p. 18), the fact of the matter is that she does. Rosa is an escapist. Confronted with a barren life in which she had no real childhood and nothing much of anything else, she finds a scapegoat in Sutpen, blaming everything on him and casting herself in the role of martyr.

Rosa cannot get past her own embittered subjectivity. Rather than attempting to find human motives and emotions in her subject, she allows herself to be carried away with her own verbal excess, telling her story out of a selfish need for justification. Notable in this regard is her frequent use of clauses beginning with "because." It is as if Rosa is trying to excuse her failure to make something more of her life, primarily by blaming Sutpen. Things are as they are "Because he was too young" (p. 17), or "Because it was not even public opinion that stopped him" (p. 24),
or "Because there were plenty of them [spectators to Sutpen’s fighting the slaves] still" (p. 28), or "Because he himself was not there" (p. 159-60), or "Because there is a practicality to viciousness" (p. 166), or "Because he was not articulated in this world" (p. 171). Because, because, because—Rosa’s narrative is a litany of excuses.

Reed says of Rosa, "She mythologizes it [her life] to make it bearable." He is correct; Rosa takes the substance of an historical legend and enlarges it until it has mythic proportions. She actually demonstrates an awareness of Sutpen’s claim to "legend" status when she admits that he came home from the War a hero, with a citation for valor. But she also amplifies upon Sutpen’s "contributions" to the Civil War with the observation that the War was, after all, God’s unsuccessful attempt to rid the South of Sutpen’s evil.

Faulkner is critical of this tendency to distort the past as a means of avoiding responsibility in the present. In many respects, Rosa is the Gall Hightower of Absalom. Absalom! Though Rosa sees her larger-than-life character as a demon while Hightower sees his as a hero, the end result is the same. Both attempt to deny responsibility for wasted lives by living in an overly glorified past. In Absalom.
Absalom! as in *Light in August*, Faulkner demonstrates the folly of such mythologizing, here by allowing other characters to supply a view of Sutpen which contrasts markedly with Rosa's.

Part and parcel of Rosa's mythologizing is the melodramatic texture of her narrative. According to Brooks, Rosa's section gave Faulkner an outlet for an "elevated, involved, highly mannered strain of rhetoric which was very dear to his own heart." 9

A number of critics, including Levins and Ilse Dusoir Lind, have found that there is not a significant variation in texture among the novel's narratives. 10 Rather, the work as a whole features generally complex sentence structures and Faulkner's own brand of elevated diction. Because the narratives share these features, each of them sounds in places more like William Faulkner than like a "real" character, more like the author, certainly, than like Lena Grove in *Light in August* or Quentin's younger brother Jason in *The Sound and the Fury*. Nonetheless, each narrator does have a distinct narrative voice, Rosa included. Mere analysis of sentence structure and proportionate number of multisyllabic words fails to reveal the specific features, the metanarrational elements, that make each narrator's style his or her own.
In Rosa's case, for example, there is, for one thing, her central metaphor—Sutpen as demon. Rosa's diction with regard to her brother-in-law includes: "ogre," "djinn," "beast," "demon," and "villian." Her section also contains: "grim ogre-bourne," "half-phantom children," "poisonous secret effluvium," and "abyssal and chaotic dark." It is this diction that lends Rosa's narrative its melodrama, its Gothicism. Word choice such as this is what leads Reed to characterize Rosa's version of the Sutpen story as "a melodramatic fairy tale."11 It is also one of the features that marks, or "keys", her narrative as a performance.

Another of the markers of performance in Rosa's narrative is its insistent rhythm. Brooks notes that at times it is "close to a formalized accentual structure."12 A case in point is the following passage, also of interest for the revisions Faulkner made in it:
I saw what had happened to Ellen, my sister. I saw her almost a recluse, watching those two doomed children growing up whom she was helpless to save. I saw the price which she had paid for that house and that pride; I saw the notes of hand on pride and contentment and peace and all to which she had put her signature when she walked into the church that night, begin to fall due in succession. I saw Judith's marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse; I saw Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn to and ask to protect her remaining child; I saw Henry repudiate his home and birthright and then return and practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown; I saw that man return—the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims—who had created two children not only to destroy one another and his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him (p. 18).

This passage is basically an extended series; that in itself contributes to its rhythm. So too does the parallelism of the repetition of "I saw" at the beginning of each element. We may recall that Richard Bauman identifies parallelism as one of ways in which performance is "keyed" in many cultures. Because standard informational discourse does not typically contain parallel elements, their presence here serves the metanarrational function of calling attention to this event as "special", marking it as performance.
Also helping to create a strongly rhythmic effect are the series within the series: "pride and contentment and peace," and "rhyme of reason or shadow of excuse." Noteworthy, too, is the fact that Faulkner moves from a very short (especially for him) element in the first sentence to a longer one in the second and yet a longer still in the third, picking up speed as it were until the last sentence, with its string of "I saw" elements, fairly rushes along to its jarring, contradictory conclusion.

The contrast is in both content and style. Rosa's list of atrocities attributable to Sutpen is certainly in direct contradiction to her acceptance of a proposal of marriage from him. And the comparatively short, subject-verb-objects structure of the concluding clause contrasts in much the same way with the more complex form of the other elements in the series.

Quentin, of course, already knows that Miss Rosa was at one time engaged to Sutpen, so some of the dramatics of this passage may be lost on him. But this is the first time that the reader learns directly of the engagement, and the surprise is naturally heightened by the incongruity of Rosa's agreeing to marry a man whom it is clear she despises. Faulkner
has emphasized that incongruity by juxtaposing Sutpen's "sins" with Rosa's agreement to marry him, and further accentuated that effect by his stylistic choices within the passage.

The revisions in the original form of this section indicate that Faulkner worked consciously toward its rhythmic effect. While the original version also consisted of a series in which the separate elements begin with "I saw," nearly every one is longer than in the final version and several contain embedded clauses which detract significantly from the forward movement of the passage. For example, in the original version, not only is the fact of Ellen's dying request to Rosa included in one of the elements, but so is text of the request itself.

Further, several of the strongly rhythmic phrases in the final version were added in revision. "Without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse" had originally been "he forbade the marriage of his daughter which he himself had at one time sanctioned." "Pride and contentment and peace" had been "peace and contentment and pride," a change which Gerald Langford points to as providing a more logical sequence of items.14
An awkward set of possessives occurred in the original, wherein Henry "returned and practically threw his sister's murdered fiancé's corpse at the hem of her wedding gown." This particular sentence is not only smoother in its final form, but also features the change in diction from "threw" to "fling"—more in line with the overall tone of Rosa's dramatic rendition of the scene. Finally, the final version is marked by a change of tense. While in the manuscript Henry "renounced," "returned," and "threw," these actions occur in the present tense in the book itself. The change lends a greater sense of immediacy.

This segment also illustrates Rosa's tendency to exaggerate. In fact, she did not witness first hand many of the things she mentions here: Sutpen's forbidding the marriage, his argument with Henry, or Bon's murder. But she is so convinced that she "knows" how they happened that she can supply vivid detail, such as Henry's practically flinging Bon's corpse at Judith's feet. That doesn't square, however, with Quentin's visualization, in which Henry rushes into the house, pistol still in hand, tells Judith that he has killed Bon, and rushes out again. The latter version is certainly more plausible than the thought of Henry's dragging Bon's body all the way into the house and up
the stairs. Even if Henry did not need to escape quickly, before his crime became known, he would scarcely have had the stamina to do it Rosa's way, having just survived the rigors of the Civil War and the long ride home. Certainly the confrontation between brother and sister is dramatic enough without the added business of the bloody corpse at the hem of the wedding gown.

Rosa is embroidering the facts, adding a little color, decorating the scene for Quentin as she sees it through her melodramatic perspective. Whatever one says of Rosa's performance, one cannot deny its descriptive power. The only difficulty is that Rosa allows herself to believe that it really happened as she imagines it. This is the tendency Levins notes in saying that Rosa is not interested in what actually happened, but in what she wants to believe happened.15

In summary, what can be said of Rosa's performance? That it is motivated by her need to justify the barrenness of her life and occasioned by her immediate desire to find out who or what is hiding in the old Sutpen mansion. That is reflects her egocentricity; all events are seen in the light of their effect on her. That she tells her story badly, without giving it coherent structure or taking into
consideration what her audience already knows. That it is exaggerated and melodramatic, both in content and in style. The end result is that we learn only a small portion of Sutpen's story from Rosa, but we learn a great deal about her.

Her narrative may be disjointed, but Faulkner's presentation of Rosa's performance is well integrated. All the pieces dovetail—the texture fits the text, and both fit the personality of the narrator. The context is appropriate for this particular performance in that it reflects Rosa's own limitations, and it corresponds well with the general tone and flavor of her presentation. Where there are holes in Rosa's knowledge or flaws in her reasoning, Faulkner will build his subsequent narratives. With Rosa's performance, he has established the basis for a novel of multiple perspectives, a novel in which the telling itself is part of the tale.
NOTES

1 "The Poetry of Miss Rosa Canfield" (sic), *Shenandoah* 21 (Spring, 1970), p. 204.


3 William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1936), 11. Future references to this work will be identified by page number in parentheses within the text.


7 Levins, p. 38.
8 Reed, 162.


11 Reed, 160.


15 Levins, p. 37.
Chapter II

Mr. Compson's Narrative:

A Horrible and Bloody Mischancing of Human Affairs

Rosa Coldfield's performance lasts several hours, "from a little after two o'clock until almost sundown" (p. 7). Yet when Quentin Compson finally leaves Rosa's home, he remains confused. He has found her performance unsettling, in part because of his tendency to identify himself and his sister Caddy with Henry and Judith Sutpen, but also because Rosa's story poses as many questions as it answers. Struggling to gain a perspective on Sutpen's story which makes sense to him, Quentin turns to his father, and the second performance of the novel takes place.

The scene for Mr. Compson's performance is actually set in Rosa's opening section. In a parenthetical remark near the beginning of Rosa's tale, Faulkner depicts Quentin's bemusement at being singled out as her audience and gives us Mr. Compson's
explanation. This section (p. 12) also informs us that when Quentin goes home, he and his father sit on the veranda and discuss the Sutpen story. This helps us to orient ourselves when Mr. Compson's narrative begins in Chapter II.

In the actual progression of events in the novel, Mr. Compson's performance follows Rosa's. However, Faulkner has placed it in Chapters II, III, and IV so that it bisects Rosa's narrative, which appears in Chapters I and V. By sandwiching Mr. Compson's narrative between the two halves of Rosa's, Faulkner has increased the degree of contrast between the two performances. In both tone and setting, Mr. Compson's performance is a counterpoint to Rosa's. Where she is emotional, he is detached; where she is hysterical, he is analytical. But the contrast does not end there.

Rosa's performance is forced and unnatural, given for an unlikely and somewhat unwilling audience in an overheated, uncomfortable setting. Mr. Compson's performance occurs far more naturally. To begin with, the occasion for his narrative is not as artificial, and therefore as strained, as Rosa's occasion is. Quentin has promised to return for Miss Rosa at sundown, and prior to keeping this rendezvous he seeks a better understanding of the whole Sutpen affair than
he was able to derive from her lengthy but disorganized tirade. It is quite understandable that he should turn to his father for information. Secondly, Mr. Compson's stage is more comfortable for Quentin, both because it is not formal, hot and unventilated like Rosa's study and because it is familiar; we get the impression that Quentin and his father, Southern gentlemen that they are, frequently retire to the porch after supper to chat idly while Mr. Compson enjoys his cigar. This night's conversation, however, is not idle; it is, for Quentin, the second performance he will witness this day regarding the Sutpens and their tragic fate.

Because context is an important variable in the performance ethnography, a detailed look at the differences in context between the first two performances in the novel will help to illuminate their broader divergences. Though linked by the presence of wisteria vines, the settings of these two performances are nevertheless quite distinct and definitely at odds with one another in atmosphere. Faulkner establishes the contrast skillfully, invoking several senses (sight, hearing, smell) to accentuate the differences:
There would be the dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wisteria against the outer wall by the savage quiet September sun impacted distilled and hyperdistilled, into which came now and then the loud cloudy flutter of sparrows like a flat limber stick whipped by an idle boy... (p. 8).

Like Rosa's tale, this setting is oppressive, too much: "oversweet," "hyperdistilled," "savage." Even the syntax seems pressed to its limit, packed with embeddings. Mr. Compson's setting, on the other hand, is genteel and serene:

It was a summer of wisteria. The twilight was full of it and of the smell of his father's cigar as they sat on the front gallery after supper until it would be time for Quentin to start, while in the deep shaggy lawn below the veranda the fireflies blew and drifted in soft random... (p. 31).

Faulkner places this description at the very beginning of Chapter II, telling us immediately that the scene is no longer Rosa's domain and establishing a new tone, less hurried and less intense. The sequential clauses (right-branching in linguists' terms) and the absence of overmodification and elevated diction help establish a quieter tone.
The contrast extends to the narrators' physical posture, which matches their respective mental attitudes. Faulkner depicts Rosa:

... sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children's feet, and talking in that grim haggard amazed voice ... (p. 7).

Rosa is every bit as inflexible and rigid in a physical sense as she is in her view of Sutpen. Against her furious intensity, Faulkner sets Mr. Compson as the picture of ease and refinement. Having retrieved Judith's letter for Quentin to read, Mr. Compson returns to the veranda and takes up his cigar, reclining and "raising his feet once more to the railing, the letter in his hand and the hand looking almost as dark as a negro's against his linen leg" (p. 89). His is a pose of relaxed contemplation, which matches his personality just as well as Rosa's severe posture matches hers.

There is general critical agreement that the Jason Compson III of Absalom, Absalom! is much the same character who appears in The Sound and the Fury: detached, ironic, and resigned to the machinations of Fate. Olga Vickery, taking the position that each of
the narrators of Absalom, Absalom! has a special advantage as a storyteller, credits Mr. Compson with "his carefully guarded objectivity." She says of him, "His is the deliberately rational, impersonal approach, which allows him not only to weave patterns and posit hypotheses, but also to doubt his own conclusions."\(^1\) Michael Millgate characterizes Mr. Compson's attitude as "effete disenchantment."\(^2\)

Mr. Compson is the dispassionate observer, narrating a tale that doesn't involve him, taking an intellectual's interest in its characters and their passions. For example, Mr. Compson "creates" Charles Bon just as much as Rosa does; neither ever saw him alive, and of all the major characters in the Sutpen affair, Bon was the least known in Jefferson, having appeared there only a few times and then mostly at Sutpen's Hundred. But Mr. Compson's approach to drawing Bon's character differs markedly from Rosa's. Rosa becomes emotionally involved with Bon. She denies to Quentin that she loved Bon, but quickly qualifies that with, "Even if I did, not as women love..." (p. 146). Yet she decides that merely to have a picture like Bon's picture on the dressing table would be the answer to every adolescent girl's fondest
yearnings. In short, Rosa’s response to Bon, like the remainder of her narrative, is emotional.

Mr. Compson, on the other hand, takes a sort of scholarly sociological approach in reconstructing Bon. He imagines Bon’s sophistication in comparison with his classmates, including Henry. He stresses Bon’s social status and his natural graces and manners, which he takes care to point out that Sutpen lacked. He repeatedly cites Bon’s detachment, "a certain reserved and inflexible pessimism stripped long generations ago of all the rubbish and claptrap of people (yes, Sutpen and Henry and the Coldfields too) who have not quite yet emerged from barbarism..." (p. 94).

The contrast between the level of "civilization" Bon has attained and that reached by the Sutpen clan is a frequent one in Mr. Compson’s narrative; elsewhere, he compares Bon to "a youthful Roman consul making the Grand Tour of his day among the barbarian hordes which his grandfather conquered," while Henry and Sutpen are akin to "troglodytes" (p. 93). Mr. Compson’s interest in Bon is the social scientist’s interest—the contrast in cultures is what attracts his attention, rather than his own emotional reaction to Bon, such as preoccupied Rosa, or Bon’s own personal emotions, which will concern Quentin and Shreve.
Mr. Compson has two sources for the information he passes on to Quentin. The first is simply the town’s general knowledge of the Sutpen story, the local legend, as it were. The second is General Compson, Quentin’s grandfather, who was Sutpen’s only real friend and therefore privy to certain information denied the general populace, such as Sutpen’s being turned away from the front door of the mansion as a boy. Quentin himself also had information from these two sources. What we see operating here, then, are very traditional means of information transmittal, what Cleanth Brooks describes as "history not so much book learned as passed down from father to son or from mother to daughter or simply through a process of cultural osmosis." It is what the folklorist would call "oral history."

Some of the information Mr. Compson provides deals more directly with Rosa than with Sutpen, and serves to help us as readers understand her biases and begin to reinterpret her narrative. Much of what we come to know about Rosa’s puritanical upbringing at the hands of a miserly father and embittered aunt comes from Mr. Compson. It is also he who reveals her pathetic attempts to make a gift to Judith when Judith and Bon become engaged.
It is Mr. Compson who relates the story of Sutpen's arrest on the day of his engagement to Ellen and who describes the debacle of the wedding itself. He provides the fact that Clytie is Sutpen's daughter by one of two slave women he purposely included in his "batch of wild niggers." He also tells Quentin that Sutpen went to New Orleans to investigate Bon's background and speculates on the visit that Bon and Henry make there after riding away from Sutpen's Hundred on Christmas Eve. Much of his conjecture on this last point centers around the existence of the octoroon mistress; Mr. Compson imagines Bon's attempts to reconcile Henry to the fact that he has undergone a marriage ceremony of sorts with his mistress, and posits that this is, in the end, the factor that leads Henry to kill Bon. And of course, Mr. Compson allows Quentin to read Bon's letter to Judith, preserved as a result of Judith's having given it to Quentin's grandmother.

The letter itself is one of the few tangible remains of the Sutpen drama on which the novel's narrators can build their stories. Therefore, like Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson frequently relates what he imagines to have happened. Certainly he has no way of knowing what actually transpired between Bon and Henry.
in New Orleans, but he reconstructs Bon's introduction of Henry to that unfamiliar culture in minute detail. Similarly, he can know little about Bon himself, yet as I noted above, he engages in considerable conjecture about Bon's personality, telling Quentin, "He is the curious one to me... He seems to hover, shadowy, almost substanceless... with an air of sardonic and indolent detachment..." (p. 93).

It is no coincidence that Bon, as described by Mr. Compson, bears a striking resemblance to Mr. Compson himself, at least in attitude. As is the case with each of the novel's performers, we learn as much about the narrator from his tale as we learn about his subject matter. In Mr. Compson's case, the text of his narrative contains two themes at which we must look more closely in order to understand his performance.

The first is the theme of marriage and its attendant subjects such as the loss of virginity, the brother's sexual desire for his sister and jealousy of the brother-in-law, and the significance of the marriage ceremony. It is noteworthy that it is Mr. Compson who includes in his performance such marriage-related topics as the events of Sutpen's engagement to Ellen, the aunt's siege of Jefferson with the wedding invitations, and the uninvited guests at the wedding
itself. Much of this could have been narrated by Miss Rosa, who certainly had heard about it, and could have used each incident as further evidence that Sutpen "wasn't even a gentleman," but forced himself on the town. By placing these and other matrimonial topics in Mr. Compson's narrative, Faulkner has established Mr. Compson's preoccupation with marriage and laid the groundwork for his theory that the marriage ceremony with the octoroon mistress explains Bon's murder.

In addition, he has reinforced the linkages between this novel and The Sound and the Fury. Mr. Compson's performance takes place in September, 1909. The following April, Caddy, pregnant with another man's child, will marry Herbert Head. We know that Quentin's conversations with his father about Caddy's promiscuity and his "confession" of incest with her take place in 1909 before Quentin leaves for the fall term at Harvard, which places them in the same general period of time as Mr. Compson's and Miss Rosa's performances.

In short, Mr. Compson seems to know as he presents the Sutpen story for Quentin that his son is deeply disturbed about his sister's sexual activity and harbors both incestuous feelings for her and the thought of committing suicide. John Irwin believes that "the dialogue between Quentin and his father about
virginity that runs through the first part of *Absalom*. *Absalom* appears to be a continuation of their discussions of Candace's loss of virginity and Quentin's inability to lose his virginity contained in Quentin's section of *The Sound and the Fury*. Given this context, Mr. Compson adapts his performance to his audience (Quentin) by addressing those issues which he knows most concern his son.

John T. Matthews suggests that Mr. Compson's narrative is intentionally didactic, stating that "Quentin's despair at Caddy's loss of virginity encourages Mr. Compson to editorialize at the appropriate points in Sutpen's history." He notes, for example, that Mr. Compson consistently devalues a woman's virginity and maintains that the formal marriage ceremony is more significant to a woman than the "actual and authentic surrender."

Certainly, Mr. Compson's theorizing about incest is strongly resonant of *The Sound and the Fury* and seems to suggest a way in which Quentin could resolve his feelings:

In fact, perhaps this is the perfect incest: the brother 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 whom he would become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoller, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. (p. 96)

Although he is the for most part a passive audience to his father's performance, Quentin obviously sees the parallel his father is implying between him and Henry, and between Caddy and Judith. His extraordinary identification with Henry during his own performance four months later reveals how deeply he has been affected by what he sees--at least in part because of his father's prompting--as a dilemma very much like his own.

While one must normally exercise extreme caution in drawing inferences between novels, within the performance approach, we can use what we know about Quentin and his father from The Sound and the Fury as part of the context which will help us interpret their actions in this novel. Within that context, it seems fair to say that one of Mr. Compson's purposes in giving this performance for Quentin is to provide some subtle direction that will help his son resolve his agony over Caddy's loss of virginity. He attempts to make incest not the horror that Quentin envisions but an almost understandable impulse in a loving brother which is appropriately exorcised by a close
identification with the brother-in-law. Having heard perhaps of Quentin's confrontation with Dalton Ames, he suggests that a sophisticate like Bon would disdain dueling over a woman, and minimizes the drama of suicide, quoting Judith as telling Quentin's grandmother, "No. Not that. Women don't do that for love. I don't even believe that men do" (p. 128).

If one must judge the success of his performance in part on the extent to which it achieves this objective, then it obviously fails, for Quentin commits suicide over Caddy the following summer. Mr. Compson must be credited with tailoring his performance to his audience, taking into account not only what Quentin already knows about the Sutpen story (he is not nearly as repetitive as Rosa), but also what Quentin is feeling about his own sister. But his attempt to make the Sutpen story into a sort of morality play for Quentin's edification is unsuccessful, in part because he has another agenda as well that undercuts this first one.

The second theme that infuses Mr. Compson's performance is his fatalism, his view of the universe as devoid of transcendent meaning and his attitude of amused detachment as he watches his fellow mortals behaving as if there were some significance to life
that could be discovered if only they knew where to look. This philosophy has as pervasive an influence on his performance as Rosa's demonizing does on hers.

Mr. Compson tends to see the world as a stage upon which each of us struts his part and is gone, with Fate responsible for changing the set every so often. References to the theatre abound in his narrative. For example, he describes an imaginary portrait of the Sutpen family, "the originals of which had lived and died so long ago that their joys and griefs must now be forgotten even by the very boards on which they had strutted and postured and laughed and wept" (p. 75). He says of Sutpen, "and now he acted his role too . . ." (p. 72), and describes Ellen "speaking her bright set meaningless phrases out of the part which she had written for herself . . ." (p. 69).

These allusions to the theater reinforce Mr. Compson's posture as the observer, outside the scene, in a position to judge its participants. At the same time, they serve to remind us that this is a performance, by providing a type of referential comment that is not typical of everyday discourse. Barbara Babcock maintains that devices such as this "are-the storyteller's means of establishing an implicit dialogue with his own and other narrative texts."6 In
other words, they remind us that this is a story, like other stories which are invoked by the allusion, and unlike, say, a weather report or directions to the supermarket.

In addition to the figurative language that marks Mr. Compson's performance, we should note the frequent use of parallel structures and a "mirror image" type of repetition. For instance, I cited above the passage in which Mr. Compson describes the "perfect incest." Notice the repetition of "metamorphose" and "despoil" in the description of Bon as:

. . . the brother-in-law, the man whom he would 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. (p. 96)

Noteworthy, too, are the paired images of lover/mistress and husband/bride. Finally, there is the rhythm created by the doubling of virtually every element; there is never one verb, but always two ("become, metamorphose into"), never one noun, but always two or more ("the brother-in-law, the man"/"the lover, the husband"/"the sister, the mistress, the bride").
Mr. Compson's narrative relies heavily on these and similar devices. Another example is his description of Henry and Bon's relationship as they observe the "abeyance" Henry imposes after the trip to New Orleans:

... the man and the youth, seducer and seduced, who had known one another, seduced and been seduced, victimized in turn each by the other, conqueror vanquished by his own strength, vanquished conquering by his own weakness... (p. 120).

Again, the pattern runs to pairs, two contrasting halves of a single whole. This is a highly stylized structure, and as such draws attention to itself, making us focus not only on the story Mr. Compson tells, but the way in which he tells it. In Babcock's terms, these passages are "metanarrational," because they do serve to remind us of the performance frame of the story. On a broader plane, and one which I will address more fully in Chapter IV, they are also metafictional, in that the same structural elements mark or "key" the novel as a piece of literature.

Certainly, his frequent allusions to the stage and his elaborately structured descriptive passages indicate that Mr. Compson is, like Rosa, a self-conscious narrator. He, too, is embellishing his
tale, making it a "better" story. However, Mr. Compson certainly does not share Rosa's view of Sutpen as a demon, but he substitutes for it his own interpretation—Sutpen as tragic hero. Lynne Gartrell Levins points out that Mr. Compson's narrative turns Sutpen into a Greek hero "operating against a backdrop of fate and eternity."7

There is support for this position in the text of the narrative itself, for example, in Mr. Compson's theory that Sutpen meant for Clytie's name to be Cassandra, "prompted by some pure dramatic economy not only to beget but to designate the presiding augur of his own disaster" (p. 62). Then, too, there are the references to fate, doom, tragedy, and victimization that abound in Mr. Compson's section. Notable examples include his descriptions of Bon as an "indolent fatalist" (p. 105), of Henry as "victim too of the same folly and mischance" (p. 87), of Rosa as "the spinster doomed for life at sixteen" (p. 75), of Sutpen's Hundred as "a shadowy liminal region something like the bitter purlieus of Styx" (p. 69), and of Sutpen's trip to New Orleans as "perhaps just a little more of the illogical machinations of a fatality which had chosen that family in preference to any other in the county" (p. 102). As these citations indicate, the texture of
Mr. Compson's narrative dovetails with the text, the two combining to form the impression of a classic tragedy.

Levins maintains that, within the context of the Greek tragedy, Mr. Compson sees Sutpen's fatal flaw as his inability to reject the South's tradition in regard to blacks once he recognizes its inequity, that inability evidenced by his refusal to acknowledge Bon as his son. There are several problems with this interpretation. First of all, we have no indication in the novel that Sutpen did recognize the injustice of the South's racial attitudes; he may have been surprised as a boy to find that some men owned others in his new environment, but he came to accept that system as an integral part of his design and there is no evidence that he later questioned its propriety. Further, at the time that he narrates this performance, Mr. Compson does not know that Bon may be Sutpen's son. To the extent that we as readers accept both Mr. Compson's view of Sutpen as a tragic hero and the notion that Sutpen fathered Bon in his first marriage, we may certainly see his fatal flaw as his inability to reject the same caste-system attitudes that led to his own rejection as a boy and to welcome Bon as his son. This is essentially Michael Millgate's position in
asserting that Sutpen's flaw was "man's inhumanity to man." However, that cannot be how Mr. Compson, in the context of his narrative, perceives the problem.

Arthur Kinney provides a more likely theory in arguing that Mr. Compson believed Sutpen's fatal flaw to be his lack of good breeding. (We may recall Mr. Compson's unflattering comparisons between the Sutpens and Bon.) Kinney insightfully points out that Mr. Compson focuses on the one thing that Sutpen lacked and the Compsons still have, thereby trying to reveal Sutpen's weakness while at the same time shielding his own. This theory not only fits the "facts" as Mr. Compson knows them, it also is in keeping with his psychological motivation for the performance he gives.

Faced with the final decline of the Old South and with it his own estate, Mr. Compson needs a means of coping. We know from The Sound and the Fury that he frequently finds solace in his decanter, and completely apart from what modern medicine has taught us about the physical addiction of alcoholism, it has long been regarded as a form of escapism for those with pressing problems. Even generous quantities of sour mash are not sufficient, however, to disguise the disintegration which confronts him on every side, so Mr. Compson adopts what Joseph Reed, Jr. has called "his own brand
of resigned, ironic morality." He uses this philosophy to avoid taking responsibility for either state of affairs: the larger societal decay or the sorry state of his own family.

By striking the pose of an objective, detached observer who takes merely an intellectual interest in the playing out of Fate, Mr. Compson effectively shuts himself off from having to acknowledge any feelings about the situation. Vickery perceives this weakness in Mr. Compson's narrative and notes:

... in establishing his own impersonality, Mr. Compson also extracts much of the human quality in the past. The rational has, in some way, submerged the imaginative power, deduction has taken the place of intuitive understanding. Accordingly, what he describes is a battle of ideas or concepts and not a conflict of people.

In the end, this accounts for why Mr. Compson's version of the Sutpen story "just does not explain" (p. 100); it is not a tale of the human heart in conflict with itself, but a philosophical treatise. It also accounts for the fact that Quentin is unable to find any comfort in this view. While it attempts to devalue the issues that have excruciating significance for him, it fails to offer him any meaningful replacement for them.
Another reason that Mr. Compson's narrative is unsatisfying is that his basic premise is flawed. His theory that the marriage with the octoroon is the fundamental problem in the Henry/Judith/Bon relationship is neither logical nor based on shared cultural values for the South in 1861. Mr. Compson assumes that Sutpen went to New Orleans and discovered the mistress, and for that reason forbade Bon's marriage to Judith. But it is unlikely that Sutpen would have seen a mulatto mistress or even wife as an impediment to Bon's marrying Judith, considering that he himself had "put aside" his first wife because of her trace of Negro blood and subsequently married Ellen. Nor is it likely that moral objections to Bon's affair prompted his action, since he had purposely imported two slave women from the West Indies and fathered Clytie by one of them. If in fact the mistress is all that Sutpen found in New Orleans, he would have had little reason for even mentioning it to Henry.

If we assume that Sutpen did tell Henry about the octoroon mistress, perhaps using her as an excuse to forbid the marriage without revealing his real reasons, then the inconsistency in the theory becomes Henry's reaction, which was hardly likely to have been so
violent as to cause him to forsake his birthright.
After all, Henry had a black half-sister in Clytie, with whom he had been raised; that alone should have tempered any tendency to horrible outrage at a white man's affair with a black woman. And considering that such relationships were common in the South (New Orleans was the only city where white men actually kept black concubines, but numerous historians have pointed out the pervasiveness of the master/slave affair), Henry would have had no reason to be shocked, much less appalled at Bon's situation.

Mr. Compson may realize this, for he insists that it was not the mistress to which Henry objected, but rather the marriage ceremony Bon had undergone with her. But the South did not recognize interracial marriages as valid. According to historian Ernest Porterfield, "All Southern states, as well as most Western states, had laws against Negro-white intermarriage." (The Civil War did little to change this situation; many of those laws remained in force until anti-miscegenation laws were declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1967.) I want to look more closely at the prevailing cultural attitudes toward miscegenation in my concluding chapter, but here it will suffice to say that Bon's
Interpretation of the marriage ceremony as a "meaningless shibboleth" is one that would have been generally accepted in the antebellum South, where illicit relationships were tolerated, but certainly not considered binding.

Mr. Compson's explanation for Sutpen's forbidding the marriage and for the subsequent rift between Sutpen and Henry is inconsistent, then, with what we know to be Sutpen's own behavior and with the opinions of the time regarding racially mixed unions. It is, however, consistent with his belief that the Sutpens were underbred; Bon, whom he obviously sees as more worldly, has no squeamish compunction about the matter. This internal consistency is not enough, though, to overcome the weight of evidence against the plausibility of his theory.

Even Mr. Compson recognizes that his explanation does not make sense. He admits that there is no understandable motivation in it for Judith to evidence such dedication to a man she barely knows; for Bon to risk death to marry Judith after appearing completely nonchalant about their engagement; and for Henry to kill Bon to prevent a marriage that he renounced—his birthright to champion. His version is not backed up by recognizable human motives; his characters do the
things they do for no discernable reasons. Like Rosa, he has failed to concoct an explanation we can accept, a "shared vision" that would make his performance satisfying.

Realizing his inability to explain, Mr. Compson turns it around and tries to use it to confirm his philosophy:

It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature . . . we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable—

Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, . . . you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you reread, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy, inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a bloody and horrible mischancing of human affairs . . . (pp. 100-101).
It's a nice try, but it doesn't work. Mr. Compson tries to fit the story to his theories so that he won't have to question the theories. That his formula is deficient is apparent from the fact that when he brings its elements together, nothing happens. But Mr. Compson can't bear to question the formula, for to do so would force him to recognize his personal contributions to the state of affairs that has caused his despair. Rather than do that, he hides behind his fatalistic theories, even after they have proven their insufficiency. He sighs in resignation and says, "they don't explain and we are not supposed to know."

We are not likely to find that explanation very satisfying. Even if we subscribe to the theory that Fate is running the show, directing events, we know that people have reasons for the things they do. Was it Fate that sent Bon and Henry to the University of Mississippi at the same time, so that Judith and Bon would meet? Even if it was, why would they behave as they do toward one another? And why would Sutpen forbid their marriage? Was it Fate that kept either Bon or Henry from being killed in the War? That still does not account for Henry's killing Bon himself. Says Reed, "Mr. Compson is trying to sell his brand of resigned, ironic morality more than he is attempting to
grasp the shape of the Sutpen story. . . . He wants the fiction to fit his rather tired philosophical bromides so that he can feel superior not only to the story but to the men and women who originally enacted the events which form it."15 That may be, but he isn’t likely to sell much of that theory to anyone who expects the characters in his story to behave like real people with real motives for their actions. Something is missing in this formula, all right, and that something is the human heart.

When Rosa Coldfield does not understand a piece of the Sutpen story, she maintains that there is no reason beyond Sutpen’s inherent evil. When Mr. Compson cannot explain his characters’ actions, he says that "we are not supposed to know," that human affairs consist merely of a "horrible and bloody mischancing." Neither of these solutions is particularly satisfying, unless we ascribe to the nihilistic worldview Mr. Compson advocates, and I submit that Faulkner himself does not advocate that view in this novel or intend for us to buy into it. Rather, we are conditioned throughout the first two narratives to expect a reason for the things that happen, even if that reason is not immediately apparent to us.
Partly that expectation is aroused by the ratiocinative qualities of the novel, at which I will look more closely in the final chapter. But apart from that, it is our natural inclination to want to know why along with who, what, when and where—and Faulkner satisfies that curiosity in several instances. His pattern, however, is to send us chasing after several false leads before providing a plausible motivation. We find out, for instance, after the smokescreens about a literary career and the reason that the South lost the War, why Miss Rosa sent for Quentin: she wanted an escort out to Sutpen's Hundred. We find out, after enduring all the rhetoric about a curse on the South, why Sutpen felt impelled to create a dynasty: he needed to assuage his rejection as a boy at the front door of the mansion.

With this pattern established, we come to Mr. Compson's version of why Henry killed Bon, and it is a version that even its author admits does not make sense. Are we likely to shrug our shoulders in existential angst? Or are we likely to look further for an explanation, for the "real" reason?

By the time we get to the third major performance in this novel, we have already learned with regard to the central event—Henry's murder of Bon—what
happened, when it happened and how, where it happened and who did it. Some may wish to argue this point, but consider: we have a consensus among the characters that Bon was killed (what), by being shot (how), by Henry (who), as they rode up to Sutpen's Hundred (where), on their return from battle (when). Nothing is missing except "why." Rosa and Mr. Compson have been unable to supply the last critical piece of information. We will naturally look for it in the final performance. Whether we find it there or not may be another matter.
NOTES


3 Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 266.

4 John Irwin, Doubling and Incest: Repetition and Revenge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 74.


8  Levins, 40.

9  Millgate, 158.


12 Vickery, 89.

13 Most historians of the pre-Civil War period confirm this point. See, for example, W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Random House, 1941), 87.


15 Reed, 163.
Chapter III

Quentin's Performance:

Some Happy Marriage of Speaking and Hearing

Of all the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin Compson is the one about whom the most has been written, and the one about whom the least consensus has been reached. Quentin is inarguably one of Faulkner's most psychically anguished characters, both here and in *The Sound and the Fury*, and therefore one of the most interesting to literary critics. When this is considered in tandem with the fact that Quentin's section of *Absalom, Absalom!* is dramatically different from those that precede it, it is little wonder that so much attention has been focused upon him.
In a letter to his editor, Harrison Smith, Faulkner explained his choice of Quentin as a narrator in this novel:

Quentin Compson, of *The Sound and the Fury*, tells it, or ties it together; he is the protagonist so that it is not complete apocrypha. I use him because it is just before he is to commit suicide because of his sister, and I use his bitterness which he had projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people to get more out of the story itself than a historical novel would be. To keep the hoop skirts and the plug hats our, you might say.¹

Certainly, Faulkner has gotten more out of this story than a historical novel. *Gone With the Wind*, replete with hoop skirts and plug hats, was published in the same year, to greater public acceptance, but it is not engendering nearly as many books and articles of literary criticism fifty years later.

It is obvious from Faulkner's comments in his letter to Smith that Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the same character who appeared in *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner confirmed this in his lectures at the University of Virginia, telling a student, "To me, he's consistent."² As with Mr. Compson, then, it is fair to
extrapolate what we know about Quentin from the earlier novel to help explain his behavior in this one.³

As we look at Quentin's performance, the first point at which our knowledge of The Sound and the Fury seems to have relevance is with regard to Quentin's attitude toward his subject matter. Both during his father's performance and at points in his own when Shreve is speaking, Quentin thinks, "I have had to listen too long ..." (p. 193). He wishes that the Sutpen story would go away, that he could stop listening to it, yet he seems drawn to it, as though there might be within it some personal significance for him. We may surmise that it brings up for him painful reminders of his relationship with Caddy, and of his abortive attempt to stop her promiscuity by threatening to kill her lover if he refused to leave town. Quentin's tendency to associate Judith Sutpen with Caddy helps to shape his performance, and certainly causes his close identification with Henry (and to a lesser extent Bon) as he and Shreve reconstruct the part of the story involving the Sutpen children.

But there is more in the Sutpen story than just a tale of incest and the defense of one's sister's virginity, which is, after all, a story that could take
place anywhere. Sutpen's rejection of Charles Bon because of his negro blood makes it as well a story of peculiar significance to the South, and forces Quentin to address the fact that his homeland was built upon the principal of slavery. This may be what Faulkner had in mind when he said of the novel, "It's incidentally the story of Quentin Compson's hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves." 4

Quentin's performance is occasioned by the arrival of Mr. Compson's letter announcing Miss Rosa's death. The letter is delivered by Quentin's roommate Shreve McCannon, who apparently begins asking questions about its contents because Quentin finds himself "soon needing, required, to say 'no, neither aunt, cousin, nor uncle, Rosa. Miss Rosa Coldfield, an old lady that died young of outrage in 1866 one summer' . . . ." (p. 174).

Quentin is less willing a narrator than either Miss Rosa or his father. Rosa, of course, initiates her own performance by summoning Quentin to her house, and if her histrionics are any indication, she genuinely relishes her role. Mr. Compson, too, seems to welcome the opportunity to hold forth on the Sutpen story, or more to the point, the opportunity to demonstrate the applicability of his nihilistic
worldview. Quentin must be drawn into his role as narrator by Shreve's persistent questions about the South and the Sutpens. His reluctance no doubt stems from his desire to avoid facing the emotional issues the story holds for him. Quentin's attitude toward his role is evident in his demeanor, "brooding, almost sullen" (p. 218) when he begins his narrative. His countenance causes Shreve to watch him intently, suspecting that there is something disturbing to Quentin here, and Shreve is therefore even more curious about the story he has maneuvered Quentin to tell.

There are other major differences between Quentin's narrative and those that precede it. The most striking is context; the other performances in the novel take place in Mississippi on a warm September day and evening, while Quentin's is set in Cambridge on a frigid January night. Quentin is therefore geographically distant from the scene of his story. Moreover, his setting lacks the immediacy to the Sutpen history that the others possess; it is not told in a house that Sutpen himself had visited, one resonant still with his presence thanks to Miss Rosa's unforgiving fury, nor on the veranda of a Southern mansion less grand than Sutpen's own perhaps, but no less subject to the decay of both its physical
structure and the dynasty that created it. In fact, Quentin's story is not told in the South at all, but in the North, among people who do not understand the South, who regard it as a spectacle "better than Ben Hur ..." (p. 217).

It has been suggested that this "distancing" in the setting gives Quentin the space he needs to be able to look deeply into the Sutpen story for its significance in his own life. That may very well be the case. At the same time, the imaginative recreation of the characters in the Sutpen drama is surely a greater feat when undertaken in a cold Harvard dorm room than in the heat of a Mississippi summer in the same community where those characters once lived.

One effect that accompanies Quentin's context is a heightened contrast between it and the scenes he depicts. Significantly, every chapter in Quentin's section of the novel begins with a reference to the cold New England winter in which he narrates his tale. Quentin's setting is not exactly hostile, but it is certainly alien. Within it, he is the outsider, the stranger constantly asked to, "Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all ..." (p. 174). As a performer, he will be faced with the
task of trying to bring a piece of his world into a strange environment and make his audience understand it.

Another major difference between the other performances in the novel and Quentin's is audience. For the first time, Quentin is not the audience. The performance situation does not involve an older, more experienced narrator presenting material to a young member of the community for the purpose of passing down cultural information and attitudes or providing philosophical guidance. Instead, Quentin's audience is someone his own age, but of another culture.

While some folklorists have felt that traditional performances take place only between people in the same social group, Richard Bauman has demonstrated that this is not the case. He identifies a number of variables which may obtain between performer and audience, and one of them is regional difference, such as the one between Quentin and Shreve. Interestingly, Bauman cites as an example the frontiersmen of the West who, tired of being stereotyped by Easterners, created the "tall tale" and then performed it for those same incredulous and unsuspecting Easterners. A similar situation exists here; the South is stereotyped by Quentin's classmates, including Shreve. Quentin could
have chosen to make the Sutpen story into an exaggerated yarn that only he would know was a farce. But he does not do this, perhaps because of his own agony over his social heritage. Instead, the story he narrates has as its center the very sources of his anguish, as though he is using it to work through the meaning, for him, of being a Southerner. Unfortunately, the result is not catharsis, as the ending of the novel indicates.

One result of Quentin's having to deal with an audience from a different regional background is that he is faced with a performance situation quite different from Rosa's or his father's. When they were telling the story to him, they enjoyed an audience familiar with the community in which it took place, the cultural attitudes which surrounded it, and the actual local legend about Sutpen. For Quentin, the story "was part of his twenty years heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man Sutpen" (p. 11). Furthermore, Quentin as audience had a vested interest in the Sutpen story, bred both of his need to come to terms with his Southern background and of his struggle to cope with his feelings about his sister.

Shreve McCannon has no such intrinsic motive for wanting to hear the Sutpen history. While Shreve is
eager to learn about the South, his interest stems from curiosity rather than from a need to understand his heritage. In fact, Shreve is curious about the South specifically because it is so different from his own environment. He tells Quentin, "I'm not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I don't know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got" (p. 361).

Shreve is a not just Northerner, he is a Canadian, and this sets him even further apart from Quentin's world. Shreve's ancestors did not fight on either side of the Civil War, so he is completely divorced from this central facet of Southern history. Given an audience without an understanding of his culture, Quentin has more to convey than just the details of the Sutpen story, and must work to overcome Shreve's preconceived notions about the South, such as his mock amazement that Quentin and Rosa are not related to one another and his refusal to stop referring to her as "Aunt Rosa."

As Quentin's audience, Shreve plays a crucial role. Although he is more at home in Cambridge than Quentin, in the context in which the Sutpen story takes place he is the foreigner. The structure is like a box within a box--Quentin the stranger inside the Northern
environment, Shreve the stranger inside the story
Quentin brings with him. By virtue of the very fact
that he is an outsider, Shreve provides distance and
perspective--both geographic and emotional. Faulkner
himself acknowledged Shreve's role, saying:

Well, the story was told by Quentin
to Shreve. Shreve was the
commentator that held the thing to
something of reality. If Quentin
had been let alone to tell it, it
would have become completely
unreal. It had to have a solvent
to keep it real, keep it
believable, creditable, (sic)
otherwise it would have vanished
into smoke and fury."

One way that Shreve keeps the narrative from
vanishing "into smoke and fury" is to provide what
almost amounts to comic relief. He resorts to
outrageous exaggeration to the point that Lynn Gartrell
Levins likens his contributions to a tall tale
(although Shreve does not exaggerate for the benefit of
a naive audience of outsiders). He effect is also
attributable in part to his tendency to debunk the
myth, as for example, when he describes Sutpen's
marriage to Ellen as his "scuttling into respectability
like a jackal into a rockpile . . ." (p. 178) and when
he equates Sutpen's engagement to Rosa with his playing
"an ancient stiff-jointed Pyramus to her eager though
untried Thisbe . . ." (p.177). In providing a foil for
any tendency Quentin might have to be, as Hyatt Waggonner puts it, "too obsessive or too shrill," Shreve performs a function within this section of the novel that Miss Rosa could dearly have used in hers.8

Francois Pltavy identifies Shreve as performing a role similar to the reader's, in that he asks questions that the reader, too, needs to have answered.9 By using Shreve in this manner, Faulkner conveys necessary information to the reader without implying that Quentin is repeating material his audience already knows. This is yet another difference from Rosa's section, in which Quentin is bored by the repetition of familiar details, even as the reader is gaining the information for the first time. As I illustrated earlier, Faulkner uses this device in the opening chapter to indicate, by stressing that she is boring her audience, that Miss Rosa is not a skilled performer. Here, however, Shreve is not bored, but anxious to hear the story, to the point of encouraging Quentin's performance with his questions.

Faulkner also uses Shreve's questions to bring out precisely the information we don't have yet, such as the fact that Milly's child was a girl. Like Shreve, we are anxious by this point to have inconsistencies resolved and gaps filled in. We get
our information at the same time that Shreve does, and sometimes as a direct result of his inquiries. And just as Shreve reflects our need for information, we, having gotten it, may come to share in his tendency to extrapolate from it a "logical" explanation for Bon’s murder. This is one of the ways in which we are drawn in to the final performance in the novel and encouraged to take part in the exercise in imagination that it represents.

It is also notable here that some information in this section comes to us by way of Quentin’s reveries. This is often information that he has previously shared with Shreve, as evidenced by Shreve’s subsequent comments. Again, Faulkner finds a way to provide us with new information without suggesting that Quentin is insensitive to his audience’s prior knowledge. We also become accustomed to the intensity of his mental images, and this too helps to prepare us for the "two—then four—then two" passages.

Any discussion of Shreve’s role as audience in this performance is incomplete without consideration of his relationship with Quentin. Recognizing the relationship between the two is important to our ability to accept their later collaboration in reconstructing the events of the Henry/Bon/Judith
affair. Again, the difference from the other performances in the novel is significant. Quentin and Rosa had not exchanged a hundred words before her performance for him; he barely knows her, let alone having a deep bond of intuitive sympathy with her. His father, of course, is another case in terms of familiarity, but here too Quentin fails to get either psychological comfort for his agony over Caddy or a philosophical vantage point from which he can view his world. Critics of both this novel and *The Sound and the Fury* have pointed out Quentin's estrangement from his father. In contrast, Faulkner stresses Quentin and Shreve's mutual affinity:

... both young, both born within the same year; the one in Alberta, the other in Mississippi; born a half a continent apart yet joined... --the two of them who four months ago had never laid eyes on one another yet who since had slept in the same room and eaten side by side of the same food and used the same books from which to prepare to recite in the same freshman courses, facing one another across the lamplit table on which lay the fragile pandora's box of scrawled paper which had filled with violent and unratificative djinns and demons this snug monastic coign, this dreamy and heatless alcove of what we call the best of thought. (p. 258)
The two sleep in the same room, eat the same food—we may be reminded of the comment of a classmate who in *The Sound and the Fury* called Shreve Quentin's husband. The relationship suggested here, however, is that of brothers, the word "monastic" implying brotherhood, if not of blood, then at least of mind—Quentin and Shreve are brothers bound together in a fraternity of "the best of thought." Given their later metamorphosis into Henry and Bon, it is a neat bit of foreshadowing indeed.

The bond between the young men becomes evident gradually in the text of the narrative itself. At first, Shreve occasionally interjects pronoun referents into Quentin's speech, for example:

But all he remembered—""The demon," Shreve said)—was that one morning the father rose, and told the older girls to pack what food they had . . . (p. 223)

As the narrative progresses, however, neither will need to specify the antecedents of their pronouns:

. . . It was not Bon Shreve meant now, yet again Quentin seemed to comprehend without difficulty or effort whom he meant . . . (p. 314).
They begin to sound like one another:

It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them . . . . (p. 303)

Eventually, it will not even matter which of them is speaking:

... It did not matter (and possibly neither of them conscious of the distinction) which one had been doing the talking . . . (p. 334).

This gradual merging of two distinct voices helps prepare us for the joint visualization in which they recreate Sutpen's meeting with Henry in the camp tent.

As is obvious from the preceding discussion, Shreve is a far more participative audience than Quentin had been for Rosa and his father. If we convert Janson's range of possible audience participation—from 0% for no participation to 100% for a full role in the performance—to a scale of one to ten, we might give Quentin a two for his minimal participation in Miss Rosa's performance and perhaps a three for his slightly more active role in his father's. But we must award Shreve an eight or nine, for while Quentin narrates a sizable portion of the
final section, Shreve becomes deeply involved as well, to the extent of telling Quentin at one point, "No, . . . you wait. Let me play a while now" (p. 280). It is hardly stretching a point to suggest that we take the word "play" here in the sense of its dramatic definition, which enables us to see that what Shreve is asking for is a chance to join in the performance.

We must remember that a high degree of audience participation is not in itself an indication of a superior performance. The appropriate level of audience involvement may vary widely from case to case. What Shreve's desire to take part in the performance indicates here is that his sympathies have been engaged by the Sutpen story and that he desires to join Quentin in an imaginative seeking for the truth about what happened to them. As I will demonstrate elsewhere, this is central to one of Faulkner's primary themes in this novel.

Because Shreve does have an active role in the performance, and because we get information from more than one source, we need to look at the text of this final section to clarify who tells what to whom. Quentin has evidently repeated parts of the Sutpen story to Shreve in the past, because Shreve has some
knowledge of the tale at the outset. After the letter arrives, he is eager to hear more, but Quentin has gone into a reverie, reliving the night of his visit with Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred. Shreve, wanting details, actually goads Quentin into undertaking the performance by recounting the parts of the story he already knows and making Quentin affirm their accuracy by prefacing them with, "You mean that . . ." (p. 176).

The incidents he relates include the general details of Miss Rosa's life with her aunt and father, her engagement and subsequent affront by Sutpen, Sutpen's building of the house and attempts to salvage his estate after the War, and passing reference to his seduction of Milly and his murder at Wash's hands. We actually learn for the first time from Shreve's account what Sutpen said to Rosa that outraged her so. (This is significant in that it begins the pattern of having earlier obfuscations resolved in this section of the novel, therefore teasing us into expecting that all ambiguities will be resolved within this performance.) His rendition is irreverent and slangy—he calls the President of the Confederacy "Jeff Davis" and Rosa "this old dame"—and he ends each vignette with his request for verification, forcing Quentin out of his dreamworld and into the present moment.
For quite some time Quentin, reluctant to perform, manages a one word answer to Shreve’s demands for affirmation: "Yes." At one point, Shreve’s characterization of Sutpen as a "mad impotent old man" leads Quentin into so deep a reverie that he does not even hear Shreve, nor do we. We only know that Shreve has been talking while Quentin ruminates on Sutpen because eventually Shreve pauses for affirmation again and Quentin automatically says, "Yes" (pp. 180-184).

Getting nowhere, Shreve directs the conversation back to Quentin’s visit to Sutpen’s Hundred, saying, "And yet this old gal, this aunt Rosa, told you that someone was hiding out there and . . . so you went out there, drove the twelve miles at night in a buggy . . . and there was?" Quentin’s "Yes," this time is not enough; Shreve has set his roommate up to tell who it was that was hiding in the house. But then he says, "Wait then. . . . For God’s sake wait," (p. 216).

Why does Shreve stop at this point? For one thing, he doesn’t know who Quentin and Rosa found in the house, so he can’t continue his pattern of repeating what he knows and asking for Quentin’s concurrence. He has gotten to a point at which the next logical move is a direct question: who was it who was hiding in the house? But Shreve not only avoids
asking the question, he avoids having Quentin anticipate and answer it. He puts Quentin off at the exact moment when Quentin would finally compelled to say something beyond, "Yes." This is because all along Shreve has wanted more than information, more than the answer to a question. He wants a performance.

There is evidence in the novel that both Shreve and Quentin recognize that the Sutpen story calls for a performance. Quentin resists playing his role for a while, but Shreve is insistent, even asking directly for a reprise of an earlier performance in which Quentin evidently told about the visit to the grove of cedars:

... How was it? ... You told me; how was it? you and your father shooting quail, the gray day after it had rained all night and the ditch the horses couldn't cross so you and your father got down ... (p. 187)

It is evident here that Shreve is not just asking to be reminded of details he has forgotten; he had forgotten very little, if anything, and demonstrates that fact by the degree of detail he supplies to jog Quentin into picking up the tale. In fact, Shreve revels in the detail, in the color and drama of the Sutpen saga. Shreve still looks upon the South as "better than the theater" (p. 217). And he expects it
to be, like good theater, suspenseful. Shreve does not want just any performance, he wants a performance that leads up to the denouement, that builds to its climax. So he is not ready yet to be told who Quentin found in the decaying house; he wants to delay that gratification. Therefore, when he has led Quentin to the point at which Quentin cannot avoid taking over the narrative, he forestalls an answer to his question and instead changes the subject to Sutpen's wanting a grandson. Quentin, accordingly, begins his performance an explanation of Sutpen's design.

Launched upon his narrative, Quentin seems to be almost mesmerized by the sound of it; he takes little notice of Shreve's interjections, ranging from pronoun antecedents to the smart-aleck suggestion that the architect ran away because he wanted a girl. He sits relaxed yet undemonstrative, his head lowered, his eyes on the letter, his voice "flat, curiously dead" (p. 258). But he responds to Shreve's prompts to tell about the deal between Mr. Coldfield and Sutpen, about the design, and about Sutpen's children. And he recognizes Shreve's need for order and causality in the story. As he recounts Sutpen's storytelling episode around the campfire, he tells Shreve, "And I reckon Grandfather was saying 'Walt, wait for God's sake'
about like you are, until he finally did stop and back up and start over again with at least some regard for cause and effect even if none for logical sequence and continuity" (p. 247).

Quentin’s tendency in his narrative is to go into exhaustive detail, which Shreve sometimes foreshortens by urging him, "Get on, now" (p. 260). Again, Shreve acts almost as a surrogate for the reader, unable to bear the suspense created by Quentin’s drawn out explanations and eager to proceed with the substance of the tale.

There is indeed substance in the performance Quentin gives. He tells Shreve about Sutpen’s childhood; his being turned away from the door of the mansion and the subsequent development of his design; and his sojourn in the West Indies and abandonment of his first wife and child, all information that Sutpen provided General Compson as they drank whiskey beside a campfire. He passes along General Compson’s assessment that Sutpen’s trouble was innocence, and also reveals that after Henry repudiated his birthright and rode away with Bon, Sutpen visited General Compson’s law office to try to discover the flaw in his design. These points are significant in Quentin’s narrative because they represent an attempt to understand why
Sutpen did what he did, an attempt that Miss Rosa did not make at all and that Mr. Compson gave up in defeat, with the excuse that we are not supposed to understand.

During the discussion in the law office, Sutpen evidently told General Compson that Bon was his son, but the General never repeated that information to Quentin's father. Shreve apparently knows from an earlier conversation that Bon is Sutpen's son. When Quentin mentions his father's comment that Sutpen probably named Bon himself, Shreve realizes that that is inconsistent with what he knows to be Mr. Compson's rationale for the story. He interrupts Quentin with:

He seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-five years. If he knew all this, what was his reason for telling you that the trouble between Henry and Bon was the octoroon woman? (p. 266)

Quentin admits that he himself provided the new information, after his visit to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa. This passage is significant on two counts. First of all, it indicates that Mr. Compson's explanation for the murder is incorrect, based on inadequate information. For that matter, the incorrectness of Rosa's rationale is also implied, since her version is based on even less information than Mr. Compson's.
The second point of interest here is that Shreve assumes that Clytie is the one who told Quentin about the relationship between Bon and Sutpen, and Quentin does not disabuse him of that notion. It is interesting that Shreve makes this assumption, because earlier he asks specifically if Rosa was right when she said there was someone else in the house besides Clytie and Jim Bond, and Quentin says yes. At this point in the narrative, Quentin could easily tell Shreve that it was Henry in the house, and he who provided the key fact about Bon. By deciding not to do so, he too postpones this climactic revelation. Instead, he continues the narrative by telling Shreve about Sutpen's meeting with Henry in the tent, which both Shreve and Quentin believe led Henry to murder his brother.

Another delay in the transmission of crucial data takes place here. This is the point at which Shreve asks to be given a turn to "play," introducing the subject of Wash Jones. Perhaps the allusion to Henry's catalyst for killing Bon has reminded Shreve that he has unanswered questions about the other murder, Wash's murder of Sutpen. Quentin ignores Shreve's request for an opportunity to narrate, but he does shift gears in terms of subject matter "taking Shreve up in stride
without comma or colon or paragraph . . ." (p. 280).

He talks about Wash's years of service to Sutpen and eventual murder of him. Shreve, thinking that Wash's granddaughter bore Sutpen a son, doesn't understand Sutpen's rejection of her, but Quentin never pauses in the narrative to explain, still so engrossed in his story that he does not hear Shreve's interruptions until Shreve becomes vehement, at which point Quentin supplies the information crucial to Shreve's understanding. Of course, it is also information crucial to the reader's understanding, and Faulkner has allowed Quentin to ignore Shreve's question (and ours) in order to position it at the very end of Chapter VII. The delay creates suspense and the revelation makes for a dramatic ending to the chapter, a hallmark of this novel, but it is deflated somewhat by Shreve's reply, "Oh. . . . Come on. Let's get out of this damn icebox and go to bed" (p. 292).

They do not, however, go to bed. Instead, they turn to the subject of Henry and Bon. Quentin has already offered the opinion that "nobody ever did know if Bon ever knew Sutpen was his father or not, whether he was trying to revenge his mother or not at first and only later fell in love . . ." (p. 269). But when the talk turns to Bon this time, Shreve concludes that Bon
did not know about Sutpen's paternity at first. He then develops an elaborate characterization of Bon's mother, who plans to use her son as the instrument of her eventual revenge, and of a lawyer who handles the mother's affairs and plots to have Bon meet and fall in love with Judith so that Sutpen will have to reveal the truth to prevent their marriage. Shreve's theory is that the lawyer sends a letter of introduction to Henry on Bon's behalf, and that when Henry shows Bon the letter, he suddenly realizes that Henry must be his brother.

Several things are significant about the early portion of Chapter VIII, where this text appears. One is that it is the beginning of the "two--then four--then two" scenes in the novel; as Quentin and Shreve begin to focus more intently on Henry and Bon, we move further and further into their joint recreation of those characters and their actions. Accordingly, this is where the distinction between performer and audience becomes blurred:

It was Shreve speaking, though save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them... it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thought become audible, vocal; the
two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere . . . . (p. 303).

Implicit in this passage is the acknowledgement that this process of imaginative recreation does not produce literal truth, that is, an account of what really happened, but a kind of poetic truth, an explanation of events that is "probably true enough . . ." (p. 335). For example, Quentin and Shreve imagine Henry looking out the library window during the interview in which his father tells him Bon is his brother and seeing Judith and Bon walking together in the flower filled garden. Then Faulkner's anonymous narrator points out that there would have been no flowers in the garden, since it was December, and that Henry's meeting with his father took place at night when it was unlikely that Bon and Judith would be walking in the garden. "But that did not matter because it had been so long ago. It did not matter to them (Quentin and Shreve) anyway . . ." (p. 295).

As I will show in more detail later on, it may not matter much to Faulkner either that the garden scene envisioned by the roommates is an anomaly.- As Joseph Reed, Jr. puts it:
As I will show in more detail later on, it may not matter much to Faulkner either that the garden scene envisioned by the roommates is an anomaly. As Joseph Reed, Jr. puts it:

Revelation of what who did when and what resulted, no matter what its thematic point, is maybe not as important to Faulkner as is the whole process of curiosity, skill, and delight in the Teller, and receptivity, demand, and ratiocination in the Hearer.10

It does not matter any more to Quentin and Shreve which of them does the talking, any more than it matters to them whether or not the lawyer and the mother were "real" people just as they imagine them or whether there were flowers in a Mississippi garden in December. What does matter to them is that their version of the story deal truthfully with what they sense is its real motivating factor--love. To do that, they dedicate themselves to what the novel's anonymous narrator refers to as "the best of ratiocination . . ." (p. 280). Where Rosa focused on Sutpen's demonic nature (making her section Gothic) and Mr. Compson concentrated on Sutpen's fore-ordained doom (making his section tragic), Quentin and Shreve focus on love. Theirs is a love story, or what Levins calls a "chivalric romance," but with a decidedly ratiocinative bent.11
The passage in which Faulkner states Quentin and Shreve's focus on love also contains much that is significant in regard to his view of performance in this novel:

"And now," Shreve said, "we're going to talk about love." But he didn't need to say that either... since neither of them had been thinking about anything else; all that had gone before just so much that had to be overpassed and none else present to overpass it but them... That was why it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it. performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other--faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding of the false and conserving what seemed to be true, or fit the preconceived--in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault or false (p. 316).

This passage seems to define what for Faulkner may be the ideal performance, that happy marriage between speaking and hearing that allows performer and audience to move beyond the mundane business of sorting information into piles of true and false to a higher plane of cognizance, a place where paradox and
inconsistency do not preclude the truth that lies within the human heart. This "overpassing" is obviously more important for Faulkner than absolute accuracy of detail or virtuosity of the part of the performer, and more important than photographic recall or unassailable interpretation on the part of the audience.

Accordingly, Quentin is not a perfect narrator, nor Shreve a perfect audience. As I have noted above, Quentin tells his tale in a near monotone, without expression or gesture to enliven it. Shreve, for his part, interrupts at regular intervals, sometimes with flip remarks that belie his sympathetic reaction to the characters Quentin presents. There are indeed "faultings' between them. Quentin, for example, having recounted Sutpen's experience in the West Indies up to the point of his engagement, says, "Then he stopped" (p. 254). He means that Sutpen stopped telling the story to General Compson at this point, but his wording is ambiguous and Shreve takes him to mean that Sutpen somehow broke off the engagement, which confuses him because he knows that Sutpen did marry in the West Indies. In Faulkner's own ethnology of performance, however, such misalignments of understanding are
forgivable, because more important is the collaborative movement toward the creation of meaning.

This passage also stresses that the creation of meaning is necessarily a collaborative effort. It is not the talking alone which accomplishes the "overpassing," but a "happy marriage of speaking and hearing." We may recall that a performance consists of the performer, the audience, and the communicative event that takes place between them. Faulkner's "happy marriage of speaking and hearing" is in fact a corollary for the communicative event which folklorists call performance.

Finally, it is obvious that Faulkner's "overpassing" involves more than the mere exchange of information. For one thing, if its goal was simply information exchange, lack of accuracy would scarcely be deemed so acceptable. But even more pertinent is the fact that Quentin and Shreve don't just create their characters--or in this passage Bon, "this shade"--they exist in them. surely this corresponds with the folklorists' idea that a performance is something "creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events." Similarly, Quentin and Shreve's ability to "overpass" from the strictly literal level of the story may
correspond to creativity in the traditional performance, or what Bauman calls its "emergent" quality, demonstrated when a performer uses his competence to adjust his material to the situation at hand.14

The transcendent quality of Quentin and Shreve's section is nowhere more apparent than in the "two--then four--then two" passages in the novel. The first occurs when they visualize Henry in the library denying his father's allegations about Bon, and then riding off with Bon for the steamboat to New Orleans. There is a sort of hiatus during which Shreve picks up the narration, imagining Bon's upbringing, but we are repeatedly reminded that it does not matter which one does the talking. Then the scene is again the departure from Sutpen's Hundred, and again "it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two--Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry . . ." (p. 334). It is also four of them as Quentin and Shreve imagine Bon's mother laughing when she realizes that Judith and Bon are in love with one another. Again, the situation reverts back to two of them talking in a cold New England dorm room, both
Most critics regard the italicized passage that follows as a joint visualization of the scene in which Sutpen confronts Henry with the information that Bon is part Negro, after which Henry informs Bon that he will not allow Bon's marriage to Judith. Having been told that it does not matter whether it is Shreve or Quentin talking, we now find that it is neither, that we have moved beyond talking into a sort of composite vision which is as close as we will come in this novel to immediate experience of the actual events of the Sutpen history. That the crucial scenes between Sutpen and Henry and Henry and Bon should occur outside the context of narrative may reflect Faulkner's theory, which a number of critics have connected with the philosophy of Henri Bergson, that language is subordinate to perception and experience, and cannot represent experience with absolute accuracy. If so, the fact that Quentin and Shreve experience this scene more than verbalize it may suggest that it is somehow more "real" or more "true" than a scene which is merely narrated.

This is not to suggest, however, that language in general or the specific language used in this novel is unimportant. As we have seen, figurative language is
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general or the specific language used in this novel is
unimportant. As we have seen, figurative language is
one of the elements that alerts us to the performance
status of the work. In fact, I wish to look briefly at
the language use—the texture—in this final section of
the novel before drawing some conclusions about
Quentin's performance.

The point remains that the various performances
in this novel do not differ significantly from one
another in style, particularly in terms of syntax.
However, just as Rosa's performance is set apart by her
melodramatic diction and Mr. Compson's by his frequent
allusions to the theater and to Greek tragedy, so too
are there distinct voices in this final section of the
novel. Shreve asks more questions than other
characters, reflecting his role as the outsider. His
slangy irreverence is a cover for his sympathetic
response to the Sutpens, but it also serves as a device
to differentiate his parts of the narrative from
Quentin's. Only Shreve calls Rosa "the old dame" or
"this old gal," Sutpen "the old guy," and Mr. Compson
"your old man," and punctuates his sentences with
"Jesus." That it is primarily a matter of diction that
distinguishes Shreve's voice from Quentin's is
reinforced by Faulkner's telling us that the differences in their speech were "differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words..." (p. 303). (Of course, that comment in itself is metalinguistic, in that it comments on the speech act itself.)

For his part, Quentin has the least distinctive voice in the novel, in large part because much of his narrative consists of his repeating what his father or grandfather said. At one point, Shreve even notices that Quentin sounds like his father.

What seems most authentically Quentin's "voice" appears not in his spoken narrative to Shreve but in his reveries, where he despairs at having to listen too long, or ponders, as he also does in *The Sound and the Fury*, the nature of time:

> Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happens is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, had fed, did feed..." (p. 261)

This is vintage Quentin, lost in his own tortured thoughts, stringing together clauses as he strings together remembered comments and incidents, creating
out of them extended metaphors on such momentous subjects as time and death. (As Quentin thinks the above thoughts, he is but three months from suicide. It is interesting to ment that in his reverie on the nature of time, he conjugates the verb "to feed", delineating the categories of time by reminding himself of the grammatical distinctions between past and present. His conjugation, however, has no future tense.)

Although it is not limited to this chapter, the voice of the anonymous narrator should be mentioned here as well, for we do get considerable information from this narrative voice that does not belong to any of the novel's characters. It sets the scene for each of the performances, and provides information that we could not get filtered through the consciousness of one of the characters. For example, this is the voice that tells us in Rosa's section that her handwriting revealed "a character cold, implacable, and even ruthless" (p. 10). In Quentin and Shreve's section, this authorial voice stresses the link between the two, and provides commentary about their attitudes:

This was not flippancy either. It too was just that protective coloring of levity behind which the youthful shame of being moved hid itself, out of which Quentin also
spoke, the reason for Quentln's
sullen bemusement, the (on both
their parts) flipness, the strained
cloining . . . (p. 280)

Most critically in this section, the anonymous
narrator informs us about the degree of Shreve and
Quentln's identification with their subjects; it is
this voice that signals the "two--then four--then two"
passages, and that tells us about the "compounding"
that takes them back without benefit of speech
forty-six years to the Rebel camp. This is the voice
of the central "happy marriage of speaking and hearing"
passage as well.

Faulkner could hardly have avoided the use of
this "second author," especially in the final section
of the novel. All of this is material that he could
not have given us through one of the novel's narrators
without prejudicing its effect. As it is, when a
section of narrative begins we are occasionally
confused about who is speaking until we find a telltale
sign such as Shreve's "Jesus." We simply could not
know that Shreve and Quentin become Bon and Henry, in a
very complex way, unless Faulkner explicitly signaled
this merging with his "two--then four--then two"
notations.
We should note, however, that Faulkner’s anonymous narrator is not an omniscient narrator. He does not give us incontrovertible facts (the novel would be far different if he did), but rather, often relates what “probably” happened or what someone “may have” thought. This is a crucial point, for part of the meaning of Absalom, Absalom! is that there is no such thing as an omniscient narrator.

I would like to suggest that Quentin’s performance, and Shreve’s to the extent that he takes part, is superior to Miss Rosa’s and Mr. Compson’s, that Faulkner indicates this in his authorial voice or anonymous narrator’s comments, and that the superiority of this version is integral to one of the major themes—perhaps the major theme—of the novel.

First of all, Quentin is obviously not on an equal footing with the other narrators. He has a larger part in this novel than the other narrators, because he figures in some role in each of the novel’s performances. This alone gives him a certain degree of pre-eminence.

Faulkner’s own comments about his “using” Quentin to tell the story and about the novel being
"Incidentally" Quentin's story also indicate that we are not dealing with a case of three separate but equal narrators. When he told a student, "It's incidently the story of Quentin Compson's hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves," he was making the point that the principle story is Sutpen's. However, he did not say that it is incidentally the story of Rosa Coldfield's hatred of her brother-in-law, or of Mr. Compson's intellectualism. The number two spot belongs clearly to Quentin.

A number of critics have chosen to debate this point. Indeed, Quentin's role in the novel has been the subject of a good deal of the controversy surrounding him. Richard Poirier, for example, believes that "the emphasis here is primarily on Quentin, that neither Rosa nor Sutpen can serve as the dramatic center of this novel." John Pilkington, on the other hand, asserts that "Quentin becomes not the subject of the novel but only one of the media through which the reader obtains his data . . . ."

I believe that some critics have been prone to identify Quentin as the main character in the novel simply because of his stature as the most successful narrator. After all, in a novel that deals with narration to the extent that this one does, that is no
insignificant position. Pilkington is correct that Quentin is one of the conduits by which we learn Sutpen's story, but he is obviously a more important source of information than Miss Rosa or his father.

There is a direct connection here with the other major issue in contention: whether or not Quentin's version of the Sutpen story is accurate. Arnold Goldman believes it is, maintaining that Faulkner has "gone beyond even suggesting that Quentin synthesizes these [previous narrators'] views to an amount of authorial confirmation ..." 19 James Guetti, however, states that "Quentin's narrative is significant not as the resolution that a reader has expected but only as the summation of all the speculation and misguided intensity that has preceded it." 20

Critics do not quarrel about whether or not Miss Rosa's or Mr. Compson's performances are definitive because they clearly are not; each is later revealed to be lacking key pieces of information that illuminate the Sutpen story. So Quentin is set apart from the other narrators in the novel by virtue of the fact that his is the only narrative that might qualify as conclusive. It is he who reaches what seems to be a resolution of the "facts" of the story, because it is
he who is able to make the imaginative leap that resolution demands.

The success of Quentin's narrative lies in its presenting a version of Sutpen's story that is internally consistent and in consonance with human motivations and emotions, and in its thereby exciting the imaginative sympathy of its audience. Certainly, Quentin's is the only performance for which one can claim this achievement. Miss Rosa allows Sutpen no human motivations or emotions, preferring to see him as a demon. Hers is not a story of the human heart in conflict with itself, because in her version, Sutpen has no heart. Mr. Compson's version lacks internal consistency, which he excuses with the attitude that we are not supposed to understand what motivated Sutpen. If we recall Roger Abrahams' assertion that the skillful performer can create a "shared and sharable world" through metaphor, we can see that Rosa and Mr. Compson have been unable to do so; Quentin, as their audience, and the reader by extension, is unable to accept their versions of the story, to share in their visions or affirm their base metaphors. In contrast, Shreve shares very actively in Quentin's vision of the story (as does the reader), and his explanation is one that is consistent with what we know
about the South and therefore one that we can accept as plausible in the world we know.

Because Quentin's performance occurs last in the novel and because at the point at which it begins we are still left with a number of unanswered questions and unresolved inconsistencies, there is the natural tendency to expect that this version will be the one that straightens everything out, much as the plot is fully explicated at the end of a Sherlock Holmes story. To a point, Faulkner encourages us in that hope. As I noted earlier, this is the section in which we find out how Sutpen insulted Rosa. This is also the section in which we learn directly, though it has been alluded to earlier, that Wash killed Sutpen with the rusty scythe, and why he did so. Of course, this is where we learn, at long last, whom Quentin and Rosa found at Sutpen's Hundred.

The critics who deny that Quentin's narrative represents the "true" version of the story do not dispute these points. They do dispute the other major revelations of his section: that Bon is Sutpen's son by his first marriage, and that he has a trace of Négro blood. Those who argue that Quentin's version is just one of "thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird" contend that nowhere in the novel is there a definite
Indication that either of these items is true, that they are simply a fabrication on the part of Quentin and Shreve which may or may not be true. They have a valid point. But we are predisposed to accept these explanations as the "real" version because we have already experienced the resolution of other uncertainties in this section, and because they do square with what we know of the South and of human nature. Unlike Mr. Compson's theory about the octoroon mistress, Quentin and Shreve's explanation that Henry responded to the combined threat of incest and miscegenation is certainly in consonance with the shared values of the culture at the time. (I will explore those values in greater depth in my concluding chapter.) Similarly, the notion that Sutpen had a singularly humiliating experience as a boy that motivated him to make himself and his heirs above such rejection ever again is more in keeping with our understanding of human nature than Rosa's demon theory.

The argument that Quentin's version is definitive also has in its favor the geneology and chronology, which identify Bon as Sutpen's son and confirm that Sutpen's reason for rejecting his first wife was her negro blood. Further, Gerald Langford has documented Faulkner's original intent to have Bon's parentage
known from the beginning of the novel. 20 Faulkner changed his mind and the text of the novel now does not indicate directly that Bon is definitely Sutpen's oldest son and has a trace of negro blood. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence that he is and he does, and this evidence lends further credence to Quentin's version of the story.

But can we know for certain if Bon was part Negro, or even if he was Sutpen's son? Not from the text of the novel, which must be our primary source. What I am saying here, then, is that although there is enough evidence to that effect to make a strong argument, we cannot take the position that Quentin's performance is superior to the others because it is the true version. There may not be a "true" version, which is one of the novel's principle points. It is superior, though, because it is a plausible version, which the others are not. It is "probably true enough;" that is as far as we can go. Perhaps the whole point of Absalom, Absalom! is that "probably true enough" is as far as any of us can ever go.

How do we get to "probably true enough" in a novel where "the getting to it" is it? In the same way that Quentin and Shreve do, by unraveling what we know about the Sutpens, discarding what seems to be false
(like the demon theory), keeping what seems to be true
(like the little-boy-at-the-door), and from there
"overpassing" from merely verifiable data to what
speaks to us as coming from the heart. This is yet
another way in which this final performance is superior
to its predecessors. Quentin and Shreve have looked
for the "eternal verteities" to puzzle out their version
of the story, while Rosa and Mr. Compson have attempted
to make the story fit the mold of their own
preconceived, selfish, self-justifying ideas. In that
we can recognize the "sharable world" of Faulkner's
eternal verities in the final version of the novel, we
are more prone to accept it as "probably true enough."
To do that, however, we must take, like Shreve, an
active role in the performance, in this case, the
performance that is Absalom, Absalom!
NOTES


2 Frederick Gwynne and Joseph Blotner, eds., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 274.

3 John Irwin argues this point persuasively in Doubling and Incest: Repetition and Revenge (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), 27-28.

4 Faulkner in the University, 71.


6 Faulkner in the University, 75.


11 Levins, 36.

12 John T. Matthews cites this as a model for the way in which the author inhabits his characters, in *The Play of Faulkner's Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 158.


15 See, for example: Eric E. Larsen, "The Barrier of Language: The Irony of Language in Faulkner," Modern Fiction Studies, 72 (Spring, 1967), 20-23. Also, Matthews, 35-36.

16 Faulkner in the University, 71.


Chapter IV

Conclusion:

The Telling is the Tale

Absalom, Absalom! presents us with three performances of essentially the same story. Yet despite their shared subject matter, they are very different from one another. Aside from Quentin's being the audience for the first two performances, none of the primary performance components are the same: performer, setting, occasion, motivation on the part of the performer, specific texture, relationship between performer and audience, audience response, and even the text of the Sutpen saga itself—all differ from one performance to the next. That the same basic events could lead to such different renderings speaks to the dynamic and variable nature of performance, and underscores the need to look beyond the "who-did-what-to-whom" elements of the story for a complete understanding of it.
None of this is presented to us very directly in the novel. The performances take place; we must make of them what we will. They contradict one another, there are gaps between them, they "just don't explain." Unless we are willing to buy into Mr. Compson's theory that we are not supposed to understand, we must actively construct the meaning in this novel: we must undertake our own sifting of what seems true and what false, and finally we must "overpass to love" in order to come away from *Absalom, Absalom!* with any sense at all of understanding and fulfillment. It is in this regard that the novel is itself a performance that demands active involvement on the part of its readers in creating its significance.

Early critics who expressed frustration with this novel often judged it merely obtuse, failing to perceive that that very obscurantism demanded their participation in creating its meaning. In all fairness, we must recognize that this was a pretty radical concept for 1936, and probably helped to account for the novel's generally negative critical reception. The vast majority of more recent criticism, however, recognizes this as one of Faulkner's most important novels—if not his most important—and many critics today attribute the book's stature in
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Early critics who expressed frustration with this novel often judged it merely obtuse, failing to perceive that that very obtuseness demanded their participation, not only in deciphering the events of the Sutpen story but in finding the deeper significance of that story. In all fairness, we must recognize that this was a relatively radical concept for 1936, and probably helped to account for the novel's generally negative critical reception. The vast majority of recent criticism, however, recognizes this as one of Faulkner's most important novels—if not his most important—and many critics today attribute the book's stature in Faulkner's canon in large measure to its ability to elicit our involvement in making the story
meaningful. John Pilkington says that the reader must create his own Sutpen, noting, "... the reader, outside the novel, must reconstruct in his imagination not only the conjectures of the narrators but the narrators themselves. Even more, he must make that final construct of the overall meaning of the Sutpen story." Robert Dale Parker says, "Absalom, Absalom! is predominantly a participatory novel, a novel about its author's imagination, its characters imaginations, and also a novel directly about our own imaginations." (His emphasis.)

There is a clear correlation, I believe, between such critical sentiments and the study of the reader's response to literature. Of course, Absalom, Absalom! is not the only literary work which sets the reader to the task of creating meaning. Reader-response theory tells us that this is, in fact, the role of the reader. Wolfgang Iser explicates this approach by saying that a work of literature presents multiple views of its object, each revealing only one aspect. "The reader's job is to bridge the gaps between these views," Iser maintains, and through a "free play of meaning-projection" to repair the "unformulated connections between the particular views."
As he undertakes this act of interpretation, the reader has no objective standard against which to measure the validity of his conclusions. Literary texts are creative rather than expository; the "real thing" is not there for us to compare to the novel's presentation. "The reader," says Iser, "... cannot refer to any definite object or independent facts in order to judge whether the text has represented its subject rightly or wrongly." Iser's term for this state of affairs is "indeterminacy."

While a detailed study of the reader's response to *Absalom, Absalom!* is outside my scope here, I think the applicability of the approach is clear. The reader must, in this novel, bridge the gaps between disparate views of the same object, and having reached his conclusion, is left with the realization that it is ultimately unverifiable. This is not necessarily different from what the reader does with other literary works, particularly modern works in which the author has forsaken much overt direction of the reader's response. What is different about *Absalom, Absalom!* is the extent to which the reader is forced to become conscious of his role in creating meaning, as well as the extent to which he must confront the ambiguity about the "truth" of that meaning.
Absalom, Absalom! is a good illustration of the fact that performance appraisal and reader-response theory are closely related to one another. When one evaluates the reader's response to a piece of literature, one is actually studying the audience's response to a given performance, the audience in this case being the reader and the performance being the literary work. Reader-response theory is, then, a form of performance appraisal. It can supplement the sort of study I have undertaken in this paper, and in cases in which there is a performance situation within the literary work itself, it can be supplemented by this type of study.

Absalom, Absalom! lends itself to both types of analysis particularly well because one of its subjects is the creation of meaning. If we look back at the crucial "happy marriage of speaking and hearing" passage in Quentin's section, we can see much that is echoed in both performance theory and reader-response analysis. Faulkner's narrators must sift through conflicting information, keep what seems true and discard what seems false, and then finally make a leap of faith to construct their meaning. As readers of the novel, we must do the same. Absalom, Absalom! helps us to understand our own interpretative role by
dramatizing that same role in its performances. Its real triumph is that it not only shows us how meaning is arrived at, but at the same time makes us discover that truth for ourselves through our own act of interpretation.

The elements are central to the novel’s ability to do this; ambiguity and suspense. Although many critics have found the ambiguity of this novel a source of frustration, it is ironically that very ambiguity which, in addition to being central to the novel’s meaning, keeps us reading and forces us to become participants in creating an ending to the story. In order to build bridges between the disparate versions of the Sutpen story, we must resolve the inconsistencies between them. Our need to understand is challenged by the ambiguities in the novel, and we are driven to unravel them.

Of course, the primary ambiguity—or indeterminacy—in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the question of Bon’s parentage, and by extension his racial heritage. But this is far from the only ambiguity in this novel, which, as I indicated in my introduction, goes so far as to send us conflicting clues as to its genre. *Absalom, Absalom!* is part Gothic novel, part classic tragedy, part romance, part legend. It defies standard
classification. But pervasive each section is an atmosphere of ratiocination, bred in large part by Faulkner's intentional use of foreshadowing and suspense. Combined with the ambiguities in the text, these elements lead us into the role of detective, force us to look for pattern and motive in the story, and finally make us full partners in the creation of its meaning.

In some respects, Faulkner the writer's performance for us as his readers is the antithesis of Rosa's performance for Quentin. Rosa repeats material with which Quentin is already familiar, ignoring his prior knowledge. Faulkner, on the other hand, makes passing references to parts of the story with which we cannot possibly be familiar yet, ignoring (or at least refusing to acknowledge) our need for fuller explication. Thus our feeling that there is more the story waiting to be told is engendered early.

For example, Faulkner describes Henry early in Rosa's first chapter as "the son who widowed the daughter who had not yet been a bride . . ." (p. 11). The reader is, in effect, being presented with a riddle: how can a woman be a widow before she's been a bride? We are naturally puzzled, curious. The only way to find the answer is to read on.
Similarly, Faulkner, in the voice of the anonymous narrator, tells us that Sutpen, upon his arrival in Jefferson in 1833, "... was at this time completely the slave of his secret and furious impatience, his conviction gained from whatever that recent experience had been—that fever mental or physical—of a need for haste..." (p. 34). (Emphasis mine.) Of course, Faulkner knows what Sutpen's recent experience has been, namely his sojourn in the West Indies and the failure of his first marriage, which he believes has put him behind schedule on his design, hence his need for haste. But we don't know any of this; this comment merely serves to pique our interest and tempt us further into the novel out of simple curiosity.

This sort of foreshadowing is carried on frequently. Much of the time it deals with important elements of the story such as Henry's killing his sister's fiance, or Sutpen's experience in the islands. We get partial information, hints of more to come, about Sutpen's affair with Milly, about Wash's reaction, and about Rosa's cause for her moral outrage at Sutpen. As we proceed through the novel, we will naturally look for information that will clarify these points, and so our search for pattern and motive is instigated.
But Faulkner also takes the opportunity to build suspense in the novel with regard to relatively insignificant events. A good case in point is the description of Sutpen's trip into Jefferson to ask Mr. Coldfield for Ellen's hand in marriage. Shortly before this occurrence, Sutpen has brought in wagonloads of furnishings for his mansion (the wagons having been rented by Goodhue Coldfield), and a citizens committee, certain that the goods were illegally obtained, rides out to Supten's Hundred to arrest him. They encounter him riding toward town with a portmanteau and a small basket. We might at first overlook this detail, assuming that Faulkner is merely setting the scene. But the portmanteau and in particular the basket quickly become a source of mystery and suspense.

When Sutpen goes into the hotel and emerges in a new hat and coat, we are told that his observers realize that these were in the portmanteau he had carried. Then Faulkner tells us, "They even knew now what the basket had contained because he did not have that with him now either" (p. 46). They may know, but we do not, because Faulkner does not tell us. Instead, he heightens our curiosity with the remark, "Doubtless at the time it merely puzzled them more than ever . . . ." (p. 46). Doubtless it did, but certainly no one is
as puzzled as we are, especially as the next reference to the basket's content tells us that it was "that which must have seemed to them the final gratuitous insult . . ." (p. 47). What can it be, this puzzling but gratuitous insult to civic virtue? Finally we learn, in a disappointing anticlimax, that Sutpen's basket had contained a bouquet of flowers wrapped in a newspaper.

This instance may seem to us evidence that Faulkner teases us, leads us on, in this novel even when he doesn't have to. Certainly a bunch of flowers doesn't merit this kind of a build up. But the point here is that the build up itself is more important than the flowers. We can be fairly certain that Faulkner himself would agree, because he added some of the business about the basket in revision and embellished on the rest, seizing upon an opportunity to introduce yet another element of suspense into the novel.

The first mention of the basket and portmanteau is pasted in on the manuscript at the point of the description of Sutpen's riding gear. The manuscript also originally omitted mention of the basket from Sutpen's arrival at Holsten House, but Faulkner wrote it into the margin. Perhaps he had to go back and make these additions, because by the time he got further into
the paragraph he had recognized the opportunity to use the basket as an object of suspense. The manuscript at this point includes in its unedited form the statement that when Sutpen emerged from the hotel he no longer had the basket, and describes the puzzlement of the townspeople at its contents. Here, however, we are told that those contents must have seemed "the final gratuitous bafflement and even insult." Bafflement may have seemed redundant after the mention of the observers being "puzzled," because it disappeared in revision. A more significant change, for its dramatic effect anyway, is that in the manuscript version, the revelation of what the basket contained occurs right in the middle of a paragraph. In the book, Faulkner has broken the paragraph at that point, lending more emphasis to his surprise, anticlimactic though it may be.

I mentioned earlier that most of the chapters in this novel end dramatically. Many of the chapter endings actually have the flavor of a serialized novel, in which each installment ends on a note of suspense for the purpose of bringing the reader back for the next. This is most particularly the case with Chapter III, which ends with Wash Jones riding up to the Coldfield house and shouting, "Air you Rosie
Coldfield?" (p. 87), and Chapter IV, which ends with the repetition of this scene but also includes the remainder of Jones' statement: "Then you better come on out yon. Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as a beef'" (p. 133).

This too is a change from the manuscript, in which Jones' entire announcement came at the end of Chapter III. On his typescript, Faulkner reduced this to "I reckon you better come on out yon to Sutpen's. . . . I reckon you better hurry." But then he rejected this option as well. Finally, he added in ink the single question that now ends the chapter.7 Gerald Langford points out the effect of this change:

. . . to end Chapter III as Faulkner does in the book, withholding Jones's disclosure . . . is dramatically effective. We know only that Jones came to relay some information about Henry, whose whereabouts have been unknown to Rosa for four years. To report Bon's death at this point would diminish the suspense in the next chapter.8

Yet another example of Faulkner's revising for the sake of suspense or dramatic effect is the description of Wash Jones' virtual suicide, which in the manuscript ends with the remark, "They said he never made a sound," but in the novel ends with Major de Spain's shouting desperately, "'Jones! Stop! Stop, or I'll kil
you. Jones! Jones! Jones!" 9 On a larger scale, Faulkner also deleted Wash's throwing kerosene on the fire and burning down the shack, which takes place in the short story which bears his name and which was the genesis for this portion of the novel. Langford speculates that Faulkner did not want to dilute the drama of the burning Sutpen mansion by consigning Wash's shack to the same fate. 10

There are still other examples of Faulkner's careful craft in revising the manuscript to heighten the drama or prolong the suspense. In addition, we have instances of the same end achieved without revision. Taken together, they are testimony to a conscious working toward an artistic goal, that of involving the reader in the plot and engendering his participation in deriving a coherent story from it. Faulkner the "performer" is shaping his performance very deliberately.

As I indicated in my earlier chapters, Faulkner also made revisions which served to enhance the texture of the novel. That that texture is dense and sometimes labyrinthian, and that it relies heavily on such-performance keys as parallelism, rhythm, and figurative language, is apparent to anyone who has even attempted to read this book. Robert Zoellner calls it
a "tortured prose style," and points out that Faulkner often constructs sentences which require the reader to hold a number of elements in his consciousness before reaching a point of closure. A detailed analysis of the texture of this novel is in itself a major undertaking, and not within my purview here. However, for the purposes of performance analysis, we should note two factors. The first is that the same textural elements that serve to "key" the narratives as performance—the rhythmic sentences, the allusions, the elevated diction—also serve to "key" the text as literature for us as readers. Secondly, we can appreciate how Faulkner's sentences, when they do force us to hold several pieces in suspension until we reach a grammatical closure that shows us how they fit together, mirror the structure of the novel as a whole. Sentence by sentence, we must balance multiple elements throughout the novel.

While we must in the end come back to the "indeterminacy" of the text (as we must in all literature), there are some points at which Faulkner drew upon real-life situations for the circumstances of this particular novel (apart from the way in which he drew upon his "postage stamp of native soil" for all the Yoknapatawpha novels). At some points, these
elements simply add local color; in other instances, they seem to have a more direct bearing on the plot.

Now Orleans, for example, was in fact the only city in antebellum America, north or south, where there was "institutionalized mulatto concubinage," a situation which historian Winthrop Jordan attributes to the influence of Spanish and French refugees from the West Indies. Faulkner knew New Orleans, having lived in the French Quarter for nearly a year in his late twenties and visited on other occasions. He drew upon his experiences there in other works, notably Mosquitoes and Pylon. It appears no coincidence, then, that he chose New Orleans as the home of Bon's displaced "Spanish" mother, or that he invested Bon with a mulatto mistress. Even the careful introduction of Henry to the idea of the Negro concubine gains credence, since the practice was unique to New Orleans.

A similar bit of historical realism occurs in his description of the young master who rides out to the field where the slaves are at work and instructs the overseer to send him one of the female slaves (p. 110). Faulkner postulates that Southern white women owed their status as "the virgins whom gentlemen someday married" (p. 109) to this practice, and here, too,
historians tend to agree. W. J. Cash, in *The Mind of the South*, says of the slave woman, "Boys on and about the plantation inevitably learned to use her, and having acquired the habit, often continued it into manhood and even after marriage."14 (Faulkner's scene dramatizes this point.) Cash then asserts that Southern men, to compensate for behavior about which they secretly had misgivings, placed the white "Southern belle" on a pedestal and literally idolized her.

Another element in this equation is that since men were not in practice devoting themselves to the preservation of racial purity, they wanted to make quite certain that women were. White women were assigned the role of "perpetuator of white superiority in legitimate line," and this the very thought of a sexual union between a white woman and a black man was anathema.15 So pervasive was this attitude that even abolitionists, accused of advocating "amalgamation," vigorously denied it.16

In this historical context, Henry's dilemma seems all the more wrenching. We begin to see why he might have found miscegenation a less tolerable circumstance than incest. At the same time, Sutpen's decision that his first wife and child were irretrievably outside the
scope of his design fits in with the cultural attitude that the woman must be a bastion of white purity.

Both Sutpen and Henry face tragic choices in this novel—something they value will be destroyed either way they choose—but their situation really reflects the larger tragedy of the deep South. They are trapped in a cultural milieu based upon injustice and inhumanity, and each of them individually is unable to rise above it. Faulkner brings that inhumanity down to a very personal level in Sutpen's rejection of Bon and Henry's murder of him, but it remains a commentary on the South itself. We scarcely need the author's explanation that this is "...Incidentally the story of Quentin Compson's hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves" to explicate Quentin's anguished outburst at the end of the novel.17

We know from Joseph Blotner's biography of Faulkner that he loved to listen to stories as a boy, and that as he grew older, he loved to tell them.18 The role of performer, then, was not at all alien to him in real life. Absalom, Absalom! is evidence of the degree to which Faulkner mastered the art of storytelling, the extent to which he understood the inter-relatedness of plot, audience, purpose, setting and timing. For in Absalom, Absalom! he has told one
story through three very different performers, and in so doing has turned in an incredibly masterful performance of his own.

Performance analysis helps us to appreciate this fact in a way that other critical approaches do not, because it focuses not just on the storytelling that is the novel, but on the storytelling that takes place within it. The storyteller who is the artist creates another storyteller within his work—and by looking closely at that character and the performance he gives, we can achieve a fuller understanding of the artist's own approach to narration.

Of course, performance analysis is not applicable to every piece of literature, or even to every work in which there is more than one narrator. We have multiple perspectives in *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*, for example, but we do not have performances, because the narrators do not have an audience within the novel, either actual or implied. (We may in fact argue that they do not "narrate" in a literal sense at all.) But for those works in which there is a performer and an audience, we can profitably apply performance analysis—as folklorists have been doing for some time now—to the communicative event that takes place, within the work, between them. There
are storytelling events elsewhere in Faulkner where this approach could be enlightening (in the closing portion of *Light in August* and in *The Hamlet*, for example), and there are other writers to whose work performance analysis could be effectively applied; Chaucer, Twain, and Isaac Bashevis Singer come immediately to mind. It is my hope that this paper has illustrated how performance analysis can enhance our understanding of literary texts as it has our appreciation of folk texts, and that other critics will find it a fruitful approach to a variety of additional works.
NOTES

1 Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner, eds. *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), 274.


5 Iser, 8.


8 Langford, 23.
9 Langford, 295.

10 Langford, 38.


14 Cash, 87.


16 *Faulkner in the University*, 71.
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