

**Much More than “Notpeople in Notlanguage”:
Biblical Connections and Quentin Compson’s Limits in *Absalom, Absalom!***

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“Why tell me about it?” Quentin Compson asks his father near the opening of William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*. This question about the purpose of Miss Rosa Coldfield’s narrative, and the relevance of the old story of Thomas Sutpen and his family to any of its listeners, is one that pervades the novel as a whole. It is arguably the main source of Quentin’s anxiety throughout the novel, and is not fully answered for Quentin even by the end. Using Erich Auerbach’s discussion about the nature of Biblical narrative as a starting point and a guide, this essay explores Quentin’s anxiety based on the tensions inherent in Faulkner’s unique prose. Stephen M. Ross has pointed out that Faulkner’s combination of short staccato diction and the often overwhelming thickness of his descriptive language speaks to the struggle between multiplicity and singularity that storytelling embodies. Quentin is paralyzed between these two aspects of Faulkner’s prose, and what they represent. The text acknowledges that every story, every history, is necessarily made up of multiple voices. This multiplicity might allow for a sharing of the past, and finally might provide a means for a departure from traumatic experience. Indeed, in many ways this is the power the writing process enacts. At the same time, Quentin’s reactions mark a tendency to avoid that very departure, for the promise of multiple voices and retelling requires much pain.

This conflict in Faulkner’s prose, and Quentin’s struggle, can be mapped onto the distinction Auerbach makes between the Greek Epic and Biblical narrative in the first chapter of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. In Greek Epic,

the details of the story are presented for the readers' and listeners' pleasure, in an absolute present with clear temporal boundaries. Biblical narrative is never finished due to gaps in its presentation. The unanswered questions that these gaps engender compel its readers to constantly re-apply the Biblical narrative into the present moment of its reading.¹ We find Quentin, in his struggle between acknowledging the multiplicity of storytelling and avoiding it, at the cusp between what these two storytelling methods entail. He wishes he could merely listen, and that Sutpen's story and all that it symbolizes about his heritage would remain in its place in the past. Retelling it necessarily moves it into the present, and thus exposes the tension between his heritage and the present world in which he inhabits. It is this tension that is the source of his anxiety and represents an undoing of narrative progress.

Criticism has remarked upon Faulkner's use of Biblical reference in his title to this novel, and has delved into the references made throughout *Absalom!* and throughout his oeuvre, but has not applied the nature of the Biblical text as a lens through which to look at Quentin's particular predicament. Rather, criticism around Quentin has often considered the unique situation he is in as a storyteller, by drawing upon other works of which he is part in Faulkner's oeuvre.² In *Absalom!* alone however, Quentin's situation might stand as a symbol for the post Civil War South, stuck in its grief and outrage over the loss of the war. Thus this study merges these strands of criticism as it examines the relationship Faulkner creates to the Biblical text through his references, widens it to a more general discussion about his prose in the novel, and applies it to the critical conversation around Quentin Compson.

Faulkner began with the working title "Dark House," and the change of title to

Absalom, Absalom! reflects the conflict in attitude toward the purpose of story telling, which the novel itself carries out. Instead of the title anticipating an empty, unoccupied, dead space, the final title of *Absalom, Absalom!* anticipates a provocative and active negotiation with an ancient past and the value of an age-old storytelling tradition. The reference is to II Samuel 18, part of a story which itself models the delicacy of the balance between overwhelming, paralyzing grief for what has been lost, and the realization of a new future that might emerge from such a loss. As David cries out brokenly for his dead son in the Biblical story, his misery causes him to stammer helplessly and incoherently, but simultaneously allows him to recognize the devastating power of war, and thus bring the violence to an end. On a less specific level, the repetition of Absalom's name compels the reader to consider what might be gained from repetition, and the value of revisiting past material. Erich Auerbach uses the David story to support his argument that the Biblical narrative is "fraught with background" (Auerbach, 12), shadowed by the unknown, and therefore in need of constant re-interpretation. It is that re-interpretation by later readers, and the multiple points of view that necessarily comes out of this process, that gives the David story its realism and its power: the text opens itself constantly to new ways of reading the story and new ways of applying it to the present moment. Taken along with Auerbach's insights, the title to Faulkner's novel gives readers a clue into the novel's central concern, for despite the repeated telling of the story of the Sutpen family, the characters fail to discuss and re-assess traditional values productively. The Biblical connection of the title, and the Biblical connections made in various ways throughout the novel signal a far larger point about how one could interact with the past: the voices of the past do not serve only as

paralyzed, “baffled ghosts,” but when dealt with positively, might help a later generation to untangle the narratives they tell, and therefore move forward. Re-interpretation of old stories holds the promise of revealing new visions for the present, but within Faulkner’s novel that possibility is not finally realized. In contrast with an idea of progress through repetition, Quentin Compson feels trapped by the story to which he is made to listen and tell. He becomes more and more lost and feels increasingly more paralyzed in what he understands only to be a limiting, endless rehearsal of a deeply disturbing past. Through the interactions Quentin has with Miss Rosa Coldfield, and later with Shreve McCannon, Faulkner’s text works to reveal two bitterly conflicting consequences that might come out of re-evaluating long-engrained tradition: progress and paralysis.

Many critics have pointed out the thematic linkage between Thomas Sutpen and the God of the Judeo-Christian creation story, but what is particularly significant about this connection is its juxtaposition with Quentin’s particular feeling of paralysis. The first time Faulkner makes the Biblical connection explicit, he couches it in Quentin’s remarkable passivity; the language around it implies awkwardness, and a certain inability to act. Rather than such a reference serving as a launching point for a renewed understanding of the story Quentin has heard all his life, the connection he makes only serves to reiterate his inability to do anything new with that story:

Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm and pontific, creating the Sutpen’s Hundred, the *Be Sutpen’s Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light* (Faulkner, 4).

Quentin does not recognize the potential significance of his vision, for he only “seemed” to “watch [Sutpen and the builders]” “in the long unamaze.” He feels himself several

times removed even from the scene he is witnessing through his mind's eye. The two images at work here are disconnected: the laborious, physical movement across a vast horizontal space cannot be reconciled with the quick vertical motions of a card dealer; the distance between these images is concentrated into a capitalized, reductive "Nothing." The difference between these two contrasting images, the language implies then, is not worth consideration to Quentin. The card-dealer is laying out the cards into the metonymic "up-palm" – hands that are suspended, passive, waiting – a gesture that is "pontific" in its passivity. That pairing of "pontific," with the members of the church, and with the larger idea of Quentin's passivity, completed by the biblical reference implies an understanding of the Biblical story as unchangeable and closed to interpretation. The connection is only to what is deemed "oldentime," and the implication is thus that the space between the tenor and the vehicle of the simile is no longer relevant. This is a direct contradiction to what Auerbach would argue: that the connection back to the text of the original creation story would bring more meaning to the story Quentin is hearing. Instead, it is this very connection he makes that serves to remind him that he is stuck.

The power of the reference becomes clearer as the passage continues, and the reader understands that he is stuck fast by Rosa Coldfield, and everything "oldentime" that she represents for him. The passive way of looking at the Biblical connection makes room for an evaluation of the reason why Quentin feels split into two selves: one is ready to embrace changes, challenge, reinterpret and perhaps dismiss old values, and the other is still caught in an inability to move away from the old values.

Then hearing would reconcile and he would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now – the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the

deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was – the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage, like this: *It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa says) – tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which – (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only – (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) – and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says – (Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson (4 - 5).*

Any of the action Quentin was capable of through his inner sight, as he “watched” in the part of this passage cited earlier, any of his own wondering at the fraught nature of the reference he makes is here “reconcile[d]” by listening. Faulkner demonstrates Quentin’s resentment of this “listening” by explaining that he “[has] to listen;” he has been forced. Quentin attempts to dismiss the ideas that this woman represents: he labels the society from which she emerges as long dead, her herself as “garrulous,” which implies excess and triviality, and her being “outraged” stemming from her being “baffled” and thus not thinking clearly. As much as he tries however, he is overpowered by a second Quentin, who is himself feeling her emotions. It is clear that the second Quentin struggles against his state of being, for his introduction is stilted, held back by the prolonged “still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost” before the narrator finally gives into his state, as if it were inevitable. It seems that Quentin wants only to understand Miss Rosa as “garrulous” and “baffled,” but there is something too powerful about what she represents for him to dismiss her so simply.

The purpose of that re-telling of the history of the Sutpens, as far as Quentin can

tell, is that it be preserved through her perspective alone and it is this message that she wants conveyed in another voice. Quentin's first explanation of his role of listener is presented as, "*It's because she wants it told...*" (6). He then dismisses this reasoning for her need of him because he remembers that she is herself a poet. As the narrator tells us, "it would be three hours yet before he would learn why she had sent for him because this part of it, this first part of it Quentin already knew" (7). As he goes over what he already knows, he does not understand why the writer remains unsatisfied. Quentin fails to recognize his own voice as an important part in Miss Rosa's telling.

When he asks his father to help him understand his own role, the piece of dialogue to which the opening of this analysis alluded, the first part of Mr. Compson's response predicts a problem that the novel carries out as a whole: a denial of the promise of a new voice. "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" (8), Mr. Compson says. He explains that the reason Miss Rosa picks Quentin is because he is "a man, a gentleman," a person who stands for the traditional Southern social constructs. This reasoning seems counter-intuitive: Quentin is young, and should therefore be able to break away from these very constructions. Miss Rosa is indeed looking for someone "to go with her," but the reason exceeds Mr. Compson's explanation. It is also to have her story turned into action and engender change. In his resentment and his fear, Quentin cannot understand the simultaneous limitation and strength of her creative process. At this point, and in his later conversation therefore, Quentin does not go through a creative process himself, and the story cannot not move out of the past for him.

The passage discussed earlier, the conversation between the two Quentins,

demonstrates this very conflict. It reveals the potential of the rich material of the story, but that Quentin focuses on the limited aspects of what Miss Rosa represents. If we understand the first Quentin's voice to be outside of the parenthesis, and the second to be inside, it is clear that the second, the one limited by Miss Rosa's very limitations, finally takes over the first. This second Quentin is overpowered by a kind of personal involvement in a past that is bracketed. The parenthetical comments are correctives, they imitate Miss Rosa's sensitivity to protocol, and stubbornness that she has the best interpretation of the story being told. Sutpen can be labeled as a demon, but he cannot be Sutpen without his title of respect, and Miss Rosa Coldfield is always referred to by her entire name; the "strange niggers" are not worth Quentin's examining, and it is not necessary to correct the offensiveness of that particular terminology; the story is about Sutpen's violence in particular, and dismisses the largest gap in the story involving just how and why he died. Halfway through the argument, the parenthetical and the not parenthetical voices become less distinct, for "which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age" is very much in Miss Rosa's rhetorical style, and the next sentence is credited to her. The way that the "Yes" stands on its own presents that the two Quentins have now become one: not only does he believe that the story of the past is fixed, but that his involvement can only re-enforce that paralysis: he labels and nullifies the conflict as only a "long silence of notpeople in notlanguage." It is stronger, and therefore rather at odds with the "yes,..." referring to Miss Rosa's emotions.

A close look at Miss Rosa's expressions reveals that her mode of storytelling does not only represent that limitation, but it contradicts and challenges itself. Though the

elderly lady's speeches reveal that she is stuck fast by her outrage and her commitment to old traditions, the very rhetoric she employs signals the potential for progress away from both. The next part of this analysis will present the ways in which Miss Rosa's speeches prove her paralysis, and then will present evidence that her speeches carry out a conflict between that paralysis and a potential mobilization.

The physical space in which Quentin listens to her is defined by the narrator as a kind of repetition that is only cyclical, and Miss Rosa's physical being underscores her impotence in Quentin's eyes. They are in a room "called the office because her father had called it that" and "there was a wistaria vine," a plant that grows in a circular structure, "blooming for the second time." She was "...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..."(4). There is nothing about her or the objects surrounding her that offer up any flexibility. It seems logical enough that Miss Rosa's size and her dangling legs should remind one of a child, but the description, oddly, seems to map the impotence and stasis onto the vehicle of the child as well. As the description continues, Biblical language supports and extends this idea of a static cycle, rather than Auerbach's idea of a process that engenders progress, while she watches Quentin "from the too tall chair in which she resembled a crucified child" (4). This contradictory rigidity is thus mapped, briefly but very memorably, onto a particular way of understanding the Bible, before it gets carried into the way she expresses herself, and the way she interprets the past and her part in sharing it with Quentin.

As Quentin understands, Miss Rosa is operating out of sheer outrage. Her return

to her past through this retelling only re-affirms his conviction that she is a “garrulous outraged baffled ghost.” As demonstrated in the dialogue between the two Quentins, he understands her to be obsessed by form, trapped by her own perspective, and not able to address what might be problematic within that form. Quentin feels her mood closing in, as her obsession “began to assume a quality almost of solidity, permanence. Itself circumambient and enclosed by its effluvium of hell, its aura of unregeneration...” (8). There appears to be no progress in Miss Rosa’s process, because her view is too limited; she is too isolated to see that she is affected merely by form, and that this is not enough. Viewed in this way - the way Quentin sees her - her particular understanding of the purpose of storytelling is closed, solid, and finally unproductive.

Miss Rosa’s attitude toward her religious tradition can be taken as a symbol for her limited treatment of the story she tells:

...What there could have been between a man like that and papa – a Methodist steward...that man to discover Ellen inside a church. In church, mind you, as though there was a fatality and curse on our family and God Himself were seeing to it that it was performed and discharged to the last drop and dreg. Yes, fatality and curse on the South and on our family as though because some ancestor of ours had elected to establish his descent in a land primed for fatality and already cursed with it... ” (14).

Miss Rosa blames a combination of other individuals’ past action, the land itself, and fate for the events of which she considers herself to be a victim. All must have been previously set in motion for any of these horrific events to have taken place, and the later people themselves and the particularities of their way of life could have had no preventative effects. As she says, “some ancestor of ours,” she rejects a closer examination of the past. Here is an understanding of a God that is removed, and operates in a manner that mortals cannot even hope to understand. She wonders what that terrible

crime committed by her kin could have been, but it is a passive wondering; she is only voicing her outrage, not actively attempting to study the past and thus apply it to the present and the future.³ The Bible narrative thus represents boundaries, rather than the possibility of pushing past those boundaries. However, because of the nature of the mobile text, Faulkner's employment of Biblical language simultaneously gestures toward movement.

Miss Rosa's stubborn view undercuts itself as certain words within her language of the passage presented above push out of the concept of frozen time. The conjunction of "land" and "curse" is, as Robert Alter discusses, part of a rhetoric that Faulkner has lifted directly from the King James Bible (Alter, 94). It is this most traditional language that pushes through, and exposes the stubborn solipsism that Miss Rosa projects. It is by using these key words from the King James version that Faulkner "is not only responding to the Bible itself but also is challenging a tradition of American interpretation that goes back to the Puritans" (97). Alter concentrates on the way these words are used first and foremost to expose what Faulkner called the "intolerable condition" that slavery is (Faulkner, remarks on *Absalom!* Ed. Fred Hobson, 287). This mode of Biblical interpretation to which Alter refers looks even outside of that particular concept however, for the mode is one that fails to address what the Biblical text calls for in general: a constant productive re-evaluation of ideals and values.

Alter traces the following words through his study of Faulkner's powerful usage of "thematic lexicon": "birthright," "curse," "land" or "earth," "name" and "lineage," "get," "sons" or "seed," "birthplace," "inheritance," "house," "flesh" and "blood," "bones," "dust" and "clay." When these Biblical words come up, as they do time and

time again throughout the novel, they create a striking contrast from the intricate, ornamented prose that defines Faulkner's style. Thus they counter the effluvious, misty unknowable-ness in which so many of the characters exist. If we apply both Alter's and Auerbach's ideas about the Biblical narrative simultaneously, Miss Rosa's speeches remind the reader of what is open and can be shared, even as she seems unable to break out of her individual points of view. Her story cannot finally function completely uninterrupted. Although it may seem that her narrative is mostly comparable to the way Auerbach speaks of Greek Epic wherein "never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths" (Auerbach, 7), like the Biblical narrative, Miss Rosa's speeches admit that personal narrative does have these openings. As Auerbach warns, "But when, through too great a change in environment and through the awakening of a critical consciousness, this becomes impossible, the Biblical claim to absolute authority is jeopardized; the method of interpretation is scorned and rejected, the Biblical stories become ancient legends, and the doctrine they had contained, now dissevered from them, becomes a disembodied image" (16). This severing is the danger that Miss Rosa falls into, and Quentin, by labeling her as ghostly, and irrelevant to him, extends that danger.

Miss Rosa does not consciously allow for those gaps as she talks and talks: "her voice would not cease, it would just vanish" (Faulkner, 4), and that voice remains throughout the text, reaffirming this isolated view. In this first part of the novel, her voice is broken only by the narrator's description of Quentin's private thoughts, and his own few polite interjections of "Yessum" (5, 14), or "Nome" (13). Indeed, the above passage is taken from Miss Rosa's very own chapter, spoken without any interruption.

This isolation supports what Stephen M. Ross famously labels as a dichotomy between monological and dialogical narration, and what he claims is the central tension in the novel. He uses this Bakhtinian terminology to point out that the novel operates mostly through monological narration, a style that epitomizes traditional Southern oratory. Faulkner's prose itself disrupts that "overvoice" but then submits to it. The points of dialogue in the novel tend to be stark, jarring and physical. Ross concentrates on the exchange Quentin imagines must have taken place between Henry and Judith immediately after the killing of Bon: the narrator describes Quentin's imaginary dialogue as "slaps...blows" (139). When this violence of dialogue occurs in the novel, Ross argues, the interjection rehearses the "death of dialogue" and a "memorial [is] erected" for the dialogical word through the novel itself (Ross, 85). An extension of his claim points to less of a violent victory of the monological, and more of a tension between the monological and the dialogical.⁴ Miss Rosa represents an oratorical style that strives toward the monological. Interruptions come from within, and the prose thus betrays the possibility of an alternative, dialogical style, more integrated with the moving times.

Of Charles Bon and the idea of love, Miss Rosa simultaneously laments and celebrates the limitations of her scope, and she seems to land on the value of individual imagination without substance to support it. The "thematic lexicon" which Alter identifies, is at work as she expresses her opinions, and thus allows the reader to recognize the tension built into that expression:

But I never saw it. I do not even know of my own knowledge that Ellen ever saw it, that Judith ever loved it, that Henry slew it: so who will dispute me when I say, Why did I not invent, create it? – And I know this: if I were God I would invent out of this seething turmoil we call progress something (a machine perhaps) which would adorn the barren mirror altars of every plain girl who breathes such as this – which is so little since we want so little – this picture. It would not even

need a skull behind it; almost anonymous, it would only need vague inference of some walking flesh and blood desired by someone else even if only in some shadow-realm of make-believe. – A picture seen by stealth, by creeping (my childhood taught me that instead of love and it stood me in good stead; in fact, if it had taught me love, it could not have stood me so) into the deserted midday room to look at it. Not to dream, since I dwelt in the dream, but to renew, rehearse, the part as the faulty though eager amateur might steal wingward in some interim of the visible scene to hear the prompter's momentary voice (118, Faulkner's italics).

Miss Rosa speaks of the human ability to create situations, and emotional content, out of nothing. She seems to put more stock in this ability rather than anything else, for it is that ability that she believes carried her through her frustrated adolescence. As her words focus on the reality of an empty existence and an understanding that “we want so little,” she applies her frustration to the collective present. She contradicts herself, for as real as her vision might have seemed and still does seem to her, it is only “[an] adorn[ment for] the barren mirror alters of every plain girl...” Placed on a mirror, this “something” would also help the viewer to better see herself; this kind of thinking is a turning inward, a reflection that rejects the value of communication with another. She “creeps” only to look in a “deserted midday room,” and the description of the imaginative power is therefore negated by its emptiness. Miss Rosa denies the importance of physical or emotional existence of any other as “it would not need a skull...” or any tangible “flesh and blood.” It is this empty “renewal,” and “rehearsal” that carries her through, but does not move out of the solipsistic, constrained cycle. Indeed, this progress she knows of is only a “seething turmoil,” and therefore not at all positive. “If she were God,” she says, she would only make this kind of imaginative egoism and isolation more possible. She would “create (a machine perhaps),” widening and then overlooking the space between potential happiness and human emotional communication. Here again, religious rhetoric provides the reader with a clue into the boundaries of a story rooted in a single

consciousness, and thus stagnant in history.

As important as the imaginative capacity is to Miss Rosa, the full realization of what it could do remains hidden or restrained. Her language demonstrates that she appreciates and celebrates her skill, but that this skill could be taken further, toward action and change. Writing and talking by itself, individually, without allowing the narrative its flexibility, does not accomplish what it could if taken outside of its isolation. Quentin however, is not able to take the next step.

Alter focuses on a later passage to extend his claim that Faulkner's combination of Biblical language and effusive, elusive prose allows him to push back against the initial confidence Miss Rosa's speeches present. The critic claims that the contrast shows that Faulkner takes a stand against slavery, and calls for social reform. Some fragments of this passage will give the idea of just how much Alter's thesis comes into play:

Where high mortality was concomitant with money and the sheen on the dollars was not from gold but from blood – a spot of earth which might have been created and set aside by Heaven itself, Grandfather said, as a theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty... the black bones and flesh and thinking and remembering and hopes and desires, was ravished by violence and the cold known land to which it was doomed... the yet intact bones and brains in which the old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance” (Faulkner, 201 – 202).

Suffice it to say, as Alter does, “no American writer, white or black, has written more wrenching prose than this to convey the foundational crime of slavery in the New World” (Alter, 99). Inherent in Faulkner's language then, with the combination of sharp Biblical words and very dense prose, is a hint toward the belief that the written word can push change and mend communication between differing groups. Yet the context of the passage undercuts such a belief, for it is Quentin who speaks this passage. As we have already seen from previous passages, he represents a promise of a more general idea of

change, but a simultaneous rejection of the possibility. It is to the relationship between Quentin and Shreve that we now turn to further the claim that Miss Rosa's narrative remains fixed for Quentin, ultimately preventing him from recognizing and carrying out the transition that he could engender within himself.

In many ways, critic Glenn Meeter attempts to do just what this study attempts: to look at Quentin within a framework presented by the generative capacity of Biblical text. Meeter focuses on the technical aspects that Modern Biblical Scholarship claims went into the creation of the Biblical narrative. He argues that the novel explores multiplicity and sharing above anything else, and therefore enacts the process of the progressive creation of the Biblical text. He studies the Biblical analogies in *Absalom!* along with the goals Faulkner himself expressed, and the Religious discussions that were going on at the time of the novel's writing and suggests that Quentin symbolizes the power of the written word and productive communication as he acts as "final redactor" (Meeter, 118). In coming to this conclusion however, Meeter seems to overlook the implications of the passage about the struggle between the two Quentins, presented earlier. The narrator tells us that Quentin believes that this process is "of notpeople in notlanguage."

Meeter provides much evidence for Faulkner's interest and involvement in the debate between conventional faith and the modern critical approach to the text. The former viewed the Bible as Sacred Text, a foundational document that had been given and received in its final, completed state; the critical approach saw it as a text that progressed over a great span of time that "demands questioning, analysis, and criticism" (113 – 114). The critic draws from "Faulkner's statement at the Nagano conference that the Old Testament is 'some of the finest, most robust and most amusing folklore'" and

points out that “the word *folklore* implies both multiple sources and an extended process of transmission...” (115). Certainly, Faulkner knew and made use of the debate at the time of his writing, and as this study has already demonstrated, reading the novel as a commentary about what the Bible itself has the capacity to do is very generative. Meeter supports himself by pointing out that throughout the latter half of the novel, as Quentin and Shreve construct the narrative, they do bring “fresh information and fresh insight....they bring to light forgotten or repressed truths...” (120). Quentin’s resentment, however, prevents such a direct parallel.

Meeter does speak of this resentment: he uses Quentin’s emotional state as further evidence for his thesis that Faulkner is re-enacting the process of the making of the Bible through his novel. The review and revision of Israelite history, which gave rise to the compilation of the Bible in its final form according to Modern Biblical Scholarship, came out of the Israelite experience of exile. The exile imposed on both Israel and Judah, by the Assyrians and the Babylonians respectively, gave enough space and distance for “review and revision of past history,” and thus the emergence of the text (108). Faulkner creates a parallel situation through Quentin’s “certain kind of resentment” which informs the creative process: “both remembering and interpretation, in this view are dependent on loss and repression, which become ‘occasions for remembering, for interpreting, that is, for re-creation’ (111 quoting Reed, 118). We will see rather, that it is the “certain kind of resentment” that is a crippling fear of the meaning of the past for Quentin. The exile, the forced remembering, acts against itself.

Quentin leaves the community, and in the latter half of the novel he stands on his own without the physical influence of the paralyzed population with whom he has

interacted for his entire life. One would expect optimistically then, that he would be able to free himself from the fetters that Miss Rosa represents to him, and be able to turn it into something positive. The deadness remains however, and Quentin feels even more isolated when he is away from the deadness he perceives of his origins. The stagnation of the South and the stagnation of the North meet and merge as he tells the story of the Sutpen family with Shreve. Shreve's presence might allow for a chance to move forward: this is the presence of an outside perspective and a voice that has not been so steeped in the culture. We learn however, that Shreve is not particularly interested in Quentin's plight, and this exacerbates the isolation that Quentin feels. Rather than Quentin symbolizing a move toward embracing the power of multiplicity in storytelling then, the text rehearses the difficulty he has with embracing that storytelling potential.

From the start of their sharing, Quentin has already rejected the possibility of such a chance:

There was snow on Shreve's overcoat sleeve, his ungloved blond square hand red and raw with cold, vanishing. Then on the table before Quentin, lying on the open text book beneath the lamp, the white oblong of envelope, the familiar blurred mechanical *Jefferson Jan 10 1910 Miss* and then, opened, the *My dear son* in his father's sloped fine hand out of that dead dusty summer where he had prepared for Harvard so that his father's hand could lie on a strange lamplit table in Cambridge; hot dead summer twilight – the wistaria, the cigar-smell, the fireflies – attenuated up from Mississippi and into this strange room, across this strange iron New England snow (141).

Shreve's physical presence, his "ungloved blond square hand," although "red and raw with cold" fends off that snow, for the focus is on the hand itself, and the "snow... vanishing." "Then," however, that physicality, that corporeality of the present moment, is covered by the conflict with the past. The handwriting representing the old culture is "familiar, blurred, mechanical" suggesting a tension of comfort and inability to

understand that has been made into a habit difficult to break. The letter is “lying” on the “open text book beneath the lamp.” Both openness and light invite perusal, and the letter itself is “opened.” Quentin’s reaction, however, to this invitation is reductive. It seems that Quentin has only left “so that his father’s hand could lie...” and everything that the letter represents can be displaced into this new space. This space is “strange,” indeed it is labeled as such three times, and therefore labeled unreachable and impossible for Quentin to understand. The sensual aspects of the south have been “attenuated,” and then lost in all “strange”ness, “iron” and cold. Thus his origins are open for closer inspection, but have been already labeled as closed for the better, and long dead, and utterly irrelevant in the hostility of this new environment.

There is then a fundamental lack of communication between the characters, despite the multiple voices that form the novel as a whole: an overwhelming sense that such multiplicity cannot build a bridge between times or places. Through Quentin’s obvious pain throughout the process, which only worsens as more of the tale is discussed, the author demonstrates the extreme tension between what the process *could* do, and what it does not accomplish. The events in which Quentin has taken part take on a new meaning through his imaginative capacity to recall and re-evaluate, and his new location. All the elements are present to engender progress based on an evaluation of those events, and a move from a “symptom of history” toward a “passing out of isolation” (Caruth, 5, 11). Psychoanalytic research can be aptly applied to Quentin, for latency acts as the preserving factor: the event, that is the Sutpen story itself, and the significance of its rehearsal, gathers new meaning in a new context. As immediacy and belatedness paradoxically collapse, it is the literality of the experience he had with Rosa and the

closeness he feels to the story he tells, in spite of the displacement, that causes his uncertainty. As Shreve speaks, and as Quentin speaks a combination of voiced and silent thoughts, Quentin only moves backward. The analysis of subsequent passages will show that Quentin only allows his imagination to function in the isolation of his past. As effective psychoanalysis has demonstrated, this isolation can only be surpassed by a kind of sharing: having another person listen to a retelling of the event. What the novel enacts however, is the halting of such a process; a sharing is taking place, but Quentin cannot acknowledge the value of the process. Peter Brooks explains the connection between psychoanalysis and textual narrative in his discussion of the “dynamic of transference” (Brooks, 52), as Freud described in his work of that title, and the value of narrative construction:

Our sense that the transference, as a special “artificial” space for reworking of the past in symbolic form, may speak to the nature of a narrative text between narrator and narratee.... The transference is textual because it presents the past in symbolic form, in signs, thus as something that is “really” absent, but textually present, and which, furthermore, must be shaped by the work of interpretation carried on by both teller and listener (Brooks, 54).

As many other critics have noticed, as they read Quentin’s lack of action in other texts and apply it to *Absalom!*, Quentin becomes quieter and quieter, less convinced of the value of the activity of telling as the novel progresses. The “persuasive rhetoric,” so necessary on both the side of the analysand and the analyst to achieve effective psychoanalytic treatment is not present on Quentin’s end. If we continue to use Peter Brooks’s terms, Shreve creates too much “counter-transference” as he adds his own voice, for the conversation to be useful (57 – 58). Thus Quentin’s fears, couched in his attempt to dismiss Miss Rosa, are not finally dissipated, corrected, or mobilized properly. The process only increasingly negates Quentin’s sense that his Southern heritage has

virtues worth examining in the present moment.

The telling becomes a strained single voice that strives to block out any other. Ross's observations are again helpful here and again, a look at instances of interjection throughout the novel support his thesis, but plead a more nuanced label than the "death of the dialogical word." They signal that an attempt is made toward a transference that can move the old story out of its place, but only a competition between the voices results. Many of the interjections of the "overvoice" to which Ross appropriately refers are a "yes" or a "no" from Quentin to Shreve. A patient's "yes" or "no," as Brooks explains in Freud's terms, helps the analyst to assess the patient through their expression of agreement or denial. A "no" is a halting, closing off that can, perhaps counter-intuitively, provide a clue into what is at the root of the patient's denial, and a "yes" is only helpful when it opens into further narrative, and thus allows for further interpretation (56 – 57).

The answer "yes," given repeatedly by Quentin throughout the latter half of the novel, does not clearly lead to more of his voice, but signals more of the "overvoice," which is more obviously controlled by Shreve. "Wait!" is an example of a repeated interjection and is uttered at different times by both young men. "Wait, I tell you!" says an exasperated but "restrained" Quentin to Shreve, "I am telling" (Faulkner, 222). Quentin successfully takes over, whether aloud or in his head for an extended passage, before Shreve says, "No,...you wait. Let me play a while now" and takes over, in a voice that is obviously aloud (224). Acknowledgement of difference of voice and difference of opinion is present, but because Shreve is invested in his own telling, and Quentin is already in despair, for Quentin the acknowledgment is only painful rather than progressive.

Even as Quentin and Shreve begin and share the story, their sharing is not equal, nor does it heal the wounds of what forces Quentin into feeling that he is a “baffled ghost.” The start of the process demonstrates the possibility of such sharing, but then reveals the contradictoriness of the situation at the same time:

They stared at one another – glared rather – their quiet regular breathing vaporizing faintly and steadily in the now tomblike air. There was something curious in the way they looked at one another, curious and quiet and profoundly intent, not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself – a sort of hushed and naked searching, each look burdened with youth’s immemorial obsession not with time’s dragging weight which the old live with but with its fluidity: the bright heels of all the lost moments of fifteen and sixteen (240).

Many critics have been caught up by the homo-erotic implications of this description for both young men, but the more basic tension between positive and negative, life and death, growth and decay, are more applicable to the present study. Much can be gained by an intense stare at another face, for one might pick up on emotions and sensitivity. A glare however, implies anger, competition and hostility. A shared virginity - that “hushed and naked searching” - is gentle, full of possibility for a mutual love, but immediately that love is “burdened.” The language itself holds back and weighs down that mutual love and sharing. Although the look is not “burdened by...time’s dragging weight” it is, paradoxically, held down by “youth’s immemorial obsession”: it still extends beyond the boundaries of memory and is disturbing, and not productive. They are obsessed with motion forward, but with the “lost moments” in the wake of those “bright heels.” They are not moving forward, but are left behind, watching that fluidity. They are separated from that youth, as they simultaneously stare out of it and sit in the “tomblike air.” The dichotomies between life and decay, and growth and age demonstrate the difficulty of the potentially progressive storytelling process.

The outside narrator continues to claim how integrated the two voices are in the telling of the story, in a passage that closely follows. Again “they stared – glared – at one another” (243). Although the telling “might have been either of them and was in a sense both,” the process does not finally render these figures real or relevant.

(... 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, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, to Shreve) shades too) quiet as the visible murmur of their vaporizing breath (243).

Here, the tangible language that Alter highlights as the grounding language of the King James Version – “flesh,” “blood,” and “breath” contrasted with the “shadows,” “vaporizing,” “murmur” - once again emphasize the tense space between physical and mental connection and isolation and therefore the futility of their communication as a means to move out of this story that paralyzes Quentin. Although it brings the two young men together on the surface, the telling of the story betrays their inability to fully communicate with one another, and with the significance of the story they tell. These are only the “rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking,” not anything whole or substantial. Neither speaker can bring the history to life, and Shreve separates himself from Quentin through his lack of emotional investment, which is further emphasized by the presence of the parentheses.

“How was it?” Shreve asks Quentin (Faulkner, 152). Instead of Quentin answering himself, the narrator takes over and the reader joins Quentin in a mental journey backward, to what Meeter refers to as “archeological evidence” (Meeter, 118). That evidence does bring to light “forgotten or repressed truths,” but it is through graves and gravestones, and overgrown gravestones at that. The passage presented earlier around

the letter from Mr. Compson to Quentin supports the claim that archeological and textual evidence throughout the novel is described constantly as ghostly, dying, and held back. Quentin is no longer mentally present in the cold room with Shreve after Shreve's question, but he has gone back instead to the South, to an indefinite moment he shared with his father. The shared narrative process is halted by backward movement and counteracted by the concept of death:

It was dark among the cedars, the light more dark than gray even the quiet rain, the faint pearly globules, materializing on the gun barrels and the five headstones like drops of not-quite-congealed meltings from cold candles on the marble: the two flat heavy vaulted slabs, the other three headstones leaning a little awry, with here and there a carved letter or even an entire word momentary and legible in the faint light which the raindrops brought particle by particle into the gloom and released...(Faulkner, 153).

The lighting is critical in this description. The writing itself, on the gravestones, is almost visible in this light. Everything is *almost* arriving at its state of description: the rain is "like drops of not-quite-congealed meltings..." the headstones "lean[] a little awry," and the words themselves are visible "particle by particle." Here, Faulkner presents the idea of near decay, but this decay still gives space to read, to interpret, to question.

Quentin recognizes that space, his own imaginative capacity, but there is no celebration of that capacity. His attitude thus contrasts, as we remember, with Miss Rosa's faith in the power of her imagination that emerges from her speeches. At first, as he remembers standing in the cemetery with his father on this indefinite day in the past, he gains a new perspective about the situation they are discussing. "It seemed to Quentin that he could actually see them..." and language of judgment pervades this passage that describes what he sees. The troops, "ragged and starving without shoes," watch a metaphorical ship carry tombstones. The bitterness of the description is overt, for the

members of the regiment sweat under the weight of a symbolic death, “not even something to eat, but that much bombastic and inert carven rock...” With Shreve’s help and his own imaginative capacity, Quentin has created an image of the past situation that highlights its irony. As the episode ends, Quentin realizes the power of his creation: “he could see it; he might even have been there. Then he thought *No. If I had been here I could not have seen it this plain*” (155). The image, with its slant of obvious irony, lays bare and extends what was already known as fact, and makes it more visible and real. Quentin however, even as he makes such mental leaps, remains determined to keep to the facts: ““But that don’t explain the other three, he said, ‘they must have cost something too’” (155). Quentin does not finally involve himself in the work of filling the space between fact and interpretation.

Glenn Meeter observes that in the second half of the novel, Faulkner’s Biblical references are to the New Testament, an observation which supports his thesis that the young men are rehearsing a process that mirrors the progressive formation of the Bible. He cites the instances of Shreve’s “repeated though casual” exclamations of “Jesus!” among the many other valid connections he makes.⁵ This conclusion however, when applied back to the text, also supports the idea that Faulkner’s use of Biblical reference in general is to draw attention to a need for progress, but that this need is not met, even through the young mens’ experience of shared narrative. Overwhelmed by the details of the story they are telling together, Shreve says “wait then...for God’s sake wait” (175). This invocation, as casual as it might be, reminds the reader of the biblical text, but it is a request to stop the telling, and thus signals stasis and a lack of communication. Just a little later, Shreve says:

So he [Sutpen] just wanted a grandson... that was all he was after. Jesus, the south is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur isn't it. No wonder you have to come away now and again isn't it (176).

Quentin "does not answer." Shreve is not leaving any room for him to answer. Whether intentionally or not, Shreve is imposing his own views onto the story, removing himself from Quentin's heritage, and dismissing the richness of that heritage. He appears to be asking questions, through the repeated "isn't it"s, yet the punctuation signals that they are not questions, but statements. In his declaration that the South is comparable at all to "Ben Hur," Shreve underscores the tension of this entire process. The reference is to Lew Wallace's 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, a work that itself mobilizes Biblical narrative. Thus Shreve exposes the possibility of a fictional narrative that speaks back powerfully to the past. Shreve also reduces Quentin's heritage to a single work of fiction through this comparison, limiting the capacity of that heritage's meaning through closed sentences, and thereby marginalizes his roommate. For Quentin, the Biblical reference and the reference to another novel that uses Biblical themes signal the stasis, rather than the progress, of the story they tell together. At this point, the letter from Quentin's father is impossible to read because of its position upon the table (176). This observation further supports the claim that the young men represent a conflict between movement and halting of the narrative process.

Shreve then, seems to limit Quentin in a similar way to how Quentin limits Miss Rosa, but at the same time, Shreve points the reader to the value of creating fiction, the value of narrative, and Miss Rosa herself. It is Shreve who finally points out the elderly lady's strength:

"I dont know," Quentin said. "Yes of course I understand it." They breathed in the darkness. After a moment Quentin said: "I don't know."

“Yes. You don’t know. You don’t even know about the old dame, the Aunt Rosa.”

“Miss Rosa,” Quentin said.

“All right. You dont even know about her. Except that she refused at the last to be a ghost. That after almost fifty years she couldn’t reconcile herself to letting him lie dead in peace. That even after fifty years she not only could get up and go out there to finish up what she found she hadn’t quite completed, but she could find someone to go with her and bust into that locked house because instinct or something told her it was not finished yet. Do you?”

“No,” Quentin said peacefully (289).

Once again, Faulkner’s language demonstrates the tension between the potential progress shared narrative could engender, and narrative that remains fixed. The two young men “breathe in the darkness:” the nature of their process is thus re-enforced by their surroundings. Quentin is just as lost as ever he was. He sticks to what he does know: the importance of title in the old south, something we noted much earlier as important to Miss Rosa. Shreve points out a different way of looking at the situation, for he sees Miss Rosa’s process as positive, her appeal to Quentin as courageous. “She couldn’t reconcile herself,” she will not give before her imagination has become a means to action. His tone is too forceful and flippant to have any positive influence. “...Bust into that locked house,” he says; the imaginative capacity is only “instinct or something.” Thus the house remains “locked” for his roommate. Quentin remains passive, and convinced that the story only has meaning in the past and a far away place.

Quentin’s shock and fear, after his meeting with Henry in the dark, after he leaves Miss Rosa at her door, is further manifested by an invocation of the New Testament material:

“Yes,” she said. “Yes. I’m all right. Goodnight.” – ‘Not thank you,’ he thought: ‘Just goodnight,’ outside the house now, breathing deep and fast now as he returned to the buggy, finding that he was about to begin to run, thinking quietly, ‘Jesus. Jesus. Jesus’, breathing fast and hard of the dark dead furnace-breath of air, of night where the fierce aloof starts hung. His own home was dark....He

could not help it. He was twenty years old; he was not afraid, because what he had seen out there could not harm him, yet he ran; even inside the dark familiar house, his shoes in his hand, he still ran, up the stairs and into his room and began to undress, fast, sweating, breathing fast (297 – 298).

The symbolic connection to Biblical text, as it signals potential for action and understanding, instead works to highlight Quentin's overwhelming fear. Although he breathes "deep" he also breathes "fast": the breaths do not calm in their depth, but pass too quickly to be helpful. All that is "familiar" is not comforting, but only "dark," and he cannot even express or justify why he is afraid. He acknowledges that "what he had seen out there could not harm him," but somehow it is that very immobility of the image he remembers that haunts. All is still, unmoving, dark, and although he moves fast, he is ultimately stuck by that immobility. Even the "stars," which theoretically represent everything beyond and an infinite movement, are "fierce aloof" and they "[hang]," halted, in the sky. In his room with Shreve, he "lay rigid" in the cold, unable to fully emerge and evaluate that experience. This is the "dark house" without the possibility of interpretation. Quentin "could see" all the scenes from that night played out as if they are happening before him, but that sight does not translate into progress for the present (300). By the end, Quentin "did not even say, *Miss Rosa*" (301), although he has been correcting Shreve throughout the process of their telling. This could finally signal that he has moved away from the limitations Miss Rosa represents by her insistence on old traditions, but within the context, it is clear that this change only shows Quentin's ultimate inability to make those old traditions relevant for himself in the present.

Very near to the end of the novel, Shreve continues to express his awe for the South:

“The South,” Shreve said. “The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years.” It was becoming quite distinct; he would be able to decipher the words soon, in a moment; even almost now, now, now.

“I am older at twenty than a lot of people who have died,” Quentin said (301).

“The South” is an alien place, distinct from Shreve’s experience, and his exclamation of “Jesus” further emphasizes his removal from his roommate. The concept of text, through the phrase, “decipher[ing] the words,” represents the coming presence and the promise of writing and meaningful communication. Such an idea is displaced again and again for Quentin, and he remains completely alone. “Soon, in a moment” he feels that meaning through meeting will come, but he still waits, until “even almost now...” Still he cannot look at the meaning; he cannot accept the presence of the two times and the two spaces and bring them together. Even as the attempt is felt, delayed yet occurring through “now, now, now” he can only mourn. He can finish his father’s letter, which at its end talks about the afterlife and the promise of Heaven he hopes for. There is no here and now. The religious language hints at a bridge toward what is not finally reached. The characters process is about longing, but not possessing, and the past and the future are not finally allowed to meet. The result is a view of history that forces it to remain a fiction that is only fixed and irrelevant, in the past.

In his Nobel speech, Faulkner spoke about the importance of the writer for society:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past” (Faulkner, Ed. Malcolm Crowley, 724).

By invoking Biblical narrative through his title, and weaving references throughout *Absalom!* Faulkner hints toward what he believes to be the strength of the writer: to show the continuity inherent between the ancient past and the current time. As the novel itself proves - for Miss Rosa's narrative seems at first enclosed, but then is repeatedly re-opened and re-interpreted - a story is never finished, because of all its inherent gaps and openings. These references however, frame scenes that show that Quentin cannot understand Miss Rosa's process as an attempt to re-interpret, that he limits himself, and that he feels limited by Shreve. In the middle of it all, Quentin's role in the novel, between Miss Rosa and Shreve, thus enacts the tension between the potential role of the writer, and the paralyzing difficulty of that very role.

NOTES

¹ Faulkner also makes many references to the fall of the House of Atreus, both explicit and implicit, throughout the text. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* represents a the Greek tragic genre, it would therefore be fascinating to use those references to further explore the tension Faulkner creates between paralyzed and moving narrative. Such a study would necessarily involve a closer look at Sutpen's family, especially Clytie.

² Through this kind of reading, Quentin's experiences especially in *The Sound and the Fury* serve as an explanation for his disturbing reactions throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* As the trauma surrounding Quentin's relationship with his sister Caddy is carried over into his understanding of the Sutpen story. A step away from the other texts in which Quentin appears however, as this study carries out, reveals that his role in *Absalom, Absalom!* can symbolize such cultural tension without the support of his experiences in other texts.

³ Miss Rosa's words here reflect an immense respect for her father, a Methodist preacher, and his actions in the novel reflect a certain removed stance from life. Critic Charles Reagan Wilson uses Mr. Coldfield as a prime example to support his claim that Faulkner's writing reveals that the Southern Church created, in many instances, a holy prison tower that failed to come to terms with human nature (Wilson, 31). Mr. Compson claims that Mr. Coldfield stood "armed not with a musket but with the big family bible...declaim...violent vindictive mysticism..." (64). Although it is shown here that he believes the text to still be relevant to the marching soldiers millennia after it was written, he has no means of actually lifting it out of that context for them, and the

language emphasizes only the violence of his action. His next step is to cloister himself in the attic, and he eventually starves himself.

⁴ The oratorical style to which Ross refers brings us back to Auerbach's assessment of the stylized speech in Greek Epic, which separates it so starkly from Biblical style. "With the utmost fullness, with an orderliness which even passion does not disturb, Homer's personages vent their inmost hearts in speech; what they do not say to others, they speak in their own minds, so that the reader is informed of it....no speech is so filled with anger or scorn that the particles which express logical and grammatical connections are lacking or out of place...." (Auerbach, 6). The characters, even in the intensity of battle, do not interrupt one another's strikingly eloquent speeches. Again, it is worthwhile to note the references to the story of the House of Atreus and therefore Greek Epic style, especially throughout Miss Rosa's speeches.

⁵ In addition, Meeter points out helpfully that the young men "speak of love," imagine Bon's offering himself up to Henry almost as sacrifice, and that the destruction of Sutpen's property and his lineage, except for Bond, rehearses the apocalypse. I pick up his first point about Shreve's exclamations, for the examples support my claims about Shreve's general insensitivity, and what that creates.

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