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## From *Flags in the Dust* to *Absalom, Absalom!*: Faulkner's Development for the Center of Consciousness

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## PAPERS ON SOUTHERN LITERATURE

### FROM *FLAGS IN THE DUST* TO *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*: FAULKNER'S DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTER OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Both *Flags in the Dust* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are relatively early novels of William Faulkner, having been written in 1927 and 1936 respectively. The nine years between the writing of the two novels, being years of great productivity and literary development for Faulkner, however, were enough time for critics to judge the two novels as vastly different in importance. *Flags in the Dust* is considered an early attempt, while *Absalom, Absalom!* is considered among the finest of Faulkner's novels. "Too diffuse, too lacking in plot and structure" are words about *Flags in the Dust* attributed to Faulkner's first publisher Horace Liveright by Douglas Day, in his introduction to the 1973 edition (vii). Liveright and others in 1927 agreed that *Flags in the Dust* was not publishable because of its length and its unwieldy plot structure with its many characters whose interactions are sometimes minimal. *Absalom, Absalom!*, on the other hand, even though its length is comparable, its plot structure much more complicated, and its large number of characters from three time periods, was considered eminently publishable because it was the epitome of a form Faulkner used for most of his major works.

This form, "the conscious stockpiling of information by the characters as the story is repeated over and over," according to critic Richard Poirier, allows for a shifting focus as various characters tell their

versions of the story (27). The beauty of this form is not necessarily just in the retelling of the story, but in the fact, according to John Basset, that “the first chapter captures the method of the novel—to enclose in a moment of understanding an entire complex of experience, to see it whole in a moment, to defeat the tyranny of narrative while exploiting its advantages” (133). Although Bassett does not define the “tyranny” of the narrative, a reasonable explanation is that the story has an internal unity, derived from its plot line, which cannot be violated. Faulkner’s method of “exploiting” the advantages is to use the characters as multiple narrators, not just as characters. In doing so, Faulkner allows the reader to view the plot from various angles in what is commonly called dialogic narrative, defined by Gerald Prince as “a narrative characterized by the interaction of several voices, consciousnesses or world views, none of which unifies or is superior to (has more authority than) the others” (19). If, as Mikhail Bakhtin believes, the dialogic text is the strength of the novel form (279), then Faulkner’s exploitation of the voices of the character-narrators does indeed create the superiority that characterizes *Absalom, Absalom!* in opposition to *Flags in the Dust*.

Although *Flags in the Dust* has several voices heard through its omniscient narration, they are not all equal in importance, and thus the novel does not attain the level of dialogic narrative. In fact, in writing of the authorial voice, Judith Lockyer, in the preface to her Faulkner study, asserts that several voices are present “only as a halting interruption in the otherwise closed narrations of an idealized mourned past.” In *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, Lockyer says that Faulkner’s major thrust is “listening to other voices, articulating one’s own, and integrating them all into an open-ended yet coherent whole” (preface). Many critics agree that Faulkner’s great works, including *Absalom, Absalom!*, are great because of this dialogic narrative, but an added factor which most cannot agree upon is the importance of a center of consciousness within the works. The greatest difference in the quality of *Flags in the Dust* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is the reader’s unconscious recognition in the latter work, but not in the former, of a center of consciousness, which,

while remaining dialogic in that no voice is superior to others, unifies the plot.

In *Flags in the Dust* Faulkner creates an authorial, omniscient voice which peers into the lives of several community members of Yoknapatawpha County (called Yocona County in this book). The book begins with the authorial voice reporting a conversation between old man Falls and old Bayard Sartoris concerning the Civil War. Old man Falls controls the conversation, but he doesn't own it: as many as four times in the space of a two-page narration he invokes the dead John Sartoris with the words "Cunnel says" (4-5). The omniscient narrator ends the sequence with the words "[a]s usual old man Falls had brought John Sartoris into the room with him. Freed as he was of time, he was a far more definite presence in the room than the two of them..." (5). Instead of a center of consciousness being placed in one of the two men, the narrator seeks to place it in the ghost, whose "bearded, hawklike face" seems to hover above them (5).

By Book Two, Chapter Three, however, the center of consciousness has shifted several times, beginning with old Bayard's musings as he searches through the cedar chest for the family Bible, moving through Miss Jenny's determination to get Colonel Sartoris to the doctor, and ending with Dr. Loosh Peabody's consciousness listening to them leaving his office. It also follows the actions and words of most of the Sartorises' servants including Simon and Caspy, newly arrived home from the war, as well as the inner thoughts of Narcissa and young Bayard. Later she remembers her curiosity about young Bayard's wife, who, by "voluntarily associating so intimately with a Sartoris... too must be an animal with the temporary semblance of a human being" (79). Then the reader is invited to follow young Bayard's inner consciousness as "he felt savage and ashamed" after frightening Simon in a reckless car ride (126).

Book Three begins with yet another center of consciousness, following Horace Benbow as he arrives home from World War I. While the omniscient narrator reminds the reader more than once that Horace possesses an "air of fine and delicate futility" (170), Horace himself

reminds the reader several times, first in his words and then in his inner consciousness, that what he is after is “the meaning of peace” (177, 184). Another shift occurs, however, so that by the middle of Book Three, an objective third-person narrator describes the actions and thoughts of Miss Jenny, old Bayard, Simon, old man Falls with his second Civil War incident, and Isom, before focusing on Dr. Alford, who becomes an individual center of consciousness with the words “feeling himself sinking” for just one short incident (268). Also, in Book Three, Faulkner uses a narration in the style of stream of consciousness, once with Horace’s character and once with The Snopeses’. The Horace passage is typical: “And Belle like a harped gesture, not sonorous. Piano, perhaps. Blended chords, anyway. Unchaste? Knowledgeable better. Knowingly wearied. Weariedly knowing. Yes, piano. Fugue. Fugue of discontent. O moon rotting waxed overlong too long” (302). Occasionally, too, the narrator shifts from one’s life to another’s in a confused fashion. Chapter Four ends with the words “at last he merged with himself, fused in the fatalism of his nature,” in which the “he” refers to Horace (228). “For a time the earth held him,” the beginning of Chapter Five, however, refers not to Horace, but to young Bayard (228). The center of consciousness shifts without any syntactic markers.

In Book Five, Chapter Two, the center of consciousness first focuses on Miss Jenny, immediately shifts to Narcissa, gains distance to tell objectively of the women’s effort to get young Bayard to return home, and shifts to the consciousness of young Bayard who loses his life because of his reckless decision to fly an unsafe plane. The narrator’s first attempt to end the story is through Aunt Jenny’s thoughts while looking at the graves of the long line of Sartoris men: “Well, it was the last one, at last, gathered in solemn conclave about the dying reverberation of their arrogant lusts, their dust moldering quietly beneath the pagan symbols of their vainglory and the carven gestures of it in enduring stone” (428-9). But that is not the end; the end is with Narcissa’s statement that her child is not John, a Sartoris family name, but Benbow, her maiden name (432).

Such shifts create senses, not of omniscient narration, but of separate, non-communicating consciousnesses who tell their own stories at the expense of the main story line. In fact, *Flags in the Dust* really does not have a main story line; instead it has the Civil War incidents, the decline of the Sartoris family, represented by the deaths of old Bayard and young Bayard, the story of the Black family who work for the Sartorises, the romance of young Bayard and Narcissa, and the entrapment of Horace by Belle. Such diverse lines should qualify the book as a dialogic example, but, in reality, the book falls short of the dialogic definition because of the unequal narration. If a center of consciousness existed, each story could stand congruently with the others. Instead, some of the stories are actually lost by the end of the novel; for example, no one investigates Byron Snopes's vandalizing Narcissa's home and his robbing Sartoris's bank.

John Bassett, among other critics, has settled on Miss Jenny as the voice, or central consciousness, of the novel. He says, "She is not so much a character in the novel as a voice . . . in her oracular ambivalence she reveals Faulkner's own emotional tie to the nonsense [the myth of the genteel South] he consciously spoofed" (37). Earlier, however, Bassett asserts that the major story line of *Flags in the Dust* is the counterpart story of young Bayard and Horace, with the two characters suggesting multiple parts of the self (35). Yet that particular story is not filtered through Miss Jenny, since her character has but one interaction with Horace throughout the novel. Logically, the center of consciousness is Narcissa, since she is the only character who interacts with all of the other major characters. Obviously, too, Faulkner casts her in that role, since she holds the end of the story, not only in the space of the pages, but also in the sense that she is willing the end to the violent history of all Sartoris men. Unfortunately, so much of the story is tangential to her aloof character that she never becomes the true focus.

In the novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, on the other hand, Quentin Compson is the center of consciousness, even though his voice is not the central voice of much of the novel. Chapter One begins with a third-person authorial voice narrating Quentin's afternoon visit with Miss

Rosa, shifts to Quentin talking to himself, then shifts to a dialogue between Mr. Compson and Quentin, and ends with a virtual monologue of Miss Rosa. Although the kernel of the whole Sutpen story, with its issues of incest and miscegenation, is contained in Chapter One, the content centers on the earliest history of Thomas Sutpen in Yoknapatawpha County. The narrator first acknowledges only that "Quentin thought" (3), but then the narration gives his thoughts, such as the words "[i]t's because she wants it told" when he is thinking about why Rosa wanted him to "spend a whole afternoon sitting indoors and listening while she talked" (5). The narration even allows for the fact that Quentin makes judgments about Miss Rosa's story with the words "almost immediately he decided that neither was this [that she wants it told] the reason why she had sent the note" to him (6). As Quentin's thoughts become more specific, the picture of Miss Rosa and her purposes also becomes more specific.

Generally, Chapters Two, Three, and Four are narrations of dialogue between Mr. Compson and Quentin, with Mr. Compson being the major narrator of the story of Sutpen's family life up to the middle of the Civil War. Even when the narration, through the use of quotation marks, indicates that the words are those of Quentin's father, not only is the hearer definitely Quentin with direct comments such as "Mr. Compson told Quentin" (33), but also Mr. Compson links his story to the story that Quentin has heard that afternoon from Miss Rosa, with words such as "she admitted to you that he was brave" (39). The beginning of Chapter Three has Quentin entering into conversation with the words "I wouldn't think she would want to tell anybody about it" (46). Such comments keep Quentin at the center of the story that is not his at all.

Occasionally in these chapters, the voice appears to be the voice of the community, which, according to Bassett, "merges smoothly with Father's own narration with no disjunction at all," and in Chapter Three in only a few places is the voice of Mr. Compson "separable from a community voice or the authorial narrator" (135). Even in this chapter that is buried in a past before Quentin's lifetime, however, Mr.

Compsom himself continues to link Quentin to the story by referring to Quentin's grandfather and grandmother as sources of information. Thus, Quentin is so intimately linked with all the possible narrators that "[i]t seemed to [him] that he could actually see" the characters being talked about: Henry, Judith, Clytie, Ellen, and Charles Bon (105).

Chapter Five, almost totally composed of Rosa's monologue explaining her entanglement with Sutpen, "is apparently a product of her mind," according to Poirier, "but it is presented as if it were being recalled in Quentin's, even as he sits listening to her" (22). Miss Rosa herself keeps Quentin in the narration as she uses such phrases as "[s]o they will have told you doubtless already how I told that Jones to take that mule. . . . [b]ut they cannot tell you how I went on up the drive" (107-108). Also, in this chapter is Miss Rosa's famous declamation on the summer of wisteria:

Once there was—Do you mark how the wistaria, sun-impacted on this wall here, distills and penetrates this room as though (light-unimpeded) by secret and attritive progress from mote to mote of obscurity's myriad components? That is the substance of remembering. . . . Once there was (they cannot have told you this either) a summer of wistaria. It was a pervading everywhere of wistaria. . . . as though of all springs yet to capitulate condensed into one spring, one summer. . . . it was a vintage year of wistaria. (115)

But Quentin has already thought the same words—"It was a summer of wistaria"—earlier that evening as he sat on the front gallery listening to his father (23). The effect of the repetition is to collapse Miss Rosa's earlier time with this later time as one experience in which Quentin, indeed, experiences what Miss Rosa had experienced as she had run into the house where the dead Charles Bon lay so that he felt there "was also something which he too could not pass—that door, the running feet on the stairs. . . the two women, the negress and the white girl" and, most of all, the words from Henry: "Yes. I killed him" (139-140).

The third person authorial narrator sets Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine in Quentin and Shreve's dorm room at Harvard, but the setting is minimal in its impact since the bulk of the chapters' content is the hypothesis of Quentin and Shreve concerning the end of the Sutpen story. Often, the voice of one blends into the voice of the other, with Shreve, the Canadian, according to Quentin, sounding just like Mr. Compson (147). The truth, of course, is that Shreve could only sound "almost exactly like Father" because Quentin had "heard too much," "been told too much," and "had to listen too much," until he had finally become his father's voice to Shreve, who then became his father's voice, too (168). Shreve is the one who says, "And now . . . we're going to talk about love" (253), but it is Quentin whose consciousness thinks, "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" (253). Later it is Shreve who says, "Maybe he knew there was a fate, a doom on him," speaking of Charles, and "the fate was on her too," speaking of Judith (260). But when he pronounces the words of fate and doom on this would-be incestuous brother and sister, Quentin is surely thinking of himself and his sister Caddie as well. In such a passage Quentin is the center of consciousness not only for this narrative, but also for the narrative found in *The Sound and the Fury*.

The growing distance from actuality, as Quentin and Shreve conjecture the end of Charles, Henry, and the others, allows them to transgress boundaries, being narrators who are also listeners who become the narrated characters, in a process that Gerhard Hoffman calls the "transindividual Faulknerian Voice" (286). But this transindividual voice is transmitted through a consciousness of both indiscriminately: ". . . now 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 . . ." (267). But Quentin is the one who originally told the story, and Quentin could have continued, "and then just one—Charles-Shreve-Quentin-Henry." He had become all of the characters. As Shreve continues to re-tell the tale that he had first heard from Quentin,

Quentin retreats from the dorm room into the “wisteria Mississippi summer, the cigar smell, the random blowing of the fireflies” (301). He is older because he has channeled all of them into life in his story.

The four major narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!*, according to Michael Milgate, do have different emotional emphases, with Rosa suggesting “violence and verbal frenzy,” Mr. Compson being “much less involved, much cooler and more skeptical,” Quentin holding “final responsibility” for re-creative interpretations, and Shreve cutting across Quentin’s mood (45-49). Such an interpretation of the narration supports the view that *Absalom, Absalom!* is a dialogic narrative in which none of the several voices has more authority than another. At first saying that there is no central narrator (199), Linda Bollinger, in her article that is concerned with the three women in the central part of the novel, Judith, Clytie, and Rosa, says that Quentin and Shreve “achieve the interdividuality” of a speaker relating “alongside” the original narrator (201). Such a concept is similar, then, to the dialogic voices of a text. On the other hand, critic Andrea Dimino says that “the voice of Miss Rosa is in a significant sense a part of Quentin’s consciousness” (185). And critic Jonathan S. Cullick maintains that, although Sutpen cannot tell his own story accurately, “Quentin’s style is consistently interpretive” as he tells Shreve the story of Sutpen’s “design” (55). Poirier asserts that “Quentin is nearly allowed to appropriate the position of the author” (13), and Bassett says that he “transmits most of the details about Sutpen’s youth. . . . In a rather neutral voice with little distortion” (127). Thus, regardless of the type of connection the critic finds, almost all critics see a connection between the voice of other characters and the voice of Quentin. In the terms I use here, then, Quentin is the central consciousness, possessing an almost authorial tone, yet with the difference from an omniscient narrator that Quentin does not pronounce judgments; instead, he acts as a medium through which all the voices are allowed to speak in such a way that a unified narrative is achieved.

Quentin, unlike Narcissa in *Flags in the Dust* who is distant from the others with whom she interacts, is so close to the other narrators of the story that he becomes one with them. He thinks with

Miss Rosa; he speaks like his father; he speaks interchangeably with Shreve; he rides the horse with Henry. "He can think or understand what others say. They thus enter his consciousness," is Michael Dunne's interpretation of Quentin's ability to be central in a dialogic narration. Joseph Urgo describes this unifying principle of narration in terms of the text: "Perspectives are folded over one another to provide a single, recognizable text [so that] the reader is seldom appealed to for verification or even sympathy and is invited only to witness the collaborative creative processes which unfold over the course of the novel" (59). This collaborative creative process of all the narrators is finally reported through the conduit of Quentin's mind. He does not become a filter, as in a monologic narrative in which the narrator colors the reader's perceptions, but he becomes the channel through which each narrator's thoughts can be perceived interdependently, simply because he is the character who is both most objective to the narrative and most sympathetic to the other characters.

Thus, Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!* can be called a reliable center of consciousness who aids the reader in seeing the complex story as a whole. *Flags in the Dust*, on the other hand, gives a rather loosely woven story, almost as if the narrator, fearful of his own omniscience, fails to center the reader on a unified plot. Although considered unpublishable because of its lack of unity, *Flags in the Dust* was edited severely and published as *Sartoris*. Perhaps viewing that text would yield different results, but those results would be the work, not of Faulkner, but of the editor Wasson, according to Day's edition of *Flags in the Dust* (viii-ix). The critic is left with a book that demonstrates Faulkner's first attempt to bring Yoknapatawpha County into focus as his "postage stamp of the world," a task which he accomplishes without providing a center of consciousness for that world. That center comes with the creation of Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In *Absalom! Absalom!*, the story grows from the stark summary, encapsulated and collapsed in Chapter One, to a story of expanded, ever-widening, yet unified, plot. These two books, then, taken together, demonstrate Faulkner's movement from a monologic, amorphous narrative to an interwoven

dialogic narrative that provides unity without sacrificing the individual voices of his characters. With that movement, Faulkner sealed his success as the modernist-stylist and also provided his readers with a center of consciousness who might change his name from text to text, but who is always, at the core, Quentin... Faulkner.

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