

SHROUDED SHELLS:

THE DEAD WOMEN AND SURPRISING FEMINISM OF *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

By Anne Smazal

William Faulkner mentions clothing over 120 times in *Absalom, Absalom!* He carefully crafts descriptions of women's clothing, but they are more often than not "faded and shapeless" (157). Rosa, Judith, and other unnamed female characters function in the story as bodiless, rag-draped shells, never fulfilling their natural womanhood. By creating flat, disembodied female characters, Faulkner shows the denied role of women in Southern society. It's arguable whether this denied role is a display of Faulkner's incapability to create female identity, a *reflection* of the truly confined role of Southern women at the time, or a projection of his hatred to women. He accuses and rebukes the Southern men for entrapping women, yet through his failure to create a fully embodied female character, demonstrates his inability to resist the power of patriarchal opinion.

Numerous critics have discussed Faulkner's view of women; most agree that he "feared and distrusted women" and that his writing displays blunt misogyny and near-complete denial of female autonomy (Clarke 6). "Rather than being fully rounded, his female characters are often stereotypes, incarnations of such qualities as fecundity, serenity, sexual desire, death, or evil" (Mortimer 1). Mortimer's claim holds true in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Rosa, the first and most prominent female character, is immediately characterized as an embittered old crone, a role she cannot escape for

the duration of the novel. Ellen's stereotype is one of pure frivolity and ineffectiveness: she is "gracious and assured and talking the most complete nonsense, voluble, speaking the bright meaningless phrases of her part" (54). Upon her death, Faulkner tells of her "substanceless shell...no body to be buried" (100) in a cold acknowledgement of her worthlessness. Judith's stereotype bounces between sister, fiancé, and daughter; she never stands alone as an independent entity. As Rebecca Mark pointed out, a talented writer like Faulkner should be able to imagine a fully shaped female character, but regardless of the narrator, he consistently portrays women as shells of humans, draped in ragged clothing. Contrary to most feminist Faulkner critics, I believe he consciously chose to depict women in this way to show them as victims of the South's decomposition, ultimately arguing for the necessity of female power for a society's success.

As an occasional cross-dresser, Faulkner understood the power of clothing to display the self and capitalized upon this opportunity to construct victimized women. Sartorial theorists declare "Fashion is used by individuals in the ongoing effort to establish their own identity, delineate their own distinctiveness, and enhance the meaning of their lives (Lauer 4). Indeed, individuals have a singular opportunity in clothing to modulate outward presentations of their bodies and identities. Think of fashion magazines, laying out outfits for work, for weekend, for dates—each meant to convey a certain, easily changeable performance of the self. In literature, authors similarly can manipulate depictions of characters' clothing to further communicate the identity of the character.

However, in discussing the easy manipulation of clothing to represent self or literary characters, we must not forget the myriad limitations on fashion: economics, fashion trends, and function. One cannot dress solely to express the self without influence from these societal constructions. These restrictions are fully at play in *Absalom, Absalom!*, more specifically, the limitations that Southern men imposed on women.

Clothing in the American South, as in any culture, functioned as a nonverbal communication of power and wealth.

The climate can emphasize sacrifices made by the body to maintain such distinctions in hierarchy and entitlement: the body encased in hoopskirts, crinolines, bustles, corsets, tight pantaloons, high cravats, and gloves in a semitropical environment—and this without perspiring—becomes distinctly different from the body of the laboring slave in loose-fitting, unadorned, rough, work-and sweat-stained clothing...Clothing, therefore, becomes one site where social order seeks to stabilize authority and prestige.” (Stewart 162)

Set between 1833 and 1909, the main plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* explores the chaos of post-Civil War life in the South and the struggles of Reconstruction. Undeniably, the “distinctions in hierarchy and entitlement” became more difficult to establish in the feeble economy of Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner realized the implications of dressing white women in “shapeless calico and faded sunbonnet[s]” (163) so akin to the slaves’ “loose-fitting, unadorned” garments (Stewart 162). By dressing the white, middle-class women in clothing similar to that of a slave laborer, Faulkner clearly demarcates the degraded and base position of women in society. This mirrors the truly ill-fitting feminine role in the South, as uncomfortable as “hoopskirts, bustles, and...gloves in a semitropical environment” (Stewart 162).

The question now becomes why Faulkner chose to portray middle-class white women in this way. One might assume this was a reflection of the ruined Reconstruction-era economy, but the story of *Absalom, Absalom!*, first published in 1933, actually spans eight decades, many of which were quite prosperous in the Southern states. There is strong evidence that Faulkner, by depicting ragged and ill-fitting dresses, was actually relieving his female characters from oppressively uncomfortable fashion trends. From the Victorian-era sloped shoulder, to the full skirt of the 1850s, to the flounces of the 1880s, to the strong shoulder of the early

1900s, “the only feature of the bodice which remained constant was the universally tight waist” (Norris 147). Fashion sloped the shoulders, padded the hips with bustles and crinolines, and squeezed ribs with iron or whalebone corsetry to mold the female body into a tiny-waisted form. Male designers controlled fashion until the late twentieth century, when a sudden explosion of female designers revolutionized the industry. Therefore, it is male designers who enforced the entrapped waist, just as Southern men entrapped the female characters of *Absalom, Absalom!*.

The waist is, physiologically speaking, a quite dangerous place to constrict; too-tight corsets inhibited breathing and digestion by pressing the diaphragm and compressing the smooth muscles of the stomach. Furthermore, this compression directly contrasts with a main function of female bodies: pregnancy. Constant compression of the ribcage led to a condition called “the chicken breast.” “The woman with a chicken breast suffered from insufficient respiration, fractured ribs...in adults, the lacing was sometimes so that physicians reported the impression of the ribs on the liver of an autopsied woman... One of the most terrifying consequences was prolapsus uteri, the falling of the womb down the vagina until it could even project out of the body” (Lauer 213). By physically and visually limiting the expansion of the uterus, fashion subverted the presentation of the true female body.

Likewise, women who wore another major trend between 1820 and 1900, the hoopskirt, risked their health in the name of fashion. The width of the skirt presented other dangers “when working in kitchens with open fireplaces. Burning was cited as a cause of death among southern women in the nineteenth century in numerous oral testimonies” (Stewart 181). Women sacrificed health and comfort by donning the heavy corset. Fashion scholar Herbert Norris detailed the complexity of the full skirt as follows:

In 1863, a special variety of crinoline was recommended to achieve the fullness of the skirt which fashion demanded. It was called the

'cage americain'... It consists of five bands inserted with steel, attached at distances apart by criss-cross tapes. From the bottom band is hung a coarse network of horsehair about eight or nine inches in depth, also having a band of steel at its lower edge...The crinoline opens all the way up the front; it fastens by buttons or hooks fixed to a canvas panel. (Herbert 160)

This skirt, literally the “American cage,” perfectly fits the trapped role of women in Southern society, while the corset mirrors the discomfort of forming one’s body to please men. Faulkner’s refusal to dress his female characters in such clothing could show an important view of women. His women are freed from the weighty garments, symbolizing an independence from fashion controlled by male designers. But inversely, his women seem not to have bodies to be shaped. By refusing to further the tradition of oppressively constricted, potentially dangerous clothing, Faulkner recognizes the horror of Southern women’s fashion. But in his refusal to re-dress his female characters in anything besides worn-out, over-used rags scavenged from flour sacks, Faulkner never constructs a fully dressed woman. He recognizes the problem, but does not create an alternative solution, leaving his non-women as disembodied and disempowered as dead Ellen’s “substanceless shell” (100). By completely stripping female characters of all control, Faulkner shows the dominance of the male characters. As Jefferson spirals into ruin, Faulkner reveals the men as misguided tyrants, freeing the female characters from blame. Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* is not a novel about alternate solutions; it is a presentation of complete, devastating, diseased necrosis. If women are the “signifier for fertility in our society,” their regenerative symbolism simply does not belong in Yoknapatawpha County (Mark 110).

The character Clytie, born out of Thomas Sutpen’s affair with a slave and servant to Judith and Henry, is described twice as a “shapeless little clean bundle of

rag”, inanimate and disembodied. This image is so opposite to that of Scarlett O’Hara, protagonist of *Gone with the Wind*, published nearly on top of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. Scarlett, flat broke and struggling, rips down a set of curtains to display her famously tiny waist, declaring her independence and quick thinking. One cannot fathom the weakened and exhausted women of Faulkner mustering the strength to rip curtains, much less the body to fit a pretty dress. Yet Scarlett serves an entirely contrasting function in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, which paints the South so romantically that the movie adaptation called the region the “land of Cavaliers and Cotton fields...where Gallantry took its last Bow” (Fleming 1939). In this portrayal of the South as a bastion of chivalry and honor, women have a decorative, high-spirited, and sometimes matriarchal role. In contrast, in Faulkner’s tainted, ruined South, riddled by miscegenation and racism, the women are ineffective and bodiless victims.

The women of Sutpen’s Hundred, middle-class at best after the economic devastation of the Civil War, would still have made every effort to imitate the trends from Paris using any material available. The women of *Absalom, Absalom!* were extremely limited in their sartorial choices as a direct consequence of total male economic control in the South. Women’s clothing would be approved of and paid for by the male head of the household, restricting the wearer in expense and taste. However, critic Patricia Gantt similarly studied clothing in Faulkner’s work and concluded that “the language of their clothes speaks subtly but undeniably of his female characters’ struggle for autonomy, as novel after novel shows us women wearing their protest on their backs” (Gantt 1). But when Mr. Compson explains the process of acquiring wedding clothes for Judith, Faulkner shows that Judith was actually powerless to choose what she wore. Compson describes how Miss Rosa had to visit her father’s store to “get the material to make those intimate young girl garments which were to be for her own vicarious bridal...He [Rosa’s father] didn’t give it to her. He would have felt it incumbent on him to supply his granddaughter

with clothes if she were indecently clad or ragged or cold, but not to marry in” (77). This statement implies that though Judith’s grandfather had the resources and good fabric to outfit her appropriately to her station in society, he felt that this was unnecessary beyond basic survival. In showing the grandfather’s unnecessary tightfistedness, Faulkner subtly rebukes him for undervaluing Judith and displays Judith’s lack of autonomy over her own clothing. This lack of self-sufficiency shows a lost opportunity in rehabilitating the South. In not creating an independent female character, Faulkner allows the reader to imagine the many ways Judith *could* have taken control of the household, and in a larger sense, how a balance of masculine and feminine power *could* have helped Southern society.

Furthermore, Gantt claims that Judith “rejects all clothing except a shapeless, faded calico dress” and questions “why else would the author mention Judith Sutpen’s clothing over two dozen times...when he gives her only one speech in the entire novel?” (Gantt 2). I refuse to believe that Judith Sutpen had the resources at her disposal to choose to reject all clothing besides a hideous dress. While Gantt does point to her buying tombstones as a marker of financial stability, Judith lacked the self-value to consider buying clothing for herself after the death of her almost-husband Charles Bon. Though her father, Sutpen, has died and has no direct control over her actions anymore, he oppressed her mercilessly throughout her childhood. Rosa says Judith was “created by a hundred years of...tradition in which Thomas Sutpen’s ruthless will had carved a niche. [She was] handicapped by...ten generations of iron prohibition” (125). His death did not represent a complete freedom for Judith; his attitudes still scarred her. She certainly would not dare to splurge on good clothing for herself. If she were to choose to display her autonomy in clothing, one of the military-inspired, strong-shouldered fashions popular from 1870 to 1890 would surely have better conveyed power than tattered gingham.

To address Gantt’s question “Do her clothes not speak for her?” (Gantt 2), Judith’s clothes no more express her autonomy than a burial shroud speaks for the

corpse. By describing her clothing “over two dozen times” and giving “her only one speech in the entire novel” Faulkner reveals the Southern status quo that women should be seen and not heard. He has created a caricature of the helpless, directionless Southern female. But in demonizing Thomas Sutpen, Faulkner shows the reader how a father’s cruel actions ruined his daughter. Judith is not to blame for her struggle for autonomy, but rather pitied as a victim; she serves as a warning against oppressive patriarchal control.

In contrast, Faulkner did create one female character whom he valued and gave some measure of control over her own clothing: “I, who never had a sister and was fated to lose my [first] daughter in infancy, set out to make myself a beautiful and tragic little girl” (Meriwether 7). This little girl is Caddy Compson of *The Sound and the Fury*. In the story, Caddy is buffeted about by her brother’s emotions and makes few decisions for herself. Faulkner describes her as a loving mother figure to her brothers. In contrast to Judith, who is essentially discarded by her family members, (brother Henry only really notices her when he becomes jealous of her love for Bon), Caddy is treasured in the family, especially by her brother. Her power over her brothers argues for the “slipperiness” of Caddy as a truly feminine character. She “reveals herself as an extraordinarily eloquent performer of gender possibilities, probably the most varied and certainly the most disruptive in the novel” (Kartiganer ix). In the following excerpt from *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner clearly shows his ability to create a character in charge of her clothing and her choices.

She [Caddy] stood up in the water and looked at her dress. “I’ll take it off,” she said. “Then it’ll dry.”

“I bet you won’t.” Quentin said.

“I bet I will.” Caddy said.

“I bet you better not.” Quentin said.

Caddy came to Versh and turned her back.

“Unbutton it, Versh,” she said.

“Don’t you do it, Versh,” Quentin said.

“Taint none of my dress.” Versh said.

“You unbutton it, Versh,” Caddy said. “Or I’ll tell Dilsey what you did yesterday.” So Versh unbuttoned it.

“You just take your dress off,” Quentin said. Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn’t have on anything but her bodice and drawers, and Quentin slapped her and she slipped and fell down in the water. (The Sound and the Fury 18)

The back-and-forth of the argument builds anticipation for the eventual removal of the dress, anticipation that suddenly flops once the dress is off: Faulkner refuses to describe Caddy’s body. Readers wonder if Caddy is a truly female character, as powerless and subdued as the women of Sutpen’s Hundred, or a character that Faulkner imagined with the positive qualities of a man and simply named female. He never describes her body whatsoever. He understands the need for women’s power to restore the South, but never delineates exactly how that power would manifest. I see two possible explanations for this: Faulkner, as a product of the South, a confused cross-dresser, and an unfaithful husband, may be actually unable to depict an honorable woman. Yet given his close relationship with his mother and relationships with various successful women (actresses, etc.), I see this emptiness as a blank canvas to be filled by the reader. Faulkner hesitates to recycle the tired stereotypes: the woman as the angel in the house, the sweetly stubborn Southern belle (a la Scarlett O’Hara), or the kindly wizened crone. By making such deadened and hopeless women as Judith and Rosa, Faulkner forces the reader to decry their entrapment, ultimately arguing for the absolute necessity of female empowerment. Furthermore, an embodied woman has *no space* in the story of Jefferson; the dominating males have crowded them out, leaving room only for an insubstantial ghost.

Faulkner uses blatantly misogynistic narrators throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* to give the reader insight into the common male viewpoint. For example, Mr. Compson relates the bleak story of Judith's non-wedding. According to Compson, Ellen never mentions love between Judith and Bon in the weeks leading up to the non-wedding. Bon will never be a companion or lover for her daughter but rather an accessory, "a garment which Judith might wear as she would a riding habit or a ball gown" (59). The simile subverts the standard gender roles of southern society. Men dress the women; women dress to attract and please men; men pay for their wife's or daughter's clothing. Yet here, the man is casually worn, draping a woman's body. Faulkner subtly shows his understanding of the importance of clothing by casting a man, the symbol of Southern power, as an item of clothing. Furthermore, the image of a man slung across his wife's shoulders parallels the concept of patriarchal control over women. It seems that Judith's only opportunity to gain power in society would be to put on her husband as a costume, adapting a male self and hiding her female body.

In Compson's eyes, Judith lacks the capacity for love, an idea he furthers in his heartbreaking story of Judith's trousseau. Miss Rosa sews Judith's wedding clothes, a rather sweet gesture that Compson obliterates by detailing a biased and bitter view of the project. Though Compson admits that "Nobody knows how she managed to get that material from her father's store" he declares "I believe she stole it...with that amoral boldness, that affinity for brigandage of women" (61), showing his distrust and contempt for women. Without evidence, Compson simply decides that Rosa robbed her father for her niece. Rosa sews "tedious and clumsy stitches on a garment which she [Judith] would never wear and never remove for a man whom she was not even to see alive" (62). In the triplet repeat of "never, never, not" Faulkner powerfully denies the possibility of a happy future for Judith. Upon engagement, the non-bride "began at once to fashion a wedding dress and veil out of rags and scraps" (81). Wedding dresses are traditionally clean and white to represent

the bride's pure virginity. A ragged and stained wedding dress reflects sullied and destroyed womanhood. Judith's stolen, clumsily sewn, and unused wedding garments show a misogynistic view of women: amoral, awkward and unfulfilled. Assuming that Judith's fiancé, Bon, is only a "riding habit or ball gown" as previously discussed, Rosa seems to imply that Southern men are as ragged as their women's clothing, so subtly that even Compson doesn't notice her distaste when relating her comments (59). Later in the story, Judith's clothing is "both faded and shapeless" (157). The non-description of her clothing reflects Compson's view of Judith as a person: unimportant and diluted when not serving as Henry's sister or Bon's future wife.

Though Compson accounts for the boldest misogynistic statements, Faulkner reveals Southern society's contemptuous view of women through Rosa's tale of waiting for the men to return to Sutpen's Hundred in blankly monotonous dysfunction: "So we waited for him. We led the busy eventless lives of three nuns in a barren and poverty-stricken convent" (124). Through Rosa, Faulkner claims that in this society, women without men are neither independent nor liberated, but imprisoned by helplessness. Just as Judith could not act freely following her father's death, the women have been so entrapped by their husband/brother/nephew that they cannot function in their absence. Although the idea of "Stockholm Syndrome" appeared forty years after the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the theme of a victim becoming emotionally attached to her captor seems pertinent to the women's feelings of hopeless confusion. Rosa describes clothing as another mundane and hopeless daily task, sighing "It was as though we were one being, interchangeable and indiscriminate, which...spun thread and wove the cloth we wore," and admitting she, Clytie, and Judith lived "not even as three women, but merely as three creatures who still possessed the need to eat but took no pleasure in it" (125).

Rosa's commentary is so blatantly pitiful that the reader must examine Faulkner's intent in forcing a primary female character to renounce her own self-worth. Having witnessed the cruelty of Sutpen, the sadness of her niece's non-

marriage, and her own “embattled virginity”, Rosa represents the anti-male viewpoint in the story (4). Yet rather than using her as a clear mouthpiece for these sentiments, Faulkner muddies her narrations with bitterness and constantly envisions her as a corpse. These descriptions, though seeming to contrast with Faulkner’s condemnation of Southern patriarchy, rather reveal the extent of its stain. In repeatedly negative descriptions of the “Deep South, dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” Faulkner has created a reverse Utopia—a world of bitter ruin (4). Rosa certainly fulfills the role of an “outraged ghost.” In creating a ruined, dead, dystopic world, Faulkner’s characters function as warnings against the patriarchal actions that led to such damage.

In characterizing Rosa Coldfield, Faulkner blames her father for the death of her autonomy. Specifically, Rosa’s clothing, described as shroud-like “black which did not even rustle, the wan triangle of lace at the wrists and throat” (6) firmly ensconces her in the tomb of her father’s dim, airless house. The choice of “throat” rather than “neckline” or “collar” calls attention to Rosa’s body, or lack thereof. The throat, like the waist, represents another extremely vulnerable body part. The fragment of lace at the throat calls to mind images of nooses, of hanging or strangulation. Faulkner leaves no doubt as to Rosa’s deathly appearance, but stumbles slightly from his usual refusal to describe a body. Rosa had the “rank smell of old female flesh long embattled with virginity” and “resembled a crucified child” (6). Faulkner has officially mentioned a female body- or at least, a corpse, draped in a cheap black dress that her father paid for.

The black dress would rustle if its wearer moved, but Rosa is essentially deadened after years of entrapment. In this sense, Faulkner firmly blames Rosa’s father for her death as a person, and in a larger sense, blames white Southern patriarchy. Like Faulkner’s beloved Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, “Rosa insists on the possibility of female desire and female symbolization within...a patriarchal culture which turns on the male fear of deprivation of power” (Gwin

153). This fear of “deprivation of power” seems to be exactly why Faulkner refrains from creating an autonomous, embodied female character. The men of Jefferson lost the Civil War and lost the legal ability to own slaves. In a post-Civil War society, one can understand the increased restriction on women, almost as a creation of surrogate slaves, so that the men would not lose that control too. As I argued earlier, women must be either disembodied or dead so as not to detract authority from men.

Further illumination of William Faulkner’s personal life reveals interesting clues about his view of women. He married Estelle Oldham, a childhood sweetheart whose first marriage ended ten weeks prior to her wedding to Faulkner. He struggled to remain faithful in his marriage, developed an intense drinking problem, and frequently experimented in cross-dressing. Cross-dressing reveals Faulkner’s comfort with exploring the roles of men and women in society, and as Faulkner critic Deborah Clarke notes, “Cross-dressing exposes the ideals for which the South is fighting—stable racial and gender hierarchies—as a sham” (Clarke 16). When pointing out the misogyny of his characters, especially in descriptions of women’s dress, Faulkner plays the part of the enlightened man, seeing the South from a challenging perspective. Yet when describing Rosa’s life as hopeless without male companionship, Faulkner steps back into the patriarchal opinion. In an essay on Faulknerian gender dizziness, critic Robert Dale Parker remarked “Faulkner oscillates between...seeing the binary of feminine and masculine genders as stable and seeing it as unstable” (Parker 2). Furthering this sentiment, Faulkner fluctuates between two opposing characterizations of feminine and masculine characters within *Absalom, Absalom!*. The utilization of several different narrators in the story accounts for these complications; Rosa and Compson function as the voice of the victim and the voice of the oppressor, respectively.

An example of this subtly appears in Faulkner’s word choices, which undercut Mr. Compson as he prefaces a story to Quentin with a bemused “They lead beautiful lives—women. Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably

excommunicated from, all reality” (156). By stating that women are “divorced” and “irrevocably excommunicated” from the realism of the world, Faulkner allows that women must have once been married to realism and upstanding members of the Church of Truth. The word “excommunicated” especially proves that women are not to blame for this shift, and by characterizing Compson as an intensely misogynistic, unlikeable narrator, Faulkner highlights the true cause: white men like Compson. Excommunication is not a choice, but rather a punishment proclaimed by a priest or bishop (Incidentally, the only male Catholic officials allowed to determine excommunication; female nuns do not have the authority). What could have led the female population as a whole away from logic, but Southern society, headed by the patriarchal white male? Compson accuses women of delusion, but as a white male in the South, must unconsciously contribute to the shackles that inhibited female power.

Indeed, Compson blames the war, a convenient scapegoat, for ruining Southern women: “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?” (7). What did Southern women lose in the Civil War? Perhaps the livelihood to afford expensive, formal clothing and frilly dresses that crushed their lungs with whalebone stays is the only identity of femininity that Compson can comprehend, but the scarring defeat killed the confidence of their men—for better or for worse, the backbone of Southern civilization. In retaliation to this loss, men sought surrogate slaves and projected this role onto women. This enslavement continued or worsened pre-War attitudes, further entrapping female power in society.

As Minrose Gwin pointed out, “Mr. Compson is more accurate than he knows when he constructs Rosa (her younger self) as ‘not only a living and walking reproach to her father, but a breathing indictment ubiquitous and even transferable of the entire male population’(46)” (Gwin 154). Her pitiful role exemplifies the result

of cruel male authority. As previously discussed, Rosa's "living and walking" or "breathing" capacity was destroyed after years of living under her father's tyranny (46). Compson's pure misogyny taints the reliability of his storytelling until the reader distrusts his opinions. By making an untrustworthy character blame the war for ruining Southern women, Faulkner seems to beg the reader to consider the real culprit behind their downfall: white patriarchal leaders like Mr. Compson himself.

Again, it cannot be overstated that Compson's views do not mirror that of William Faulkner. When interviewed at the University of Virginia in 1957 regarding *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner remarked, "Every time any character gets into a book, he's actually telling his biography—that's all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, he's talking about himself in a thousand different terms" (F. Gwynn 8). Compson tries to illustrate and ridicule feminine logic, but Faulkner carefully counters his claims through the clothing in his stories.

Having condemned the entire female population, blissfully oblivious to his own role in their so-called downfall, Compson continues telling Quentin about his aunt. Faced with a life-threatening operation and convinced that a kinswoman will deliberately choose a hated brown dress as her burial garb, the aunt insists the brown dress be burned as she watches. The incineration of the dress gives her such peace that "as soon as the dress was consumed she began to mend" (156). Many years later, the aunt dies peacefully and is buried in her wedding dress. Her intense fear that her kinswoman will bury her in the brown dress, sealing her eternal appearance to that of an African, proves that racism has terrorized her life, and on a broader scale, has terrorized Southern white women.

Compson describes her recovery "as soon as the dress was consumed." The dress was not burnt, nor destroyed, but *consumed*, a word implying the metabolic cycle of destroying one substance to provide fuel for another. In a racist society, white supremacy cannot function without a fuel, that is, the degradation of non-whites. The consumption of the dress mirrors the consumption of women by men through

the story. In keeping with this projection of all trouble onto the brown female body, represented by the hated brown dress, the aunt dies in peace and is buried in her wedding dress, which must be as white as her own skin. Neither dress ever drapes a healthy, whole female body: the first represents the shell of a black woman, and its tortured destruction in the backyard summons the image of a brutal lynching. The second dress shrouds the aunt's corpse in her casket, and Mr. Compson continues his storytelling as he and Quentin roam the graveyard, stopping to examine Charles Bon's grave, once "watered by tears" of an octoroon (157).

Although I have stated several times that "embodied" white women cannot or do not appear in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner does include an alternate, faintly sexual female role in a non-white woman: Charles Bon's octoroon mistress. An octoroon refers to a person of one-eighth African ancestry. Often pale enough to pass for white, the "one drop rule" of society dictated that even a tiny amount of "black blood" is enough to be legally and socially black. However, the term "octoroon" refers to a sickening tradition of young octoroons girls raised for the express purpose of becoming a concubine or mistress to a successful white man.

Faulkner devotes great attention to her physical exterior and dress, again using Mr. Compson as a narrator. The description opens with an interesting contrast between the woman's appearance and her purpose. She is "magnolia-faced," showing that time has bleached her one-eighth African ancestry to a delicate shade of pale, yet she is still "created of by and for darkness" (157). Though "darkness" outwardly refers to her distant African ancestry, Compson reveals his misogyny with the second meaning, saying women are created of evil, by evil, and for evil. Again, her description reflects the strong fear of miscegenation that permeated white Southern families; despite her magnolia-pale skin, the woman's defining feature is her distant dark roots.

Faulkner describes her appearance not in terms of physical description, but rather of the desperately convoluted emotion she invokes, even specifying that she

might have been dressed by Beardsley. Beardsley was an English cartoonist famous for his erotically themed cartoons in the late nineteenth century. Compson, telling this story in 1909, would have been quite familiar with the shocking and quietly sad nature of Beardsley's drawings. Rather than the expected mood, of "bereavement or widowhood," the octoroon's garb conveys her "slumberous and fatal insatiation," an eerily empty, shadowy, and doomed sense of eternal dissatisfaction (157). The initial description of a "soft, flowing gown" invokes a naturally sensual, fulfilled image of womanhood, but in the desperate "passionate and inexorable hunger of the flesh" Compson denies feminine sexuality.

In referencing the work of Audrey Beardsley, Faulkner sidesteps the responsibility to fully illustrate female sexuality and embodiment in the actual text of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Beardsley's subjects, in their loose-fitted, draping gowns, could not be more opposite from the rigidly corseted fashions of nineteenth-century Southern women or the rag-wrapped women of Sutpen's Hundred. Furthermore, Beardsley's subjects are frequently bare-chested, allowing Faulkner to minimally include symbols of female fertility without having to commit the words to paper himself. He tries to allow the possibility of feminine sexuality and in his words of bondage and veils, even going so far as to describe the parasol's fabric: lace. Delicate, transparent, and feminine, lace evokes images of lingerie—fitting for the octoroon, a character who has led a life fully committed to sexually serving a powerful white man. Her body was consumed by her white lover, leaving nothing but a shell under the lace.

When her provider/lover/employer dies, Faulkner loads the description of her clothing with words of necrosis, of rotting and foul death. She stays a week "in bed, in the new lace and silk and satin negligees subdued to the mauve... of mourning—that room, airless and shuttered... with the heavy fainting odor of her flesh, her days, her hours, her garments" (158). The images of suffocation reinforce that her spiritual death was due to a lack of essential nutrition; in this case, the

necessary fuel was the sexual objectification and monetary support of her white lover. Through the octoroon, simultaneously erotic and denied, Faulkner reveals the contrast between natural feminine physiology and the twisted role of women in Southern society.

The octoroon has a young son, a boy dressed to the nines in “expensive, esoteric Fauntleroy clothing” (158). Born of the union with his octoroon mother and her white lover, he is one-sixteenth black. Fifteen-sixteenths white makes him still black, but his impeccable clothing is miles ahead of Judith and Rosa’s ragged and shapeless garments. The “Fauntleroy” adjective refers to an immensely popular children’s novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, published in 1887 and entitled “Little Lord Fauntleroy,” in which the eponymous main character wears ornate cut-away velvet jackets, tailored knee-pants, and a lace blouse.

Importantly, this octoroon’s son, in his lacy blouses and fancy pants, wears the most feminine clothing in the book. By subverting the stereotype of women striving to dress well (because of course the men have better things to do), Faulkner aligns this young boy with Southern white women. Despite their totally opposite physical descriptions, they share the subjugated identity of living as an “other” in the South, where the “other” is non-white or non-male. Their commonality in being downtrodden by the white patriarchy intensifies with the swap of expected clothing—it is the white lady who “should” be in lacy embroidery, and the black boy in ragged clothing.

The most important aspect of the little boy’s identity, in New Orleans, is his maleness. The male child of an octoroon would have a fairly good place in New Orleans society—better, certainly, than the male child of “full” black or of a black female (Braddon). However, when he becomes orphaned and must leave New Orleans, with its fancy Rampart Street houses paid for by white men and inhabited by octoroons, his societal position falls dramatically. In Mississippi, a black boy is a black boy, regardless of how rich his mother’s suitor may be. Faulkner shows this

drop when Clytie forces him to change his clothing: “The delicate garments of his pagehood already half-concealed by that harsh and shapeless denim cut to an iron pattern and sold by the millions—that burlesque uniform and regalia of the tragic burlesque of the sons of Ham” (160). When Clytie forces the boy to swap jackets, the reader sees how clothing functions as an important, outward display of social status.

Sadly, it seems the treasured young boy has become one of many—the “millions” of others wearing his identical, roughly made denim coat. He becomes one of the most pitiable characters in the sad cast of *Absalom, Absalom!*; even Compson notes that “Beardsley might not only have dressed but drawn” (157) the little boy (his mother was only dressed by the artist). The boy’s complete lack of control over his fate is revealed through the swap of clothing. When entering Sutpen’s household with Clytie, he was “driven and herded...into that gaunt and barren household where his very silken remaining clothes, his delicate shirt and stockings and shoes...vanished, fled from arms and body and legs as if they had been woven of chimaeras or of smoke” (159). The support of his mother’s white lover is compared to a mythical creature or an insubstantial wisp of mist. The reference to smoke implies the burning of one substance to create another; here, the mother’s life has been devoured to provide for her son’s physical needs, represented by clothing.

In comparison to the women’s tattered dresses, the older white men in the story wear well-made, highly structured clothing. In contrast to Ellen’s “made over dress that all Southern women wore” (125), her fiancé Thomas Sutpen “wore a new hat now, and a new broadcloth coat” (35). The coat, well-structured and well-made, is mentioned no fewer than nine times throughout the novel. A coat’s primary function is to protect the wearer from weather, but Sutpen’s coat seems to function dually as emotional armor and an outward display of his new money in the town.

Furthermore, Faulkner actually describes Sutpen's body and face, and honor never bestowed upon a female character in the story.

A man with a big frame but gaunt now almost to emaciation, with a short reddish beard which resembled a disguise and above which his pale eyes had a quality at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed in a face whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven's fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay (24).

Thomas Sutpen seems to have once had the potential to become a good man, but this "glaze" over his face has halted that. The glaze from the "oven's fever" seems to represent the sickness of the South, the sickness of racism and panicked fear of miscegenation, of a slow death of a wronged society. His body has been reduced by hunger in the shambles of the Reconstruction-era economy. But lest the reader pity Sutpen, a plantation owner, for his plight, Faulkner inserts predatory images in the description of Sutpen's eyes. "Alert" and "ruthless" are fine qualities for a rapacious animal, and certainly Sutpen preys upon his wife, Ellen, and his daughter, Judith (24). He consumes Ellen's good family reputation in an attempt to fuel his own societal advancement.

In describing Sutpen's arrival and progress in Jefferson, Faulkner introduces the notion of clothes as societal construct, an idea that further delineates the limitations of Southern women. In driving his savage slaves to construct the plantation, Sutpen sheds his clothing, working "stark naked underneath the croaching and pervading mud" (28). Rosa narrates how fully excluded Sutpen lived from the society of Jefferson. She explains "he was saving his clothes, since decorum even if not elegance of appearance would be the only weapon...with which he could conduct the last assault upon...respectability" (28). The warlike language in this

statement reinforces the savagery in which Sutpen attacked the community of Jefferson. Meanwhile, the French architect, “resembling a human creature because of the French clothes which he wore constantly with a sort of invincible fatality” (29), is described as conscientious, good at his job, and more than a little judgmental of Sutpen’s antics.

In the contrast between the maniacal labor of Sutpen, nude except for the muck of the swamp, and the careful work of the architect, Faulkner blatantly states the importance of clothes in society. The architect carefully keeps his fancy French clothes on, both as a physical protection from the muck and emotional protection from Sutpen’s fervor. In this dichotomy, the female characters have no clear landing. While clothed, they wear the leftovers of household items like flour sacks, or the made-over dresses handed down from older relatives. In better times, the fabric that drapes their bodies would be used to scrub the dirty floors or simply thrown out. Therefore, Faulkner presents women as the leftovers or trash of Southern civilization.

By stating the importance of clothing in society, Faulkner shows the complete ruin of Southern civilization, damned to brutal lawlessness. Just as Faulkner can deconstruct women’s clothing, yet fail to imagine good clothing or a healthy body, so he can point out the problems of the South without presenting any clear solution. By thoroughly detailing the women’s ruined rags, Faulkner makes readers well aware of the worthlessness of the female in Southern society. Yet he concurrently presents the men as brutal, unkind, stingy, or unloving—yet extremely powerful, and therefore to blame for the destruction of female identity. Furthermore, *Absalom, Absalom!* essentially details the death of the South and the decay of moral values as racism eats away at society. If it is the women who lack power in this corrupted community, I argue that Faulkner is by no means a misogynist, but rather wholly respectful of the female potential to contribute positively to Southern life. He simply shows the *reverse* of autonomous women throughout the novel to illustrate

and caution against the removal of women from societal power. In refusing to redress the women in finery or create a fully embodied and independent character, Faulkner shows the total absence of space or potential for women in a society that devalues feminine identity. By presenting the South as a dystopia, Faulkner strongly warns against oppressive patriarchal control, ultimately arguing for the necessity of female power in a successful society.

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