Hailing the Faulkner Women: False Misogyny in *Absalom, Absalom!*

William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* has been acclaimed as the greatest American novel of all times and thus subjected to much criticism and analysis over time. One of the most popular and widely accepted viewpoints remains that the novel is a misogynist text. This is a false interpretation based on an incomplete picture. While several misogynist aspects may strike the reader, complete analysis reveals that *Absalom, Absalom!* actually empowers women and captures their love and power.

A quick glance of the text leads to the conclusion that Faulkner portrays women as clueless, hopeless, and powerless. When Ellen Coldfield confronts Thomas Sutpen about bringing Judith down to see a fight, Sutpen says to Ellen, “I dont expect you to understand it…Because you are a woman. But I didn’t bring Judith down here. I would not bring her down here. I dont expect you to believe that. But I swear to it” (21). Immediately, the reader faces these statements that blatantly attack women. These offensive descriptions continue to the end of the novel, when Faulkner fails to present Clytie in a motherly way: “Clytie lay there on the floor, more than eighty years old and not much more than five feet tall and looking like a little bundle of clean…and her arm felt like a stick, as light and dry and brittle as a stick” (280). This description suggests that Clytie can never fulfill a mother role, that she is still inexperienced. Next, women in this novel sometimes seem to be hopeless, lacking their own voices. Miss Rosa presents a sense of lost hope after the murder of Charles Bon: “…as we carried him down the stairs and out to the waiting wagon I tried to take the full weight of the coffin to prove to myself that he was really in it” (121-122). Rosa does not participate in the burial; she
stays distant, representing her loss of hope in ever getting married. Mr. Compson furthers the idea that women are powerless: “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts” (7). This statement implies that women are subservient not only to unstoppable events of nature but also to men. Faulkner uses several other examples that propose the power of men over women. Referring to herself, Clytie, and Judith, Rosa says, “So we waited for [Sutpen]. We led the busy eventless lives of three nuns in a barren and poverty-stricken convent…not as two white women and a negress, not as three Negroes or three whites, not even as three women, but merely as three creatures…” (125). This selection almost implies that one man wields more power than three women, that one man has the ability to control the actions and lives of three women. Faulkner does present some strong examples of misogyny, but they do not capture the entire picture.

A detailed examination of the whole text uncovers Faulkner’s real message. The men, not the women, are portrayed poorly. First, the men are shallow and cannot see deeper than the surface: “Sutpen did not need to borrow money with which to complete the house, supply what it yet lacked, because he intended to marry it” (31). Sutpen marries for money, not for love. In fact, Faulkner suggests that men do not even know what love is, for love is a quality that they lack: “[People] did not think of love in connection with Sutpen” (32). Love is not the only positive quality lacking in men. Even Mr. Compson, who would only have bias in favor of men, claims, “Now since [Sutpen] had got out of his father-in-law all which Mr. Coldfield possessed that Sutpen could have used or wanted, he (Sutpen) had neither the courage to face his father-in-law nor the grace and decency to complete the ceremonial family group…” (49-50). Sutpen is not
the only man without courage; in an effort to avoid military service, Mr. Coldfield hides from Confederate soldiers by climbing into the attic, nailing the door behind him, and throwing the hammer out the window, and thus ultimately committing suicide (52).

These examples strip the men of admirable traits, both masculine and feminine. The men, not the women, are clueless. Even after being around Sutpen for years and seeing how he treats women, Wash Jones trusts Sutpen with his 15-year-old granddaughter, Milly. Wash tells Sutpen, “I know that whatever your hands tech, whether it’s a regiment of men or a ignorant gal or just a hound dog, that you will make hit right” (228). Wash obviously makes a mistake, since Sutpen abandons Milly as soon as she has a baby girl instead of a boy. Furthermore, Ralph Behrens suggests in his article “Collapse of Dynasty: The Thematic Center of Absalom, Absalom!” that the cause of Sutpen’s failure may be his hubris. Behrens writes, “Sutpen never considers the possibility that the design, which became the essence of the man himself, might contain the moral flaw that would bring doom to it” (26). Sutpen fails to consider the morality of his plan, the possibility of flaw in his design, or the consequences of his actions. In case Faulkner’s message regarding men is still unclear at this point, the author presents one final clue: Quentin understands from Miss Rosa, “why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth” (6). The South lost the Civil War because of men like Sutpen. Men, not women, ruined an entire society and way of life.

Understanding the poor light in which men are depicted, Faulkner’s positive portrayal of women becomes even more evident. In his book, William Faulkner: the Making of a Modernist, Daniel Singal claims, “Given the nature of his attack, it is clear
that [Faulkner’s] real target was the southern lady (Singal 57). In reality, Faulkner cherished the *Absalom* women. The author points out that Rosa represents all the love in the Sutpen family. In her narration, Rosa states, “I who had learned nothing of love, not even parents’ love…I became all polymath love’s androgynous advocate” (117). Faulkner purposefully strips men of love and then grants this trait to women. Even if Faulkner does deny Clytie motherly traits, he attributes them to Rosa: When Shreve insists on calling her “Aunt Rosa,” she becomes somewhat of a mother figure (143). Additionally, Rosa takes care of her father even after he foolishly locks himself up in the attic and tries to starve himself. She feeds him up until his death, proving that she truly does have a heart. The *Absalom* women, especially, Rosa, possess those estimable qualities lacking in men. Deborah Clarke describes the passive strength of women’s language in her book, *Robbing the Mother: Women in Faulkner:*

> Women’s language--talky yet silent, lucid yet foreign--lies at the core of their mysterious strength…[Faulkner’s] compulsively overarticulate male protagonists fling words around like frisbees, constantly seeking to assert mastery through linguistic control. His women, on the other hand, recognize language’s limitations” (Clarke 8).

Faulkner further emphasizes the excellent perception of women through Miss Rosa’s carefully chosen words. Rosa tells Ellen, “[Sutpen] has already given [Judith and Henry] life: he does not need to harm them further. It is from themselves that they need protection” (15). The meaning of this sentence becomes clear to the reader as the novel progresses, and through the intricacies of the plotline, one realizes the striking accuracy
of Rosa’s observation. Faulkner’s women may not be outright aggressive, but they encompass love and intelligence.

Not only does Faulkner rip the men of worthy characteristics and pour them onto the women, but he also dooms all the men. Mr. Coldfield commits suicide. Sutpen’s dynasty collapses. Mr. Compson desperately tries to cover up Rosa’s story but fails. Even Charles Bon is trapped. As Egan notes, “[Charles] lives out a ritual of self-punishment for being part black in a society that does not officially tolerate mixture of the races” (Egan 210). Stuck between two races, Charles can never become an accepted human being of society. Doomed himself, he inflicts problems on others around him; he spreads yellow fever to Judith, which kills her, and he invokes racial clashes in town with his marriage to an octoroon. Henry is merely his father’s tool, helplessly carrying out the murder planned by Thomas Sutpen. Perhaps most importantly, the men are hopeless in regards to fate. Referring to Sutpen, Faulkner writes, “While he was still playing he scene to the audience, behind him fate, destiny, retribution, irony—the stage manager, call him what you will—was already striking the set” (57). In this deterministic and fatalistic text, every action redeems itself. Initially, men use and corrupt women, but ultimately, fate defeats men. This is Faulkner’s depiction of men returning from the War:

It was winter soon and already soldiers were beginning to come back…. not the same men who had marched away but transformed—and this the worst, the ultimate degradation to which war brings the spirit, the soul—into the likeness of that man who abuses from very despair and pity the beloved wife or mistress who in his absence has been raped (126).
In reality, this sentence does not refer to women raped by men; on the contrary, it
describes men raped by the North. The men, not the women, are powerless.

Critics often assert that the *Absalom* women are helpless puppets of men, but in
reality, the women control the novel. They stir the scenes, push the plotline, and shape
the story. Fundamentally, *Absalom, Absalom!* is Miss Rosa’s story. She begins the novel
with her narration, and her voice rings through the entire book, despite attempts from the
men to cover her story. For instance, Rosa establishes that Thomas Sutpen is a “demon”
on page 5 of the text: “It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen” (5). For the first
mention of Sutpen to exist in this way solidly connects the two words “Sutpen” and
“demon” in the reader’s mind for the rest of the novel. In Philip Egan’s article
“Embedded Story Structures in Absalom, Absalom!”, Egan claims, “Faulkner attributes a
great deal of subtle and sophisticated storytelling art to Rosa and…he makes her
artistry—especially her use of narrative divisions—a manifestation of her character”
(202). Indeed, Rosa’s narration is a detailed story, and she keeps the reader on his or her
toes with suspenseful endings of chapters. Chapter five ends with this cliffhanger from
Rosa: “No. Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living
hidden in that house” (140). This sentence holds readers’ attentions, suspending them in
midair, and forcing them to read on. As a result of Rosa’s powerful storytelling, Mr.
Compson cannot cover up her voice with his own voice. He tries to do so many times,
such as the large section beginning with “that aged and ancient and timeless absence of
youth which consisted of a Cassandra-like listening beyond closed doors…” (27);
however; his voice is transparent and it is clear that Mr. Compson tries to force this false
description onto Quentin and the reader. Indeed, Rosa successfully maintains her voice and status through the entire novel.

Not only does a woman initiate the story, but women also push the story along, produce plotline twists, and eventually end the novel. The event that sets off Sutpen’s downfall is Charles Bon’s return to see his father, leading to Sutpen’s refusal to acknowledge his son, forcing Henry to murder Bon, and bringing about the fall of Sutpen’s design. The mastermind behind this plan was a woman: Charles Bon’s mother. Ever since Sutpen repudiated her and her son, “Bon’s mother [was] already plotting and planning him since before he could remember” (241). At the end of the text, Clytie sets fire to the Sutpen house, killing herself and Henry and bringing the Sutpen dynasty to ruin forever. Faulkner purposely made a black woman end the design of a white man. The fact that Miss Rosa starts the story, Bon’s mother triggers Sutpen’s collapse, and Clytie finishes off Sutpen’s design thwarts a misogynist classification of this novel.

_Absalom, Absalom!_ does contain a few strong misogynist characteristics. Analyzed as a whole, however, the story truly cannot be classified as a misogynist text. Faulkner thrusts men in a poor light and emphasizes positive qualities in women. He illustrates how the men are doomed to fate, and most importantly, he gives Rosa, Bon’s mother, and Clytie the power to control the plot. With the reigns of the story in the hands of women, such a novel cannot be considered a true misogynist text.

Works Cited
Behrens, Ralph. “Collapse of Dynasty: the Thematic Center of Absalom, Absalom!”


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**Works Consulted**