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ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

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ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

by

William Faulkner



Edited by Diane Sauder

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

William Faulkner's novels are set in the American South, most of them in a mythical county Faulkner created called Yoknapatawpha. Located in Northeastern Mississippi, this county resembles Faulkner's native.....

CHARACTERS

Major Characters & Narrators

Thomas Sutpen - the enterprising son of a poor farmer from West Virginia who comes to Jefferson in 1833 and founds the Sutpen estate. This colorful character, who forms the hub of the novel, is killed by Wash Jones, a poor white squatter on his land.

Henry Sutpen - the son of Thomas by Ellen Coldfield and heir to the Sutpen estate. He kills his half-brother, Charles Bon, to prevent him marrying his sister, Judith.

Judith Sutpen - Henry's sister. She falls.....

Minor Characters

Miss Rosa Coldfield's Aunt - A strange, eccentric character who lives with the Coldfields and influences Rosa's upbringing.

Akers - A coon hunter who spies on Sutpen's plantation and reports what he sees in Jefferson.

Judge Benbow - The lawyer who manages Rosa Coldfield's legal affairs and handles her financial work. He has a secret admiration for Rosa and pays her bills out of his gambling winnings

Percy Benbow - The son of Judge

CONFLICT

Protagonist: Thomas Sutpen is the tragic protagonist of *Absalom, Absalom!* He typifies Faulkner's vision of the Southern man, tough.....

Antagonist: Thomas Sutpen's real antagonist is himself. He falls victim to his own blind desire to found a dynasty and leave a legacy. The conflict in the novel arises from his great desire for a son and heir. For Thomas Sutpen, "son" means..... a white man. He rejects his first wife, Eulalia, and their son, Charles Bon, after discovering that

Climax: The climax of the story occurs when

Outcome: *Absalom, Absalom!* ends in bleak

PLOT (Synopsis)

Absalom, Absalom! is a brilliantly crafted, complex detective novel. Employing a multiple narrator technique, it uses the varying voices and points of view of a number of characters to examine the life and character of Thomas Sutpen, a tragic figure who tries and fails to build a family dynasty in Yoknapatawpha County.

The novel shuttles back and forth in time between past and present. It opens in September, 1909, the present, with Quentin Compson talking to Rosa

THEMES

Major Themes

Absalom, Absalom! is primarily a social tragedy, concerned with the themes of legitimacy, legacy and racial prejudice. With its biblical and epic allusions, however, it also takes on the qualities of a mythological tale. Thomas Sutpen's story becomes.....

Minor Themes

A number of minor themes are interwoven into the plot. Faulkner explores the themes of incest, fratricide, and miscegenation, as well as.....

MOOD

The mood and atmosphere of the novel are primarily

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

WILLIAM FAULKNER

William Faulkner is a product of the rural Southern state of Mississippi, and his family roots go deeply into the Mississippi soil. His great-grandfather was Colonel William Faulkner of the Confederate Army, a wealthy man who became a distinguished soldier and writer. He appears in Faulkner's novels as Colonel John Sartoris. After Colonel Faulkner's death, the family's.....

LITERARY/HISTORICAL INFORMATION

William Faulkner was an inventive genius with a gifted imagination. In his novels, he analyzes the culture and character conflicts of Southern society. Faulkner felt that the South had been blessed by a bountiful and beautiful natural world, but that its ill-treatment of blacks had left it cursed with misfortunes, many caused by the Civil War. This war, which ended slavery in 1865,.....

CHRONOLOGY OF NOVEL

1807: Thomas Sutpen is born in the West Virginia mountains to a large, poor, white family of Scottish-English stock.

1817: The Sutpen family moves down into the Tidewater region of Virginia.

1818: Ellen Coldfield is born in Tennessee.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

CHAPTER 1

Set in the Yoknapatawpha County town of Jefferson, Mississippi, the novel opens in 1909. Rosa Coldfield, who is now sixty-five, is talking to Quentin Compson on a summer afternoon. She narrates the early part of Thomas Sutpen's life, starting with his arrival in Jefferson in 1833, twelve years before Rosa's own birth. Sutpen does not introduce himself to the local folks, but buys a hundred square miles of land from the Indians with Spanish gold. He builds a mansion and plantation with his French-speaking slaves and a French architect, whom he keeps captive on the plantation while he works. After the house is complete, Sutpen disappears for five years, returning at last with a house full of furniture. Soon after his return, he approaches Mr. Goodhue Coldfield, the local storekeeper, for the hand of his daughter, Ellen. Sutpen and Ellen soon marry and subsequently have two children, Henry and Judith. In 1845, Rosa is born to the Coldfields, four years after the birth of Judith and twenty-seven years after the birth of her sister, Ellen.

Rosa recollects seeing Ellen, Sutpen, and their children at church. Because of their great difference in age, however, she and her sister Ellen are virtual strangers to each other. When Ellen comes to visit the Coldfields, Rosa remembers playing with her children. Rosa next remembers her visit to Sutpen's Hundred to see Judith, who was ill. Rosa then reflects on an evening on the plantation when Ellen hears a commotion and finds her bloodied husband standing over a Negro after a fight. The young Henry is sickened by the violent sight, and Ellen wonders in agony if Judith and Clytie, Sutpen's illegitimate daughter from a slave, have also been watching the bloody duel.

Rosa's wild, melodramatic account makes it clear that she hates Sutpen, looking upon him as a monster or demon who destroyed the innocent and the wicked. She blames him for the downfall of both the Sutpen and Coldfield families. Even though she is now an elderly woman, her childhood memories of Sutpen are still vivid and painful. In fact, she has spent forty-three years of her life in obsessive brooding over the events of the past.

Rosa has summoned Quentin, for she plans for the two of them to travel to the family estate, known as Sutpen's Hundred, where Rosa thinks someone is hiding. After Rosa speaks to Quentin, Mr. Compson (Quentin's father) and General Compson (Quentin's grandfather who was a personal friend of Sutpen) also share their recollections with Quentin.

Notes

The novel opens on a summer afternoon with Rosa Coldfield, who is Thomas Sutpen's sister-in-law, as the narrator. It is obvious that this sixty-five year old woman is bitter and frustrated. As a result, she cannot be really trusted as a narrator, for what she tells in her story is obviously colored by her emotions. In fact, she uses colorful, romantic, imaginative language to convey her intense negative feelings about Thomas Sutpen and the past. In spite of her bitterness, Sutpen emerges as a legendary hero, who seems arrogant, powerful, ambitious, prejudiced, bloodthirsty, determined, and aloof. Faulkner uses biblical rhetoric to convey the grandeur of his character. Although Quentin feels Rosa is being melodramatic in her descriptions and wonders why she hates Sutpen so much, he is also a bit scared by her anger. He tries to guess what her motive was in calling for him. The scene then shifts to evening, and Mr. Compson, Quentin's father, tries to explain to his son why Rosa has sent for him.

Through Rosa's dramatic descriptions, Quentin can picture Sutpen as a fanatical planter with his French-speaking slaves whom he abuses and his captive architect who is responsible for transforming a

wilderness into a plantation - Sutpen's Hundred. Quentin also notices Sutpen's prejudicial treatment of the blacks in Rosa's description. It is significant that Sutpen thinks nothing of beating his slaves until they are bloodied; it is also important to notice that Sutpen's young son, Henry, is horrified at the cruelty.

It is also important and ironic to note that Rosa calls her sister Ellen a blind, romantic fool, for Rosa is just like her. In fact, all of the Coldfields suffer from romanticism that colors their way of seeing things. In contrast, Thomas Sutpen is aloof, cold, and calculating. Ironically, his son Henry, in whom he placed so much hope, is more like his mother and a Coldfield by nature; he is horrified at his father's treatment of the slaves, is attracted to Bon, and renounces his father's heritage. Henry's sister, Judith, is much more a Sutpen by nature and shares many of her father's traits.

There are many things to notice in this opening chapter of Faulkner's difficult novel. The author reveals, through Rosa's narration, the most important events of the entire story about Sutpen. During the rest of the novel, the same story will be retold in more detail and from different points of view. By the end of the novel, the reader knows Sutpen's story almost as well as the narrators who are telling his story.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

RECAP OF NARRATORS

The telling and retelling of the tragic tale of the Sutpen family has been told by the following narrators:

Chapter 1: Rosa Coldfield narrates to Quentin, and Quentin reflects on his own memories.

Chapter 2: The voices of the town are narrated by Mr. Compson, and Faulkner makes comments as an omniscient third person narrator.....

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE USED BY WILLIAM FAULKNER IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

William Faulkner, in the line of other twentieth century experimental novelists, such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Henry James, used the stream of consciousness technique in his novels. He has his characters engage in long, extended monologues, often internal, in which their passing thoughts seem to appear in their totality. This technique allows.....

CHARACTERS

Narrators

Rosa Coldfield

As a link between both past and present, Rosa Coldfield is an important character and narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* This embittered sixty-five-year-old woman, in her black shawl, hat, and voluminous gown, views Sutpen as a demon who is responsible for the downfall of her family – the Coldfields. In chapter, one she recounts some of Sutpen's history to Quentin. She goes back to 1833, when Sutpen first came to Jefferson as an aloof and arrogant man obsessed..... with building a mansion and a dynasty. It is amazing that Sutpen has been dead for forty-one years

General Compson

General Compson is Thomas Sutpen's good friend in Jefferson. He admires Sutpen's courage, self-confidence, and ambition and feels he is an innocent and a victim of forces beyond his control.

In chapter seven, Quentin portrays Sutpen.....

PLOT STRUCTURE

Absalom, Absalom! does not have a traditional plot, in which events happen in sequence. Rather, most of the important events in the novel have occurred in the past, and what there is of a "plot" lies in the attempt of the characters in the present to make sense of these past events, which emerge slowly and imperfectly through a variety of narrators. The time within the story shuttles back and forth from the past to the present.

Chapter one opens in 1909 with Rosa Coldfield's flashback; she is talking to Quentin Compson about Thomas Sutpen's career. Rosa has called Quentin because she believes someone or something is hiding at the ruined estate and she wishes him to.....

THEMES

Major Themes

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, William Faulkner weaves several significant themes into his novel about the South, so that it becomes a social tragedy as well as a family tragedy. He masterfully shows how suffering, endurance, racial discrimination, decadence, and ruin all play a part in the lives of the Sutpen family.

The theme of moral degradation in Thomas Sutpen is an important one. By placing a greater weight on racial purity than familial ties, Sutpen precipitates a series.....

Minor Themes

One minor theme is the difficulty of knowing human motivations as well as the full story of any person's life. The shifting perspectives continually affect the reader's perception of the characters and their lives, and many questions remain unanswered, both for the characters and the reader. Why does Henry feel miscegenation is a crime worth killing for while incest is tolerable? Does Henry perhaps love Judith too much himself? Did he have a homoerotic love for.....

STYLE

William Faulkner style's is rich and complex in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The novel contains a mix of poetic prose and stream of consciousness narration. The storyline of the novel is actually quite simple, though its long, rambling sentences of dreams, desires, nightmarish recollections, and strange and telling images often make for difficult reading. To analyze the style

QUESTIONS

1. Who are the narrators used by William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Explain the key information that you learn from each.
2. Explain why the novel ends in tragedy.
How is the Sutpen saga.....

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