IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Unknowable Past: Narrative, Myth And The Subjectivity Of History In Faulkner's "Absalom, Absalom!"

Author : DEEKSHA S RAO
Designation : MA English
Name Of Department: USHSS
Name of organisation: Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

Abstract

This paper explores William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom! deconstructs the notion of an objective historical truth. Through a fragmented, multi-perspectival narrative, the novel argues that history is not a collection of facts but a subjective, individually interpreted, and often problematic construct.[1] By presenting the story of Thomas Sutpen through the biased lenses of four distinct narrators—each using a different literary genre—Faulkner demonstrates how personal memory, beliefs, and emotional trauma inevitably shape historical understanding.[4] The novel's atypical structure forces the reader into a collaborative role, grappling with conflicting accounts and questioning the very knowability of the past.[9] Ultimately, the paper argues that the novel is a meta-commentary on the impossibility of a singular historical record, positing that the past is a perpetually "living force" that haunts the present and is constantly being re-created by those who inherit its burden.[3]

Keywords: William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom!, Subjectivity of History, Narrative Structure, Historical Memory, Southern Gothic, Allegory, Inherited Trauma, Unreliable Narrator

1. Introduction: The Labyrinthine Past

William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! is not merely a chronicle of the past but a profound critique of historicity itself. Through a fragmented, multi-perspectival narrative, the novel fundamentally challenges a positivist view of history, positing it instead as a subjective, mythic, and perpetually contested construct shaped by personal trauma, cultural myths, and the inherent biases of the storytellers. The central conflict of the novel is not the tragic rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, but the characters' (and by extension, the reader's) fraught attempt to "reconstruct the past on the bases of some available data".1 The narrative's complexity is a deliberate device to illustrate that history is not a collection of facts to be found, but a tapestry of memory and speculation to be woven. This report will demonstrate how Faulkner's narrative technique is a meta-commentary on the impossibility of a singular, objective historical record. The analysis will proceed by examining the novel's non-linear structure, the distinct narrative strategies of its four primary storytellers, the allegorical function of the Sutpen legend, and the collaborative role of the reader in creating meaning from the narrative fragments.

2. The Narrative as a Deconstruction of Objective History

2.1. The Absence of a Single Truth

The novel deliberately forgoes a linear plot, instead unfolding through "a mosaic of perspectives, with characters retelling events, often with conflicting accounts".[2] This non-linear approach is a structural choice to build tension and "slowly unspool the story" of Thomas Sutpen and his family, keeping the reader engaged with this complex allegory of the South.[3] However, its primary function is to demonstrate the unreliability of a single narrative. The narrative structure is considered to be "the most difficult one that Faulkner has ever written," with "four narrators" telling the story of the same person from their own distinct points of view.
1 This difficulty is intentional, forcing the reader to abandon the search for a singular, authoritative truth and instead grapple with a multiplicity of "re-creations".4 The lack of a central, omniscient voice is a powerful statement on the elusiveness of historical fact.
The novel's structure is not just a reflection of the difficulty of knowing the past; it is a manifestation of the traumatized Southern psyche. The fractured, non-linear narrative and the characters' obsessive retellings mirror the South's own inability to process the historical trauma of the Civil War and the legacy of slavery.[5] The narrators are "haunted" by their family's history [7] and live in a South "peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts".[5] The inability to "lie still" is not just a characteristic of the characters but of the story itself.[8] The narrative is as restless and obsessive as the narrators, suggesting that the very act of historical inquiry for a Southerner is an emotional and psychological ordeal, not a detached, academic exercise. The form of the novel is a direct result of its content, arguing that the psychological and historical burden of the past can only be expressed through fragmented, non-rational means.

2.2. History vs. Narrative and the Power of Bias

The text explicitly distinguishes between history and narrative, arguing that storytelling is "shaped by trends and biases".1 The central thesis of the novel is that "a single character's story is reconstructed through multiple viewpoints".1 This is the foundation for the entire exploration of subjectivity. The novel's modernist experimentation, also present in works like As I Lay Dying and The Sound and the Fury, emerges in Absalom, Absalom! as the multiple perspectives on Sutpen produce a narrative without any single authorized truth.[9] The novel's lack of a clear "moral fumigation" and its reliance on hearsay and speculation are not narrative flaws but rather a core part of its statement on the nature of truth.[8]

3. The Narrators as Historians of Self and Culture

3.1. Rosa Coldfield: The Gothic of Personal Vengeance

Rosa Coldfield's narrative, which opens the novel, is a "warped confession" driven by her "hatred and resentment toward Sutpen".[11] As "a living artifact of the Old South," her storytelling is not an objective account of her era but a desperate act of "retroactive self-creation".[12] Her language is described as "overly poetic and exaggerated," possessing a "hallucinatory tone" and "heightened intensity".
12 This places her narrative firmly within the Gothic genre of mystery and the supernatural, a form that allows her to portray Sutpen as a "demon" or "ogre" and frame his story as a moral outrage.[4]
Rosa's use of the Gothic genre is not just a stylistic quirk; it is a defensive mechanism. As an "outsider" in her family who felt a "lack of personal connection" and was limited to a passive role as an observer, she uses her narrative to "place herself in the role of sympathetic heroine and active protagonist".12 By casting Sutpen as a demon, she elevates her own marginalized position to one of heroic victimhood, demonstrating that her historical account is fundamentally a form of self-vindication. Rosa's preference is clear for the "'citadel' of the imagination" over "unbearable reality," and her narration becomes a way to escape her isolation.12 She makes herself a "might-have-been," a spectral figure lost to time, and her Gothic storytelling, with its emphasis on haunting and secrecy, is the perfect vehicle for this self-imposed isolation.12 She makes herself a ghost in a ghost story she herself created, a paradoxical act of self-entrapment.12

3.2. Mr. Compson: The Greek Tragedy of Deterministic Fate

Mr. Compson presents a more detached, cynical perspective, narrating the Sutpen story as a classic Greek tragedy.[4] This framing emphasizes themes of fate, Sutpen's "fatal flaw," and the "epical proportions" of his ambition and downfall.[4] He recounts the story to his son, Quentin, a symbolic passing of the torch of Southern legend. His narrative, however, is a re-creation of Sutpen's own, flawed account.
4 Mr. Compson is a conduit, but he filters the story through his own intellectual and cultural lens, presenting Sutpen as a tragic figure whose grand design was doomed by an "ancient curse".[14]

3.3. Quentin Compson: The Chivalric Romance of Inherited Trauma

Quentin Compson is not just a listener; he is the nexus of the novel's historical and psychological burdens. He feels so inextricably tied to the past that his body is "an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names".[5] He is haunted by the past, which he experiences as a "fever" from which the South is still recovering, "even forty-three years afterward".[5] He and his roommate, Shreve, "reconstruct the past" from available data, but Quentin's obsession stems from his own personal crisis, particularly his relationship with his sister Caddy, which is detailed in Faulkner's earlier novel,
The Sound and the Fury.[1] This personal entanglement leads him to interpret the story of Henry and Charles Bon as a doomed
chivalric romance 4, a saga of brotherhood, honor, and betrayal.
Quentin's narrative is a form of self-projection. He is not merely interested in Henry's and Bon's story; he is reliving his own trauma through it. He uses the historical events as a stage for his own psychological drama. The fact that the story becomes a "chivalric romance" suggests that Quentin is attempting to imbue a brutal and messy reality with a sense of noble, tragic purpose, perhaps to make his own perceived failure with Caddy more palatable. This is the ultimate example of how personal, psychological needs manipulate historical memory. Quentin's "love-hate relationship with the South" and his desperate attempts to "piece together" the story are a search for meaning in a past that feels both suffocating and deeply personal.[8] He is "desperately trying to piece together this story—perhaps to help him understand his love-hate relationship with the South—in the same way that we, as readers, are trying to piece together Faulkner's story".[15] His failure to do so, symbolized by his final, tormented protest ("I dont. I dont hate it") [8], demonstrates the psychological impossibility of separating self from history.

3.4. Shreve McCannon: The Tall Tale as a Rational (and Ludicrous) Foil

Shreve, a detached Canadian, provides a counterpoint to Quentin's emotional intensity.[8] As an outsider, he lacks the inherited trauma of the South and does not grasp the "weight and significance the stories hold for Quentin".[8] His perspective is shaped by the
tall tale, a genre of exaggeration and humor.4 While Shreve contributes to the speculation, his detached position ironically makes his interpretation more clear-sighted in some respects, even if it is presented humorously. His question to Quentin, "Why do they live at all" [8], is a devastating, rationalist critique of the emotional and ideological baggage that imprisons the Southern characters.

4. History as a Haunting: The Allegory of the South

4.1. Sutpen's Design as the Southern Myth

Thomas Sutpen's rise and fall is a "mythic archetype" and a "perfect allegory" for the American South.[5] His "design" to create a dynasty, a legacy of wealth and respectability, mirrors the South's agrarian, white supremacist system.[5] The novel explicitly links Sutpen's success to his "feeling of superiority over Black people" and his reliance on the institution of slavery, which drove the South's economy.[5] His rejection of Charles Bon, his mixed-race son, because Bon "has no place in Sutpen's design," is the fatal flaw that leads to his downfall, just as the South's reliance on and defense of slavery led to its own ruin.[5]
The novel's allegorical function is a critique of the "Lost Cause" narrative. Faulkner "unashamedly illuminates issues within the region caused by the South's bloody history".[17] The novel shatters the "traditional southern

ideals of white supremacy" and the belief that the region must be "restored to its former glory".[17] By making Sutpen's downfall a direct result of his racism, the novel asserts that the historical project of the Old South was not just a noble failure but a morally bankrupt one, destined to fail from the start. Sutpen's "design" begins when a poor white boy is insulted by a black man; this humiliation drives him to seek power and respectability, but his "solution" to this problem—building a dynasty on slavery and racial exclusion—is the very thing that destroys him.[5] This cause-and-effect loop is the novel's central political argument: the foundation of Southern society was its own undoing, and its failure was not a tragedy, but an inevitability.

4.2. The Haunted Landscape

The past in Absalom, Absalom! is not a static memory but a "living force in the present, a force that molds our sense of the present".[3] This is literalized through the "ghosts" that haunt the characters and the land itself.[5] The novel uses the
Southern Gothic genre to explore the dark history hidden behind the region's beauty.[14] The land, with its "decaying plantation houses" and "crumbling houses and graveyards," is personified with "corpses" and "ghosts" of slaves and exhausted land, suggesting that the brutality of slavery has been absorbed into the very soil of the South.[14] The land itself is a repository of trauma that cannot be escaped.[17] This abusive relationship with the land is described globally, with Quentin's grandfather describing Haiti, where Sutpen first gained wealth, as a "theatre for violence and injustice and bloodshed".[17] Sutpen’s view of the land as something "ripe for the taking" reinforces how the moral failings of society are intrinsically tied to the exploitation of the physical landscape.[17]

5. The Reader as Co-Author of History

5.1. The Collaborative Process

By presenting the story through conflicting narratives and withholding information, Faulkner makes the reader a "solitary reader" who must engage in a "collaborative process" of interpretation.[18] The novel forces us to piece together the "intricate puzzle" of the Sutpen saga and "separate this from emotional rant".[2] This lack of a clear, single truth is the central point of the novel.[9] It’s not a narrative flaw; it’s a statement on the nature of truth itself. The novel is a puzzle, a legend, and a haunting family drama all in one, and Faulkner "doesn't hand you the truth".[2]

5.2. The Unknowable Truth

The novel's conclusion reinforces the idea that an objective truth is unattainable. The Sutpen saga ends with destruction and silence, leaving only the "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts".[8] The story ends, but the questions linger, forever. This is Faulkner's final point: history is not a completed event; it is perpetually in the process of being told, debated, and re-told.[9] The deliberate confusion forces the reader to rely on hearsay and speculation, and it is in this act of grappling with uncertainty that the novel's purpose is realized.

6. Conclusion: The Burden of the Past

Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! masterfully uses a complex narrative structure to argue for the subjectivity of history. The novel's fragmented form, its biased and psychologically-driven narrators, and its allegorical themes all work in concert to dismantle the notion of a single, knowable past. By forcing us to become detectives, weighing evidence and making sense of conflicting accounts, Faulkner illustrates that history is not an inherited artifact but an ongoing, personal, and profoundly moral act of creation. The novel’s enduring power lies in its challenge to the reader to confront their own relationship with historical truth, and its final statement is that the burden of the past can only be confronted through an understanding of its inherent subjectivity.

7. Citations

- [7]: url: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/absalom-absalom-analysis-major-characters
- [13]: url: http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/313/faulkners-absalom-absalom-and-the-mysterious-rosa-coldfield
- [16]: url: https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1766203/lynch.pdf
- [18]: url: https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/bitstream/handle/1956/10872/141258732.pdf?sequence=1
- [6]: url: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/708824/summary
- [8]: url: https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/characters/quentin-compson
- [15]: url: https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/absalom-absalom-faulkner/quentin-compson.html
- [11]: url: https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/characters/rosa-coldfield
- [3]: url: https://lithub.com/how-much-did-the-history-of-american-chattel-slavery-shape-william-faulkners-absalom-absalom/
- [2]: url: https://love-books-review.com/blog/absalom-absalom/
- [10]: url: https://www.reddit.com/r/literature/comments/691e6s/thoughts_on_absalom_absalom_and_faulkners_art_of/
- [9]: url: https://hawksites.newpaltz.edu/sr35/nothing-ever-happens-once-and-is-finished-absalom-absalom-and-the-politics-of-historical-memory/
- [5]: url: https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/themes/the-south
- [14]: url: https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/absalom-absalom-faulkner/genre.html
- [17]: url: https://scholarworks.uark.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=engluht
- [17]: url: https://scholarworks.uark.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=engluht
- [3]: url: https://lithub.com/how-much-did-the-history-of-american-chattel-slavery-shape-william-faulkners-absalom-absalom/
- [17]: url: https://scholarworks.uark.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=engluht
- [18]: url: https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/bitstream/handle/1956/10872/141258732.pdf?sequence=1
- [9]: url: https://hawksites.newpaltz.edu/sr35/nothing-ever-happens-once-and-is-finished-absalom-absalom-and-the-politics-of-historical-memory/
- [3]: url: https://lithub.com/how-much-did-the-history-of-american-chattel-slavery-shape-william-faulkners-absalom-absalom/
- [14]: url: https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/absalom-absalom-faulkner/genre.html

- [7]: url: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/absalom-absalom-analysis-major-characters
- [5]: url: https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/themes/the-south

Works cited

1. (PDF) William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! A Narrative Study A Narrative Study, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389848573_William_Faulkner's_Absalom_Absalom_A_Narrative_Study_A_Narrative_Study
2. Absalom, Absalom! (by William Faulkner) - Love Books Review, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://love-books-review.com/blog/absalom-absalom/
3. How Much Did the History of American Chattel Slavery Shape ..., accessed on September 6, 2025, https://lithub.com/how-much-did-the-history-of-american-chattel-slavery-shape-william-faulkners-absalom-absalom/
4. The Four Narrative Perspectives in Absalom, Absalom! | PMLA ..., accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/pmla/article/four-narrative-perspectives-in-absalom-absalom/7C33E1F59E1E429C2ACE5DFAB796B8E5
5. The South Theme in Absalom, Absalom! - LitCharts, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/themes/the-south
6. “Aghast and Uplifted”: William Faulkner and the Absence of History - Project MUSE, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/708824/summary
7. Absalom, Absalom!: Analysis of Major Characters | Research Starters - EBSCO, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/absalom-absalom-analysis-major-characters
8. Quentin Compson Character Analysis in Absalom, Absalom! - LitCharts, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/characters/quentin-compson
9. Nothing Ever Happens Once and Is Finished”: Absalom, Absalom! and the Politics of Historical Memory - Hawksites, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://hawksites.newpaltz.edu/sr35/nothing-ever-happens-once-and-is-finished-absalom-absalom-and-the-politics-of-historical-memory/
10. Thoughts on Absalom, Absalom! and Faulkner's art of deliberate confusion. - Reddit, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/literature/comments/691e6s/thoughts_on_absalom_absalom_and_faulkners_art_of/
11. Rosa Coldfield Character Analysis - LitCharts, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.litcharts.com/lit/absalom-absalom/characters/rosa-coldfield
12. Listening to the Ghost: Illusory Self-Image and Agency in Rosa ..., accessed on September 6, 2025, https://uca.edu/cahss/files/2020/07/Sammons-CLA-2019.pdf
13. Faulkner's "Absalom, Absalom!" and the Mysterious Rosa Coldfield - Inquiries Journal, accessed on September 6, 2025, http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/313/faulkners-absalom-absalom-and-the-mysterious-rosa-coldfield
14. Absalom, Absalom! Genre | Shmoop, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/absalom-absalom-faulkner/genre.html
15. Quentin Compson in Absalom, Absalom! Character Analysis - Shmoop, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/absalom-absalom-faulkner/quentin-compson.html
16. The Narrative Truth About Sutpen, Absalom, Absalom - Monash ..., accessed on September 6, 2025, https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1766203/lynch.pdf
17. William Faulkner's Southern Landscape - ScholarWorks@UARK, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://scholarworks.uark.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=engluht
18. Problematizing Historical Truth Through Narration in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!, accessed on September 6, 2025, https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/bitstream/handle/1956/10872/141258732.pdf?sequence=1