



An Analysis of the Sutpen Brothers in *Absalom, Absalom!*

QU Shuang^{[a],*}

^[a]Lecturer, School of Foreign Languages, Northeast Petroleum University, Daqing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

William Faulkner is a famous American novelist, and he won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1949. He was regarded as “modern classic writer” by western Literature. *Absalom, Absalom!* is one of his most important works, and is also one of the most complicated and abstruse, the most epic style works. The book’s title comes from a Bible story, and the story describes the love and hate between parents and children, between brothers, and also describes the ambiguous relationship between the brother and sister. Through these descriptions, William Faulkner created vivid characters, and through these characters, William Faulkner revealed the rotten and evil nature of racism of the Old South.

Key words: Analysis; Brothers; Racial discrimination

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INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner was born and raised in the American South, and the history and culture of this land influenced him a lot. Also, Faulkner got inspirations of writing materials from this familiar South and in his enduring works, Faulkner focused on the daily life of the people, the rise and fall of glory, and the traditions and ethics of this small-scaled southern land.

American Civil War ended in the failure of the South, and the traditional values collapsed and disintegrated after

the war in the south, but they still affected the southern society. William Faulkner lives in a traditional southern family, and growing up with hearing the legends of the courage, honor, pity, pride, justice and freedom of their ancestors. He is proud of his family and devoted to his homeland. However, the rapid collapse of South, the impact and the spread of lost feelings after the Civil War, all of these led him to make reflection on the tradition, facing the reality to make new thinking, and to peel off the beauty of the southern spiritual heritage, seeing the evil of the southern slavery and corruption, cruelty and inhumanity of plantation owners.

William Faulkner is a prolific writer, and he wrote nineteen novels and more than seventy-five short stories. Most of his works have the same fictional background—Yoknapatawpha Country, which is the incarnation of Faulkner’s homeland—northern Mississippi. *Absalom, Absalom!* Is one representative novel of this kind. Although the story is complex and fragmented in structure which sets huge obstacles for readers to understand, its literary value and beauty make it one of America’s finest novels fair and square. Faulkner himself made great effort in weaving the complication of this novel, and it might be one of his most laborious works. So readers are also sufferers in comprehending this fine fiction.

The novel mainly tells the story of the Sutpen family. It is a story spanning four generations. The protagonist Thomas Sutpen, coming from the West Virginia, married a rich girl of West Indies, but after knowing that his wife might have one eighth black blood, Sutpen abandoned his wife and his son. Then Sutpen arrived in a southern town—Jefferson, built his own kingdom and married a respectable local lady, Ellen. Mr. and Mrs. Sutpen had a son, Henry and a daughter, Judith. Henry met and admired Charles Bon, who came from a rich family and invited the latter to Jefferson. There, Bon won the heart of Judith who wanted to get engaged to him, but Sutpen refused the

engagement firmly. The truth is that Charles Bon was the abandoned elder son of Sutpen. After the Civil War broke out, Sutpen, Henry and Bon all became the members of Confederate armies. Four years later, Bon and Henry went back to Jefferson. Henry shot Bon after he knew that Bon had 1/16 black blood but he still insisted on marrying Judith, even though, Bon saved Henry on the battlefield and Bon was his half brother. As brothers, Henry and Bon should have been the most intimate ones to each other, but under the evil influence of slavery and racial discrimination, they became enemies and both ended in tragedy.

1. THE ANALYSIS OF CHARLES BON

1.1 Persistent

Charles Bon lost his father since he was very young, and he wanted to get father's love just like other children. So when he grew up, he traveled far and wide to Jefferson to find his father. His mother could not accept the fact that she had been abandoned, and she took her son to be her instrument to revenge. Though Bon's mother asked him to take revenge on his father, he had never been able to do that. His desire was very pure, and he just wanted his father to acknowledge his existence, acknowledge he was his son. And he even accepted his father not saying it directly, just giving him a hint, he would be satisfied, but he got nothing, not even a word or a smile from his father. Sutpen was Bon's father, but Sutpen would never acknowledge him. Bon was so clinging to his identification, and dreamed of being accepted by his father, so he had no choice but doing the thing that he knew wrong. He decided to get acknowledgement by getting married with Judith who was Henry's sister, also his half sister, which he knew from the beginning. He did not really want to marry with Judith, and his only aim was to force his father to admit the fact that he had another son who had one sixteenth black blood. Bon met Judith just several times, and he had rarely been together with Judith alone. Bon's attitude to the engagement was indifferent at the beginning, but he changed his mind after 4 years. He had given many chances to his father to admit the fact, but his father did not make any response. So he wanted to persecute his father to admit their father-son relationship through the incest marriage, but he failed. Charles Bon never gave up getting his father's acknowledgement, and only death stopped him. This showed that Bon was a persistent person.

1.2 Pathetic

It is very important for a child to have a complete family, and a good growing environment is also very critical for children. Bon lost his father since he was very young, and he was brought up by his mother who had planned to take revenge on her husband all the time. And she

regarded her son just as her tool to revenge. He could not get love from his father, because he did not know where his father was. He could not get love from his mother, either, because there had been no love in his mother's mind since his father abandoned them. It was not fair for Bon, for he was just a child, and he knew nothing. He did not know why his father had abandoned him, and he even did not know what wrong he did. Readers could imagine how pathetic Bon was when he saw other children were in the hugs of their fathers. And he was so eager to be loved by his father; he was so eager to be hugged by his father; and he was so eager to just see his father. He was so pathetic. In order to find the love he lost, he came to Jefferson country to look for his father. But his father did not admit him because of his one sixteenth blood of black. But, he was not willing to give up, his was persistent to pursue the love of his father. But Sutpen would never acknowledge him, so he had no choice but to do the wrong and immoral thing that he wanted to marry his half sister to force his father to admit him. But all he got was failure, for anyhow his father would not admit him, even Sutpen used Henry's hand to kill him. He aspired his father since he was a kid, but ended up his life in the father's and his half brother's hand at last. Though Henry was the direct murderer to kill Bon, Sutpen should be responsible for the death of Bon, because he knew exactly what the result would be when he told the truth to Henry. The death of Bon was Sutpen's plot. But deeply, it is the slavery and racial discrimination that set the root of the tragedy of the Sutpens. Bon was a pathetic man, he lost his father when he was very little, and when he met his father, he lost his life.

1.3 Incestuous

Charles Bon was an important figure in the rise and fall of Sutpen's family in *Absalom, Absalom!* The name of this book comes from the Old Testament of the *Bible*. Absalom was the son of the King David, and his sister Tamar was stained by his brother Amnon who had the same father and different mother with him. For revenge, Absalom killed Amnon. Then Absalom rebelled King David and was killed in the fight. King David, tears streaming down his face, hated Absalom but loved him too. Since then, in the west, Absalom became the pronoun of darling and unfilial son. Faulkner borrowed the old framework of the story in the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* that Charles Bon "fell in love with" his half-sister Judith, and was killed by Judith's brother, Henry. But Bon was different from his prototype, Amnon, for Amnon was an immoral person who stained his half-sister. It was even not Bon's original intention to marry his half sister. The intended marriage was just his measure to be admitted by his father, for he had no other choice. In order to get his father's recognition, he was so desperate to risk the taboo of incest, even at the expense of his morality and humanity.

2. THE ANALYSIS OF HENRY

2.1 Foolish

Henry had little talent or learning, and even he had never been far away from his home before he went to college. He was just a man who did not know about the outside world, so when he met Bon, he thought Bon's behaviors were very elegant, and he was attracted by Bon's every word and action. So he began to imitate Bon from all aspects without any of his own thinking, just like a fool. He regarded Bon as his best friend, but he did not know why Bon was willing to be friends with him, and he had never thought about it, so if nobody told him the truth, he would know nothing until he was dead. He was foolish, so he was taken advantage of by everyone. Bon took advantage of him to come close to Sutpen, and in order to force Sutpen to admit him, Bon attempted to marry Judith who had the same father with him, and the foolish boy Henry even tried his best to help Bon to get into the marriage. Sutpen also took advantage of Henry, for he knew the result if he told everything to Henry, and he knew everything would be going just as he thought, because he knew about Henry very much. So he told the truth to Henry without any hesitation, and got rid of Charles Bon with Henry's hand. He was so foolish to be used, and he killed his half brother under the instigation of his father, and he had to hide from the police. He was punished by morality, and dead in the fire at last.

2.2 Betrayal

Henry's betrayal was reflected in two aspects. On the one hand, he betrayed his father and his family. In order to bring Judith and Bon together, he had a quarrel with his father, and he was even willing to sever his relationship with his father and he was willing to give up his right of inheritance. He gave up everything including his relatives to leave his home with Bon. Even though he knew that Bon was his and Judith's brother later, he also chose to accept their incestuous marriage. He was very contradictory, because he did not know whether the things he did be right or wrong, so he always gave psychological hint to himself that "But kings have done it! Even dukes! There was that Lorraine duke named John something that married his sister. The Pope excommunicated him but it didn't hurt! It didn't hurt! They were still husband and wife. They were still alive. They still loved." (Faulkner, 2014, pp.482-483). He chose to stand on the side with Bon. But on the other hand, he also betrayed Bon. Initially, he chose to be on the side with Bon unconditionally, but after he knew that Bon had black blood lineage, he betrayed Bon. He could not tolerate a black to become his family member, so he killed Bon mercilessly at last. The most important betrayal was that he betrayed his morality and conscience, and he got his punishment that he deserved.

2.3 Cowardly and Rash

Henry was a very cowardly boy. When he was a little kid, his father Sutpen took him to see the bloody scene that two black men fought with each other with no rules, and would not stop until one was defeated and could not stand at all. Henry was feared of seeing that even if Sutpen asked him to see. Henry would scream and vomit every time when he saw the bloody scene. It was right that the bloody scene was too scary for a child, but Henry's sister was so brave that she hid behind the door of the stable to see the fight. So compared with a little girl, Henry was too cowardly. And Henry was also a rash man, when Bon and Judith's engagement was opposed by Sutpen, he had a quarrel with his father and left home with Bon, abandoned his family and gave up his right of inheritance. But when he knew Bon had black blood, and Bon would not change his mind to leave Judith, Henry killed Bon. Before doing this, he did not think what would happen, he would be arrested by police, his life would be trapped into hell, and he would not only be punished by law, but also punished by morality. When he left home with Bon, he did not consider anyone or anything; when he killed Bon, he did not consider anyone or anything either. From this, readers can get Henry was reckless and rash.

2.4 Racial Discrimination

Henry respected Bon very much, and he loved his sister deeply, so when he was told Bon was his brother who had the same father with him, though he was very entangled, he overcame the conscience condemnation, and decided to accept the incestuous marriage of Bon and Judith at last. But Sutpen did not want to admit this black son at all, and he certainly could not tolerate a man of black blood to contaminate his kingdom of pure white blood. So when Sutpen told Henry that Bon was his brother, but the kinship did not prevent Henry's acceptance of the marriage of Bon and Judith and Bon, Sutpen told Henry about Bon's black blood identity. After this, Henry persuaded Bon to leave Judith and not to pester her, but Bon refused Henry's persuasion unless he could get Sutpen's acknowledgement. After the persuasion failed, Henry shot Bon. Both Bon and Henry knew it very clearly that what Henry could not bear was the miscegenation, not the incest. Henry grew up under the background of the southern racism, and he was the same as his father Sutpen who would not allow a black man to disturb the noble white family. Henry shot his black brother, not only to prevent the incest, but also to maintain the white noble origin under the concept of the southern racism.

CONCLUSION

Charles Bon's life was too hard and sad, his mother refused to accept the fact that they were abandoned. So she brought up her son and nurtured him to be her tool for revenge. She controlled Bon's actions in behind until Bon

appeared at the door of Sutpen. But Bon did not really want to avenge to his father, and what he really wanted was his father's recognition. He wanted his father to admit the existence of his the other son of black blood. He was not interested in his father's property, and he even did not expect that Sutpen would admit him directly, only a hint or a glance was enough for Bon. But Bon's little desire was not satisfied, what he got was indifference, neglect and rejection. In desperation, Bon was so helpless that he tried to grasp the last lifeline to get married with Judith. And he had thought to force Sutpen to admit their father-son relationship in this way. But he failed in this contest, for what was waiting for him was death that his father planned thoroughly.

Henry was a complete failure. He loved his sister, but he deprived his sister's happiness himself in the end. It was him that brought his sister sadness and despair. He loved Bon, but Bon died under his gun in the end. Henry grew up under the traditional ideas of racism of the South, and he would never accept a black man to mix in his noble white family, he killed his best friend, his sister's lover, and his brother .

Both Charles Bon and Henry are tragic figures in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Throughout Bon's whole life, he was persuing and chasing something that he would never get. Apparently, it was Sutpen and Henry who denied Bon's

identity, but deeply it was the inhumane racism of the rotten Old South that pave the death road for Bon. Henry was a typical representative of racial discrimination just like his father Sutpen. Before he knew the truth of Bon's black blood, he admired Bon blindly, even he could violate his code of ethics to accept the marriage of his sister and his half brother, but after he knew Bon's black blood identity, even if it might be only one sixteenth black blood, he just changed his face, and all the admiration he had for Bon turned into denial and hatred immediately. Racism made Bon and Henry, the two brothers, who should enjoy one of the most intimate relationships in the world into enemies and caused the tragic and bloody end. Therefore, the Old South, the ground that incubated slavery and racial discrimination, is destined to lose in American Civil War, because it violated ethics and humanity.

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