The absalom in absalom, absalom!

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As a classic source of insight and wisdom in the Western heritage, the Bible has been studied, questioned, and alluded to for as long as it has captured the imagination of believers and novelists alike. As such, this perennial text lends itself easily to allusion, but we might well question the point of Biblical allusions, particularly when they are subtle and symbolic as in Faulkner; what extra meaning can be gained by a reference to an ancient tale that can not be said straight out? Part of the answer lies in how biblical themes are reworked in the novel; we must keep track of which Biblical details/themes/plots are brought into the novel, which are left out, and which are purposely drastically altered. Even the details that seem to correspond to some exact parallel in the Biblical text in a one-to-one mapping are meaningful when we consider just which substitution the novelist makes for its Biblical counterpart. Great writers will use all of these methods to comment on the Bible or have the Bible comment on the novel; either way a new masterpiece is created besides these two texts, produced by the interaction between them. The allusive power of the Bible allows for stories to comment on other stories, producing a rich, multi-layered work that not only tells a tale but questions itself at the same time. This is perhaps part of the reason behind the mesmerizing effect the Bible has had on modern novelists – it allows for a new window through which a dialogue on storytelling itself can emerge. Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! is largely concerned with the power of storytelling to reshape memory and give meaning to the past and as such making allusions to the Bible (and other classic texts1) is central to the novel. We will explore how Faulkner reshapes the story of 2 Samuel 13-18 to shed light on the novel, the Bible, and the timeless stories of human passion that link them.

Faulkner reshapes the Samuel story to such an extent that the biggest hint to the reader is given in the novel’s title itself. Nevertheless, there are direct hints that link Sutpen with David, Henry with Absalom, Charles Bon with Amnon, and Judith with Tamar. The novel seems to be mainly concerned with these Biblical characters, and though a case could be made for links to other peripheral characters, the suggestions for this are more tenuous (there are however many direct references to other parts of the Bible as we shall see). Sutpen is established as David early on: he carries the suggestive red beard and somewhat facetiously claims to have cut off a piece of a Yankee coat tail (here we should be cautious in comparing the Yankee forces with Saul – Faulkner often plays with the Biblical tale, not always suggesting a symbolic link). The climatic would-be incest scene and its corresponding murder cues us in to the counterparts to Tamar, Amnon, and Absalom, but these are by no means kept certain as the narrative progresses. While the Biblical Amnon seems to be ruled by a whim of lust after his virgin sister, whom he quickly casts aside after the rape, Charles Bon (ironically carrying the name “ good”) seems to become a more dignified character as Quentin obtains more information. While lacking moral scruples (in regards to bigamy and incest, the last of which he is unconscious of) he is unwilling to abandon his octoroon wife and is just as unwilling to leave Judith to whom fate seems to have prearranged a marriage. He is careful not to offend both Henry and Judith in speech and in letters; conscientious till the end, he carries a photograph of his mistress to tell Judith “ I was no good, do not grieve for me” (p. 287) before his inevitable death. Judith is also a far cry from Tamar (who is Biblically an innocent, pitied Lucretia) – she seems determined to have the wedding at all costs, even, it is suggested, under the threat of

incest, carrying that Sutpen determinism to the bitter end; (there is also an ironic reversal of the death kiss David gives to Absalom when Sutpen kisses Judith before receiving news of Bon's death). Henry too is not exactly the Biblical Absalom, who is described primarily as someone who seeks justice (for his sister's rape and his banishment): " Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man which hath any suit or cause might come unto me, and I would to him justice!" (2 Samuel 15: 4). Henry is similar in his firm stance on respecting his sister's honor, yet he is far less righteous in the novel, and seems complicit in the incest fantasy, " taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law" (p. 77). These are just a few of the ways in which Faulkner twists the Biblical story, and the more we read the more complicated the sibling relationship becomes. All three of them seem to have a hint of sexual longing: Henry and Judith have a " relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of brother and sister" and " eat from the same dish" in an ironic reversal of the Biblical scene; Charles and Henry have a curious relationship with Henry being despoiled by Charles if he could only " metamorphose into the sister" (p. 77), yet Charles is also described as wearing " feminine garments" leaving us to question who is the seducer and who is seduced. Even Sutpen, despite his reservations about the Bon-Judith union, seems to have had incestual longing in his childhood seeing " his sister pumping rhythmic up and down above a washtub in the yard, her back toward him, shapeless in a calico dress and a pair of the old man's shoes unlaced and flapping about her bare ankles" (p. 191). It seems that every permutation of lust is allowed free reign (though often with " unconscious" hopes, " subconscious" desires (p. 75)), at least in Quentin's and Shreve's

rendering of the story, leaving us to wonder just what remains of the Biblical tale.

The reason behind this becomes clearer when we consider that the narrators are themselves trying to understand the tale, sometimes filling in pieces from their own imagination (as when Quentin and Shreve suggest that Bon had known Judith was his sister). Quentin is trying to " pass that door" (p. 142), to understand just " Why? Why? Why?" (p. 135) it happened and in order to do that he has to " reconstruct the causes", often with " old virtues" (p. 96). His tale becomes the reversal of the Biblical one, (in which, at least on the surface, the motives seem clear), and by filling in and shifting details he can provide a rational explanation for an inexplicable tragedy. This then is the largest difference between the Biblical tale and novel: the Bible is succinct, giving simple motives to characters that may not explain their full psychology but allow for the larger plot to move faster; while the novel is a Biblical exegesis of the same story, creating details out of thin air in order to explain what seems a harrowing, unnatural tale of incest, fratricide, patricide, lust and power. It is perhaps this chaos and not only his son's death that David mourns with that recurring eulogy " O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18: 33), repeating the same four words endlessly. This brief passage is one of the most moving because the Bible rarely wastes words and this circular repetition seems a chilling reminder of the incomprehensible events that David can not reason through. That passage is mirrored innumerable times in the novel – " I will believe! I will! I will!" (p. 72, 88, 89); " No! No! Not that!" (p. 101); " Judith! Judith!" (p. 110), " Henry!

Henry!" (p. 109) – as if presciently mourning the destruction before the end when Quentin gives the final mourning " I don't hate it!" (p. 303). There he is speaking about the South which is part of Faulkner's larger preoccupation of Southern myopia and megalomania personified in Sutpen. But we need not limit the novel to a purely racial/regional perspective; we can look at the larger lesson for man in his " courage or cowardice, the folly or lust or fear, for which his fellows praise or crucify him" (p. 123).

The novel refers to other Biblical tales of brotherly strife, mainly the Cain-Abel and Essau-Jacob stories – Rosa's outburst after the murder " Henry! Henry! What have you done?" (p. 109) echo Genesis 4: 10, and Henry giving up his birthright links him with the more impetuous brother Essau. The parallel with the three older brothers (Cain, Essau, Absalom) shows their characteristic of being less intelligent/lucky and more violent (perhaps because of this) than their younger sibling (Abel, Jacob2, Amnon). Sutpen says appropriately " No son of a landed father wants an older brother" (p. 253), yet Charles ironically insists on wanting an older brother just like his father; he gets exactly that and perhaps the novel is implying some inevitable quarrel between the " romantic" and " fatalist" born of the same blood and doomed to strife.

In addition to the brother-brother theme there is the father-son motif; a passing reference to Abraham seeking immortality through his descendants (p. 260) reminds us of the central place that lineage holds in the Hebrew culture (and paradoxically recalls the threat of impotence and infanticide). The Bible is certainly preoccupied with this central theme of lineage which often requires great sacrifices (Lot and his two daughters, Abraham and

Hagar). We are told that Sutpen’s ultimate goal was to have a son, as if all the ensuing chaos stems from that simple need of continuing life. Seen from this perspective it is a sad irony that the very progeny is doomed to fight itself, ultimately destroying the patriarchal father-figure as well.

The preoccupation with lineage leads to concern with race as well, and there are many parallels between the Biblical strife for purity and the same Southern ideal. Charles Etienne is compared to Lilith and one of the “ sons of Ham” (p. 150-60), both outcasts from the traditional line of descent. Sutpen is repulsed to find his wife has “ negro blood” and in the end his rejection of his mixed-blood daughter Milly leads to his death, implying that his vision of passing some pure lineage through a male is doomed to fail. This also has implications for Faulkner’s South, in particular his Yoknapatawpha county where the blacks comprise two-thirds of the population and the whites are “ only in the surface matter of food and clothing and daily occupation any different from the negro slaves who supported them” (p. 78). This outcast race is the sacrifice with which the lineage can continue; Charles Etienne, though he can pass as a white, decides to belong to the outcasts, “ treading the thorny flint-paved path toward the Gethsemane which he had decreed and created for himself, and where he crucified himself and come down from his cross for a moment and returned to it” (p. 169). The Christ image here is seen more as pointless sacrifice than a source of salvation and indeed most of the Christ references in the novel have that undertone3. This Biblical reversal underscores the despair of both Sutpen’s dynasty and the South as a whole, their legacies filled with suffering but no redeemers.

Sutpen's ambitious goal to build his " hundred" seems analogous to David's building of a great Jerusalem (which would imply that his stay in Haiti is David's Hebron; the time periods of six years in Hebron and thirty three in Jerusalem seem to roughly agree with the novel). That word " hundred" 4 permeates the novel as much as Sutpen's name and image5; when his dream is over we are told that his hundred square miles is better described as " Sutpen's One", as if all those repetitions boil down to one man, one obsession, one child. But understanding that singularity is tantamount to understanding existence itself which is why Quentin bifurcates the story into larger branches, trying to fathom what must essentially remain a mystery. In the face of nature and chance, Sutpen built his horrific legacy from a wasteland and some sixty years later nothing of it remains, save Shreve's story and the tombstones (which may be possible counterparts to Absalom's pillar that served as his remembrance in place of a child – 2 Samuel 18: 18). While Mr. Coldfield had no one to confess his last thoughts to and Sutpen died too soon to even have guilt, the story itself that Miss Rosa is dying to tell leaves that scratch that can " be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another" (p. 101). That scratch is Faulkner's text itself; as we make sense of Sutpen's horrific legacy we also find new meaning in its Biblical counterpart, and the dialogue which emerges between the two brings a new perspective on how stories are told and the historical reality that lies behind them. Though we may never know what deeper roots, motives, and seeds of chance lay behind David's last cry for his son, we can nevertheless begin to reconstruct that which is central to the timeless tale and its modern renderings by continuing that ancient tradition of storytelling.

Notes

1) Besides the Agamemnon and other mythological references there are several Shakespearean allusions, including this passage mirroring Macbeth and linking the novel with Quentin's other tale, The Sound and the Fury: " tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow beyond the immediate fury" (p. 232). Clearly the Bible is not the only source of allusions for the novel, however the title at least suggest it may be the main one.

2) A case could be made for Sutpen as Jacob as well – he is wounded in the thigh and wrestles with the black man much like Jacob with the angel. Again, Faulkner's allusions can work on many levels and do not always allow for simple symbolic substitutions.

3) Just a few examples of ironic Christ references:

– The boxes of stove polish Bon's infantry receives instead of food are described sarcastically as " the loaves and the fishes as was once the incandescent Brow, the shining nimbus of the Thorny Crown" (p. 103).

– Quentin's grandfather's reversal of Mark 10: 14 – Suffer (' the' ironically removed) little children to come unto me: " what did He mean by that? How, if He meant that little children should need to be suffered to approach Him, what sort of earth had He created…" (p. 161).

– Henry can not say to Bon " I did that for love of you; do this for love of me" (p. 72) as if Christian ethics can not apply in their lives.

– Wash thinks of Sutpen before killing him “[He is] bigger than the scorn and denial which hit helt to his lips like the bitter cup in the Book” (p. 231), mimicking Christ’s “ let this cup pass from me” in Gethsemane.

4) Some examples of the word “ hundred” permeating the novel:

-Rosa and Quentin haven’t exchanged a “ hundred words” (p. 5).

– Clytie hasn’t seen Sutpen a “ hundred times” (p. 48).

– A description of a “ hundred windows” with a “ hundred still unbrided widows” (p. 97).

– “ He’s not going to come within a hundred yards of those cedars anyway” (p. 153), says Mr. Compson

– The “ hundred dollars” for the tombstone (p. 163).

5) Identities are often mixed to the point that the reader has trouble telling who the “ he” refers to in the novel (though, we are told, Quentin and Shreve always know). Henry and Sutpen are often linked as one person, as are Judith and Sutpen. A few examples of this merging identity are:

– The fighting scene in the stable where Ellen runs in looking for Thomas and Henry runs out instead (p. 21).

– We are told that Henry was fourteen then, the same age that Sutpen was when running away (p. 40).

– Judith watches Sutpen fight the same way that Sutpen would watch Henry fight (p. 95); and they are described as " too much alike" (p. 96) to the point that they do not need to talk.

– Quentin, his father, and Shreve all blend into one: " Maybe we are both father… or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us." (p. 210).

That last phrase points to the significance of the blurring of identity – Sutpen's shadow is so large that every other character around him (or talking/listening to his story) can be seen as an extension of him.