

"mother sister wife":
an evaluation of the
disparagement of
women and its
antagon...



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Deeply entrenched misogynistic attitudes pervaded the nineteenth century. Almost all men expected women to fill the role of mother, sister, or wife. They could not imagine and often actively worked against a society in which females could exist outside of these three main positions. William Faulkner firmly establishes this societal rule in his work *Absalom, Absalom!* by infusing the text with pleasantly phrased yet forgettable sexist language. In an unexpected and bothersome way, the author positions Thomas Sutpen, the main character whose actions typically have adverse and even deleterious effects on those around him, as the protagonist of the novel by consistently wrapping the plot around the success or failure of his projects and ambitions. However, Faulkner encounters a problem in characterizing an antagonist to oppose Sutpen as no believable male character of the time would expend the energy to intentionally thwart the efforts of a monied man to build a reputation and a legacy. His solution lies in the women of the novel. By subtly stressing the inflexible expectations of women yet initially characterizing Rosa Coldfield as a seemingly strong and independent female, Faulkner creates the opportunity to tear her down and transform her into a negative character in the sense that she both corrupts and negates the typical feminine position. Due to her withdrawal from the terms of society, Rosa can no longer exist as a character in her own right but only as an inverse; she becomes the antagonist, the anti-Sutpen.

In keeping with nineteenth century culture and attitudes toward the female gender role, Faulkner firmly places women in a narrow category with rigid expectations. Referring to Mr. Coldfield, Faulkner's use of the line " at a time when he had mother sister wife...to support" punctuates this point with its

intriguing lack of punctuation (60). The oneness of the term that the missing commas create indicates that these female personas, usually associated with different characteristics and time periods in life, are to the male characters indifferentiable. Bon, Sutpen, Henry, and the other men in the novel see no need to separate this overarching designation because in their experience, the women in their lives have filled or will fill these positions at some point. Though "daughter" might arise as an expected addition, the men rarely treat Ellen, Judith, Rosa, and Clytie in the loving and tender way associated with that relationship. The seemingly all-encompassing nature of the "mother sister wife" leaves little room for the women in the novel to have any other role. Therefore, the women cannot act outside of the triumvirate capacity given to them without repercussions both in the plot of the novel and in their reception as characters.

Faulkner uses frankly stated assumptions about females' functions and capabilities to continue to cement a simplistic view of the female characters in the novel. Bon's strong assertion of and belief in the notion that the octaroon mistresses "fulfill a woman's sole end and purpose: to love, to be beautiful, to divert" produces a sense of certainty about the concept that women can do nothing but function for the benefit of a man (93). The excerpt itself has a sense of beauty to its phrasing; it almost seems able to evoke a sigh if read aloud which makes it appear significantly more pleasant and innocent than sexist and demeaning. The euphonious nature of the phrase masks the danger of the ideology it illustrates and thus allows it to slip cunningly into the subconscious of the twenty first century reader. A woman's purpose obviously goes beyond the three listed by Bon, but the

idea can easily stick with the reader and affect the perception of female characters without a true realization of the origin of the disdain.

This same method of rapid and forgettable sexism appears in deceptively nonthreatening conversations between characters. While discussing Rosa's story with his son Quentin, Mr. Compson ponders that " maybe women are even less complex than [being able to think politically] and to them any wedding is better than no wedding and a big wedding with a villain preferable to a small one with a saint" (40). The conversation between the father and son does not center on their opinions of women, yet the disparaging language still emerges when they debate the motivations behind female choices. This simplistic and reproachful understanding of women pervades their society so thoroughly that they cannot help but use it as justification for their theories. Though this picture could be disregarded as an outdated representation of marriage, the association of " women" with " less complex" still registers. In conjunction with other negative language, this wording reinforces the sentiments of the male characters that females do not have equally valid judgement, concern themselves mainly with appearances, and cannot reason beyond surface level.

With these attitudes firmly fixed and regularly reiterated, Faulkner insinuates that the main male characters would encounter less trouble and opposition if the women did not intervene. When interpreted through the sexist lens that the author has fashioned, women both directly and indirectly antagonize the men in the novel. As Sutpen develops his land and his reputation, he lives " in the spartan shell of the largest edifice in the county, not excepting the courthouse itself, whose threshold no woman had so much as seen, without

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any feminized softness or window pane or door or mattress...[with] no woman to object" (30). In Sutpen's mind, women exist as a means to an end and are in impediment unless they help him accomplish his current goals. This purposeful isolation desired in the antebellum period and long after operated within the mindset that the ability to tolerate a woman's presence only when the man desired it made the man superior to others who did not have the means to regulate their interactions. Furthermore, the choice of the courthouse as a comparison for the grandeur of Sutpen's woman-free environment creates a noteworthy contrast. You go to a courthouse to legally legitimize a marriage; to conjure an image of a house and in turn a legacy greater than that of a courthouse and marriage suggests that Sutpen's vision as the protagonist goes beyond a simple affirmation of a connection to a well-regarded family.

Rosa plays a direct role in upsetting Sutpen's grand plan by breaking away from her expected womanly role and denying his desires. After Ellen dies, Rosa moves to live with Judith and Clytie. When Sutpen returns from war and proposes marriage, he suggests that he and Rosa "breed together for test and sample and if it was a boy they would marry" (144). Rosa rightfully finds this proposition appalling and immediately moves back to town, thus refuting the regulations of her society. Sutpen suggests the proposition because in his amoral mind, he sees Rosa simply as a logical means to produce another male heir. Since to him women can only fill the "mother sister wife" role, it makes perfect sense for him to expect Rosa to occupy the position as well. The use of the words "test and sample" emphasize the superfluous and expedient view of women in the novel. Sutpen expects to experiment with

them as he pleases and fails to acknowledge the inhumanity of this proclivity. He even verbalizes this vexing attitude when he assigns Wash Jones's granddaughter Milly a place lower than his mares after he "tests" with her and does not favor the outcome (151). Regardless of the degrading nature of his request to Rosa, because he is in a twisted way the protagonist of the novel, Rosa suffers repercussions because she refuses her expected role.

Throughout the novel, Faulkner develops Rosa as a seemingly resilient and determined character that places value in her own independence and maturity which suspiciously diverges from his typical depiction of women. At one point, she even entertains the idea that she "lived out not as a woman, a girl, but rather as the man which [she] perhaps should have been" (116). The use of the past conditional tense in the phrase denotes a sense of regret and a negation of femininity. Rosa easily could have been born male, every human has that fifty percent chance, but instead Faulkner opts for the words "should have" which conveys the sense that one ought to lament being born female. However, in conjunction with and ostensibly in reaction to the thought that a woman could occupy the same mental space and presence as a man, the author razes any hope that a strong female character could exist opposite of Sutpen. As a consequence of her rejection of the restrictive yet overarching womanly position that Faulkner has established, Rosa resorts to slinking around the town picking greens from people's yards and shows no gratitude for the generosity extended to her by her neighbors (138, 171). Swiftly she develops into a pathetic and destitute character. Since she negates the expected female mold, she can no longer fit into society. This

contemptible behavior along with negative phrases regarding women like "less complex" that slyly slither largely unremembered alongside the reader throughout the novel force a palpable disinclination toward Rosa.

Exasperatingly though, the only reason perception shifts and she transforms into this unfavorable parasite is because of the rigid and sexist gender role that the time period and Faulkner enforce for women.

The roles of antagonist and inverse exist as the only places left for Rosa to fill because she rebuffs her place as a woman in the highly masculinized world of the novel. She vengefully details the life and detestable influence of Thomas Sutpen, prevents him from having more sons for heirs, and ultimately causes the ruin of everything he has built in her quest to find Henry. As she and Quentin approach the old and now dilapidated mansion, Rosa says under her breath that she "will have to find it [whether Henry is there or not] out" (292). As the negator and antagonist, she no longer has the option of "should," "could," or "would" regarding her actions. Rosa loses her place as a true character after stepping beyond the womanly realm, and therefore, she loses her choice in the necessity of her actions. She has to cause the downfall of Sutpen's legacy because the author has purposefully left no other option for her. Rosa does not conform to the position that Faulkner crafts and the male characters exclusively accept; therefore, she must elicit disdain as a woman and bring about destruction as the anti-Sutpen.

The sexism laced language that Faulkner uses to craft the restrictive ideology surrounding the female role in society frustratingly and unfairly

sanctions Rosa as the antagonist opposite the strange protagonist of Sutpen
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and allows for the fiery resolution of the novel. This conclusion evokes the sentiment that contradiction of the traditional female role begets devastation. If people assume that alternate places in society for women only bring destruction, they create a cyclical pattern of thought that continually reinforces this notion. Faulkner could not have written *Absalom, Absalom!* without confining women to a rigid box and forcing Rosa outside of that box. In fact, nineteenth century Southern culture could not have functioned without this uncompromising characterization: women had to conform to the expectations of the "mother sister wife" because without it the white males would lose their incorrectly assumed innate role as the protagonists of society.