

# Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

Spring 2021 – Ten Sessions

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Assignment for Session 3

## Reading:

> Chapters 1 and 2 of *Absalom, Absalom!*, pp. 3-45

## Guide to this Assignment:

When we pick up a work of fiction, we are looking for many things: a story, its setting and time, the characters and their interactions, and ultimately, the underlying themes and emotional impact that the story has the power to convey.

In this Study Group, in addition to digging deeply into what is generally felt to be Faulkner's greatest novel, we want to examine the bold variety of narrative devices Faulkner uses in his writing and see how he establishes the story, settings, characters, emotional intensity, and themes. This requires close reading.

**For our first encounter with the text, I am asking that you do the initial reading in segments, pausing to make notes of your reaction to the specific language used as preparation for class discussion. Once you have digested a segment, move ahead.**

We will not follow this pattern in future classes, but I want to start us off carefully.

Faulkner reveals an astonishing amount of story within the first few paragraphs, the prelude to a retelling and reworking that builds in intensity, adding to the story bit by bit, ending, as we shall eventually learn, in an attempted reimagining of past events in the hope of making sense of it all. Much of the writing is to establish a mood, almost mythic in character. The book title suggests that incest and fratricide will be central to the story. Other big themes: the fate of the Old South and its social classes, slavery, and eventually (but not in this first set of readings), bigamy and miscegenation.

**A recommendation:** The major elements of the story are first revealed in broad strokes, anticipating events that will later be filled in. You can learn a lot about how Faulkner narrates by keeping a brief journal of new plot elements (with page numbers) as they arise. Some plot elements are repeated many times in heavily emotionalized language; others are dropped in as if by accident and might be missed.

## Assignment:

**Read the first paragraph only, then consider these questions:**

1. How does this narrative opening compare with the opening paragraph of *Sartoris* from last week? What do they share, and how do they differ?
2. The paragraph effectively sets a scene, but what language, in particular, piques your curiosity?

**Read the second paragraph only, then consider these additional questions:**

3. What language in this paragraph (and the previous one) stimulates your various senses?
4. What is the mood of this narration? Cite text. Does it get your emotions engaged?
5. The word “ghost” is important here. Why? How? What are the other unearthly images?

**Read to the top of p. 7, ending with the phrase “fled, vanished, none knew where.”**

6. Is it clear “why God let us lose the War...”? What is “this demon” that must have his name and lineage effaced from the earth? This question will recur often.

**Read to the end of Chapter 1**

7. Why did Rosa Coldfield tell this story specifically to Quentin? What’s the connection?
8. Rosa reports on events she did not witness. How does that impact you as a reader?

**Read Chapter 2 – the story begins again**

9. Who is the real narrator of Chapter 2?
10. While our main focus for our discussion of Chapter 2 will be Sutpen’s actions and his relationship with the townspeople as a whole, please take note of insights into Mr. Coldfield’s character and Rosa’s aunt’s character as revealed in this chapter.
11. What do we understand about the origins of Sutpen’s house furnishings? Can you cite text that clarifies how he got them? Was the arrest justified? Was Sutpen’s release equally justified?