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A Literary Motherhood: Rosa Coldfield's Design in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the war came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but to listen to them being ghosts. (Faulkner 7-8)

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

WHILE CRITICS HAVE EXAMINED ROSA COLDFIELD'S CHARACTER AND HER unreliable narrative in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, only a handful have directly addressed her motives for telling the story. What she tells Quentin Compson on that hot September day in Jefferson is not simply a hysteric's rendition of a "Gothic thriller" (Vickery 87), nor is it merely a "frenetic tirade" (C. Brooks 150). Rosa's desire to tell her story is, rather, the engine of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the catalyst that revives her chances to fulfill, at long last, her desire for legitimacy, belonging, and voice in her community. Rather than dying alone and barren—one of the ghostlike "ladies" of whom Mr. Compson speaks in the passage above—she appropriates the "design" of her nemesis, brother-in-law, and "nothusband" Thomas Sutpen by seducing Quentin into helping her give birth to her story. Like Sutpen, Rosa exploits the conventions of Southern society to recast herself as a proper Southerner who kept alive her family legacy and line. Perhaps she achieves motherhood in the only way she can, which is a literary motherhood.

To say the least, critical interpretations of Rosa¹—both early and

¹Much of the early scholarship about *Absalom, Absalom!*, if it considers Rosa at all, casts her as either a symbol of "traditional Southern romanticism" (Swiggart 151) or as a spinster whose spurned, scorned woman attitude toward Thomas Sutpen diminishes her credibility as a legitimate, trustworthy character in the novel. She is marginalized as a "questionable figure, a case history" (Weinstein 91) or a textbook hysteric who "lives in the past, in the cherishing of her hatred and her frustration" (Waggoner 178). Later critics free Rosa from charges that she is a "bitter, unreliable narrator whose judgments are completely untrustworthy" (Hobson 11), yet the scholarship continues to examine

more recent—tend to characterize her as a tragic figure, a victim, and a powerless ghost that no one (save the reader) seems to hear. I contend that Rosa, by seducing Quentin into helping her, is not only empowered by her actions, but also made human. Her inspiration launches the inquiry into Thomas Sutpen. For example, even though Quentin does not trust what Rosa says and “seeks a more reliable source” in his father (Bauer 117), Rosa’s is the only authentic voice from the era in question, the sole frail and feeble link from the Civil War past to the early twentieth century present, from Sutpen to Quentin. Elisabeth S. Muhlenfeld argues that Rosa is “a character of major status, essential to the novel, the catalyst who forces Sutpen’s story to be considered” (250). Of the narrators in the novel, Rosa is the only one who has met Sutpen and is related to him through his marriage to her sister Ellen. She is the only one who lived with him and his family, the one who wore her own dead sister’s wedding ring during her short-lived betrothal to him. There is no question that Rosa is the central catalyst of the novel, for it is she who sparks Quentin’s fascination with the Sutpens and she who takes him to Sutpen’s Hundred and forces him to become not only a listener but also a physical player—and the unwitting bearer of her legacy—in this story. Her subjectivity as a spurned would-be lover is not a liability to her narrative; it is the point of inquiry for a deeper examination of it.

Rosa’s centrality to the novel is reflected even in its design, pervading the chapters like the ever-looming wistaria: in addition to her italicized monologue that monopolizes the whole of chapter five, Rosa is with the reader and Quentin in the first and last chapters. Her death is the topic of a letter from Quentin’s father. Quentin and his Canadian roommate, Shreve McCannon, discuss at length “the old dame, the Aunt Rosa” (289). Contrary to David Paul Ragan’s observation that chapter five

her mostly in terms of her failures: her madness, her sexuality, her fanaticism, and her role in Southern society. Sally R. Page describes Rosa as a woman “excluded from the normal female role of marriage and motherhood” and “dominated by unrealities and by a furious rage at a man, who had denied her the normal fulfillment of her femininity” (102-03). Building upon Page’s observation, Olivia Carr Edenfield notes that Rosa’s frustration is compounded by her “inability to fit into any of the roles [mother, daughter, sister, aunt, lady, wife] that she should have been able to take for granted” (58), so she summons Quentin to “create a role for herself as aunt” (58). Even as she is heralded for voicing a text disruptive to the social order of Southern male patriarchy, Rosa’s narrative is evidence of her “madness,” according to Minrose Gwin, and is eventually “silenced” (*Feminine* 114).

“provides a break” between the book’s two movements (71), Rosa’s voice appears at the “physical center of the text,” as Deborah Clarke points out (141). Albert Guérard suggests that extensive italics “indicate a state different from that of normal consciousness or speech” and conveys “an interior voice, a stream flowing beneath full consciousness even, that what the innermost spirit would say if it could” (323, 308). Peter Lurie suggests Rosa speaks as though “disembodied” in this italicized narrative, that perhaps it is within this “particularly murky and ill defined narrational space” (“Trashy Myth” 564) that the reader is taken into Rosa’s gestational terrain. Perhaps in this *sub rosa* loam of Rosa’s isolated but lively mind, we hear the expression of the “very damp and velvet silence of the womb” (Faulkner 116). From this space she expounds the words that transform her from “the man which [she] perhaps ought to be” (116) to the woman—the mother—that she had always desired to be.

Birthing imagery emerges as a metaphor throughout the novel, even in Faulkner’s endeavor to write Rosa. Diane Roberts observes that Faulkner “tries to control and regulate the woman/art into a perfect, seamless vessel, yet the woman/art sometimes erupts, resists, proves to be cracked, flawed or a space that becomes engulfing instead of chaste, ‘polluted’ instead of pure,” she explains; “Faulkner writes the feminine, giving birth in language” (xv). Such is the case with Faulkner’s description of Rosa’s imperfect, stagnant, vessel-like form that sits “bolt upright” rigid as if she “had iron shinbones and ankles” and bearing an “air of impotent and static rage like children’s feet” (3). The external rigidity of this vessel contains the lush and sensual interiority of chapter five, where Rosa gives voice, “a place—rather than a space—of interiority” (Gwin, “Silencing” 161) to the workings of her ancient but still-fallow womb. This is the voice—with its fertile, horticultural imagery borne of her grief and deprivation—that seduces Quentin.

Deciphering Rosa’s narrative, and chapter five in particular, takes some patience, yet it is possible to untangle the many threads of Rosa’s “madness”—its “power to articulate itself beyond and between whatever we may think of to say about it” (Gwin, *Feminine* 98) to yield a more informed understanding of the text. Richard Godden advances the idea that Rosa tells “one story only to hide it under another” (101), a technique he calls “doublespeak.” Lurie notes that Rosa’s monologue works “differently than ordinary language, functioning ‘extra-verbally’ or even visually,” which he calls “notlanguage.” Both terms are useful to

help further unravel meaning in this text. Faulkner, according to Lurie, tends to fashion a prose “in which the sensuous or material properties of language overtake its referential function” (*Vision's* 114–15), thus Rosa’s language never “fully conveys what occurred, but rather gives a highly wrought impression of Rosa’s state of mind” (*Vision's* 104). Just as one might read concurrent narratives, Lurie suggests that there are also concurrent listeners. Quentin, in his interview with Rosa, seems to “listen to two separate Quentins”—the one preparing to leave the South “peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts” and the one still young “to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one” (Faulkner 4). There are also at least two ways to read Rosa’s text. Reading chapter five in one context, we see that Rosa (to the best of her ability) is telling Quentin her version of actual, historic events. Reading it in another context, Rosa is inviting us (and Quentin) to enter a timeless, imagined world of her creation, an image-rich space gloriously rent with language that cries for release. As Philip Weinstein notes, “Rosa’s discourse is curiously poised between the telling and the told, the still-emerging present and the already- completed past” (92). Gwin detects in the novel “a voice that evokes not so much the past but the repetitious quality of traumatic wounding that endlessly recoils upon itself” (“Racial” 30). Thus we are able to read Rosa’s monologue—and the novel itself—not only as a historic narrative, or as one only of trauma, but as an imaginative one as well. Her text becomes her production, her avenue to motherhood.

Entwined in Rosa’s narrative about her life with Judith and Clytie, her fixation with Charles Bon, and the tragic story of Henry Sutpen are tropes of birth and regeneration, references to umbilical cords, “globy spheres,” and wombs. Rosa speaks of seeds and roots, “twice-bloomed” wistaria, and blossoms. In one passage, Rosa describes to Quentin her discovery of Judith and Clytie after she learns of the supposed death of Charles Bon. Yet she could also be describing her need for regeneration and creation:

Or perhaps it is no lack of courage either: not cowardice which will not face that sickness somewhere at the prime foundation of this factual scheme from which the prisoner soul, miasmal-distillant, wroils ever upward sunward, tugs its tenuous prisoner arteries and veins and prisoning in its turn that spark, that dream which, as the globy and complete instant of its freedom mirrors and repeats (repeats? creates, reduces to a fragile evanescent iridescent sphere) all of space and time and massy earth, relicts the seething and anonymous miasmal mass which in all the years of

time has taught itself no boon of death but only how to recreate, renew; and dies, is gone, vanished: nothing—but is that true wisdom which can comprehend that there is a might-have-been which is more true than truth, from which the dreamer, waking, says not 'Did I but dream?' but rather says, indicts high heaven's very self with: 'Why did I wake since waking I shall never sleep again?' (114-15)

Rosa's imagery here suggests that she is preparing to give birth and "form" to her story. She has mustered her courage to face this "scheme" at its root, its "prime foundation," and now someone or something has grown inside her (a "prisoner soul") that "wroils ever upward sunward," tugs at her "veins and arteries" and becomes a "globy" seething mass that only knows how to "recreate, renew." One use of the term "relict" means "widow," but in science, it means both an organism that survives long after other like species are extinct and a mineral that does not change when the rock undergoes metamorphosis. In this reading, all others around Rosa have changed and moved on, but she (as relic, as the only one left of this era) remains the same, forever in the bloom of womanhood, at the age of nineteen, trapped in the body of a sixty-four-year-old virgin.

Drawing from her own horticultural imagery, we may see Rosa as a long dormant but not dead "forgotten root" (115), past the stage of conventional procreation yet still able to offer to the world one last bloom to ensure the restoration of her family line: "*for who shall say what gnarled forgotten root might not bloom yet with some globed concentrate more globed and concentrate and heady-perfect because the neglected root was planted warped and lay not dead but merely slept forgot?*" (116). In Quentin's presence, Rosa's long-dormant "neglected root" blooms: his willingness to respond to her call and to attend to her needs provides her with the sustenance she seeks. Paul Ragan claims that Rosa "associates with the urge to flower, the urge which needs only some tenderness, some evidence of caring in order to grow. The absence of that caring has both stunted and warped her" (78). But as a woman, Rosa goes "beyond 'root' and 'urge' to the very 'bloom' she conjures even as she knows it is forbidden to warped plants like herself" (Ragan 65). Imperfect as it is, Rosa's story is her one last great effort to become a "complete" woman—a mother—before she dies.

Ragan suggests that Rosa recalls her "summer of wistaria" (23) in order to provoke "a need to re-experience those events in yet another attempt to make sense of them" (78) but he does not extend Rosa's need

to remember into a desire to regenerate. Yet from wistaria to chrysalis, regeneration and propagation are major themes in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The twining wistaria that pervades the novel provides the “skeletal framework” upon which Faulkner tells his story, as Virginia O. Bond suggests (22). Like the wistaria, Rosa’s own “hysterical and distorted” narrative generates “the tension and fatality which span the entire legend” (Lind 282). The wistaria’s second bloom suggests that Rosa has been given—or perhaps she has taken—another chance to carry on her family name and story in the only way she knows how: through her imagination. Drawing from Rosa’s rage at being left fallow but unseeded, as it were, after Sutpen’s insult, Deborah Garfield argues that “the bloom prohibited to Rosa’s body is recaptured and nurtured in the imagination.” Rosa, Garfield says, wants to “feel [her urges] blossom and resound” (65). Rosa realizes—as Sutpen had—that in order to regenerate, to have her “word made flesh” (John 1:14), she cannot do so without a willing partner.

Dirk Kuyk, Jr., writes that Rosa has only two designs—one to take care of her niece, the other to marry Sutpen—both of which fail (71); but he does not consider that Rosa’s retelling of the story to Quentin is yet another of her designs that, at long last, succeeds. According to Roberts, “Miss Rosa still sees Quentin as a vehicle facilitating her quest for authenticity. She ‘impregnates’ him with the story in a way using him as Sutpen would have used her” (168). Just as Sutpen (who, according to Margaret Donovan Bauer, “views women only as an avenue to respectability and a means of reproduction” [98]) had sought to shift his status from margin to center, to establish legitimacy as a white Southern male by having a plantation and marrying Rosa’s sister Ellen, so too does Rosa seek out legitimacy—and an heir to her story—through Quentin. At first glance, Rosa’s plan to seduce Quentin into helping her may seem to be some rambling monologue of madness, the feeble attempt of a jilted, “long embattled virgin” (4) to have the last say about a man whom she detests. Yet Rosa knows her story well and, as Godden notes, “Rosa has the man, Rosa has the motive” (94). Laurel Bollinger observes that Rosa’s monologue “bears the marks of a tale practiced in solitude: the poetry of her language and the precision of her phrases suggest that she has repeated this story over and over in preparation for a moment when she could impart it to another person” (205). Certainly Rosa has prepared her remarks for delivery (her own “brief,” as it were,

even as she keeps insisting to Quentin she holds “no brief” [131] for herself), for she continually includes phrases like “So they will have told you doubtless already” (107) or “so they will doubtless tell you” (128). These defensive phrases suggest that she believes other people have already constructed a narrative about her, and that she is aware that someone else is present (and, presumably, listening). Thus, her monologue to Quentin is her concerted attempt to build a case for herself that would justify or refute what her imagined “they” say about her. And even if Quentin does not fully believe her, Rosa convinces him enough to accompany her on her midnight visit to Sutpen’s Hundred.

In the forty-three years that Rosa devotes to hating Sutpen, imagining him into an “ogre, some beast out of a tale” (127), there is no doubt that she believes she has come to “*know* [him] *awful well*” (9). As a victim of Sutpen’s design, Rosa learns from his insult to her, transforming it into a blueprint to carry out a design of her own. Delving into their psychological patterning, Rosa and Sutpen each attempt to transform an age-old wound: a denial of recognition that they each spend their lives trying to heal.

Faulkner emphasizes Sutpen’s lack of stature by not even giving him a state to call his own. Sutpen was born on the land that would have been West Virginia, but, as Shreve notes, there “wasn’t any West Virginia in 1808” because it hadn’t yet been admitted into the United States (179). Rosa was “born between two generations, the one destroyed by the Civil War and the other engaged in reconstruction” (Vickery 87) and, like Sutpen, begins her life by having no legitimate place in either. While Sutpen had been denied land and access to property, Rosa is denied her claim of kin. Rosa’s mother died while giving birth to her. Eventually, everyone in Rosa’s family—her aunt, her father, her sister, and the Sutpens—deserts her, too. Richard Poirier notes that both Rosa and Sutpen “address a social trauma that menaces their own legitimacy and as a result are unable to react adequately to what they see” (102). Their response becomes their design. Whereas Sutpen’s design sought to transform him into the planter, a plan which required “money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife” (212), Rosa’s design “simultaneously and with great ingenuity,” as Godden notes, is “to live in a planter’s house” (92). For Sutpen, the trauma source is his being turned away from the front door of a mansion as a boy. Olga Vickery notes that Sutpen “feels the full force of this pattern of exclusion

and its application to himself when the 'monkey-nigger' orders him to the back door of the plantation house. In that brief moment the central symbol of *Absalom, Absalom!* is established—the boy seeking admittance and being turned away in the name of social code" (94). This "pattern of exclusion" is also experienced by Rosa, who turns away Sutpen's proposal in the name of "social code" (her honor and virginity) and is then, as Quentin says, barred from playing any legitimate role in her own society "neither aunt, cousin, nor uncle, Rosa. Miss Rosa Coldfield" (174).

Poirier notes that both Sutpen and Rosa "try desperately to disown the past. Rosa has had her own design," that she too is "obsessed with a future even more impossible of achievement than Sutpen's" (25). Judith Bryant Wittenberg argues that, while Sutpen's scapegoat is the "monkey nigger," Rosa's scapegoat is Sutpen: "She uses him, as Sutpen used his experience at the plantation door, to objectify an exclusively egocentric and romantic view of life which has been wrenched apart by forces and events for which she holds this remarkable childish man too exclusively responsible" (25). Yet Rosa doesn't just use Sutpen as an object of hatred; she learns from his design, enabling his failed "calculated bid for a kind of immortality" (Poirier 16) to become her success. Vickery notes that the "germ of Sutpen's design is simply his determination to create by his own shrewdness, courage, and will that pattern which he sees, rightly or wrongly, in Southern society and to conduct his life strictly in terms of its ethical code" (94). One might extend this analysis to Rosa, who, rightly or wrongly, crafts her design based on her own ethical code and, as Peter Swiggart notes, sacrifices, like Sutpen, "natural human emotions for abstract substitutes, a counterpart of his consuming ambition" (153). Hyatt Waggoner notes that "Sutpen's actions destroyed not only his 'design'—his plan for his life, his purpose" but Rosa's as well (179). While Rosa would certainly agree that Sutpen destroyed her life, she also expresses to Quentin regret and deep shame of her own actions, of her willingness to come to Sutpen "like a whistled dog" (128), that she'd prepared herself to be whatever it was he wanted her to be (except for a whore). Thus her hatred for Sutpen brought Rosa deep into the blueprint of his design. It encoded itself into her body and in her language. It even crept into her handwriting. When Quentin receives Rosa's summons, he observes that her handwriting looks "cold, implacable, and even ruthless" (6). Poirier notes that this description of

Rosa echoes a description of Sutpen's eyes: "at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed" (33). Sutpen looks like someone who "had been through some solitary furnace experience" and who was "overtaken by the unforeseen handicap of the fever" (24). Compare this to Quentin's feverish recollection of his "(furnace-breathed) Mississippi September night" (290) with Rosa. These textual parallels between Sutpen and Rosa suggest that she has internalized his seduction of her so completely that it fuels her own strategy of appropriation and propagation.

Quentin miscalculates his role in Rosa's scheme and does not recognize the guile that she uses to seduce him into this story. Enacting the role of a feeble, helpless ancient spinster, Rosa plays upon Quentin's youth, his gender, his heritage, his supposed literary ambition, and an imagined future wife in need of a "gown or a new chair for the house" (5) as a way to entice—or seduce—him into helping her revive this story from their past. "Honor and valor were fundamental values that determined social and familial interaction, but these were male attributes in a male-dominated society," Entzminger points out: "Women were seen as the objects of protection. Rosa, with little else to call an asset but her gender and her knowledge of Southern traditions, summons Quentin for help" (112). By enlisting Quentin, Rosa has found a pliable young man she thinks she can count on to "inseminate" her story, the one person "with the greatest chance to escape the South" (114) to give both life and credibility to this "long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration" (Faulkner 3). Quentin, knowing of Rosa's role as the county's Confederate poet, at first dismisses his father's thought that Rosa simply "*wants the story told*" (6), countering his first instinct with a second: "if she had merely wanted it told, written and even printed, she would not have needed to call in anybody" (6). While Roberts notes that Quentin is "a vehicle facilitating her [Rosa's] quest for authenticity" (168), his role in Rosa's design goes beyond that. Quentin's father immediately recognizes Rosa's motive in choosing Quentin, though perhaps not her full intent: "It's because she will need someone to go with her—a man, a gentleman, yet one still young enough to do what she wants" (8). Quentin soon learns that Rosa's request for assistance to have her "story told" is not as innocuous as one might conclude. Rosa doesn't want Quentin to merely hear and retell the story; she wants him to become an active player in it.

Leading up to the climactic scene in which Quentin meets Henry

Sutpen is a description of Rosa and Quentin that underscores his seduction by her and what becomes for him a transformational journey. Gwin notes that in chapter five, in spite of its madness, Rosa “creates her text as something so beautiful and powerful that it may seduce its readers (Quentin? Us?) to embrace its rhetoric, and perhaps even its madness” (“Silencing” 162). Quentin mistakes Rosa’s “clumsy and fumbling and trembling eagerness” as terror or alarm, but discovers it is instead anticipation: she leans forward, eagerly: “the prescience of her desire and need could warn its consummation” (290). This imperfect courtship—a midnight ride out to Rosa’s sister’s house—is part of the realization of Rosa’s design, her bid to rewrite history and reclaim herself as a full-fledged Southern woman and as the mother of this story. Moreover, perhaps Quentin can hear Rosa’s voice of “repressed desire which converses in the space between the conscious and the unconscious” (Gwin, “Racial” 72). Quentin eventually rejects this madness, further repressing it in his bed in Cambridge, but in this scene he accepts Rosa’s madness, and her, as his own. Considering Godden’s concept of “doublespeak” and Lurie’s “notlanguage,” perhaps when Quentin thinks “I do. Go back to town and go to bed,” he expresses, silently, his own “repressed desire.” In this reading, Quentin’s “I do,” unwittingly accepts his role as Rosa’s groom, even as he wants to “go back to town” (*Vision’s* 291). By continuing on with Rosa to Sutpen’s Hundred, he legitimizes Rosa and her story as his own.

Meanwhile, Rosa prepares to embrace her womanhood by transferring her masculine qualities to Quentin, offering him her phallic hatchet hidden in her umbrella when she discovers he fails to bring a pistol. She begins to re-embrace her family ties and her right to be on the property by referring to herself as Ellen’s “only living heir” (294). Leaving behind the horse and buggy at the twin-pillar gateposts, Rosa, her steel hand “trembling on his arm yet gripping it still with that lifeless and rigid strength, not talking not saying words, yet producing a steady whimpering, almost a moaning, sound” (293), makes Quentin escort her, the lady that she is, through that last half-mile of darkness. Through the long dark road, that “rutted tree-arched drive” (292) that suggests a birth canal, or perhaps an umbilical cord, from Rosa’s world to Sutpen’s, the unlikely couple shuttles the legacy from one womb to another, “from one closed forbidden door to the next” (116). In this scene, Rosa’s will and mindset begin to pervade Quentin’s. He finds himself repeating her

words: "If we can just get to the house, get inside the house" (293). Then, as they approach the house, he begins "aping without knowing it her own tense fainting haste" (293) and then feels something "fierce and implacable and dynamic driving down the thin rigid arms and into his palms and up into his own arms" (293). Something transfers from Rosa to Quentin, an echo of Rosa's earlier observation that there is "something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both" (111-12). Thus whether enemy or lover (this reading argues lover), Quentin's touching of Rosa severs their separateness. They are now bound to each other, a union borne of Rosa's seduction.

Under Rosa's direction, Quentin breaks into the house through the window (a window with neither glass nor lock) instead of entering through the door. There, in the first glimmer of light, at the strike of a match, Quentin sees the face of Thomas Sutpen in his ancient, half-black daughter Clytie, who (in another echo of the symbolism of that troublesome front door), lets Rosa enter the rotting mansion. Rosa rewrites her earlier confrontation with Clytie, striking her "to the floor with a full-armed blow like a man would have" (295) rather than allowing herself to be blocked again from going upstairs. The violence she commits against Clytie in her goal of discovering what has been "out there for four years, living hidden in that house" (140), her frantic run up the staircase, further seduces Quentin. Even though Quentin knows he'll be "sorry tomorrow" (296), he follows Rosa upstairs to come face to face with Henry Sutpen. Peter Brooks suggests that this scene constitutes "a kind of hollow structure, a concave mirror or black hole at the center of the narrative" that offers "the promise that [the] past can be recuperated within the present" (306). The echoed, mirrored snippet of conversation conjures the twists of a double helix, an intersection of lives and stories and histories converging on this brief exchange:

And you are?
Henry Sutpen
And you have been here?
Four years
And you came home?
To die?
Yes. To die.
And you have been here?

*Four years.
And you are?
Henry Sutpen. (298)*

Meeting Henry Sutpen, Quentin involuntarily moves from distracted observer to full-fledged player in Rosa's story, and they together (Quentin and Henry) embody the seamless presence of past and present. The twining, palindromic quality of this exchange between Quentin and Henry echoes the patterning of the wistaria that hangs from the trellis at Rosa's house in the first scene, and the "two swirls of smoke" (300) at Sutpen's Hundred. The scene, both in text and between the characters, invokes yet another of Quentin's doublings throughout the novel. Echoing back to the "two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage" (4-5), Quentin recognizes Henry "as a double of himself and thus sees his own condition as a fated repetition of that earlier life" (Irwin 134). It is here that Quentin confronts the physical form of Rosa's story. It is a copy of himself, the flesh-and-blood "evidence of a dead Southern myth" (Entzminger 114).

The last few pages of *Absalom, Absalom!*, told from Quentin's perspective—a perspective he does not share with Shreve—are replete with sensual recollections of his evening with Miss Rosa. Lying in his bed jerking uncontrollably "until he could even hear the bed" (288), Quentin recalls with great intimacy the smells and tastes of the moment with Rosa on that "breathless (rather furnace-breathed) Mississippi September night": "He could taste and feel the dust" and "smell the old woman in the buggy beside him, smell the fusty camphor-reeking shawl and even the airless black cotton umbrella" and the "hear the dry plaint of the light wheels in the weightless permeant dust" (290). Quentin's experience of his night with Rosa literally settles into his senses, the sensation of the dust moving "sluggish and dry across his sweating flesh" as he hears "the parched earth's agony rising toward the imponderable and aloof stars" (290). As Rosa tells Quentin, the "substance of remembering" is "senses, sight, smell: the muscles with which we see and hear and feel—not mind, not thought" (115). Thus Quentin's senses remember, or (conflating past with present) relive the moment, the convulsions and terror he experiences upon his return from Sutpen's Hundred that night reemerge in his conversation with Shreve some three months later. Perhaps Quentin is, as Gwin argues, "both seduced

and terrorized" by Rosa's mad text (*Feminine* 71). This is of course not to say that, in being seduced by Rosa, Quentin develops a conscious, passionate love for her; but his involvement in her birthing of this tale—as its heir—draws them together in a psychological union, with Rosa, as Shreve says, "irrevocably husbanded" (147), wedded, as John T. Matthews observes, "to those who have been negated or erased even as they become her husbands" (578). Matthews is referring to would-be husbands Charles Bon and Thomas Sutpen, but I would add Quentin as well, her narrative seductive enough to convince Quentin to legitimize her story by accompanying her to Sutpen's Hundred. Quentin is her last chance, her own cannon that "has just one more shot in its corporeality" (224) that would engender her story and provide for her an opportunity to become the bearer, the mother of this tale.

The particulars of Rosa's death—and her true motive for venturing out to Sutpen's Hundred three months after she discovered Henry alive—are unclear. Filtered through Mr. Compson's split-chapter letter to Quentin and accessible to the reader only through Quentin's imagination and Shreve's speculation, the reader has little to go on to piece together her return to Sutpen's Hundred and her subsequent death. Many critics contend that Rosa's return to Sutpen's Hundred is her last chance to dredge up the past in order "to verify her own existence" (Muhlenfeld 296) and to put an end to the world which had so long denied her existence. She could be punishing the inaccessible father's all-but-dead ghost of a son. Or, as Godden suggests, her plan is to rout out Henry so she can continue to remain the technical "mistress of the Hundred" (113).

Given the presence of the ambulance, I agree with Shreve's assumption that Rosa did "reconcile herself to it [rescuing Henry], for his sake, to save him, to bring him into town where the doctors could save him" (299). There still remains the question why it took her three months after discovering Henry to rescue him. Cleanth Brooks suggests that the three-month window would land Rosa's rescue (or return) right around Christmas: December 26 or 27 (319), a date heavy with symbolism and ripe for reconciliation for an old woman deemed both a Southern romantic and aging spinster. Olivia Carr Edenfield believes that Rosa goes into a coma of grief after spending "three months readying a place for Henry" just as she'd spent "three months preparing a place for Sutpen" (65) and that her endeavor to rescue Henry is "her

last hope of fitting into the patriarchy by becoming at the end the aunt that she never has been allowed to be" (65). Whatever her motive, Rosa's three-month wait to rescue Henry is consistent with the blueprint and source of her design. Recounting the amount of time it took Sutpen to recognize Rosa "in the garden with a hoe" (131) upon his return from war, she tells Quentin, "*It took me just three months*" (127). Another proof of Rosa's adherence to Sutpen's temporal design emerges in the four years that Sutpen was at war and the four years Rosa waited to visit Henry, as noted by Edenfield (65). These examples suggest that Rosa is operating from a design template so ingrained inside her that even she, consciously, cannot articulate it, only enact it.

In her attempt to save Henry, Rosa collapses into a fatal coma as Sutpen's Hundred goes up in flames, leaving the idiot Jim Bond, the sole heir apparent of the Sutpens, to run shrieking into the woods as his aunt and uncle perish inside. Rosa's heir is Quentin, and by extension, Shreve, with whom Quentin shares and re-imagines the story in their dorm room at Harvard. Quentin is skeptical that Shreve, who had never lived with the "smoke- and wistaria-laden air" (236) blowing over him, who had never nourished the "blooms" (236) that the Compsons and the Sutpens lived with, could understand the story:

"You would have to be born there."

"Would I then?" Quentin did not answer.

"Do you understand it?"

"I don't know," Quentin said. "Yes, of course I understand it." (289)

But perhaps Shreve does understand the story and Miss Rosa even more than does Quentin (who, moments later, admits that he *doesn't* understand it). In the fire scene, Quentin imagines Rosa, as the house collapses before her, "the light thin furious creature making no sound at all now, struggling with silent and bitter fury, clawing and scratching and biting at the two men who held her" (300). She struggles and fights "like a doll in a nightmare, making no sound, foaming a little at the mouth" (301). To Quentin, Rosa is, even to the last, like an animal, stripped of her propriety, her femininity, and her conventions, "struggling between two men" (Gwin, *Feminine* 65). Courtesy of Quentin, the reader's last sight of Rosa is, as Muhlenfeld notes, "one of a madwoman, driven beyond the brink of insanity in a final total frustration—not of a ghost, but of an active human being" (257). In spite

of Quentin's efforts to imagine away her humanity, Rosa dies not as a ghost or victim, alone in her empty house, but rather (in this reading) while trying to accomplish the most humane of acts—saving the life of another.

Quentin does not see Rosa as transformed, yet others do. Shreve and Mr. Compson both recognize some aspect of Rosa's humanity and her redemption. Shreve (calling her "the Aunt Rosa") notes that Rosa "refused at the last to be a ghost" (289), that "even after fifty years she not only could get up and go out there to finish up what she found she hadn't quite completed, but she could find someone to go with her and bust into that locked house" (289-90). Quentin's father, in recalling Rosa's death, remarks that she has perhaps been "bourne where the objects of the outrage and of the commiseration also are no longer ghosts but are actual people to be actual recipients of the hatred and the pity" (301-02). Through Rosa's narrative of seduction, she is able to rid herself of the ghosts—the "crucified child" (4), the "old lady who died young of outrage" (142)—who had haunted her body for so long. By transforming her wounds into narrative, by finding a willing listener with whom she can birth her story, Rosa can reclaim her right to her womanhood and her humanity.

Even though madness moves throughout the novel and the criticism about it, Rosa's own awareness of the role madness plays in redemption surfaces in her explanation of Sutpen's design when she tells Quentin: "since surely there is something in madness, even the demoniac, which Satan flees, aghast at his own handiwork, and which God looks on in pity—some spark, some crumb to leaven and redeem that articulated flesh, that speech sight hearing taste and being which we call human man" (134). Rosa is convinced that Sutpen was "mad, but not so mad. Because there is a practicality to viciousness" and that if any part of Sutpen was mad "it was only his compelling dream which was insane and not his methods" (134). If Rosa's assertion is accurate that Sutpen was vicious, not mad, then there is little space for redemption for him—and this is what separates Rosa from Sutpen. Thus perhaps—going back to Gwin—it *is* Rosa's madness that in the end redeems her.

Meanwhile, Shreve's continual reference to "the Aunt Rosa" suggests that perhaps she has done her job in reestablishing a kinship. Quentin, on the other hand, in his correction that she is "Miss Rosa" and not a relative, denies it. This denial of Rosa's legitimacy, of her very deliberate

act of exploitation of him that echoes Sutpen's exploitation of her, suggests that Quentin will further repress his inheritance of Rosa's madness and be unable to escape his past. This rejection (or repression) of Rosa's truth is what, in the end, will destroy him. According to Vickery, Quentin "has the choice of viewing the past symbolically or literally and of affirming or denying its 'design.' With his passionate reiteration that he does not hate the South, Quentin reveals his decision to perpetuate the design he has found in the past" (92). Perhaps Rosa's seduction of Quentin—her "madness"—contributes to his undoing, which begins with his anguished—"I don't. I don't. I don't hate it! I don't hate it!"—wail about the South at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* and, as Entzminger notes, ends with his own "hysterical symptoms" (109) and eventual suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*.

Perhaps, in her comatose state, Rosa Coldfield is finally "silenced" (*Feminine* 73), as Gwin suggests, but she has already said what she needed to say to Quentin. Not only did Rosa's madness enable her to transform an age-old wound into the birth of her family legacy, it also helped to make her fully human. Citing Jacques Derrida, Gwin argues that Rosa Coldfield's story offers a "terrifying but fascinating image—a woman (invisible) giving birth to a monstrous child. The story which Rosa gives birth to is much like this formless form of monstrosity; for although Rosa insists upon presence, she cannot reach full presence" (*Feminine* 67). One can take Gwin's notion of "birth" one step further. Perhaps by giving life to her story, by endeavoring to rescue her nephew, Rosa "leavens and redeems" into "full presence," a "being which we call human" (134).

Whether anyone in the novel recognizes it or not, Rosa is empowered by telling her story to Quentin, and so she can physically transform herself from the ghostly "lonely old thwarted female flesh" with a "grim quiet voice from beyond the unmoving triangle of dim lace" (14) in the first chapter to a "forgotten seed" that sparked a "whimpering breathing" woman eager and anticipating, who crosses the threshold of her sister's house on the arm of a proper young gentleman in the last. With help from Quentin Compson, Rosa Coldfield—in her mind and in the text of the novel—becomes a human being and the mother to the Sutpen legacy, and it is her imprint, her version of events, that takes form and regenerates in the minds and memories of those in Yoknapatawpha County and beyond.

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