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The Vampire Motif in Absalom, Absalom!

WHEN *Absalom, Absalom!* was first published in 1936, Bernard De Voto echoed the sentiment of more than one critic when he dismissed the novel as a drama of "diabolism, a 'miasmal distillant' of horror, with clouds of sulphur smoke billowing from the steady phosphorous glow of the graveyard and the medium's cabinet." Although there is general agreement today with the opinion of Cleanth Brooks that this novel is considerably "more than a bottle of Gothic sauce to be used to spice up our own preconceptions about the history of American society," I think that in their disparagement of *Absalom, Absalom!* the early reviewers were onto something. If they had refined their reaction to it, they might have recognized that Faulkner's novel is a vampire story.

I do not mean to suggest that *Absalom, Absalom!* is literally a vampire tale. No necks are punctured in the House of Sutpen, no garlic decorates its doorway. The vampires in the novel are metaphoric rather than actual.

It is interesting to note the resemblance between Thomas Sutpen and Count Dracula as created by Bram Stoker. To be sure, the Dracula of Stoker's devising, the prototypical vampire, celebrates his family's glorious past while himself transcending history, and Sutpen's grand design, the motivating force of *Absalom, Absalom!*, results from his sense of history. But Sutpen also transcends history; his defiance of the bounds of time is evident in his presence in Quentin's chilly Harvard dormitory room in the winter of 1909–1910. Moreover, Sutpen is specifically described as a vampire by Miss Rosa Coldfield, who depicts him as "standing there motionless with an expression almost of smiling where his *teeth* showed through the beard" (my emphasis). Then, too, Quentin re-

ports that just before Wash Jones kills Sutpen, the black midwife said that she saw Sutpen's "eyes and his *teeth* inside his beard" (my emphasis). Several other details in *Absalom, Absalom!* link Sutpen to the image of the vampire, particularly as we have this in Stoker's *Dracula*. For instance, Dracula's horses are "coal-black and splendid animals"; Sutpen rides a black stallion. Dracula often becomes a bat; Sutpen is characterized as "the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment." Dracula is unhurt by an attack with a dagger; Sutpen, who, "being a demon" seems "impervious to shot and shell," returns unscathed from the Civil War.

Admittedly the evidence for the direct resemblance between Sutpen and Stoker's Dracula is probably mere coincidence, but even if we discount the parallel between Sutpen and Stoker's character, we cannot fail to recognize that traditional elements of the vampire myth are present in *Absalom, Absalom!* For example, the possibility that Sutpen rapes Milly Jones in the absence of Wash suggests the violently erotic nature of the vampire as pointed to by the well-known authority on vampires, Montague Summers. Sutpen's wrestling ability further implies his vampiric nature, not only because it indicates his propensity to violence but also because vampires (again according to Summers) "can acquire sufficient energy and human substance . . . to contest in wrestling." Rosa's description of Sutpen after one of his matches, "standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at his feet and bloody too," is a tableau of vampire and victim. Traditionally, too, in the process of murdering a vampire, the vanquisher beheads the monster. Decapitation, not staking, is, in fact, Summer says, "the only certain method of destroying a vampire." Sutpen is decapitated at the end of the novel by the scythe-wielding Wash Jones.

The dynamics of Sutpen's rise to power and the simultaneous decline of his family closely parallel the predatoriness symbolized by the vampiric act of bloodsucking. When Sutpen first arrives in Jefferson, for instance, he looks "like a man who has been sick," his big frame but "gaunt now almost to emaciation." After a time, however, Sutpen begins to fill out his clothes. His health improves, the health of those surrounding him declines. Although we have no description of Ellen Coldfield's complexion before she marries (other than that she wears powder at her wedding to hide the tear stains), by the time Judith is fourteen and Henry sixteen, Ellen is failing. There remains "a faint bloom yet on what would be dewlaps and not cheeks any longer." Her rapid decline and the circumstances surrounding it help to confirm our suspicions about Sutpen. Laments Mr. Compson: "Yes, he had *corrupted* Ellen to more than

renegadery” (my emphasis). As much the victim of a vampire as Dracula’s Lucy Westenra, Ellen Coldfield Sutpen dies, her face white, her energy drained by her husband, pleading with Rosa to protect Judith.

But Judith has been under Sutpen’s control since girlhood. She watches the wrestling matches from the square entrance to the hayloft; she instigates the wild carriage rides into town. Mr. Compson characterizes her in vampiric terms: “waiting, parasitic and potent and serene.” “The young girl dreaming, not living, in her complete detachment and imperviousness to actuality,” Judith is both victim and predator, a type of vampire.

In fact, no one in the household escapes the curse on Sutpen, no one including Rosa Coldfield. After her father commits suicide, she flaunts custom by refusing to do “the natural thing,” that is, to move in with Judith. It is not this custom that she is depending on “to keep body and soul together,” comments an omniscient narrator. “*It is as though she were living on the actual blood itself, like a vampire*, not with insatiability, certainly not with voracity, but with that serene and idle splendor of flowers abrogating to herself, because it fills her veins also, nourishment from the old blood that crossed uncharted seas and continents and battled wilderness hardships and lurking circumstances and fatalities” (my emphasis). Like a vampire, Rosa chooses to be a parasite, to nourish herself on the blood of her inheritance.

From the first pages of the novel Rosa is described in vampiric terms. A more immediate presence than Sutpen, she, while accusing him with every breath, may, in fact, be more monstrous than he. Dressed in eternal black, she summons Quentin to her “dim hot airless room with the blinds closed.” The gloom surrounding her tomblike home is “dim” and “coffin-smelling”; her “female old flesh” is described as having a “rank smell,” suggesting the putrid odor said to emanate from the vampire. Quentin receives Miss Rosa’s summons “out of another world almost,” a summons “revealing a character cold, implacable, and even ruthless.” Like the nocturnal vampire, Rosa detains Quentin until dark before they start for Sutpen’s Hundred. Even Jason Compson associates Miss Rosa with the supernatural using a life-in-death image: “Years ago,” he remembers, “we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts.”

Miss Rosa displays other characteristics peculiar to the female of the vampiric species. Like the lamia, for instance, Miss Rosa is fond of young men. Mr. Compson explains to Quentin the reason for Miss Rosa’s enlisting his services: “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,

do it the way she wants it done.” At the end of the novel, when Rosa and Quentin travel the twelve miles from Jefferson to Sutpen’s Hundred, she displays the incredible strength attributed to the female vampire. According to the various narratives, Rosa, a petite, childlike woman, either knocks Clytie down “with her fist like a man would” or strikes Clytie “to the floor with a full-armed blow like a man would have.” She grasps Quentin’s arm “clutching it in a dead rigid hard grip as if her fingers, her hand, were a small mass of wire.” Also, like other female vampires, Rosa hisses. As she and Quentin approach the Sutpen homestead, Rosa hands Quentin a heavy hatchet and hisses, “Take it!” when he appears to hesitate. Again, when Quentin balks at breaking down the door, she hisses, “Break it!”

The vampiric qualities associated with the older members of the Sutpen clan extend to the offspring, for example, as I have mentioned, to Judith. But Charles Bon, the son of Sutpen and Eulalia Bon (whom Michael Millgate compares to the vampiric Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*), inherits more of his father’s vampiric traits than any other of Sutpen’s children. In fact, Bon quite closely resembles the familiar Hollywood vampire. He is, after all, “a young man of a worldly elegance and assurance beyond his years, handsome, apparently wealthy,” “a personage who . . . must have appeared almost phoenixlike, fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere.” Although handsome and elegant, Bon appears too old to be studying law with Henry at the university. His being described as “catlike” reminds us that vampire lore implicates cats in vampiric pollution. We realize that under the slick cosmopolitan veneer lies something “shadowy: a myth, a phantom . . . some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all.”

Bon, his teeth ever-glinting, commands supreme power over his siblings. Judith, who has seen Charles “for an average of one hour a day for twelve days during his life and that over a period of a year and a half . . . is bent on marrying him to the extent of forcing her brother to the last resort of homicide.” For Bon’s sake, Henry renounces his birthright. He even admits to his and Judith’s victimization by the vampiric Bon: “*Hers and my lives,*” he tells Charles, “*are to exist within and upon yours.*”

Yet another strange relationship exists in *Absalom, Absalom!*, that between Thomas Sutpen and his house, which Mr. Compson says Sutpen intends to marry. Marry it he does, and the house of Sutpen, like Poe’s house of Usher, becomes both a reflector of and a conspirator in the family doom. J. O. Bailey, in “What Happens in ‘The Fall of the House

of Usher,' " argues that the Usher mansion is a vampiric force that drains the vital energy from both Roderick and Madeline. Similarly the house at Sutpen's Hundred acts like a parasite which sucks at the lifeblood of the Sutpen clan. Rosa Coldfield blames the house for Ellen's decline. She says that as a child, she would listen "to the living spirit, presence, of that house, since some of Ellen's life and breath had now gone into it as well as his."

Like Sutpen, Rosa, Ellen, Bon, Henry, and Judith, the house lives: it too partakes "of that air of scaling desolation . . . —a skeleton giving of itself in slow dribbles of furniture and carpet, linen and silver." And when Clytie bars Rosa from mounting the stairs to see Henry warning " *'Dont you go up there, Rosa,'* " the house appears to talk. Rosa recalls, " *it was as though it had not been she who spoke but the house itself that said the words.*" As Clytie puts her hand on Rosa's arm to restrain her further, Rosa shrieks: " *'Take your hand off me, nigger!,'* " but Clytie makes no move. The hand " *was the agent of its own crucifixion, until the voice parted us, broke the spell,*" says Rosa. " *It said one word 'Clytie.' Like that, that cold, that still: not Judith, but the house itself speaking again, though it was Judith's voice.*"

Like the House of Usher and the house of Usher, as the family Sutpen fares, so fares the house, for in both cases, the family-house relationship imitates the interdependency of vampire and victim. When Sutpen returns from the Civil War, we see the "rotting porticos," and by the time Quentin accompanies Miss Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred in 1910, it has become a "rotten mausoleum." Perhaps the best picture we have of the house is curiously reminiscent of the Usher mansion in its domination of the surrounding landscape rather than in its detail. "It loomed, bulked, square and enormous, with jagged, half-toppled chimneys, its roofline sagging a little . . . now almost beneath it, the dead furnace-breath of air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh." And when the house burns to the ground, we are told that "somewhere something lurked which bellowed, something human since the bellowing was in human speech, even though the reason for it would not have seemed to be." On the literal level, the "something human" is Jim Bond, the idiot grandson of Charles Bon. He, however, merely echoes the bellowing of "the reason for it," the vampiric house. The cry of anguish that vampire lore has taught us to expect from the monster as it is staked, decapitated, or in this case, incinerated, comes from the house itself.

As the house of Sutpen goes up in flames, Henry, the last heir to

the family name, a Roderick Usher figure, finally dies. A sensitive child, he had vomited with fear and disgust at his father's wrestling matches; an impressionable youth, he had been seduced by Charles Bon and his refinements. Yet, although Henry kills Bon over a matter of blood and although Henry possesses the Sutpen family teeth which can be seen through his beard, Henry is a most unwilling vampire. Unlike Sutpen, Rosa, Bon, and the house, Henry is more the victim than the aggressor.

Henry is clearly portrayed as the victim rather than the victimizer in the climactic confrontation scene at Sutpen's Hundred. Quentin, telling Shreve about the experience, says that he "went in, entered the bare stale room whose shutters were closed too, where a second lamp burned dimly on a crude table; waking or sleeping it was the same; the bed, the yellow sheets and pillow, the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse; waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived." A flesh and blood ghost, Henry is drained and dying; his bones, no doubt, are as rotten as the house's support beams.

Although not so directly, Quentin, his emotional twin, is as surely as Henry the victim of the House of Sutpen. Ilse Dusoïr Lind comments that "the death-in-life of Henry is Quentin's own." Indeed, Quentin acknowledges that he *is* Henry, and he relates his story in a "flat, curiously dead voice." He tells Shreve that he, as much as Henry, is a descendant of Sutpen saying, "maybe it took . . . Thomas Sutpen to make all of us."

Like the Ancient Mariner, Quentin is doomed to tell and retell, to listen and relisten to the story of the Sutpens and of his own destruction. When Shreve interrupts at one point, Quentin, without even raising his voice, cuts him short with " 'I am telling' . . . *I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever. . . .*" Thus the vampiric Sutpens refuse to die; they transcend time and space to attack Quentin first at Sutpen's Hundred and later in his Harvard dormitory room, appropriately enough, during the midnight hour.

In the closing chapters of *Absalom, Absalom!*, we see how his obsession with Sutpen's saga has drained and continues to drain Quentin's vital energy. Early in chapter 8, Quentin sits "hunched in his chair, his hands thrust into his pockets as if he were trying to hug himself warm between his arms, looking somehow fragile and even wan in the lamp-light." As chapter 9 opens, an attack on Quentin by the vampiric Sut-

pens is in progress. After becoming aware of “the warming blood driving through his veins, his arms and legs,” Quentin begins to convulse. Toward the end of the novel, the young victim recalls the night the Sutpens first laid claim to his life, the night he had been so terror stricken by the sight of Henry that he had run into his own room sweating and panting and had even neglected to bathe. This memory, together with Shreve’s final question, “Why do you hate the South?” leaves Quentin susceptible to one final time-transcending attack by the Sutpen spirits. In his reply, “*I dont hate it, . . . I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*” we see a man depleted of energy and reduced to hysterics.

After setting up this grand scheme of cause-and-effect relationships, however, we should step back and wonder how it was that the apparatus was set in motion. Vampires create other vampires, and Sutpen’s parents were, after all, poor West Virginia mountain folk, hardly the vampiric type. All indicators point to the ultimate vampire in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Myth of the Old South, a myth which condones the vampiric institution of slavery. The myth corrupts Sutpen and drives him to commit himself to his grand design. Eventually the myth even instigates the Civil War, which relatively exerts, as Walter Sullivan points out, “an influence on Sutpen’s design too important to be overlooked.” Although we see little of the battlefield in the novel, we do see the war draining vital energy from Sutpen, Bon, and Henry, and turning Miss Rosa into a ghost.

Although Quentin is the ultimate victim of the vampiric South within the novel, the power of the several monsters transcends the fictional universe of *Absalom, Absalom!* The reader is the ultimate victim. We, too, are willingly deceived and corrupted by the attractiveness of the myth and of the dynamic Sutpen. Like Quentin, we, after having struggled to maintain objectivity through 378 pages of rhapsodic, hypnotic prose, are drained of energy. Quentin’s double-edged protest, “*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*” is our own.

Labeling *Absalom, Absalom!* a Gothic romance, the early critics closed the door to the identification of the vampire motif in the novel. The recent resurgence of serious interest in vampire lore evidenced by the proliferation of vampire films makes a vampiric reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* more tenable, however. In fact, a reading such as I have outlined, in which the vampire motif becomes a metaphor for predatoriness, significantly broadens our understanding of what Cleanth Brooks calls Faulkner’s greatest and least well-understood novel. The vampiric act provides a paradigm to describe that sinister, parasitic relationship among the members of the Sutpen clan. In addition to suggesting an

alternative interpretation of the familial relationships, a reading of *Ab-salom, Absalom!* as a vampire story allows us to reinterpret the final collapse of the house at Sutpen's Hundred. Deprived of its human vitality by war and reconstruction (bloodsuckers in their own rights), the house, the symbol of Sutpen's vampiric grand design, decays, reflecting the family curse. Most important perhaps, the vampire motif invests *Ab-salom, Absalom!* with a dimension of dark, mythic evil, which, like the vampire itself, transcends time.