

Postmodern Truth in William Faulkner's "Absalom, Absalom!"Nahid Sharifi¹, H. R. Rezayee² and *Kh. Mohamadpour³¹Department of English Literature, Payame-Nour University, Iran³Department of Persian Literature, Payame-Nour University, Iran***Corresponding author:** Kh. Mohamadpour

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Abstract: In this paper, the researcher has attempted to evaluate William Faulkner's salient novel; "Absalom, Absalom!" in the light of Postmodern approach towards Truth. One of the assumptions, shared amongst critics and writers of postmodern worldview is plurality and temporality of truth. By examining this representative novel, it can be said that the Faulknerian text, sometimes denies that it possesses authority to guide readers toward any real truth and since the self-recognition has been resulted in truth as it is shown through the process of narrations in the novel, it would be said that multiplicity of selves or voices results in the plurality of truths that leads us to the postmodern view of truth. In fact, the narrator does not show himself as holding authority to bring out one absolute truth (meta narrative), but the narrator allows other voices to discover their own truths in a democratic condition. Hence, all of the tellers in the novel speak some of the truth, or some truth. Therefore, it is concluded that through the invocation of postmodern narratives, Faulkner's postmodern attitude towards "Truth" in his novel makes his aesthetic philosophy close to postmodern ideas of multiplicity of truth.

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Introduction

Modernists practically inventing fragmentation and ambiguity, still believed that if they accumulated all their fragments, they could reconcile ambiguities and finally arrive at complex yet whole truth. But this is not true of the postmodernists.

Postmodernists see human attempts to describe and establish truth not only as futile but even as twisting. Berteaux's (2005) *history of postmodernism* explains the issue precisely. Postmodernists, he says, believe that modernism's search for "timeless, representational truth" subjects experience to "unacceptable intellectualization and reductions". Postmodernists hold that transcendent truth is forever out of reach. Social and provisional truth can be attained.

Terry Eagleton (1983), describing the postmodern mind as "relativist and skeptical", agrees suspicious of all assured truths. Many critics, Fowler (2000), for instance, attribute this postmodern position to the influence of poststructuralists like Ferdinand de Saussure and

Jacques Derrida, whose works "undermine traditional conceptions of truth".

Philip Weinstein (1995) describes one of the common results of seeing contingency as governing truth. He describes the growth of parody and a Nietzschean preference for play/construction rather than truth/correspondence. Postmodern writers, who consider all representation of the real to be no more than fictional, convinced that all of history, whether remembered or real is no more real than frankly fictional texts.

Postmodern Truth in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Many features of modernism and post modernism are seen in the works of William Faulkner. He demonstrates in his fiction many of the qualities typically attributed to literary modernism such as experimenting with narrative structures, temporal frameworks, narrative voices, and symbols and exploring inner consciousness as a major theme. Although Faulkner is the representative of Modernist movement in twentieth century, however his works can be evaluated in the light of

postmodernism as well. In this paper, it is attempted to reevaluate Faulkner's postmodern attitudes toward truth in his writing.

Postmodern critics interested in the impossibility of truth have turned to *Absalom, Absalom!* more than to the other fictions by William Faulkner. Some have seen the novel embracing this postmodern attitude. Gerhard Hoffman (2000), for example, has pointed to the narrative strategy of the novel, specifically, to its diction, as a postmodern rejection of truth. He describes a "pattern of uncertainty" and suggests that the multiple uses of "perhaps" and "maybe" point to the novel's grasp of the fictitious state of truth. Similarly, Brian McHale (1987), sees a movement into postmodernism truth, especially in chapter 8 of *Absalom, Absalom!*, where he sees the novel abandoning modernist's question of authority and reality and allows the narrators to "fictionalize history" without restraint. Truth becomes what they make it. Fowler (1991) comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that Quentin Compson reaches a "postmodern awareness" when he finds in the Sutpen Saga not some kind of final meaning but the impossibility of all meanings, imagined in the dissolution he faces at his visit to Sutpen's Hundred.

Even, the source of truth in the novel remains murky. When Faulkner was speaking at the University of Virginia, he himself claimed to have a level of knowledge similar to the narrator's. Asked if Charles knew that Sutpen was his father, he replied with the same kind of qualifiers the novel has: "*I think he knew. I don't know whether he--his mother probably told him. I think he knew*" (Gwynn, 79). Although the author, the creator of the fictive world who should have been able to answer all questions definitively, he chose instead to qualify his answer, with a familiar "probably". He did this because the nature of oral traditional knowledge in a postmodern novel is that. There are some truths we can not know. *He explained that Absalom, Absalom! is about the nature of truth: "I think that no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken together the truth is what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. So they are true as far as Miss Rosa and Quentin saw it. Quentin's father saw what he believed was truth that was all he saw. But the old man was himself a little too big for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson to see*

all at once. It would have taken perhaps a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful person to see him as he was." (Ibid, 273-4). In fact, Faulkner in "*Absalom, Absalom!*" had made the plurality of the truth, its central theme, that is, the truth differs according to a person who sees it and interprets it. Therefore *Absalom, Absalom!* has some similar elements with the preceding multiple perspective novels such as "The Sound and The Fury" at a purely formal level; however, the scope of this novel proceeds further at the level of content or meaning. The main point is the selection or identification of a supposedly true theory among various perspectives about a phenomenon.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* we see the story told and retold. It has, in fact, five narrators: Rosa Coldfield, who was engaged to Sutpen; Mr. Compson, whose father was Sutpen's first Yoknapatawpha County friend, his son, Quentin; his Harvard roommate, Shreve Mc.Cannon; and a third-person narrator who sets the scenes and gives us Quentin's thoughts. These narrators sometimes quote other characters during their narrations. Quentin is the focal consciousness of the novel; every word we get from the other characters who speak in the novel's present is said in Quentin's presence. These four characters, and perhaps Thomas Sutpen, are the potential "thinking consciousnesses" of this novel, which is considered to be dialogical.

Quentin is clearly the focal consciousness of the work. Though all the information is not filtered through him, he is present with the reader at all times. However, no one is dominated by the others in the sense that he discovers the truth of the Sutpen legend, as some critics believe that Quentin does or that he has the truth all the time, as others hold the third person narrator to have.

Even if the narrator knows the final truth, he is not telling. Quentin and Shreve sit "*creating between them . . . people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere*". (AA, 243). "*Perhaps*" they had never existed: the tone of the third person narrator doesn't reveal whether he has the facts or not.

The characters may all speak for themselves; none of them may hold a privileged position in terms of knowing the truth of the Sutpen story.

In the first section of the chapter one, Rosa's story is centered on Sutpen. She establishes her authority as a witness to events:

'I saw what happened to Ellen, my sister. I saw her almost a recluse . . . I saw that man return--the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its

victims—who had created two children not only to destroy one another and his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him.’ (Ibid.12)

At the end of the first chapter we find that Rosa has realistically narrated an event she was not witness to, directly quoting dialogue and describing individuals, even though much of her authority is as a first-hand witness to events. In other words, chapter 1 ends with Miss Rosa’s admission that she was not there for the scene she has just narrated.

The change in tellers is clearly signaled by Mr. Compson’s narration in chapter 2, and he continues to tell for two more chapters. In each chapter he describes events in more and more detail and presents more and more speculations that he cannot know with any certainty.

Mr. Compson’s “nobody knew what” in chapter 4 is functionally the same as the narrator’s “none knew” in the first chapter. He and the narrator have the same perspective. The “perhapses” and “doubtesses” that Mr. Compson uses are in regard to speculations about motivations; they are not about facts. In this chapter, he has the same kind of knowledge, the same kind of perspective, as the narrator.

It can be said that the novel’s narrative technique implies a project, whose purpose is to make an analysis about the process of “attesting the truth” among various interpretations which are presenting a story about a past event. Depicting a truth-establishing process which appears through an accumulation of narratives, Faulkner shows us our own cognitive condition as history. Although this novel is told by four narrator-characters, however these stories have their own sufficient significance as long as they appear in the consciousness of Quentin Compson, who attends to all of these narratives when they happen.

In fact, in “*Absalom, Absalom!* in spite of Mr. Compson’s effort to reorganize the materials at his hand, he cannot produce a seemingly valid interpretation.

“ . . . you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens . . . ” (AA,80).

On the other hand, preceding narratives to find out the truth are overlapped on Quentin’s mind with a critical awareness of his own work. Through this process, commonalities and differences of plural narratives become clear at the same time. Although Quentin’s word “*Maybe nothing ever happens once*

and is finished (Ibid,210)” is that which immediately follows another statement of his own “*Yes, we are both Father,*” we can suppose it to be Quentin’s severe criticism, offered from within, of his father’s discourse. For, here the famous “ripple” figure of Quentin’s is forming a metaphorical expression of the continuity between past and present, or self and others, resulting in an antithesis to Compson’s narrative which emphasizes the discontinuity of past and present. Here, merging with the antecedent narrative and criticizing it make two sides of one coin.

In addition, The narrative of Quentin and Shreve starts from imitating antecedent discourses with parody tones, examining mainly the truth and falsity of Compson’s preceding narrative in its details, going further for building a more plausible hypothesis. However as we see in Shreve’s comments like “*Let me play a while now (Ibid.224)*”, which can be taken as if he is merely playing a game, here, very important imaginative changes are made, for example, it was not Bon but Henry who was wounded on the battlefield. This finally enables a leap to an uncertain truth or an imaginative identification of the narrators with the narrated.

The most important thing is that we understand the two young men’s narrative in the context of a mimic differentiation of the preceding stories, and this destruction by imitating the antecedents becomes a deconstruction of the father’s story and gains an opportunity to attain some truths or some aspect of the truth.

The hypothesis of Bon’s black blood which they reach at the very end, has no ground in the actual fact to be supposed as true; therefore, there is no way to judge whether the hypothesis is true or not. It can be said that although the novel, dramatizing the process is led to the truth (or that which is supposedly true) but in fact, it is not clear that the truth may have been attained. The narrator’s probable truth becomes the portrait of Sutpen as demon. However, the reason for Sutpen’s rejection and killing of Charles Bon remains as mystery at the end of the novel as at the beginning despite the narrator’s and Quentin’s claim to have discovered the final truth in his visit to Sutpen’s Hundred. In the novel, at the same time that readers are seduced by the claims of the story to be a supreme fiction, they are bombarded with reminders that this fiction is one of many possibilities and that no version can claim final authority and final truth.

In fact, the truth in this novel is not a historical one. "The 'truth' at which the hero must and indeed ultimately does arrive through clarifying the events to himself, can essentially be for Dostoevsky only *the truth of the hero's own consciousness*" (Bakhtin *Problems* 55).

In addition, the primary question of the novel is not what the actual truth of Sutpen's life is, but what truth Quentin can take from the story to live with and how he can clarify the events for himself. Quentin, in fact, is the one upon whom the events that take place have their emotional impact. This is what stories do for people. Whether Quentin truly understands the events or not, his experience with the story helps him arrive at his own truth.

Considering "Truth" as a metanarrative (the grand ideologies that control the individual), Lyotard (1984) attacks it in his "*Postmodern Condition*", saying that the metanarratives are foundations and thus to be avoided. . He asserts the existence of micronarratives that in this sense can be considered as multiple truths. In addition, if truth is forever beyond reach, then humans should not insist that a single truth must predominate in any sphere of thought and action. Rather, humans should be intellectually heterodox that means viewing all truths as equally valid and equally invalid.

This postmodern rejection of authority and hierarchy has led to what Jameson (1965) describes as a "narrative view of truth" and the vitality of small narrative units. Postmodernism prefers a "narrative view of truth because opposing the logical view necessitates establishing a new truth as universal. The "narrative view "on the other hand ,allows thought to take horizontal rather than vertical routes and to move toward open rather than close ending .At the same time , postmodernism prefers " local narrative" and rejects "master narratives".

This postmodernism traces its way into Faulkner's fiction and criticism. In fact, the Faulknerian text, sometimes denies that it owns authority to guide readers toward any real truth. The text rejects to become a master narrative controlling the local narratives created by multiple voices within it and by multiple readers of it. In other words, in Faulkner's text, narration becomes heterodox. In other words, it can be said that since the self-recognition has been resulted in truth as it is shown through the process of narrations in the novel, so we face that the truth itself is multiple.

Conclusion

To sum up, the narrative techniques in *Absalom, Absalom!* demonstrates Faulkner's anticipation of postmodern thought and style. It highlights how the writer confounds the notion of metanarrative by disrupting chronology and raising questions about the reliability of the narrators in each work. Faulkner uses dischronology, such as flashbacks to tell the story of Thomas Sutpen in order to get close to the postmodern concept. He provides key information through questionable narrators at strategic times to manipulate readers' thoughts and opinions about specific characters by using several narrators, none of whom witnessed all events, to tell the stories of each work.

This postmodernism traces its way into Faulkner's fiction and criticism. In fact, the Faulknerian text, sometimes denies that it possesses authority to guide readers toward any real truth. Hence, it can be concluded that since the self-recognition has been resulted in truth as it is shown through the process of narrations in the novel, it would be said that multiplicity of selves or voices results in the plurality of truths that leads us to the postmodern view of truth.

In other words, the narrator , here, does not show himself as holding authority before he dramatizes the climactic scenes of the novel to bring out one absolute truth (meta narrative), but the narrator allows other voices to discover their own truths in a democratic condition. In contrast to a monological narrator who provides certainty, Faulkner chooses instead to take us to the mystery of the human's spirit. Therefore, all of the tellers in the novel speak some of the truth, or some truth, and no voice should be privileged over any other because all of them arrive at the truths of their own consciousnesses.

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