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A STUDY OF "POINT OF VIEW" OF *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!* AND *THE GREAT GATSBY*

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The location of his story in time and space is the first problem that confronts a novelist, and the way in which he solves the problem has a great deal to do with the success or failure of his novel. Then he confronts another problem − the unity of his story. Perhaps the most important and difficult aspect of this problem is the attitude which the novelist takes toward his material − that is to say, his "point of view."

Absalom, Absalom! is a fearfully complicated legend full of Gothic horror, a bloodcurdling tragic fable of Thomas Sutpen and his family in the Deep South. But it seems to me that the ultimate aim which Faulkner tried to present to the reader lies in the fact that through the discovery and historical recreation of the Sutpen story ,Quentin Compson painfully attempts to understand his own Southern tradition and the reasons for its inevitable collapse, the meaning of history and the search for human value. When the novel comes to an end, Quentin Compson and the reader remain unsatisfied. This unfulfilled search for human value, it seems to me, is the persistent theme of all of Faulkner's works.

The Great Gatsby is concerned with the disillusion and debauched life of the era following World War I. James Gatz, from miserable surroundings of

the Midwest, has risen by dubious business dealings to great wealth. The story ends with Gatsby's most miserable funeral in the rain. The background of Gatsby is comparable to that of Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Now, Fitzgerald uses the first-person narrator, Nick Carraway, to present the Gatsby story. The important thing is that Nick should have come from the Midwest like Gatsby. Quentin Compson is from the South. Everything that Nick had was small-scale and unpretentious. The effect of Nick's characteristics upon the narrative is to reduce its material to scale to such an extent that the reader can comprehend and measure the almost fabulous Gatsby. Because of Nick's reductive, objective, and orderly judgment of the Gatsby events, the reader can be continually, though gradually, led to Gatsby. It is only through the mind and eye of the narrator that the reader learns to know the Gatsby story.

Faulkner uses several narrators — Rosa, Quentin, Quentin's grandfather, and Quentin's father. And Quentin is eventually an organizer of the whole story. In the first five chapters, the whole of the Sutpen story is continually repeated. In the last four chapters, during which he is at Harvard, Quentin, with the help of his roommate, Shreve McCannon, puts together all the facts and opinions about the Sutpen story related by the different narrators in the earlier chapters, adding his own feelings about the story and about the South.

Joseph Warren Beach says as follows referring to Henry James:

"... You have rather a sense of being present at the gradual uncovering of a wall painting which had been whitewashed over and is now being restored to view. ..., it is as if a landscape were gradually coming into view by the drawing off of veil after veil of mist. You become aware first of certain mountain forms

looming vaguely a definite shape, and something can be made out of the conformation of the valleys. And very slowly, at length, comes out clear one detail after another, until in the end you command the whole prospect, in all its related forms and hues." [1]

I do not know whether or not Faulkner was aware of Henry James, but in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner employed the same technique and devices as James did. The shifting of narrators for the purpose of taking off one veil after another is well used in this novel. First, it is an effective way of handling suspense, because the meaning of the ultimate story is being deliberately withheld. Second, it is an effective way of presenting the chronological discovery of the historical story of this kind, though the chronology is by no means orderly and consistent in time. This is because the individual narrator, always very much affected by his own story, hurries through his version of it without explaining all the complex connections — for example, Rosa tries hard in the first chapter only to "demonize" Sutpen. Indeed the reader is completely confused as to what event came first and which event came later. In order to clarify this point, Faulkner is considerate enough to put "Chronology" at the end of the novel!

The chief merit of the device of telling one's story in the first person is the fact that it secures immediacy, vividness, almost automatically. The reader is closely following the narrator. The reader feels that the first-person narrator is telling the truth and a truth that is very important to him, at least. However, he is, after all, telling the reader about something that happened in the past. The reader cannot see for himself what went on, so the reader has to listen to what the narrator says. As a result, he seems always to stand between the reader and the event. This is the chief disadvantage of the device of the first-

person narrator.[2] Thus, in Rosa's narration, the reader can learn only one aspect of the Sutpen story which seems true at the moment. And it is important to Rosa to "demonize" Sutpen.

In order to avoid this defect, Faulkner employs a number of first-person narrators for the purpose of revealing to the reader the whole aspects of the story. On top of this, Faulkner uses Quentin to organize the story into an integrated historical drama closely connected with the present South.

In order to avoid the same disadvantage Fitzgerald uses a good deal of "dramatic" method, by which he has Gatsby talk with Nick, Daisy, Jordan, and Tom, as the case may be. The conversation is always very simple and terse, suggestive of Hemingway. The most effective use of this dramatic method is achieved in the seventh chapter where Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Nick find themselves in a hotel room in New York City. Here Nick rather objectively observes the heated conversation between Gatsby and Tom. His observations of the conversation and its atmosphere tell the reader a great deal about Gatsby. This is the way the narrator, Nick, directly participates in the story.

The relationship between Gatsby and Daisy is gradually disclosed in the fourth chapter. The role of Jordan Baker when she tells Nick about her Louisville days in connection with Daisy and Gatsby is comparable to that of a Faulkner narrator. Jordan might be compared with Rosa, though she is not so prejudiced a story-teller. In fact, Jordan gives her objective observations of the Gatsby-Daisy affair. In the eighth chapter, the reader learns Gatsby's version of his relationship with Daisy and his past life through Nick. Gatsby's version of it is more detailed, personal, and sentimental than Jordan's and tells

the reader the cause which seems to have driven him to become the "great" Gatsby.

Because of his shifting point of view, Faulkner has to abandon the traditional unity of a straightforward presentation of a whole complex plot, but he gains a dramatic unity within the individual stories of each of the narrators. Each of these dramas gradually develops into a completely integrated drama at the end of Quentin's version of the Sutpen story.

If Faulkner had used only one first-person narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!*, it would have been a more straightforward and easier novel, which could well be compared with *The Great Gatsby* and many of Somerset Maugham's works, but it would have lost much of the dramatic intensity unique to Faulkner and would have resulted with his difficult language in a mere long-winded novel; Faulkner would have failed even to express his deep concern with the South.

If Fitzgerald had used Faulkner's device fully in *The Great Gatsby*, the novel would have become unnecessarily intricate and a failure. What Fitzgerald wanted was to tell a story about Gatsby through Nick Carraway, and nothing more. The novel, as it is, is well constructed in order to present the portrayal of Gatsby in objective perspective.

NOTES

1. Joseph Warren Berach, *The Method of Henry James*, New Haven :Yale

University Press, 1918; enlarged edition with corrections, Philadelphia: Albert Saifer, 1955; quoted by Caroline Gordon, *How to Read a Novel*, New York: The Viking Press, 1958, p.119.

2. Gordon, p.97