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## Transferring Violence in Absalom, Absalom

At the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!* is the violence of class division, national division, and racial division; particularly the violence between white Southerners and black slaves as a substitute for the violence poor whites would like to commit against wealthy whites. Thomas Sutpen's barn fights with his "wild negroes" and his youth's encounter with the slave at the door epitomize this desire for revenge and violence by transferring it. The revelation that he was in Haiti for the revolution sheds a new light on his barn fights and the appearance of the Klan shows this transference at a larger social level. Ironically, the very violence that Thomas Sutpen cannot commit against his former antagonists and objects of jealousy is the violence that kills him when Wash loses control his rage. What begins as a class division between Sutpen's mountain family and the South's plantation aristocracy quickly becomes the division and antagonism of the African slave by the poor white.

Sutpen, and the poor whites like him, feel frustration that the slaves of these plantation owners seem superiorly dressed, fed, and cared for. In the South, Sutpen "had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink" (183). He noticed that one of the main differences would be the presence of slaves and those slaves' superior state, seeing "a nigger who wore every day better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to" (184). Not just the clothes, but the house of the whites were "not quite as well built and not at all as well kept and preserved as the ones the nigger slaves lived in" (185). In innocence, "he still didn't envy the man...he coveted the shoes" (184). However, that innocence does not exist for the others like his father who do feel a rage and hatred of the man who owns the shoes, which Sutpen may later share.

Sutpen, his father, and those like them engage in violence against the African slaves who are the only objects within reach and within their power to hurt that can represent the frustration and hatred they feel towards the plantation attitude of superiority. Sutpen realizes that this violence is useless and only a feeble attempt to fight back. He knows "you could hit them...and they would not hit back...But you did not want to, because they (the niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit" (186). When "the nigger told him, even before he had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back," Sutpen loses some of his innocence and feels the same violent frustration of his father (188). He must do something, like his father must beat the slaves, thinking, "But I can shoot him. (Not the monkey nigger. It was not the nigger anymore than it had been the nigger that his father had helped to whip that night" but the man in the hammock without shoes (190). Yet his voice tells him that it would do no good. Even the rich owner is not the final object of violence, it is beyond individuals, and Sutpen realizes, "'You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with" and it's a "them" beyond the slaves or rich owner (192).

Sutpen, does, however indulge in fights with his Negroes as a way of releasing some of that stress and frustration that he feels, knowing the fights will not change anything or bring him closer to his design; yet, he cannot quite escape that need for violence and physical contact in the face of an abstract enemy. This continued physical brutality may also reflect the ultimate

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failure of his design in that he never really manages to leave that mountain mentality. As the rich owner must have seen his family then, “as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity” is exactly the last picture we get of Sutpen’s desperate desire only to procreate (190). In the end, he could not “combat with them,” he could only fight slaves, and fighting the revolution in Haiti did no good because he fought against his mixed marriage and the son who is ultimately the demise of Sutpen. Fighting the slaves in the barn did no good since it just lowered his reputation by revealing his similarity to the slaves that he works with half-naked in the field and now fights in the bar. In the end, transferring violence onto the slaves helped no one and was not a successful means to his design.

#### Work Cited

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom*. New York: Vintage International, 1986. Print.

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