



REVIEW ARTICLE

AN ANALYSIS OF ABSALOM, ABSALOM! FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEW HISTORICISM

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ABSTRACT

New Historicism subverts the traditional binary opposition between literature and history, highlights the operation of "power" and "discourse" within texts, and explores two-way concerns for history and texts. Under the perspective of new historicism, this paper aims to interpret how HISTORICITY OF TEXTS and TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY are embodied in *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner. The paper concludes that, Faulkner's resorting to literary creation, on one hand, reflects the history and on the other hand, highlights the reality, which realizes the interaction between literature and history.

KEYWORDS

William Faulkner, new historicism, textuality of history, historicity of texts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its release in 1936, *Absalom, Absalom!* has drawn wide attention. For its rich, profound artistic ideas and superb expression techniques, it has been universally recognized by scholars at home and abroad as one of Faulkner's best work. Even Faulkner himself pays a high value on this novel, "I think it's the best novel yet written by an American" (Blotner and Leo, 1974). With the American Civil War and the post-war reconstruction as the historical background, and through descriptions of the rise and fall of the Thomas Sutpen's family in Yoknapatawpha County, this novel, with unprecedented depth and breadth, reflects the social features of the southern United States from the second half of the 19th century to the early 20th century, which can be called a tragic epic with a magnificent historical picture. Faulkner tells history through fictitious events, analyzes the nature of the real world in the south, explores the main causes of its decline, and indirectly proposes feasible measures to help the south out of the predicament. In the process of his describing the history by techniques of novelization and dramatization, Faulkner obviously realizes the interaction between literature and history.

Before the birth of new historicism, most traditional literary theory schools represented by new criticism tend to adhere to such views as textism and literary ontology, claiming that texts are self-referential, self-sufficient, and independent systems. Rising in critical response to post-structuralism and Marxist criticism, new historicism changes "the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between artistic production and other kinds of social production", and advocates to link literary texts with historical contexts (Greenblatt and Stephan, 1982). Unlike traditional historicism, new historicism does not think that history

is gradual, narratives are neutral, and texts are passive. Instead, on the basis of denying the former's arguments about analysis of objectivity and discourses of eternity, new historicism emphasizes the interaction and interplay of texts and contexts, believes that literary creation itself is not only a cultural product, but also involves in shaping culture and thus pays special attention to the operation of social power and the ideological function of literature. This paper aims to interpret *Absalom, Absalom!* by resorting to related theories of new historicism, analyzes how Faulkner in this novel skillfully deals with such couples of relationships as literature and history, reality and fiction, facts and stories, and thus explores how literary creation reflects the history and highlights the reality.

2. TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY

By shackling the fetters between history and literature in the traditional sense, new historicism focuses on the interrelated, interdependent and close relationship between them. For this purpose, HISTORICITY OF TEXTS and TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY, both core concepts are introduced into literary research and literary criticism practice. By TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY, new historicism points out that, the process of writing history is just an explanatory process. It is a descriptive construction of historical events, and there are virtually no such statements as the so-called "reproduction of historical facts". The history we feel is nothing but artifacts of our speeches. It is the product of our cutting, collaging, and processing those disorderly events in the past, and it "distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations" (Foucault and Michael, 1989). Indeed, selecting and arranging different plots for a same historical event can create literary texts with completely opposite meanings. As new historicist Hayden White states,

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one narrative account may represent a set of events as having the form and meaning of an epic or tragic history, while another may represent the same set of events—with equal plausibility and without doing any violence to the factual record—as describing a farce. Here, the conflict between competing narratives has less to do with the facts of the manner in question than with the different story-meanings with which the facts can be endowed by employment (White and Hayden, 1999).

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner deals with the southern American history in a technical way of novelization and dramatization, especially his skillful use of complicated narrative techniques, which makes the story shrouded in colors of subjective feelings, and makes the plots become complex and confusing. Frederick F. Karl, a famous scholar who specializes in William Faulkner, when referring to subjects as races, history and techniques in the novel, writes that,

we are claiming for the novel here is that while such a momentous question as race is affected by Faulkner's sense of history, it is influenced even more by his method of presenting that history with particular narrative strategies. Accordingly, we have not only the modified stream, we have that stream influenced by the use of speakers, who direct and redirect the words that make the stream flow (Karl and Frederick, 1987).

In this case, the novel loses the possibility of obtaining the ultimate “meaning”. And to learn the historical truth will eventually become a hopeless and unexpected thing, which precisely coincides with the view of textuality of history advocated by New Historicism. Rosa Coldfield, Compson, Quentin, and Shreve, these four characters as four narrators in the novel, through their own experiences, understandings, and imaginations, jointly weave the romance of Sutpen's family. They seem to be repeating the history of this mysterious family one by one. In fact, they are constantly talking with other narrators and even with themselves. Everyone strives to establish their own narrative authority, while at the same time directly or indirectly attacking others' narratives to reduce the authority of their narration. Adoptions of this multi-angle narrative strategy and the conflicts arising from various narrative perspective provide readers with a lot of confusing, unreal but “true” information, which outlines the ins and outs of the whole event, but with a strong subjective tendency. Especially on the key issues such as the cause of Charles Bon's death, there have always been divergent views. It is unreasonable not to believe them, but not all. Readers can roughly piece together the legends of Sutpen's family based on this information, but they can never know the exact historical truth. As Mr. Compson says in the novel,

It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers' letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw (Faulkner, 1986).

Obviously, Faulkner's describing the American South in such a novelized and dramatized way directly reflects textuality of history, and vividly shows that, by use of literary techniques as preservation, deletion or processing, history is nothing more than the result of people's consciously or unconsciously carrying out discourse interpretation of events happening in the past. The history of the South, just like the history of the Sutpen family, is actually a network of interwoven cultural texts composed of such conflicting and complementary “stories from mouth to mouth”. The seemingly insignificant histories of “the Sutpen family” in South, like the fragments of the mirror, once collaged together, will doubtless reflect the giant history of the entire southern United States from prosperity to decline. While such giant history is, on one hand, the background of the story which has happened and on the other hand, is existing within the novel as the foreground described directly. Such kind of interaction between literature and history completely SUBVERT the binary opposition

between them in the traditional sense, deeply showing the textuality of history in new historicism.

3. HISTORICITY OF TEXTS

While emphasizing textuality of history, new historicism believes that all texts are cultural and social, and are the products of the interaction among specific historical and cultural factors. The text itself is also a historical and cultural event, participating in the construction of history and having an active role in shaping history. At the same time, the subjectivity of individuals (and of course artists included) is inevitably influenced by the social background and cultural traditions of the time. This involves another important concept in new historicism: historicity of texts.

Absalom, Absalom! was created in 1930s. At that time, the Southern United States, which was severely frustrated during the Civil War and had been unable to recover its vitality, was not only deeply mired in the economic crisis, but the spiritual world was a vast wasteland. Many factors such as panics caused by wars and economic crises, the collapse of traditional value systems, etc., are destined to contribute to an era in which heroes are called and urgently needed. Faulkner's literary creation is thus undoubtedly affected by the social background at that time. He tries to think and explain social problems through artistic features, and then explores effective methods to solve the problems. There is no denying that, Sutpen in the novel is such a legendary hero with precious spirits of the early American pioneers. He has a clear goal, strong perseverance, hardworking spirits, “He had been too successful, you see; his was that solitude of contempt and distrust which success brings to him who gained it because he was strong instead of merely lucky” (Faulkner, 1986). From this sense, Sutpen symbolizes the future and hope of Southern America, being an epitome of a legendary hero who can save the Southerners from battles and disasters.

Great trauma and relatively isolated situations of the Civil War do not inspire those Southerners who have always been famous for self-confidence to have the courage to self-analyze, face their own problems correctly, and actively seek solutions. On the contrary, most of them chose to escape, stand still and refuse to make progress, being immersed in their glorious past. Excessive beautifications of the Southern society, coupled with its inherent romantic tradition, makes Southern American literary world full of waves of the very nostalgia for decades after the Civil War. However, what Southern America really need is bravely making further progress instead of that nostalgia. As an acute observer and a humanist who shows deep love for the Southern society, Faulkner with many other writers who also have grand visions, comes to critically examine Southern America and its traditional values, attempting to lead his fellows to step out of that visionary “God of Eden”, bravely face up to their own problems, do their utmost to welcome reforms and thus build a new flourishing Southern America.

Rosa Coldfield is a vivid representative of purist conservatives in American South. She lives in a Gothic house, “There in the gloom of the shuttered hallway whose air was even hotter than outside, as if there were prisoned in it like in a tomb all the suspiration of slow heatladen time which had recurred during the forty-five years” (Faulkner, 1986). And during these forty-five years, she all the time wears that clothes in black. She has spent her most beautiful years in endless hatred and self-reproach, and has become the biggest victim of old thoughts and traditions, being heavily slammed by Mr. Compson. However, Mr. Compson, who always show awful cynicism towards others' conservatism, is also living in the visionary past. Confronted with his own family' gradual decline, he has no action but to addict himself to wines and autonarcosis to escape the reality. Rosa's undue indulging herself in past and Mr. Compson's showing helplessness in front of the reality, are epitomes of social conditions of Southern America after the War, and externalizations of the Southerners' cultural mentality. Meanwhile, they are also great mockeries and sharp satires of the conservative nostalgia remaining in Southern America. By their characterizations, Faulkner tries to show that, nostalgia is merely a morbid performance that is shackled in the past. He uses them as a wake-up call to encourage people in the South to step out of the past, face the

present, and open up the future.

The great migration triggered by the American Civil War became an irreversible trend in the early 20th century, which thus caused a change in the social population structure. According to incomplete statistics, only in the twenties of the 20th century, 800,000 black people left the South and moved elsewhere (Hamblin et al., 1999). At that time, sharp reductions in labor force put Southern Whites under tremendous pressure to survive. And many of them, even some rich people, had to do heavy manual work. Doubtless, Faulkner has noticed that problem. Through his characterizations of Judith, Faulkner illustrates his life philosophy and conveys his ardent expectations for those Southerners living in adversity, "pride again through humility, and courage through adversity overcome" (Faulkner, 1986; Sartoris, 1956). The turbulent social environment and the ensuing family tragedy do not knock down the rich lady who has been raised very well since childhood. Instead, she has gradually grown into a strong and mature woman within long-term pains and patience. During the war, she had to deal with "axe and hoe and all the other tools decreed for men to use" (Faulkner, 1986). As Rosa says in the novel, "saw Judith's hand, not Judith—that palm in which I read as from a printed chronicle the orphaning, the hardship, the bereave of love" (Faulkner, 1986). Judith endured the tremendous grief and psychological burden of losing her fiancé and elder brother, and did not sob until he met her father. After her father's death, she bravely assumed the responsibility of atonement for the family and became the spiritual pillar of the family. It can be seen that the artistic image of Judith is a typical example of Faulkner's survival ideals and wisdom. Therefore, Faulkner's literary creation is obviously inextricably linked to the social and historical environment of the era he lives in. Through his novel, readers can still have access to certain fragments of the Southern history though the historical events have been novelized and dramatized.

4. CONCLUSION

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* as a fictional family epic, is the product of a certain cultural and historical context. Such techniques as the

fictionalization and dramatization towards history have eliminated the traditional binary opposition between the so-called "foreground" and "background" of literature and history. In fact, in this grand epic work, literature and history, reality and fiction, facts and stories are intertwined. Faulkner uses his rich imagination and superb artistic skills to provide readers with untrue "real" information, cleverly reflects the Southern American history and integrates it into the literary text. At the same time, he tries to make his literary creation serve as a light to analyze, explain and guide the real world, so as to actively participate in the great cause of historical reconstruction in Southern America, thus realizing the interaction between literature and history, reality and fiction, facts and stories.

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