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# Keeping "body and soul together": Rosa Coldfield's gothic voice in *absalom, absalom!*

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Keeping “body and soul together”:  
Rosa Coldfield’s Gothic Voice in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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*Absalom, Absalom!* written by William Faulkner, whose texts habitually break the norm of traditional story telling, has been described as a gothic tale of the curse and destruction of Thomas Sutpen's family. The text exudes traditional gothic imagery, such as the great house in decay (Sutpen's Hundred), the "man-horse-demon" (4) or ogre character (Sutpen), the vampiric, old virgin (Rosa Coldfield), and the downfall of an entire family lineage (The Sutpens). Within the laundry list of gothic genre traits, Faulkner writes Rosa Coldfield as the hysteric, ghost-like female, but also includes her within the context of multiple male narrators. Her character stands as the sole female voice allowed to influence both the story and the telling of the novel. Faulkner critic Diane Roberts observes that "[p]ersonifications are limited and contained; persons are troubling and volatile" (xii). The voice granted to Rosa, unlike Caddy Compson from *The Sound and the Fury*, allows her the opportunity to speak her past, and also constructs the novel as a text open to other possibilities. Without a voice Caddy is the personification of a female character, but with a voice Rosa Coldfield becomes an actual person, albeit spinster aunt. Within Rosa Coldfield's narration, she disrupts the dominant male discourse of the text and complicates the reading of her own character through her voice and her hysteria.

*Absalom, Absalom!* embodies the vague, circumvented, non-linear telling of Thomas Sutpen's history. The diffuse telling matches the abstraction of the actual past through the gothic style. The gothic is reflected in the depictions of Rosa as a "vampire" and a "ghost." In attempting to reconstruct the story and build the identity of Sutpen, Rosa seems to lose her identity to a stock gothic figure. Critics Teresa Goddu and Robert Hume focus on the narrative effects of American Gothic fiction and stress its inability to produce a fixed identity by means of this gothic horror. Together with the paradox of the effect of the genre on female position, Goddu and Hume also claim that the gothic identity must be subdued to maintain it due to the

subversive nature of the genre: “the gothic tells of the historical horror that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it” (10). Rosa’s marginal position in society, likewise, lacks a defined identity. Rosa’s marginal position in society lacks a definite identity, giving her the opportunity to create her own identity. Rosa is repressed in the telling of her story, yet she exceeds and surpasses the other narrators to create her own identity. Rosa can maintain her identity because she is marginalized and works within her own gothic text. Because Rosa accepts and plays the repressed hysteric, gothic role, she can create and sustain an identity and voice of her own.

Rosa lacks any position of value within her community of Jefferson and even within her own family. Rosa’s character, constructed without any social position or value, becomes a main voice and the principle impetus for action for the novel. Her disparity of social worth influences her position as a narrator and assists her fellow narrators’ ability to discount Rosa as a “ghost,” according to Mr. Compson, or as a female “hysteric,” according to the male narrators (as well as several Faulkner critics<sup>1</sup>). However, Rosa Coldfield’s marginal position as a character and as a narrator results in the destabilization of both the story and the telling through the use of her voice.

Within the context of the female gothic genre, Rosa’s hysteric personality allows her voice to control aspects of the story and the narrative that would be limited to her as just a peripheral character, the spinster aunt. The first section of this essay, “*Absalom, Absalom!* as Rosa’s Text,” argues that Rosa is a marginalized and hysteric character in the eyes of her community and her fellow narrators. Rosa’s narrative of Thomas Sutpen is surrounded by narratives of Mr. Compson, Quentin, Shreve and a third person narrator. Rosa’s position as an old maid, paradoxically, validates her position as storyteller and provides her with an audience.

The next section, “*Absalom, Absalom!* as Female Gothic Text,” sets Rosa up as a gothic heroine in the context of the female gothic. By analyzing Faulkner’s chapters narrated by Rosa as a female gothic novel, I argue that Rosa’s position as a character and a narrator creates a paradoxical empowerment for her. Rosa’s empowerment is derived from her passive-aggressive actions and words. By establishing Rosa’s awareness of her marginalized position, her behavior and narration can be read as a performative role she plays in order to enact her desires. The third section, “Hysteria: An Empowering Identity,” examines Rosa as a culturally created hysteric and the implications of this role on her identity. Like her marginalized position, Rosa’s hysteria breaks down the social expectations of her and her own repressed identity. Though critically argued as a “mad” character, Rosa uses her hysteria to bind together that which was divided by hysteria: her body and soul. Rosa may be perceived as a hysteric in actions, however, the control of her narrative suggest the control of her hysteric identity. The fourth section, “Hysteria as Subversive Female Voice,” contends that Rosa’s peripheral position within the community and her hysteria allows her voice to resonate throughout the other narrators’ accounts. Rosa’s performative hysteric persona enables her to work within the patriarchal structure of her society to influence the male dominated storytelling. The final section, “Control of Gothic and Hysteric,” locates evidence of Rosa’s command of her own identity within the hysteric context. It contests other critics’ assertions that Rosa loses her voice and identity. Rosa’s hysteria as a subversive identity sustains itself even after the loss of Rosa’s voice. The use of a gothic and hysteric personality for a female narrator allows the paradoxical assertion of identity that those two attributes generally diminish.

### *Absalom, Absalom!* As Rosa's Text

Rosa's voice infuses the text with gothic elements setting her apart from the other male narrators. She is the only character with first-hand information from the past to share and, as such, her focus on the past becomes obsessive to the point of dominating her entire story. She shares nothing about what she has done with the forty-three years since she left Sutpen's Hundred. By maintaining her family's past during the present (of the novel), Rosa becomes "like a vampire" (68) according to Mr. Compson. Rosa feeds off of the idea of her family and her position in society to support her own identity and keep her "body and soul together" (68). She has become split into two entities, her physical withered virgin flesh and her desire to impart the story that has shaped her life; she becomes a double of herself. Her need to write the past comes from her lack of family and social position. Without the story of Sutpen, she has no identity in her society. Her gothic style arises from this reliance on the past and its patriarchal governance.

Rosa relies on the stories of her family because she lacks a social and familial role within her community. Rosa constructs her family's past within her gothic perspective because that is the only role she is allowed—to be listened to as a ghost. At her birth, her mother died. Before she was born, her only sister married and moved away from the family. Her aunt snuck out a window one night never to return. Her father nailed himself into the attic to avoid the Civil War. Her family completely abandons her so she is left without a valued role in society. She never marries and the only offer made comes from her dead sister's husband. The only role she could possibly claim, not wife, not daughter, not sister, was aunt to her sister's two children, Henry and Judith. Rosa's social position leaves her with little social or financial security or power, resulting in her peripheral and powerless role as spinster aunt.

Yet Rosa stands alone as the only female with a distinct voice. Though a destitute, female character, Rosa Coldfield's position as a character and a narrator allow her to shape both the story and the telling. Her inability to maintain a role within society destabilizes both of those structures. As the sole female voice throughout the text, her vocal opposition to the male discourse repeatedly announces itself. Phillip Weinstein in "Meditations on the Other" observes the interchangeable nature of the male narrators' voices. In the Harvard dorm room Quentin and Shreve cannot discern the difference between themselves and Mr. Compson: "*Maybe we are both Father*" (210). This blatant association links the male characters that tell the story of Sutpen and continue the Southern patriarchal assumptions, leaving Rosa as the outsider. Even Shreve, the Canadian, complies with and uses the Southern male discourse. Quentin and Shreve are also aligned with the characters Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen: "So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts that Christmas eve: four of them, and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (267). This association of characters and the repetition of that association establish the discourse with and understanding among male characters. Rosa, like with her community and family, exists outside of the dominant structure: she has no role in the community and she is the only female voice.

In contrast to her fellow narrators and in the eyes of the other characters, Rosa stands apart as the irrational, hysterical narrator and character. Surrounded by the male narrators and characters, her voice becomes represented as shrill. Quentin observes at the beginning of the novel that Rosa's "voice would not cease, it would just vanish" (4). He then remarks: "And maybe it (the voice, the talking, the incredulous and unbearable amazement) had even been a cry aloud once" (9). He hears the repressed doubting, unbelieving passion in her voice that tells her story.



Rosa's position leaves her outside of the dominant community structure as does her voice. Through the other-ing of her as both a character and as a narrator Rosa maintains her gothic persona, not just through her words, but even in the eyes of other characters. Rosa exists as a ghost to her community and to the other narrators. This outside position, however, demands that speakers of patriarchal discourse notice Rosa due to southern gentleman culture. Mr. Compson asks, "so what else can we do, . . . but listen to them [ladies] being ghosts?" (7-8). His recognition of Rosa as a ghost complies with and perpetuates Rosa's role as a gothic persona and enlists him and Quentin to listen to her story. This audience allows Rosa the freedom to tell her story, even in her hysteric voice. By telling her story, she refuses to be a ghost in that Rosa's voice does not "vanish," but continues throughout the novel in contrast to the male narrators' voices. Rosa's voice stands apart from the other narrators' as hysteric. Through the gothic genre, Rosa's character and her narrator are allowed to work around the dominant text to provide a view of her as a female entrapped in a male society as a ghost and vampire.

### ***Absalom, Absalom!* as Female Gothic Text**

If Rosa's narration and participation in the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* constructs itself within the gothic genre, Rosa's character has the potentiality to be the gothic heroine. Though scholars have analyzed the multitude of gothic traits in this novel, gothic feminism assists in analyzing Rosa's marginal, yet narratively powerful position in the novel. Though the female gothic is closely associated with female writers, Rosa's narrative position and her position as a character leave room for this possibility in Faulkner.

*Absalom, Absalom!* takes on the gothic tone through its storyline, but more so through the infusion and influence of Rosa as a narrator. The effect of Rosa's gothic narration reveals how

close Faulkner's works adhere to Diane Hoeveler's description of Female Gothic literature. Hoeveler argues that for female authors, the gothic acts as a "gendered response to the creation of 'woman as subject' by the juridical systems that dominate the period" (Hoeveler xiii). Faulkner constructs Rosa within the confines of the patriarchal south, yet gives her a voice that is allowed to dominate sections of the novel and influence the rest. Though Faulkner, as a male author, may not have intended this gendered response, the effect of his attempt to complicate and decenter the telling of Thomas Sutpen's story allows Rosa to become an empowered "subject." The juridical systems of the novel do not contain Rosa—she exists distinctly outside of them. She is not-wife, not-daughter, and removed aunt. Rosa's position in society allows Rosa to be viewed outside of the systems while those systems work around her. Faulkner constructs a female gothic text with *Absalom, Absalom!*

Female writers were attracted to the female gothic novel because "they could explore within it their fantasized overthrow of the public real, figured as a series of ideologically constructed masculine 'spaces,' in favor of the creation of a new privatized, feminized world" (Hoeveler 4). By using the same techniques of the female gothic Faulkner, an author accused of misogyny<sup>2</sup>, constructs embattled female flesh as potential. Although the text contains a masculine centered world through its focus on Sutpen and its multiple male narrators to the one female, the text and the male narrators cannot not stop the writing of Rosa's history. Outside of society, yet in control of the text, Rosa is liberated from the conventional expectations of femininity. The marginalized spinster reinvents the expressions of the femininity defined by the patriarchal order to speak and enact her own story. She is a dangerous woman that threatens the male control of the story and disrupts their expectations. Rosa is able to speak her desires and to develop her identity.

Through Rosa, *Absalom, Absalom!* acquires its gothic sensibilities. She stands as Hoeveler's "female subject" in response to the juridical systems around her. Rosa's hysteria parallels Hoeveler's attribution of "purposely perverse hysteria" (13) to the gothic heroine. Gothic heroines don the hysteric to feign weakness in order to gain agency, but Rosa's position as both character and narrator effectively destabilize both story and telling.

Through a male author, Faulkner develops Rosa's narration similarly to the gothic tales told by females. In order to obtain empowerment in the female gothic, the female heroine must feign weakness and demonstrate passivity. Rosa effectively mimics the mimic (Irigaray) by playing the "feminine feminine" (Hoeveler 11). Hoeveler argues that female characters undo "the effects of phallogocentric discourse only when [she] act[s] out and hyperbolize[s] those same codes" (Hoeveler 12). Female characters paradoxically obtain their strength through the enactment of an exaggerated weakness: "female power through pretended and stated weakness" (Smith and Wallace 2). Having only observed her aunt, she literally dons the same clothes and responsibilities the aunt leaves behind. Assuming the role of aunt to Judith and Henry, she purposefully enacts those same actions and appearances of her aunt with the awareness of their significance and her position. Rosa mimics her aunt and plays the old woman for Quentin to perform her female role. Her enactment of this role, a form of repression, includes the voice of hysteria, a passive female malady, to paradoxically obtain a voice and speak her story.

In their review of Gothicism Smith and Wallace describe the heroines of Gothic novels as masquerading "as blameless victims of a corrupt and oppressive patriarchal society while utilizing passive-aggressive and masochistic strategies to triumph over that system" (2). Rosa conforms to this description of a victim and uses passive-aggressiveness to obtain her voice. Recognizing her ousted position from the male structured southern society, Rosa lives in the

penury left to her after her father boarded and nailed himself into the attic—expecting her to still bring him food. After receiving a wedding proposal from Sutpen, she cannot forget the injury of his suggestion that they attempt to have a male son together before marriage. She carries this injustice with her for forty-three years—“lonely thwarted old female flesh embattled” (9)—and it is the main subject for the story she tells Quentin. But for these forty-three years she lives as a victim of this injury in the shut-up house of her father living on the charity of the town. Her black apparel with “the wan triangle of lace at wrists and throat” (6) evoke the idea of the shackles of a prisoner. Through her father, Sutpen and her submission, Rosa is a blameless, marginalized victim in Jefferson.

Rosa moves past her role of victim through her passive-aggressive and sometimes masochistic words and actions throughout the novel. Rosa insists that Quentin take her out to Sutpen’s Hundred. Under the guise of femininity and old age, she “summons” (5) Quentin to her dilapidated house without stating a purpose. There, she says “even remember kindly then the old woman” (5) if he uses the story she tells him to get published. After downplaying the purpose of her request, she extracts a promise that he will return at dark to drive her out to Sutpen’s Hundred. Rosa knows that Quentin’s Southern upbringing will not let him ignore her as an old woman. Using her position as the old woman, she obtains what she wants. Later, when arriving at Sutpen’s Hundred she demonstrates another passive-aggressive act: she carries the feminized object of a parasol with the violent weapon of a hatchet hidden inside. Quentin, not knowing why they are making the journey in the middle of the night, cannot ignore Rosa’s request for him to smash down the door with the hatchet when she produces it from her parasol. With her identity as a disenfranchised, old female, she uses her position and the instruments of her position to hide her true forceful purposes and accomplishes them. Rosa’s insistence that

Quentin take her back to Sutpen's Hundred leads to the discovery that Henry Sutpen, being guarded by Sutpen's illegitimate child Clytie, is still alive. This discovery, that Rosa knew she would make upon returning, results in Clytie setting the house on fire with her and Henry within it. Rosa's actions and her final return to Sutpen's Hundred end in the death of Sutpen's entire lineage, excepting Jim Bond—the howling idiot. She exacts her revenge and destroys the patriarchal system that she masochistically endured during her life by relying on social responses to her marginal position and her passive-aggressive actions.

Rosa is able to disrupt the patriarchal order because of her acceptance of the hysteric character given to her by the other narrators. Hoeveler observes that the female hysteric of female gothic literature maintains a “double consciousness” (6) that splits the personality of the character. One portion continues the role of female expectations, but the other part remains aware of the performance of that role and uses that role to obtain their desired end. Rosa assumes this personality with her gothic identity in order to perform the repressed portion of her consciousness which will be discussed in detail later.

Rosa demonstrates her awareness of the patriarchal structures of Jefferson and the power and the influence they have on her decisions. She, consequently, assumes the female role deliberately through her lack of response to Sutpen's proposal of marriage, yet her narration voices the other half of her doubled, hysteric personality. While discussing her acceptance of Sutpen's proposal, she responds with a series of “briefs” that reflect her awareness of possible choices. She tells Quentin,

*I hold no brief for myself, I do not excuse it...Because I could have made one [a response]. I could have forced that niche myself if I had willed to—a niche not shaped to fit mild 'Yes' but some blind desperate female weapon's frenzied slash whose very gaping wound had cried 'No! No!' and 'Help!' and 'Save me!' No, no brief, no pity, who did not even move. (132-3)*

Aware that the expected response is “yes,” she could have made the response, but she is also aware that the correct response to this man, whom she has viewed as an ogre since her youth, would be “no.” She however makes no response being literally under his patriarchal control: she “sat beneath that hard oblivious childhood ogre’s hand” (133). She omits a response, which is taken as assent, displaying her awareness of the systems at work around her, yet refuses to participate in them. She displays and performs the passive quality of a female, yet her inner monologue cries for resistance. In viewing herself as a victim of the ogre’s power, Rosa’s character aligns with Hoeveler’s argument that enacting “femininity” leads to paradoxically gaining empowerment. This idea aligns with the passive-aggressive strategies laid out by Smith and Wallace. Rosa’s awareness of her position and the possibilities of response grant her the ability to choose. She chooses no response. She does not will the negative response. She reacts passively. Rosa’s narration demonstrates her awareness that she enacts the submissive female role.

Rosa, as a “spinster doomed for life at sixteen” (59), works outside of the patriarchal construct which allowing her to use those ideologies to her own advantage and gain the gothic feminist empowerment. She openly recognizes her position when she tells Quentin, “*to everyone else whom I knew I was still a child*” (111). She acknowledges the “*fitless garments which my aunt had left behind*” and her “*keeping a fitless house*” (119). She even calls herself “*the aunt, the spinster*” (123). She recognizes the reality of her situation through these delineations of the feminine in a masculine culture. The female gothic, “concerned with delineating highly ideological struggles between “reality” (the forces of political power) and “desire” (the forces of libidinal energy)” (Hoeveler 8), reflects Rosa’s reality and her desire to speak her past. Quentin observes at the beginning of Rosa’s narrative that she is telling it “*because she wants it told*” (5),

but then acknowledges Rosa's agency and her ability to publish it herself as the county's "poetess laureate" (6). Enacting her own helplessness of being able to spread the story herself, her passivity brings her Quentin's assistance of later breaking into Sutpen's Hundred. Recognizing her own lack of physical strength, she wanted someone to wield the hatchet to break down the door. Rosa speaks the reality and acquires her desire through her acceptance and enactment of the weak female.

Rosa's female gothic role reoccurs throughout the story with Rosa's enactment of the female character and her passive aggressive actions. Through her actions of "wise passiveness" (Hoeveler 7), she actualizes her desire to return to Sutpen's Hundred. She also uses this power to remain within the female context of a patriarchal society. Engaged females have a trousseau and a wedding gown; Judith, Rosa's niece, had neither during the midst of the Civil War. In order to keep her promise to her dead sister, Ellen, Rosa acquires and makes Judith a wedding dress. However, by performing her gender in this way, she also breaks the female code: she steals. While discussing Judith's marriage with Quentin Mr. Compson says,

So I believe she stole it. She must have. She must have taken it almost from under her father's nose...with that amoral boldness, that affinity for brigandage of women...by some subterfuge of such bald and desperate transference concocted by innocence that its very simplicity fooled him. (61)

Mr. Compson, the male essentialist, observes and emphasizes Rosa's femininity in the same moment he sees her defiance of it. Her "amoral boldness" was conducted in secret and through her passive-aggressive treatment of her own father. Her façade of obedient daughter allows Rosa to control her identity well enough to break that role and still "fool" her father. Her adherence with the female expectations resulted in the aggressive breaking of those expectations.

Rosa's narration and her awareness of her passive-aggressive actions make Rosa a female gothic heroine and *Absalom, Absalom!* a female gothic text. Her narration indicates her

awareness that she plays to the archetype of a weak female. Rosa is able to gain strength through her feigned “weakness” and passive-aggressive actions. Rosa’s passivity concludes in her acquisition of her desires. Her deliberate enactment of the hysteric responds to the male expectations of her marginal position and uses those expectations to manipulate her position.

### **Hysteria: An Empowering Identity**

Critics have used the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* to read Rosa as a hysteric, notably Minrose Gwin. She acknowledges Rosa’s role as a hysteric, but also argues that “Rosa disappears into the text of madness which she herself creates and which generates the force of the narrative” (64). As a narrator, Rosa commands Quentin and the reader’s attention through her description of her history and her madness. Her madness comes from her attempt to speak the “feminine difference within a masculine culture” (Gwin 64). Using Cixous’ idea of the *écriture féminine* and citing Rosa’s long sentences, her disjointed structure, and her ability to mystify actions in her discourse, Gwin contends that Rosa retreats into her mad voice. She argues that by the end of the novel, Rosa is silenced through her own mad text and exists as the site of her own erasure. However, Rosa’s gothic and hysteric, mad persona allows her to maintain her identity after the site where Gwin argues Rosa loses it. Mr. Compson’s observation that Rosa depends upon the story she is telling in order to keep “body and soul together” (68) shows Rosa’s dependence upon the story. Hysteria results from the separation of body and soul. Rosa’s acquisition and participation in a hysteric voice marks the paradox of a feigned weakness to gain strength. Rosa’s reliance on the phallogentric language of her father or the male discourse shapes her narrative creating and affecting her ability to tell or interpret her own text.



Rosa's awareness of her own self and own hysteric voice allows her to use the patriarchal social structures to write herself and to maintain cohesion of body and soul.

Though critiqued by feminist psychoanalysts as being radical and impractical, Elaine Showalter's ideas concerning the female hysteric work within the context of a male created female gothic narrative.<sup>3</sup> Within the male dominated world Showalter defines the "nature" of a woman through that perspective. She argues that "By *nature*, then, woman was constituted to be 'the helpmate and companion of man'; her innate qualities of mind were formed to make her man's complement rather than his equal" (123). Being raised within this culture, Showalter argues, forces women's complicity with the patriarchal notion of female submissiveness. She contends that defying this construct results in mental breakdown, but questions this further in stating: "Instead of asking if rebellion was mental pathology, we must ask whether mental pathology was suppressed rebellion" (Showalter 147). Showalter relates hysteria and "madness" to a defiance of submissiveness. Rosa, within the literary context, is born outside and ostracized from the power structure, leaving her only the opportunity to defy it. Her hysteria is mandatory to her position or lack of position in society, but it is also a form of defiance to the order of Jefferson. She disrupts the stories told by the male narrators and the acceptance of her madness allows her to act. Her mental break down to the fictional town of Jefferson is her gothically charged hysteria and rebelliousness.

Rosa's childhood, one of abandonment and blame, kept her an outsider so that Rosa had to learn and participate in a different structure of rules. According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Rosa "is given the role of hiding behind the door eavesdropping.... Kept away from power, hidden behind the observable actions, Rosa learns by stealth, complicity and fear all that she needs to know for the kind of life the Southern culture will permit her to lead" (232). The most

important lesson Rosa learns is that her position in society gives her a kind of power; she is outside of social conventions and therefore can break them. Mr. Compson acknowledges Rosa's position within society and the restrictions she faces:

this small body with its air of curious and paradoxical awkwardness like a costume borrowed at the last minute and of necessity for a masquerade which she did not want to attend; that aura of a creature cloistered now by deliberate choice and still in the throws of enforced apprenticeship to, rather than voluntary or even acquiescent participation in, breathing—this bound maidservant to flesh and blood waiting even now to escape it by writing a schoolgirl's poetry about the also-dead. (51)

Her small body, repressed through the social restriction as a female orphan and pauper, dons the “costume” for the “masquerade” that is her life. However, Rosa makes the “deliberate choice” to “escape.” Her escape is solely possible through her writing about the also-dead. Her writing and her telling her story through her hysteric and gothic personality enables her to write and control her text of madness and female difference. She uses the roles and language taught to her through the patriarchal system to forge her own identity in her voice. To keep body and soul together, Rosa must tell her story and, paradoxically, the hysteria that divides her allows her to fuse her identity through this telling.

Rosa's marginal position and hysteria paradoxically allow her the ability to tell her story, one that allows her to maintain “body and soul.” Rosa, as a social outsider and hysteric, tells her story to Quentin and can extract a promise of Quentin's assistance. Rosa's southern community allows her this position because it is a disenfranchised position: she has no money or family to effect any change or major disturbance. Additionally, Rosa's hysteria is accepted. Showalter argues that “[h]ysteria is tolerated because in fact it has no power to effect cultural change” (161). Mr. Compson and Quentin accept Rosa's position and tolerate her story and requests because Rosa does not pose as a threat to them or their society. Rosa's hysteria allows her to tell her story and to speak.

Rosa's fellow narrators discount and discredit her behavior because they believe in her hysteria as unthreatening. Rosa purchases and engraves a gravestone for Judith, her niece. Rosa inscribes on the gravestone: "*Suffered the Indignities and Travails of this World for 42 Years, 4 Months, 9 Days, and went to Rest Last February 12, 1884. Pause, Mortal; Remember Vanity and Folly and Beware*" (171). This exceptional inscription rants against the injustices Judith endured during her lifetime—most resulting from the action of her father Thomas Sutpen. Judith's complaints mirror Rosa's as a victim of Thomas Sutpen's desire to establish his own patriarchy through land and family. Mr. Compson's responds to this inscription by telling Quentin, "*Beautiful lives—women do. In very breathing they draw meat and drink from some beautiful attenuation of unreality in which the shades and shapes of facts—of birth and bereavement, of suffering and bewilderment and despair—move with the substanceless decorum of lawn party charades, perfect in gesture and without significance or any ability to hurt*" (171). Mr. Compson views Rosa and all women as being "gestures" in an "unreality," not capable of actions in society. To Mr. Compson women exist outside of a male sphere and therefore can focus on the suffering because it contrasts with their unreal lives. Believing Rosa's existence to be beautiful because of her ability to disengage with the reality of the world becomes ironic the context of Rosa's treatment as a hysteric: a person divided between body and soul, reality and desire. To Mr. Compson, Rosa's unbearable reality is a game of charades and her desires are stifled because she is merely a "gesture." Mr. Compson's reasoning leaves Rosa ineffectual in enacting change because as part and endorser of the patriarchal system of Jefferson, he discounts both parts of her hysteric being that was initially divided and labeled by Mr. Compson. Quentin blindly accepts Rosa's request to venture the twelve miles out to Sutpen's Hundred. Shreve additionally stereotypes Rosa by labeling her "one Southern Bayard or Guinevere" (142)

implying Rosa's position in a long line of women who do not fit within the social expectations. Rosa was able though to buy and inscribe Judith's gravestone. Rosa was able to leave her influence on a memorial to another woman. Rosa's words continue on this stone after her death and ignite the questions of southern culture and masculinity in Quentin's mind. Rosa's words influence the masculine culture that constructs her as a hysteric. Through the male narrators, Rosa's position and female roles in general in society are defined as hysteric, outside and agentless. However, Mr. Compson tells Quentin that he must listen to her being a ghost and he does.

Through words, the novel constructs Rosa as a hysteric and through words Rosa tells the story that she hopes will keep her body and soul together. Hysteria has often been used in literature to examine and depict the repressed lives of women. Rosa's character, depicted as a hysteric by Faulkner, demonstrates the fusion of the repressed hysteric with an opportunity to speak. The repression of self according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic* can lead to such diseases as anorexia, hysteria and agoraphobia (2031). These conditions originate in the mind, which has been viewed as an organizing structure based in language. The lack of language and the lack of pronouncing one's identity lead to the deterioration of self. The woman who remains silent risks madness, but the woman who speaks is labeled "an active monster" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2022). Silence begets madness, but Rosa speaks and yet represents hysteria. Lacan "observes in hysteria a lower threshold and a more transparent screen between the unconscious and the conscious" (qtd. in Gwin 72). A hysteric, if allowed to speak, speaks both the conscious and unconscious sides of the self; so though repressed, the ramblings of a hysteric express the unrepressed unconscious. Rosa seeks to contain her body and soul, her conscious and unconscious, through the telling of Sutpen's story

and the use of a hysteric voice provides the tool to express both. With this idea of language and the expression of self, Rosa does not lack language in her hysteria and her use of language through hysteria works to solidify her character and ultimately grants Rosa the role of gothic narrator. Though Rosa's body and actions correspond with the gendered diseases discussed by Gilbert and Gubar, Rosa's speech through hysteria enables her agency.

Mr. Compson, Quentin, Shreve, and the third person narrator observe Rosa's hysteric behavior throughout the novel. Rosa accepts these judgments and then uses them to her own purpose to describe Sutpen: "*Why he is mad . . . and I mad too*" (133). Through her narration she is able to own the perceptions of her and to pass her own conclusions and justifications: "*just as the sane have intervals of madness to keep them aware that they are sane*" (133). She remarks on the limited and controlled nature of her own madness. Her hysteria and madness are linked to the female gothic genre because immediately her text reverts to stock gothic elements, "*grim ogre-bourne and produced two half phantom children*" (135). Rosa's hysteria is viewed through the lens of the female gothic in which her madness stands for her strength and ability to voice her identity. She places herself as the victim and the passive female responder through her hysteria and the surrounding atmosphere of the gothic text. Rosa's words structure her as a hysteric and permit the continuance of her narrative.

### **Hysteria as Subversive Female Voice**

Hysteria, the splitting of self, creates a dual persona. Having acquired an identity as hysteric, ghost and vampire, Rosa can tell her story within a hysteric discourse allotted to females. Rosa argues to be allowed to keep "body and soul together" (68), allowed by telling her story. Consequently, in telling her story she enters the multiple male discourses of the novel,

creating a sense of intertextuality for both Quentin and the reader. According to theorist Julia Kristeva, “The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*” (66). The poetic language of Rosa’s text creates double meaning and awareness for Quentin and the reader. The genre Rosa inhabits, Gothicism, relies on the doubling effect to induce terror and suspense. Rosa’s position as a woman imperils the structures of class, race, and gender roles on which the South relies. As a character without social position, Rosa “attacks both the immediate family by feeding off it, and the genealogical continuity by refusing to nurture it” (Clarke 64). Rosa’s position and hysteric voice allow her the opportunity to subvert the social role she is given and to subvert the male dominance of narration. Her engagement in the gothic genre and her assumption of the hysterical text give Rosa a subversive force as a narrator to undermine the family and patriarchy. Rosa speaks and continues to speak after the text silences her because “she refused at last to be a ghost” (289).

Rosa maintains her position in the novel as she subverts the male narrators’ attempts to suppress her story by playing the gender roles that the men have attributed to her. Julia Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* constructs a system of a counter narrative for speech outside the Symbolic, dominant structure: the semiotic. This system runs parallel with the dominant discourse until it “disrupts its signifying process through elision, repetition, mere sound, and the multiplication of meaning through indefinitely signifying images and metaphors” (Butler 105). Rosa’s narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* accomplishes a disruption of the male narratives through those exact techniques. She repeats certain phrases throughout the novel: “I hold no brief for myself” (12, 128, 133), “I saw” (12), “so they will tell you” (107), and “I” repeated five times within three lines. Each of these repetitions serve to inform Quentin where Rosa fits into the story she is telling and to remind him of her responsibility for that narrative. The eight repetitions

of “I saw” within one paragraph serve to remind Quentin and the reader of two things: that Rosa was aware of Sutpen’s character and had seen what he was before she agreed to marry him and that Rosa is the only narrator that has a first-hand account of Thomas Sutpen. The repetitions serve to emphasize her knowledge and her need to tell it. Rosa creates Kristeva’s rhythm of “this repetitive sonority...this struggle between word and force gushing with pain and relief of a desperate delirium; the repetition of this growth, of this gushing forth” (28). Each repetition gains new meaning through the infusion of Rosa’s ego and purpose. Within Kristeva’s theory, Rosa transforms the patriarchal language into a semiotic representation of herself.

Rosa’s semiotic language works to enforce the idea of her narration, but because the semiotic works within the Symbolic, phallogentric language system, Rosa can only use the same words that are used to diminish her vocal abilities. Quentin also hears the story from his father, Mr. Compson and from Shreve. Rosa’s words filter into their narrative as well through their own repetitions. The phrase “according to Miss Coldfield” (28, 30, 31, 222) and its variations work both to remind Quentin and reader the source or bias for the information and to diminish her account based on that bias. Shreve’s repeated and incorrect labeling of her as “Aunt Rosa” serves as a collapse of Rosa’s identity from a formal “Miss” to a familiar “Aunt” which was also associated and used for black females. By working within the phallogentric language system in applying Kristeva’s theory, Rosa loses her authority of language and therefore any agency her narrative would allot her.

Judith Butler’s analysis of Kristeva’s semiotic theory in *Gender Trouble* reworks the idea of an opposing voice within the dominant structure, but not through a parallel structure of the semiotic to the Symbolic discourse. Butler argues that “the subversion of paternally sanctioned culture can not come from another version of culture, but only from within the repressed interior

of culture itself, from the heterogeneity of drives that constitute culture's concealed foundation" (110). The implication of Butler's statement shows the ineffectiveness of Kristeva's semiotic arguing instead a performative subversion within the dominant structure. Kristeva's semiotic, though parallel with the paternally sanctioned culture, comes from an unsanctioned vantage point and culture and so does not subvert the dominant structure. The male responses and corrections to her narrative, when her narrative is read as a semiotic response to the patriarchal narrative, discredit and belittle her account. However, if Rosa's narrative and position as character are read as a performative response to the male discourse, Rosa becomes agent and narrator of her story. Rosa's hysteria works as a performative response to the male narrators and works to subvert and influence their narratives.

Viewed by both fellow characters and by critics as a hysteric, Rosa's narrative and character enact the role of spinster hysteric in the Civil War Southern culture. She articulates and enacts this role, applying Butler's theory, to "create illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality" (173). Rosa's pose of hysteria aligns with Butler's understanding of the performative argument. Butler argues that through performance a person's actions are "imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original[;] they imitate the myth of originality itself" (Butler 176). Through the imitation of her expected role, her actual position within the Jefferson community becomes clear. Her purposeful and exaggerated hysteric behavior displays the distinction between what is socially expected from her and her actual desires and she dons what Butler later describes as a phantasmatic identity (85). Butler views "identity" as imaginary within the context of a fixed patriarchal system. Rosa's hysteria reveals the imitative structure of her narrative in her social context.



Though performing her hysteria to the social expectations, the other narrators still attempt to contextualize and contain Rosa's story. Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson and Shreve's narratives *correct* Rosa's text by providing more information removed from her personal bias. Rosa's role in telling the history of Thomas Sutpen contributes to the male fear of female history making. Even when complying with the expected social role of supportive woman, Rosa's character and narrative are restricted by the male view of her hysteria. Rosa creates her story within the male dominated story, but her hysteria establishes the need of the male story tellers to respond to her. Through her telling of the story she hoped would keep body and soul together, she creates responses from the other narrators which validate and fear her story. Rosa creates an empowered voice out of her devalued social position.

Rosa cannot replace the dominant discourse of the other narrators with her own voice, but because Faulkner allows her to be a narrator at the beginning and middle of the novel she succeeds in participating in the multiplicity of discourses. Quentin relies on her narrative for understanding. Quentin's narration continually refers back to Rosa's exact words, as a reference—"his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen," and Sutpen "built a plantation—(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently" (5). Rosa's voice in parenthesis splices and supplements Quentin's narrative. Though still marginalized by the use of parentheses, Rosa's words have influenced the male perspective of Sutpen. The use of Rosa's words converts Rosa's story from an old woman's ravings to a historical foundation to build and to assimilate his construction of the past. The resistance suggests the desire to submerge the partial truths her story contains, but the reliance indicates the desire to subsume the truth of her story into his own. Rosa's voice, using the guise of hysteria, gives her an audience and her adherence to patriarchal roles allows the male narrators to be influenced by her.

Shreve attempts to marginalize Rosa's narration by parodying her reference to Sutpen as a demon and an ogre. However, Shreve does not manage to trivialize Rosa's narrative role, but continues Sutpen's story as a gothic tale. As Shreve attempts to undermine her authority, he effectually only enhances her previously established subjectivity. Reconstructing the last part of the Sutpens' story, Shreve uses Rosa's terms for Sutpen and extends her gothic influence on the telling of the story. Though he uses this imitation as a form of mockery of Rosa's hysteric persona, his response emphasizes Rosa's telling. He remarks on her character in demeaning and mocking ways through his repetition of Rosa's use of "demon" for Sutpen and referring to her as a "ghost." Like Quentin, Shreve has accepted Rosa's role as storyteller and, accordingly, assimilated her words into his own vocabulary.

Mr. Compson, through the frame of the text, also responds to Rosa's story, thus confirming Rosa's voice in the male sphere. The novel creates an unreliable historical account of Thomas Sutpen through the plurality of narrative voices and perspectives, building on the indeterminacy of fact and fiction within the fictional work.<sup>4</sup> The third person narrative and Quentin's introspective sections refer to what Rosa said—"according to Miss Coldfield" (30, 31), "Miss Coldfield told Quentin" (24, 27, 28). Mr. Compson's narrative attempts to correct and supplant Rosa's account. Received through generational descendancy, Mr. Compson's narrative attempts to return to the dominant discourse of Sutpen's life by using his father's and Sutpen's voice to tell the story. Mr. Compson section avoids reference to Rosa and focuses on Quentin's grandfather—"your grandfather said" (35, 37)—and on Sutpen—"That is how he [Sutpen] told it" (181), "[a]nd so he [Sutpen] told Grandfather" (178, 184, 186, 186, 195), "[Sutpen] insisted on that to Grandfather" (189). However this emphasis, Mr. Compson's account is still removed by the generations and he repeatedly does refer back to Rosa's narrative,

even if to correct her. Telling Quentin about Sutpen's illegitimate child, Mr. Compson says, "Miss Rosa didn't tell you that two of the niggers in the wagon that day were women?" (48). While belittling Rosa's account of Thomas Sutpen for lack of details, this question still recognizes Rosa's story as a source. Mr. Compson's overcompensation for authenticity of facts and meaning for clarification oppose Rosa's elusive story that Quentin cannot follow, yet relies upon it. Mr. Compson asks, "So what else can we do, . . . but listen to them [ladies] being ghosts?" (7-8); Mr. Compson sanctions Rosa with the role of story-teller because she performs the role of a ghost to the male eye.

Rosa's perspective, grown from years of anger and hate, shapes Quentin's and the reader's view of main characters. Her narration affects not only Quentin, but the entire novel due to its prominence as the first character's account of the past. Only in her narrative does Quentin hear the account of Henry's feminine reaction of "screaming and vomiting" (21) at the sight of Sutpen fighting one of his slaves and Judith's masculine curiosity of violence through her covert viewing of that same fight. By entering this information at the beginning of the novel the subjectivity of the reader has been compromised in believing the accounts of the remaining narrators. Henry and Judith continue in these gender reversed roles in Mr. Compson's and Quentin's recapitulation of the past, reinforcing the validity of Rosa's story, even though Rosa admits, "But I was not there" (22). Her narrative influences the rest of the story, breaking down the male accounts of the Sutpen in both Quentin's and the reader's perspective.

Two characters, Judith and Ellen, are depicted by Rosa and by Mr. Compson in alternative perspectives resulting in complicating the identity of the characters and influencing the perception of both Quentin and the reader. Rosa depicts Judith as a wild child, racing her horses into town and enjoying the fights in the barn. Mr. Compson, alternately, describes Judith

as a young girl, existing in “a pearly lambence without shadows... [as well as] in nebulous suspension held, strange and unpredictable” (52-3). Mr. Compson’s shining account, following Rosa’s, questions both of their versions. Mr. Compson describes the effect of marriage on Ellen as, “She had bloomed” (54) and at “the absolute halcyon of her butterfly’s summer” (58). Rosa’s earlier comment that marriage made Ellen a “recluse” and “helpless” (12) destabilizes Mr. Compson’s version. By presenting her perspective, she is no longer silenced by her lack of social role, but empowered by the male contrast to her story. Her empowerment and the uncertainty of authority create turmoil in both the reader’s perception of the characters of the novel and Quentin’s.

Rosa is trivialized and made into a ghost, but her role as a narrator shapes both the stories of the other narrators and the reader’s perception of the characters within those narrations. By telling the story, Rosa gains the ability to push the limits of her role in the community and question the roles of those that surround her; through this questioning she is able to enter the male sphere. Contrary to Showalter’s assertion that hysteria is tolerated by society because it cannot effect cultural change, Rosa alters the perceptions of the male narrators and directs the course of the novel with her hysteric narration. Though Rosa maintains a peripheral role within the society, the use of her narrative as a vehicle for agency works through her subtle influence over the male narrators. Through her hysteric voice she is given the opportunity to subvert the social role she is given by influencing the male dominant narration.

Rosa speaks her hysteria and her hysteria allows her to be heard. Gwin argues that Rosa’s hysteria rests upon the conjecture that madness cannot be spoken, just as female desire cannot be spoken in a patriarchal language according to Kristeva. Rosa displays an awareness for the type of persona she presents throughout the text implying that though her voice is hysteric, she uses

that voice to show and to perform her own objectives. One of the repetitive phrases used by Rosa, her “briefs,” has been noted by Gwin and Stephen Ross as Rosa’s inability to let go of a situation. It is also a location of Rosa’s self-awareness, her own increasing rhetorical awareness, as well as Kristeva’s semiotics. Rosa becomes aware of the text she is creating through her story telling, thus making her text not a mad and unintermittible tale, but a performative action.

Rosa recognizes the rhetorical struggles she faces in her narrative position and this consciousness marks her voice as coherent with the attempt to be hysteric. Rosa self-reflects upon the story she is telling Quentin with feigned self-doubt:

*I will tell you what he [Sutpen] did and let you be the judge. (Or try to tell you, because there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them. It can be told; I could take that many sentences, repeat the bold blank naked and outrageous words just as he spoke them, and bequeath you only that same aghast and outraged unbelief I know when I comprehended what he meant; or take three thousand sentences and leave you only that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for almost fifty years.) 134-5*

Rosa’s chapter, entirely in italics, and her “doubt” of telling the story, effectively in parenthesis, marks the textual representation of Rosa as a hysteric character. Italics set Rosa’s voice apart from Quentin’s and although Mr. Compson’s narrative is also in italics, the frequent interruptions by Quentin, not in italics, in her section and not in Mr. Compson’s marks her voice as different. Rosa’s rational self speaks outside of the parenthesis in this instance—she states what she will do. Within the parenthesis exists her hysteric self, representative of her unconscious or true self. Where she says she will tell the story, the parenthesis voice questions that and yet still affirms it. The short compound sentence outside of the parenthesis stands at juxtaposition to the rambling sentences that follow indicating a different, more hysterical voice. As a narrator, however, Rosa acknowledges the impossibility of her story to reshape and retell history. Playing on the gothic characteristics of the impossibility of assigning words/signs to the

past, Rosa recognizes that impossibility yet demands that “[i]t can be told.” Within the parenthesis, her sentences are sprawling and dramatic and even lacking appropriate punctuation—the space of her self-doubt adheres to Cixous’ notion of female writing, *écriture féminine*. The preceding sentence though sets up Quentin and the reader for a logical chronological account of Sutpen. Rosa’s objective is to tell the story, but she consciously embeds the perception of weakened and insensible femininity to allow the male narrators and listener to hear and respond to her. Rosa’s incredulity of telling the story and her repetition of the fact that it has been nearly fifty years contrasts sharply with his assertion that the story can (and will) be told marking her awareness of the text she is creating as narrator and the hysteric, gothic frame she places it in.

The text itself, outside of Rosa’s voice, also recognizes her assumed persona in telling the story. Rosa’s voice, hysterical and illogical, necessitates a response from Quentin because of its effluvious nature:

It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, stillborn, and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity—horror or pleasure or amazement—depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsing time as music or a printed tale. (15)

Rosa’s discourse affects Quentin similarly to a dream that may or may not have occurred, but depends solely upon the listener’s perception and recognition to actualize the tale. Rosa’s story can only be heard when she allows herself to be accepted as a non-reality, within the hysteric half of an identity. The hysteric discourse allows the juridical systems to work within the story, while subverting those systems in displaying and enacting the female desire. By maintaining a weakened stereotype of a female voice, Rosa is allowed to speak her desire and enact her desire to return to Sutpen’s Hundred to complete the destruction of Sutpen’s lineage.

Rosa puts on the phantasmatic identity of Hoeveler's recognized gothic heroine as a narrator to will her desires. She is able to perform desires (fantasy) through her guise as a gothic persona (phantom/ghost/hysteric) allowing her to write a female discourse as a "phantasy." She works within the juridical and Symbolic structures of her culture in order to enact her desires. Rosa's method of "madness" does not result in an uninterrupted text, but of female agency and exposure of the female gender.

Rosa's ability to speak her desires affects the patriarchal structure and those within it. Though at the beginning Quentin views Rosa's story as a dream, by the end of the novel he has formally recognized her story as a "printed tale." In the emphatic closing lines of the novel, Quentin response to Shreve's question about why he hates the south, "I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!" (303) demonstrate the powerful and real effect of Rosa's story. Quentin's ideas of the south and his personal, mental stability are challenged by Rosa's tale which he eventually accepts outside of its dream-like discourse. Intertextually, in *The Sound and the Fury* Quentin, the same character, commits suicide because he could not live with the cultural expectations of the south and its difficult realities. Rosa's story and her representation of the female figure of the south through herself, though not mentioned in that text, stays within the character's consciousness and shapes his response to his sister Caddy. Rosa's voice, written later in Faulkner's career, speaks for the repressed female of his novels and allows the recognition of the enforced female roles through her subversive narration.

Rosa's irate and hysterical account of Sutpen's treatment of her allows her the ability to speak her story and to be listened and responded to by a male audience. Her hysteric behavior and words formed a discourse allowing a subversive female authority to arise in the history making of Thomas Sutpen. Her discourse, though constricted by the juridical systems of the

south, enables Rosa to relinquish the repressed identity through hysteria and combine her body and soul.

### **Control of Gothic and Hysteria**

Rosa's feminine ability to use language within Faulkner's text, viewed with the dialogic of the non-linear text and the implications of gothic genre on Rosa and history creates the complex environment allowing Rosa Coldfield to subvert language and her social position in order to maintain control of her text and her identity. Working beyond language and within "madness," Rosa subverts the patriarchal telling of *Absalom*.

Rosa's self-recognition of possible madness limits the possibility that Rosa is herself mad. Formerly attributed to Sutpen, Rosa's remark, "*just as the sane have intervals of madness to keep them aware that they are sane*" (133), applies to Rosa's voice and her consciousness of her own "madness." Rosa constructs an idea of madness for the entire novel both through her depiction of the gothic hysteric, but through her voice and authority as a narrator. Rosa describes Sutpen as "*mad, yet not so mad... If he was mad, it was only his compelling dream which was insane and not his methods*" (134). Rosa self-labels herself as "mad" as well within the same chapter. As a narrator to Quentin, she controls the order and manner in which he is permitted to hear the story. Her juxtaposition of herself and Sutpen associates his mad compelling dream with her own desire, to tell the story. Rosa's words then also links the idea that if Sutpen's methods were not mad, neither is Rosa's method of telling her story through a hysteric voice. Her hysteria is method, not madness.

Rosa writes and justifies her "madness" throughout the novel creating herself as dual character and narrator and "mad, yet not so mad." She utilizes the gothic genre to perpetuate her



madness to establish a position for herself within the community and within the telling of Sutpen's story throughout the novel. She uses the gothic reliance on juridical systems and the weak female guise of feminine gothic stories to write herself. Rosa questions, "*Why should madness be its own victim also? Or Why may it be not even madness but solitary despair in titan conflict with the lonely and foredoomed and indomitable spirit*" (135). As victim to Sutpen's madness, she is victim of her own madness—having to tell story hysterically in order to be able to utter female discourse and in order to be heard. Her voice pleads for equal consideration while she asks for special consideration for Sutpen's actions. By working within the phallogocentric language structure she is able to subvert the masculine focus, but disguises her own voice within that structure.

Rosa uses the words and language structure of her culture and heritage, but disguises the seemingly masculine influenced world around her as a female space. Rosa's "habits of language and behavior formed by that father-daughter relationship" (Wagner-Martin 230) are demonstrated throughout the text, but with variation showing the control Rosa commands over her life and words. The first scene of the novel, introduced by the third-person narrator, takes place "in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that" (3). Rosa maintains the name for the room in which they meet, but her influence has altered the space into something entirely different—a coffin. Transforming throughout Rosa's life, her house, once respectable has been "fastened for forty-three summers" (3). During those forty-three years Rosa learned to speak her own voice mirrored in her creation of her own space in a gothic sense. The windows held "yellow slashes full of dust motes" (3) and "the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity" (4) mixed with the air, "prisoned in it like a tomb" (6). Though Rosa was born into her lack of social position and into the language used to describe it, she re-

signifies the “office” that was her father’s. Her ability to transform this word and space mirrors her ability to structure history; she is working outside of language as a mere structure and outside social expectations through her performative hysterics.

Throughout the novel, a reoccurring motif presented through the third-person narrator, involves the association of Rosa with the second blooming wisteria that surrounds and engulfs her house. Her domicile contains a dual nature, similar to Rosa’s hysteric personality: “dim coffin-smelling gloom sweet and oversweet with the twice-bloomed wisteria” (4). Blooming for the second time, Rosa, who missed out on her youth becoming a stunted adult, takes a second opportunity to act her desires. Her embattled flesh like the coffin house enables this second reality of sweet fulfillment to be performed. Her reclusive life as spinster aunt is allowed a second and abnormal bloom in the shape through her socially abnormal behavior as hysteric female.

Rosa also commands her language, using her hysteric persona, in the writing of Judith’s tombstone. Ellen and Thomas Sutpen’s tombstones were ordered and written by Thomas Sutpen, but “*Miss Rosa ordered that one*” (171). Like the coffin she has made her house, she inscribes Judith’s tombstone with a dramatic message reflective of Rosa’s own life: “*Suffered the Indignities and Travails of this World for 42 Years, 4 Months, 9 Days, and went to Rest Last February 12, 1884. Pause, Mortal; Remember Vanity and Folly and Beware*” (171). Suffering after Sutpen’s insult for a similar forty-three years, Rosa claims a similar existence to Judith and inscribes the purpose of her storytelling upon Judith’s grave—to remember. Rosa tells her story to Quentin to both remember and flaunt the female existence within the historical structure of Thomas Sutpen. Rosa speaks her injustice through the gothic lens of death, coffins and the

remembrance of those through ghosts. However, Rosa's ghosts do not rest, but persist in being acknowledged.

*Absalom, Absalom!* includes different additional examples of Rosa's un-passive, but aggressive reaction to the structures around her. She demands Quentin's company to return to Sutpen's Hundred. While on their way Quentin thinks, "Why, she is afraid" (291) because of Rosa's shaking hands and soft whimpering (292). However, once there Rosa knocks "Clytie down with her fist like a man would" (280). Rosa's few words are "tense fierce hissing words filled with that same curious terrified yet implacable determination" (292) while she drags Quentin to action. Rosa's voice diminishes at this point of the novel; she speaks rarely and no longer commands the position of narrator. Even with this fading authority, Quentin changes his mind and thinks, "Why, she's not afraid at all" (293) and "Yes. She is the one who owns the terror" (295). While the "she" of Quentin's statement remains an ambiguous reference to either Rosa or Clytie, Rosa owns the terror of the novel through her depiction and persistence of displaying the female gothic figure through a hysteric voice. Her persona, even without many words or authority in this scene, perpetuates the action and increases Quentin's own terror of the situation. By embodying and performing the female hysteric, Rosa maintains agency even without words.

The following scene of Rosa's story has been interpreted as her ultimate silencing by Roberts, Gwin and Wagner-Martin. Rosa's final approach of Sutpen's Hundred, fueled by Rosa's desire to become an aunt to Henry who has been sick and in hiding there, results in the mansion's, Clytie's and Henry's destruction through fire. Enraged at not being allowed to complete her goal of acquiring a social and familial role, Rosa's "language is sacrificed to rage" according to Wagner-Martin (237). The third-person narrator describes her reaction to the

flames: “Yet they had to hold her...the light thin furious creature making no sound at all now, struggling with silent bitter fury, clawing and scratching and biting at the two men who held her, who dragged her back” (300). Restrained physically, Rosa loses her final opportunity to break the restraints of her social detainment as Henry’s aunt and sole white relative. Her position of authority in dragging Quentin in the previous encounter with Sutpen’s Hundred reverses and Rosa loses her aggressive authority. Gwin reads this scene as the “*direst consequence* of female power and female desire, what we all fear: the annihilation of the female subject” (65). As a female subject, Rosa has been physically annihilated according to Mr. Compson’s letter to Quentin announcing her death and according to critics her voice, too, has been annihilated.

While Rosa’s speech diminishes by the end of the novel, if Rosa represents a female gothic heroine in *Absalom, Absalom!* her silencing does not require that her agency as a female subject is also silence. Hoeveler, using Barthes’s “enigmatic codes,” contends that the gothic novel engages readers in the attempt to decipher the parts of a text that are unresolved (21). The multiple discourses of the novel form a web of unknowns through the myth making and story telling of the multiple unreliable characters. These untruths form the myth of Thomas Sutpen as represented by *Absalom, Absalom!* but these holes leave the reader in need of completing the story. Rosa’s diminished voice leaves such a hole, requiring Rosa’s persona as the gothic hysteric to complete her story and continue the agency of Rosa’s identity. In her article “Castration or Decapitation?” Hélène Cixous observes, “Silence: silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech...their tongues are cut off and what talk isn’t heard because it’s the body that talks and man doesn’t hear the body” (49). Rosa’s rage has engulfed her speech, but her hysteria continues to speak for itself. Her tongue is cut off figuratively and the third-person narrator notices she is “foaming a little at the mouth” (301). This attention to her

voice, or lack of voice, marks what does not have to be said: the truth about Sutpen's Hundred. Rosa does not need to speak further because her male audience believes the truth that could never be vocalized within a gothic context: "now since they must have believed her" (300).

Having completed her desire to tell the truth of Sutpen's story, Rosa reverts back into the "impotent and static rage like children's feet" (3) from the beginning of the novel as "a doll in a nightmare" (301) at the end. Despite this retreat of Rosa's vocal agency, her presence exists beyond the language structure in her hysteria. In his letter to Quentin, Mr. Compson recognizes Rosa has "*gained that place or bourne where the objects of the outrage and of the commiseration also are no longer ghosts*" (301-2). Shreve's echoes this sentiment: "Except that she refused at the last to be a ghost" (289). Rosa became a hysteric and as a hysteric she could not be silenced or diminished into the phantoms of the gothic discourse.

### **Conclusion**

Faulkner's multi-discourse of *Absalom, Absalom!* creates a meta-history of both Sutpen and the culture of the South. This highly crafted novel develops the ideas of southern culture in a variety of styles of the contrasting narrators, but only Rosa is hysteric. The male narrators, content with life (excepting Quentin; see earlier comments), are able to mold the history of the south in their own style: Mr. Compson as poetically infused idealism and Shreve as crass, stereotypical conjecture. However, in her hysteric state, Rosa is alone in seeing the full range of Sutpen's criminal acts. Her hysteria positions her outside the patriarchal structure where the rules remain vague, yet still within that structure giving her the ability to influence it.

While Hume contends that the gothic "offers no conclusions" (233), Rosa's representation of femininity through a gothic discourse creates a subversive perspective on

gender construction within Faulkner's novel. Rosa redeems the vehicle of narrative authority as a female space through her "weakened" perception of a hysteric female. By viewing the novel as a female gothic, different performative and paradoxical elements of gender roles are illuminated in their relationship to authority. The female gothic views the internalized prison of female repression as a possibility for escape, or at least of female expression. Rosa accepts the phallogentric language as her own and creates a hysteric voice to perform to the male ideologies. Rosa controls her hysteria to be heard by the male characters and commands their attention so to be responded to. Even though the female gothic's focus lies with female authors, Rosa's conception and portrayal of the female gothic applies to Faulkner.

As character and narrator, Rosa expands the bounds of her influence through her hysteric persona. As a ghost and a hysteric, Rosa reaffirms, yet subverts patriarchal society. The complacent male figures bring no change or action to the novel, but Rosa manages to destroy Sutpen's house and his line. The contrasting genders within the power structure allow Faulkner to examine the differences between the two within the southern context—the women, though powerless, enact the greatest change in the past. With this novel and with Rosa as a woman that is allowed a voice, the text opens the problem of dissociating the myth from the history and the performance from the gender. Rosa is Faulkner's ghost haunting *Absalom, Absalom!*; however, she refused to be a ghost and remains only a subversive voice within the context of Faulkner's body of work.

Rosa makes a female identity possible because she becomes the genre, the gothic, which according to Smith and Wallace, makes national identity possible. These identities are complicated because both must be repressed in order to be sustained. Through hysteria, madness caused by the division of self, Rosa can tell her story which allows her to join her "body and

soul.” Hysteria, paradoxically, allows Rosa’s full identity to take shape and interact with the other characters and narrators of the novel. This agency is allotted because she works within the structure of female roles within the patriarchal society. She actively helps form the story of Thomas Sutpen and achieves her desired goal: his destruction. Though her voice fails at the end, her hysteric persona and her identity is preserved by having others believe her story.

## NOTES

1. Such as Minrose Gwin, Diane Roberts, Linda Wagner-Martin, and Philip Weinstein.
2. Leslie Fiedler, Albert Guerard and Irving Howe argue Faulkner’s misogyny while other critics read his portrayals of women as sympathetic. For a more information see the introduction to *Faulkner and Women: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha* edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie.
3. Donald Carveth and Jean Hantman Carveth correct the blurring of hysteria and psychosomatic conditions in Elaine Showalter’s work in “Fugitives from Guilt.” Allison Fraiberg examines where Showalter’s theory breaks down.
4. Mr. Compson justifies and attempts to establish his narrative authority, but he makes it personal when he is himself separated completely from the story by a generation. According to Mr. Compson’s narrative of Sutpen, “He [Sutpen] was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced” (199). Sutpen, on the other hand, distances his own story from himself; he does not think, only experiences and relates those experiences. Rosa’s story, at the other end of the spectrum, is personal, even more so than Mr. Compson’s; but her story avoids the physical account of her experience and focuses on the mental and psychological experience. Rosa removes the physical aspect from her subjectivity, decreasing her actual engagement from the facts of history and increasing the ability to read her text as hysteric. Her perspective challenges Mr. Compson and Sutpen; to Rosa, Sutpen was a “demon,” but to Mr. Compson, Sutpen was tragically too innocent. These multiple views of the same person complicate the authenticity of history and the authority of Rosa as narrator. Rosa’s female perspective helps disrupt the factual history Mr. Compson hopes to tell.

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