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Little Lord of Sutpen's Hundred: Building up a "Family Plot" in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Hisayo OGUSHI

In his popular American TV talk show *Dr. Phil*, the TV show host and psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw gives advice to guests who have serious problems in their lives. These might include financial problems, addiction, and family issues. This show premiered in September 2002, and it is recorded in front of a live studio audience. The intense conversations between Dr. Phil and the guests are like therapy sessions open to the public.

Along with its third season, McGraw published *Family First: Your Step-by-Step Plan for Creating a Phenomenal Family* in 2005, in which he states,

As a parent, you're the head of your family, and therefore you occupy an unbelievably powerful role in shaping the tone, mood and quality of this interconnected and vitally important unit. You're system manager. By successfully managing this system, you can parent your way to a phenomenal family—and avoid the problems and erosion seen in so many of the families in your very own neighborhood. (8)

Because they have a "powerful role," McGraw insists that parents are supposed to be managers in order to prevent dysfunctional family relationships.

As for modern family situations, especially after World War II, demographic changes during the war triggered changes in employment and women's social advancement. The male population's absence and return also influenced the family structure, which forced post-war America to reconsider the significance of family relationships (Levy 126). In her

1948 essay, Margaret Mead interprets this highly volatile situation as follows: “The life of a family is coming to be seen as a ship which may be wrecked by any turn of the tide unless every member of the family, but especially the two parents, are actively and co-operatively engaged in sailing the boat” (459). Parents, for Mead, are the captains of the ship and are responsible for controlling the crew. At the same time, Mead’s metaphor of a family as a ship and of its members as a crew suggests the group is vulnerable. Unless every crewmember makes an appropriate effort, the ship will not stay afloat.

Because of this, “family” needs discipline to maintain its organization. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz describes her purpose of writing as “by exposing many ‘memories’ of traditional family life as *myths*, I could help point the discussion of family change and family policy in a more constructive direction” (x; italics mine). Coontz, furthermore, points out that a “family” etymologically signifies “a band of slaves” (43).¹ In other words, the word “family” implicitly contains the power structure of a master-slave relationship, implying a hierarchy among family members. Coontz’s argument against “traditional family life” leads to severe criticism of the idea that the family unit is the base of a nation, or “the idea that private values and family affections form the heart of public life” (96). Coontz argues that a family is, most importantly, a unit in which you can depend on others. However, since American men are bound by the principle of “self-reliance” in the public sphere, dependence is not tolerated. “Self-reliance” can induce the (mainly) men in the public sphere to pursue their own self-interest. Family thus becomes a compliment for them, acting as a receptacle for feelings of communion and relationships with others (Coontz 53).

Family, therefore, is not wholly located in the private sphere: it is at the intersection of public and private, containing a master-slave hierarchy. At the same time, a family is a group which can easily fall apart if issues shake this familial bondage, as Mead observes. William Faulkner is one of the most prominent American authors to depict family romances, in which family relationships are so intertwined that it is hardly entangled, and *Absalom, Absalom!* is a perfect example. In this novel, Faulkner reveals a tragic and brutal history of the Sutpen family, established by the tyrannical patriarch Thomas Sutpen, whose abandoned and oppressed past haunts the family.

Thomas Sutpen rules the whole family, and his obstinate urge to climb the social ladder and have his own descendants ruins the fate of the women around him. Hisao

Tanaka points out that Rosa Caulfield is shattered by this “patriarchal family system” and the “masculine principle,” which supports the former. Thomas Sutpen, an embodiment of masculinity, intentionally exploits women who are destined to get involved with the cursed family (231). At the same time, Rosa indicates her subversive desire to avoid an unbalance of power in the family by choosing to be a spinster, as Ikuko Fujihira argues (181-88). With these frameworks of modern family situations in mind, this essay will consider how Sutpen’s desire is shattered by his daughter’s “family plot,” by focusing on the “Fauntleroy” outfits of Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Judith’s Choice

In his review of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936, Harold Straus said the novel was “a basically simple story,” but that its “indirectness” made the novel “strange” (7). Straus also said “occasionally there are passages of great power and beauty in this book, passages which remind us that Faulkner is still a writer with a unique gift of illuminating dark corners of the human soul” (7). Straus’s description of the novel as a “basically simple story” would be appropriate if this back-and-forth story described the ambition of a man with a humble origin and his tragic collapse. And yet, Faulkner could not illuminate the “dark corners of the human soul” unless we read the story as if we were trapped between the past and the present. If a man’s ambition can be a “basically simple story,” “the dark corner of the human soul” is probably closely related to women, since it reveals the dark side of the family relationships that doom the women in the novel: Rosa, Ellen, Clytie, Judith, Millie Jones, and the unnamed black woman who mothered Jim Bond.

Thomas Sutpen’s kinship is expanded via women. However, Thomas’s only legitimate daughter Judith decides not to have children of her own, after her engagement with Charles Bon is suddenly ended by his death. This is despite the fact that she is considered (at least in her early age) to be just like her grandfather with his uncompromised, brave courage, rather than his elder brother Henry. As Rosa says in the novel:

Probably he [Thomas Sutpen] would have been as amazed as we were since we would all realize now that we were faced by more than a child’s tantrum or even

hysteria: that his face had been in that carriage all the time; that it had been Judith, a girl of six, who had instigated and authorised that negro to make the team run away. Not Henry, mind: not the boy, which would have been outrageous enough; but Judith, the girl. (17-18)

Judith's strength is clearly revealed in her childhood when she pays rapt attention to her brother Clytie, while he is crying for fear as her father has a bloody fist fight with one of his African-American workers (22-23). Judith's uncanny strength is eloquently conveyed by Rosa's narration of this event.

Her fierce character vanishes, however, when she allegedly falls in love with Charles Bon, to whom she is introduced by Henry; rather, her calmness and prudence is highlighted. Judith's mother, Ellen, announces her daughter's engagement with Charles promptly, but though Judith should be showing her happiness, Mr. Compson says she is like a "young girl dreaming, not living, in her complete detachment and imperviousness to actuality almost like physical deafness" (55). A little girl who forced an African-American servant to drive the carriage at a reckless speed, and who willingly observed her father's brutal fight, grows up into a woman who never shows her feelings and emotions. Moreover, it is not clearly stated that she gives her consent to the engagement to her brother's best friend. Mr. Compson understands that Judith probably prioritizes Henry's plot. As we are told in the following passage from Chapter 4, the courtship between Judith and Charles is obscene because the true seducer of Judith is Henry Sutpen, her brother:

"Yes, Henry: not Bon, as witness the entire *queerly placid* course of Bon's and Judith's courtship—an engagement it ever was, lasting for a whole year yet comprising two holiday visits as her brother's guest and which periods Bon seems to have spent either in riding and hunting with Henry or as acting as an elegant and indolent esoteric hothouse bloom possessing merely the name of city for origin history and past, about which Ellen preened and fluttered out her unwittingly butterfly's Indian summer; he, the living man, was usurped, you see. . ." (77; emphasis mine)

At the same time, Mr. Compson suggests the possibility of mutual love between Judith and Charles Bon. Judith waits for a man whom she has seen for only twelve days, and she starts making a wedding dress after she receives a letter from Charles for the first time in four years (81). Judith also subtly implies her position as “a mature woman in love” (83), according to Mr. Compson. The hardest evidence Mr. Compson has for his assertion is that Judith buries Charles Bon in Sutpen’s family plot. As Mr. Compson says, “Yet there was the body which Miss Rosa saw, which Judith buried in the family plot beside her mother. And this: the fact that even an undefined and never-spoken engagement survived, speaking well for the postulation that they did love one another” (83). Unfortunately, readers may be confused to read later that Judith might have “chosen spinsterhood already before there was anyone named Charles Bon” (148). She does not show her feelings even though she witnesses her fiancé’s death, but maintains “a calm absolutely impenetrable face” for her aunt, Rosa (148).

Judith’s inner thoughts are never revealed. We don’t know whether she loves Charles Bon or not, whether she decides to wait for her fiancé herself, what she thinks about her engagement, what it means for her to be a member of the Sutpen family, etc. She is a mystery about whom a lawyer writes, “daughter? daughter? daughter?” (241). The only thing we know for certain in the story is, as explained above, that she resolves to bury Charles in their family plot, for it is she who orders the tombstone for Charles. Judith thus considers Charles a member of her family and deals with him as such, though we never know if she thinks of him as a fiancé or a brother.

Judith later prepares another tombstone for Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon, one of Charles Bon’s sons. It is not clearly stated whether it is Clytie who looks for Etienne, waiting for the day when he becomes an orphan, or if it is Judith who tells Clytie to find him. What is certain is that Judith takes this orphan into Sutpen’s Hundred, and that she asks Quentin’s grandfather to prepare a new tombstone (156). Judith decides that she will take care of the parentless child as a member of her own family. Mr. Compson says of her decision that “[t]hey lead beautiful lives—women. Lives not only divorced from, but irrevocably excommunicated from, all reality” (156).

Judith’s choice, which could also be described as “irrevocably excommunicated from all reality,” contributes to the corruption of the Sutpens. Etienne, whom Judith offers a place to live, is partially responsible for the decay of the family. He is eventually expelled

from Sutpen's Hundred for the trouble he causes, and later comes back with an African-American woman with whom he has a son named Jim Bond. Judith then sends Etienne to the North with money she acquires by selling a part of the family estate, to hide that Etienne has a mixed-blood child. Etienne again returns to Sutpen's Hundred and dies from yellow fever, which also fatally spreads to Judith while she takes care of him. Judith's decision thus contributes to the downfall of what Thomas Sutpen established. What does Judith think of her decision? Why does she make up her mind to accept a child of her ex-fiancé and his mistress? Why does she always bear the consequences of his failures? And what does Etienne mean to Judith, the only legitimate heir of the Sutpens?

Even though Judith seldom reveals her emotions towards the orphan child, she cannot refrain from expressing herself about this:

Nothing matters but breath, breathing, to know and to be alive. And the child, the license, the paper. What about it? That paper is between you and one who is inescapably negro; it can be put aside, no one will anymore dare bring it up than any other prank of a young man in his wild youth. And as for the child, all right. Didn't my own father beget one? And he none the worse for it? We will even keep the woman and the child if you wish; they can stay here and Clytie will... No: I. I will. I will raise it, see that it... does not need to have any name; you will neither have to see it again nor to worry. (Faulkner 168; italics in original)

Judith tries to comfort Etienne, stating that his black wife and their child do not matter at all because it is too familiar a story—it is exactly what her father did. She also declares that it is she, not Clytie, who will take care of the child. Is it possible to call her feelings toward Etienne affection? If this is affection, what kind is it? Familial? Or does Judith redirect her affection for her dead fiancé to her nephew? Why does she take Etienne to the family plot?

Etienne and the Little Lord of Fauntleroy

Before he is adopted by Judith, Etienne visits the Sutpen's Hundred for a week and stays with his mother. This is shortly after Charles Bon, his father, dies, and the boy dresses

himself with an “expensive and esoteric Fauntleroy clothing.” Faulkner also tells us the following:

Judith told her or not that it was another negro whom she served, yet who served the negress just as she would quit the kitchen from time to time and search the rooms downstairs until she found that little strange lonely boy sitting quietly on a straight hard chair in the dim and shadowy library or parlor, with his four names and his sixteenth-part black blood and his expensive esoteric Fauntleroy clothing who regarded with an aghast fatalistic terror the grim coffee-colored woman. (Faulkner 158)

The phrase “Fauntleroy clothing” probably refers to Cedric Errol, the protagonist of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* by Francis Hodgson Burnett, which was published in 1886 (Fig. 1). His clothing is repeatedly mentioned in *Absalom! Absalom!*. Etienne wears “one of the outgrown Fauntleroy suits” and “a new oversize overall jumper coat which Clytie had bought for him” (159) when he is taken to the Sutpen’s Hundred on a cold December day. The elegance of the clothes reminds him of what he is, despite his current situation; “his silken remaining clothes, his delicate shirt and stockings and shoes which still remained to remind him of what he had once been, vanished, fled from arms and body and legs as if they had been woven of chimaeras or of smoke” (160). Two years after Etienne comes to Jefferson, Judith finds a broken mirror with which Etienne spent hours, “examining himself in the delicate and outgrown tatters in which he perhaps could not even



Fig. 1. An illustration of Cedric in *The Little Lord of Fauntleroy* (1st edition, 1886. Owned by Keio University Library)

remember himself, with quiet and incredulous incomprehension” (162). The connection between Etienne and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* is also highlighted when Etienne is banished for the trouble he makes “for no reason” (164), and he is described as a man “who had come there eight years ago with the overall jumper over what remained of his silk and broadcloth” (166).²

The recurrence of Etienne’s Fauntleroy-style clothing implies an interesting association between *The Little Lord of Fauntleroy* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. It’s curious that Cedric Errol, a perfect and beloved child in children’s literature, and Etienne, a lonely and rebellious orphan, would have something in common. Cedric, a fatherless child, lives in a shabby district in New York with his gentle mother, when one day a lawyer named Havisham comes all the way from England to convey a message from the Earl of Drincourt, Cedric’s wealthy grandfather. Cedric’s father, the youngest son of the Earl, was disowned by the Earl when he decided to marry an American woman (Cedric’s mother) because the Earl despised the younger nation. However, now that the millionaire has lost his first son, he wants Cedric to come to England to be his heir. Being cold-blooded and self-centered, the Earl demands total subjugation from Cedric’s mother, planning to make her stay away from Cedric while his grandfather educates him as an heir of the vast estate. However, after observing Cedric’s innocence and ingenuousness, the Earl abandons his obstinacy and bigotry, since considering and prioritizing others is rewarded in the long run.

Cedric, just like Etienne, does not know his father’s heritage until his father dispatches someone to retrieve him and he is taken to where his unknown relatives wait. Observing the similarity between the two young boys, *Absalom, Absalom!* should be considered in the context of orphan stories in American children’s literature at the turn of the century, which indicates the proximity of Francis Hodgson Burnett and William Faulkner. Strangely enough, it was F. Scott Fitzgerald who discerned the connection between these two writers. In a letter to Cary Ross on September 3, 1932, Fitzgerald mentions *Little Lord Fauntleroy* along with Faulkner’s recently published *Sanctuary* (1931):

Have been reading *Sanctuary* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy* together—chapter by chapter (this is serious) and am simply overwhelmed by the resemblance. The books are simply two faces of the same world spirit and only by putting them

together do you get anything as integral as, say, “Smoke” or “Moll Flanders.”
(Fitzgerald 298)

Fitzgerald casually points out the similarities of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* and *Sanctuary*, a novel written almost five years earlier than *Absalom, Absalom!*. As for the “two faces of the same world spirit,” Thomas Inge and Chris Messenger assert that Popeye in *Sanctuary* and Cedric in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* respectively symbolize two separate spheres of evil and good (Inge 436; Messenger chapter 9). Even though Fitzgerald’s letter was written before *Absalom, Absalom!* was published, this curious juxtaposition of Burnett and Faulkner gives us some clues with which to consider the appearance of Fauntleroy in Sutpen’s tragic family story.

Cedric is impeccable: he is mature for his age, wise, and totally selfless. Nonetheless, the more his innocence and righteousness are highlighted, the more uncanny his perfection as a young person seems, which reminds us of Etienne’s strange disposition, who gives an impression “as if he had not been human born but instead created without agency of man or agony of woman and orphaned by no human being” (159). Now let us closely consider these two characters’ family situations so that their similarity can be further explored.

Tyrannical Grandfathers and Docile Grandsons

The story of *Little Lord Fauntleroy* ends happily when Cedric, his isolated English grandfather, and his American mother (who takes the grandfather’s son away from him) establish a new harmonious family relationship. As Cyndi Weinstein argues in *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, they follow a tradition of American literature in which protagonists choose their own family members not necessarily based on blood kinship but on their dispositions. In *Audacious Kids*, Jerry Griswold asserts that Little Lord Fauntleroy represents the American desire to be internationally acknowledged as a legitimate member of global society after a hundred years of the United States’ independence from Europe. Cedric, therefore, must be a half-American boy who needs to be admitted as the heir of an English earl (94). Remembering Coontz’s argument that family plays an important role for a receptacle for community and relationships, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* describes a family which symbolizes a well-balanced juxtaposition of American self-reliance

and the United States' dependence on its tyrannical European parents.

Nevertheless, we should not dismiss the vulnerability of this family, though it seems to be harmonious. Cedric's heirship can be gained only because the other legitimate successors, his uncles, all passed away. Cedric is saved from a poor and yet friendly district of New York only because the Earl needs an heir, not because the Earl loves his grandson nor because he wants to see Cedric in person. Moreover, the contingency of Cedric's position implies that it is unstable, especially when another American woman appears with her son in front of the Earl claiming that he is the legitimate heir of the Earl of Drincourt. Cedric's family relationships could easily be shattered.

It is indeed true that Cedric receives affections from both his mother and grandfather, but they also take advantage of him. His grandfather is a man of cold-blooded, calculating nature, but he eventually gains gratitude and accolades from people in his estate for the things Cedric asks him to do (Chapter 4). Cedric's mother also takes advantage of her son. When she finds it necessary to improve "the degradation and wretchedness of the poor tenants" (Chapter 10), she thinks it would be a good idea that Cedric asks his grandfather to reform the living conditions of people who works for the Earl.

The Earl would give him [Cedric] anything," she [Mrs. Errol] said to Mr. Mordaunt. "He would indulge his every whim. Why should not that indulgence be used for the good of others? It is for me to see that this shall come to pass. (Burnett, Chapter 10)

The Earl's indulgence of Cedric is used by Cedric's mother to guide his grandfather to charity while the Earl, giving Cedric a place to live and the title of Lord Fauntleroy, gains a good reputation he wouldn't have had without Cedric. His mother skillfully takes advantage of Cedric's influence on his grandfather. Beneath this family's harmonious facade lies strange power dynamics which are associated with pecuniary and charitable issues. Their relationships are also reflected in what they call each other. Cedric's mother lets her son call her "Dearest," but not "Mother." The Earl says that his grandson and he are "good companions" as if they were equal, but this only highlights their hierarchal relationship, as Coontz points out (43). These complicated relationships in the family are what lie beneath

the family's appearance as a loving, harmonious unit.

Faulkner's fatherless boy, Etienne, who wears clothing similar to that of Little Lord Fauntleroy, is also taken into the family of his deceased father. The difference is that his grandfather is already gone, and that he is not sure what to call the two women who take care of him. Neither woman is an aunt, exactly. Judith, a white woman, is his father's ex-fiancée, and Clytie, a black female servant, is his father's sister from a different mother. Since Etienne's tombstone was already bought, it is highly possible that Judith welcomes this orphan as a member of the Sutpen family—but what is his relationship to them? What kind of family do Judith (and Clytie) want to establish?

While Cedric reveals the vulnerability of his family's relationships, Etienne in *Absalom, Absalom!* represents indulging the arbitrariness of family rather than refusing the harmony of kinship. The silent orphan boy refuses the familial master-slave relationships that *Little Lord Fauntleroy* tries to conceal, and rejects Judith's dependence and dedication to him. He also forbids himself to be subject to Judith. What waits for him in the Sutpen family is a strange life with a woman he does not know what to call; neither "Miss Judith" or "Aunt Judith" are appropriate. She is not his mother, nor his aunt, nor his lover, and yet she is somehow related to him. It might be easier to understand their relationship if Judith had no feelings toward this orphan and wanted him only because he is the Sutpens' only heir, but she is described as having "a cold unbending detached gentleness" toward Etienne:

Yes, sleeping in the trundle bed beside Judith's, beside the woman who looked upon him and treated him with a cold unbending detached gentleness more discouraging than the fierce ruthless constant guardianship of the negress....
(Faulkner 160)

Judith's "detached gentleness," even though it is "discouraging" for Etienne, suggests that she maintains her familial relationships by force, just like Etienne's Fauntleroy outfits "which still remained to remind him of what he had once been, vanished, fled from arms and body and legs as if they had been woven of chimaeras or of smoke" (160).

It is indeed this choice of Judith's that eventually brings about the corruption of Sutpen's designs. Instead, she achieves her own "family plot" through Charles Bon, Etienne,

and Jim Bond in a way that connects them loosely with “a cold unbending detached gentleness.” This reveals the vulnerable, patriarchal, disharmonious, and yet interminable nature of their family relationship. This is the way of women, who lead “beautiful lives.”

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Note

- 1 According to Oxford English Dictionary Online Edition, “family” is explained as follows: < (i) Middle French *famile*, Middle French, French *famille* servants (13th cent. in Old French as *famelie*), group of people living under the same roof, household (1337), group of people related by blood, lineage (1442–4), retinue of an important person (1461–6), group of people related by blood or marriage and living under the same roof (1580), group of people who share a common philosophy (1658), group of genera of plants or animals which share certain general traits (1676), and (ii) its etymon classical Latin *familia* household, household servants, troop (of gladiators), personal servants, retinue, group of persons connected by blood or affinity, school (of philosophy), estate (underlines mine).
- 2 Another reference to “Faunteroy” appears in Chapter 7, when the clothes of the French architect is described.