

# Listening to the Ghost: Illusory Self-Image and Agency in Rosa Coldfield

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Through a series of narrators, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) presents readers with a winding, colorful narrative of Southern life and lore that raises questions about the past more often than it provides answers. Of Faulkner's narrators, Miss Rosa Coldfield is perhaps the most unreliable—her motive for telling Quentin the story of her involvement with Sutpen is questionable and her overly poetic and exaggerated descriptions of events are reason enough to wonder how much of her tale is warped by her romantic and sometimes bitter outlook. Rosa's unique position as both narrator and character in her own retelling allows the reader a look into her perception of herself and also exposes the tension between Rosa's desire for and lack of an active role in the events of her past. Most scholars, including Olivia Edenfield and Erica Lazure, praise Rosa's agency as either a character or a storyteller throughout the novel. Indeed, Rosa's account of her history does expose a desire for self-authorship, but her early experiences and narrative as a whole provide her more often with a comfortable illusion

of power rather than actual agency. In reality, Rosa is nearly as much of an outsider as Quentin Compson in that she has little direct involvement with the actions of Sutpen and his family. Furthermore, a healthy amount of skepticism towards Rosa's story is present in the characters (and perhaps readers) of the novel, which prevents her audience from wholeheartedly embracing the story as she tells it. By continually using her narrative to place herself in the role of sympathetic heroine and active protagonist, however, Rosa does fulfill her own criteria for self-authorship, though the implications of such an accomplishment remain ambiguous.

From the beginning of her life, it is apparent that Rosa's relationships with those around her suffer from a lack of personal connection, which inhibits direct involvement with her sister's and brother-in-law's lives and makes her an outsider in her own family. Mr. Compson tells Quentin that Rosa's mother died in childbirth and that she grew up in a house with a father who saw her as "a living and walking reproach" for "the sacrifice of her mother's life" and a spinster aunt who taught her "to look upon her sister as a woman who vanished not only out of the family and out of the house but out of life too" (Faulkner 47). These details about Rosa's early life serve to establish her as an emotional outcast within her own family, and Betina Entzminger notes that she is "a young girl sheltered from many of the events by her age and by the fact that she did not live with the family at Sutpen's Hundred" (108). Rosa lacks a nurturing maternal figure, is ignored by her father, and is discouraged from seeking her sister's affection, meaning she is cut off from her three closest relations and essentially left to her own devices as she matures and tries to build an identity. According to Olivia Edenfield, Rosa's early life was spent learning "not how to love, but how to lurk behind closed doors, how to listen in hallways, how to survive on very little attention and care," and indeed, the majority of Rosa's addresses to Quentin are accounts of what she

saw, heard, thought, or somehow otherwise knew — rarely does she recount a conversation, interaction, or a scene in which she was an active participant (58). In characteristically romantic dialogue, Rosa herself acknowledges her outsider status when she tells Quentin, “I displaced no air...from one closed forbidden door to the next and so acquired all I knew of that light and space in which people moved and breathed as I...might have gained conception of the sun from seeing it through a piece of smoky glass” (Faulkner 116). Rosa implies that those around her pass by without even noticing her, which must create in her an emotional independence as she is forced to live in want of attention. Born of necessity, this subsistence limits her connection to her relatives and prevents her from being proactively involved in her family’s drama. Thus, Rosa is relegated to being the passive observer and outsider in her own life, just as Quentin is the passive listener and outsider to Rosa’s tale.

Instead of allowing her position as peripheral observer to detach her from the events she witnessed, Rosa uses her circumstances to invoke sympathy by exaggerating the severity of her years spent in emotional isolation. Rosa tells Quentin that she spent her younger days waiting “for that doom which we call female victory which is: endure and then endure, without rhyme or reason or hope of reward — and then endure” (Faulkner 116). This report of an unavoidably hopeless existence is in keeping with Lynn Levins’ description of Rosa’s narrative — “the language of the dreamer, which, with its hallucinatory tone, possesses that heightened intensity which will pervade, in varying degrees, the entire reconstruction of [Sutpen’s] legend” (37). The “heightened intensity” of Rosa’s language is particularly evident when she describes her past, referring to her childhood as “not living but rather some projection of the lightless womb itself” (Faulkner 116). Her invocation of death and total darkness to illustrate her life are superlative conditions characteristic of her hyperbolic narrative

tendencies, which no doubt contribute to Quentin's perception of Rosa as "a crucified child" — an innocent unjustly and cruelly deprived of the chance for a peaceful maturity (4).

Though she encourages sympathy, Rosa's characterization of herself does not invite pity; instead, she celebrates herself as a insightful observer and portrays herself as a central figure of past events. Early in the novel, while still listening to Rosa, Quentin recalls that Sutpen died "Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says— (Save by her) Yes, save by her" (Faulkner 5). This rumination occurs as Quentin becomes bored with Rosa's story and begins a mental discourse with himself. Though his tone is mocking, Rosa's voice can still be heard as an intruder in the words Quentin thinks to himself, and the parenthetical "save by her" could just as easily be interpreted as an interruption from Rosa, which Quentin then affirms. Having been exposed to Rosa's storytelling for some time now, Quentin withdraws from reality enough to enter "the long silence of notpeople in notlanguage," yet he includes Rosa's subtle assertiveness in his own bored, distracted dialogue with himself, tellingly beginning to repeat elements of Rosa's story even before he has left her company (5). His reflection exposes Rosa's influence, intrusiveness as a narrator, and her ability to privilege herself by implying not only that she alone had the capability to access certain information, but that she is the only one able to interpret and communicate such information. Furthermore, Rosa ascribes to herself an admirable amount of youthful wisdom by saying, "I saw what happened to Ellen, my sister. I saw her almost a recluse...I saw the price which she had paid..." (12). These statements are followed by several more sentences all beginning with the phrase "I saw," the repetitive and demonstrative impact of which asserts that Rosa is a singular victor over her circumstances through simple observation. When contrasted with Rosa's self-proclaimed child-state and lack of vitality, the phrase "I saw" allows her to gain the upper-hand and rise out of her isolation by

virtue of the fact that her position allowed her to see and therefore know. If Mr. Compson's account of her childhood suggests that Rosa is to be pitied, Rosa's description of herself does just the opposite, inviting the listener to sympathize with her unfortunate circumstances, but exult in her ability to triumph as a perceptive observer and trust her authority as self-proclaimed all-absorbing axial figure in past events. Rosemary Coleman refers to Rosa as "the only narrator [in *Absalom, Absalom!*] powerful enough to actually act within the confines of the text," and this observation is warranted if Rosa's narration is viewed as her own method of retroactive self-creation (424).

As the peculiar juxtaposition of her tragic past and the exaggerated, triumphant tone of her present narrative suggest, Rosa's becoming the narrator of Sutpen's story provides her with the opportunity to color her past and present herself as more than someone who simply "displaced no air." As Erica Lazure states, "Rosa's desire to tell her story is...the catalyst that revives her chances to fulfill, at long last, her desire for legitimacy, belonging, and voice in her community" (479). This need for establishment and self-authorship is seen in her own admission that "anyone who even had as little to call living as I had had up to that time [when Sutpen died forty-three years ago] would not call what I have had since, living" (Faulkner 12). This account of Rosa's imprisonment in the past is evidence of her inability to cope with true isolation—having neither anyone to ignore her nor anyone to listen to her. This inability manifests itself as stagnation through a reliance on and fascination with the past when she still had at least a small amount of vitality in comparison to the pre-Quentin present. Thus, when she discovers there is something living in Sutpen's Hundred, she "summons Quentin in order to finally...narrate herself. Unlike other narrators, who tell Sutpen's story with resonances for their own personal needs, she is concerned with her own experience, and only secondarily with that of Sutpen. Her discourse is an act of self-creation" (Coleman 428). This

self-creation afforded through narration opens a door to the past that provides Rosa with the opportunity to reinvent herself as a character in her family's history. It is Rosa's role as narrator that allows her to present herself as an informed insider, retroactively live her life, and formally ascribe to herself the status of sympathetic heroine and active protagonist of central importance.

Rosa's presentation of herself as a principal player of years ago allows her to fulfill her need for self-authorship in her own life, but it also paradoxically exposes her odd complacency within the dreamlike state of her existence. This contentment within the world created by her own narrative is an indication that she would prefer to live apart from reality since only fantasy can promise her the control over her own past that she was never allowed in her youth. According to Deborah Garfield, "There is no alternative in *Absalom* between the overprotected 'citadel' of the imagination and the reality which shatters it," and if this is the case, then Rosa's preference is clear (72). Throughout the novel, she speaks fondly of dreams and her strange separation from the world, to the point of sounding eerily self-aware of her own airy existence apart from the present reality. Twice, when discussing her youth, Rosa mentions the ever-intrusive and seductive presence of "a might-have-been which is more than truth" and a "might-have-been which is the single rock we cling to above the maelstrom or unbearable reality" (Faulkner 115, 120). The fact that Rosa even acknowledges such "might-have-beens" is an indication that she can distinguish fantasy from reality, but as with her conceptions of the pre-Civil War South, Rosa's "might-have-beens" are lost to time, and rather than face the "unbearable reality," she herself becomes a might-have-been, choosing to relive past events through an idealized version of Rosa Coldfield. Thus, while her narration allows her to escape reality and take control of her past life, her control is ultimately limited by the fact that it can extend only as far as her listeners are willing to believe. Mr. Compson,

who presumably has never heard Rosa's version of events from her lips, explains to Quentin, "Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts" (7). Mr. Compson's insight into Rosa is telling, and his statement implies that Rosa is no more real (or no more living in reality) than a spectre. As someone who has not heard her narrative from her lips, Mr. Compson sees Rosa as having trapped herself in some other plane of existence that disconnects her from the surrounding post-war South.

Furthermore, Quentin and later Shreve, who unlike Mr. Compson have been exposed to Rosa's version of events, still have a less-than-favorable view of her: they are either disinclined to believe Rosa's depiction of herself or they do not notice how she is inflating her role and her status as heroine. Quentin's description of Rosa as "the lonely thwarted old female flesh embattled for forty-three years in the old insult" at the beginning of the novel differs only slightly from his thinking of her as an "implacable doll-sized old woman clutching her cotton umbrella" in later chapters after he has heard her story (12). Shreve, also, after listening to Quentin, refers to Rosa as "Aunt Rosa" and "old dame" — titles hardly befitting the heroine of Rosa's invention (143). The sharp contrast between Rosa's characterization of herself and the treatment she receives from other characters suggests that the fantasy Rosa has created is not as convincing or alluring to her listeners as it is to herself. Quentin and Shreve do not hail Rosa as the sympathetic heroine and active protagonist she envisions herself to be, so Rosa's narrative itself becomes another dreamy entrapment, offering the power of self-reinvention that is, in fact, an illusion and only "some trashy myth of reality's escape" (115).

Adding to the complexity and mystery of Rosa's character, her status as "the town's and the county's poetess laureate" begs the question of why she did not simply write down Sutpen's story herself (Faulkner 6). Rosa's proclivity for the dream-state partially addresses

this question—a written and or published record of the past would be concrete, not subject to the changeable, intangible, and ephemeral life of an oral account—but a deeper need for Quentin as listener exists as well: Rosa’s tale is a kind of warped confession that, according to Terrence Doody, “need(s) the confirmation of an audience” (455). All in all, Rosa’s narration is ultimately an explanation, roundabout and unreliable as it may be, of her past involvement with Sutpen. After “the death of hope and love...of pride and principle, and...of everything save the old outraged and aghast unbelieving which has lasted for forty-three years,” what little grasp Rosa had on her own identity is lost, and she becomes so deeply entwined in her own version of the past that she must seek validation from outside herself (Faulkner 136). She turns to Quentin with her narrative, hoping not only to characterize herself as she wishes and relive the past as she sees it, but to justify herself in the eyes of someone even very distantly connected to Sutpen. As evidenced by the way Rosa portrays herself in her narrative, she “is clearly seeking from Quentin the recognition and sympathy she has never had even from her own family,” and only through presenting a full account of her actions, motivations, and emotions regarding her past involvement with the legendary Sutpen can she finally punctuate “the tedious repercussive anti-climax” of her life that has caused her to suffer for forty-three years (Doody 459, Faulkner 121).

Rosa is so involved in the past of her own imagination that she begins to view Quentin as her opportunity for validation, just as her narrative becomes her opportunity for salvation and reformation. When Quentin first visits her, Rosa says, “Maybe some day you will remember this and write about it....Perhaps you will even remember kindly then the old woman who...talked about people and events you were fortunate enough to escape” (Faulkner 5). Though her phrasing sounds innocent, an underlying, even latent desire to be forever preserved as the protagonist and authority on events of years ago can be discerned



from Rosa's words, and Quentin senses that he was summoned "because she wants [her story] told" (6). Though he is correct in this assumption, Quentin does not seem to realize that "[Rosa] is much less interested in having it told than in telling it herself, for her own vindication" (Doody 459). As a narrator, Rosa is able to present herself as a commendable character in the past, live within a dream of her own concoction, and seek out the affirmation of a listening audience without exposing herself entirely to an unpleasant reality where any formal criticism of her narrative may jeopardize the past she has fashioned for herself and detract from the idealistic fantasy of her own romantic characterization.

Rosa Coldfield, as both narrator and character, is one of William Faulkner's most complex creations, appropriately situated against the equally complex backdrop of the Southern past and its persistence in modern memory. Almost paradoxically, Rosa spends a great deal of the novel recasting herself as she wishes to be seen and creating a comfortable dream world for herself, and yet her connection to reality is never completely severed, for she seeks out a very real and personal validation in the telling of her story. In fact, perhaps Rosa's legacy to Quentin, whether she intended it or not, is an introduction to preserving the paradox that is storytelling. Quentin himself becomes a dreamer-creator as he recounts Rosa's story to Shreve and the two begin to speculate and lose themselves in the events of the past, but the result of their exchange ultimately reveals (or at least brings into question) Quentin's real feelings towards the South when Shreve asks, "Why do you hate the South?" (Faulkner 303). Rosa's narrative affords her at least the illusion of authority in taking charge of her own portrayal and existence, but it is arguably Quentin who benefits most from her narrative, through which he is brought to confront the reality of his own relationship with the South in the last lines of the book. Thus, through the influence she has on Quentin's thoughts about the South, it is

perhaps Rosa's role as a narrator that gives her a strange and indirect final word in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

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