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## Fifty Shades of Rosa Coldfield: Sex, Gender, and Trauma in Absalom, Absalom!

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The antebellum Southern United States is portrayed with idyllic binary images of life. The black and white fairytale is constructed with beaux who leisurely maintain plantations and delicate belles who maintain a steady schedule of socializing and needlework; the lack of deviation keeps the story simple and predictable for its heroes and villains. William Faulkner used this binary fairytale framework for his novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, but plants within its fertile soil the seeds of people who live in the gray area outside of the South's prescribed binary roles. These characters revisit their traumas by retelling the experiences which have placed them outside of the norm in an attempt to make sense of their stories without having to label themselves as villainous deviants. Through the retelling of her story, Rosa Coldfield makes *Absalom's* readers victims of trauma, allowing them to identify with the characters who struggled to understand their place in their binary society.

Structuralist criticism tells us that “[t]he human mind perceives difference most readily in terms of opposites...two ideas, directly opposed, each of which we understand by means of its opposition to the other” (Tyson 213). This way of classifying ideas is called *binary opposition* and makes it easy to define sexuality on the basis of “is” or “is not” in the same way that a light is either on or off, but not in between. Traditional Southern sexuality was a binary system which dictated who was a gentleman or Southern woman, the classification system which is the setting for *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In standard contemporary usage, “sex” refers to a classification system in which biological, physical, chemical, and bodily traits—especially genital anatomy...are the primary determinants of the “sex” of an individual. Thus, “females” (considered isomorphic with “women”) generally are recognized as bearers of “female” internal and external sexual-anatomical parts...while “males” (“men”) are recognized as a contrasting organism bearing “male” internal and external sexual-anatomical parts. “Gender,” on the other hand, refers to a classification system in which social, behavioral traits are the primary determinants of an individual’s “gender”...Thus, “feminine” roles include care-giving, nursing, teaching...and a variety of other service jobs, and “feminine sexual roles” include submissiveness, passivity...all of which are supposed to lead women to the social role of motherhood. “Masculine roles,” on the other hand...include the highly paid professions...and the somewhat less highly paid blue-collar occupations...“Masculine sexual roles” include aggressiveness (even dominance). (Adkins 121)

Adkins identifies the roles of the binary system of sexual identity used in the South and how they lend themselves to the contemporary classification of gender which is based on social behavioral traits where women are the caregivers, thus feminine, while men have masculine occupations which earned their family a living. The “gendering of cultural differences figures itself as a process of devaluation” (Gwin 177), giving value to members who fit nicely into traditional sex roles while excluding those who require the less stringent definitions of gender. “[O]ur gender strongly influences how we are treated by others and by society as a whole as it is embodied in such institutions” as the South (Tyson 108).

*Absalom's* Coldfield sisters demonstrate this valuation process. The older of the two, Ellen Coldfield is raised by her mother, who was a proper Southern woman. From her mother, Ellen learns how to be feminine, giving her cultural value which allows her to marry and become a mother herself, combining the prescribed sexual and gender roles for a Southern woman. Ellen's mother dies giving birth Rosa, "with her sister [Ellen] already seven years married and the mother of two children" (Faulkner 46). Instead of the potentially strong feminine models of her mother or sister, Rosa is raised by her "aged and ancient" aunt and father, who are sexually male and female respectively (Faulkner 47), but require the fluidity of gender classifications to better identify their social behaviors. The father is a "queer silent man whose only companion and friend seems to have been his conscience and the only thing he cared about his reputation for probity among his fellow men", a confusing model of masculinity for Rosa which "the aunt seems to have invested her with at the birth" (Faulkner 47). Where the aunt would be expected to be a subordinate, refined, and modest woman in the binary Southern culture, it is Rosa's father who is femininely submissive to the forceful and domineering masculine aunt.

Despite a brash delivery, the aunt tells Rosa the binary fairytale of the South through the delicate, feminine heroine, Ellen, and her gruff, villainous husband who is so vile that he is "not even a gentleman [and m]arrying Ellen or marrying ten thousand Ellens could not have made him one" (Faulkner 11). Despite the contrary nature of her marriage, Ellen is still able to fit the role which defines success in her binary society:

[T]his "constative" trope continually coextends two aspects: the binary opposition of sunlight and enclosed darkness, and the idealized role of *matriarch* as adjunct to darkness and enclosure... "The aunt" had taught Miss Rosa to look upon her sister as a woman who had vanished not only out of the family and the house but out of life too. (Foerst 39-40)

Once married, Ellen moves into the best house in town where the household chores are done by servants and anything Ellen or her daughter, Judith, want is easily purchased on one of their frequent shopping trips. As the ideal Southern woman, the burdens of life have been lifted from Ellen.

In the binary terminology of the South, in order to vanish from her life like her sister, Rosa understands that she needs to learn how to be feminine. Instead, she is forced to stay at home with her angry masculine aunt, "that strong vindictive consistent woman who seems to have been twice the man that Mr Coldfield was and who was in very truth was not only Miss Rosa's mother but her father too" (Faulkner 49). The sexually female but masculine gendered aunt and mother-figure and sexually male but feminine gendered father create confused models of sex and gender for Rosa which stunt her social growth. Instead of observing or participating in conversations which would allow her to learn the nuances of gender roles, "Rosa...remains shut out from all closed rooms within which meaningful interaction occurs" (Foerst 43). Her role models make her wait in dark halls, out of rooms which are literally lit as well as enlightened with the knowledge necessary for her development, the kind of light that allows Ellen to escape the house to become the idyllic matriarch that Rosa is taught to aspire to.

Rosa waits for a strong, dominant Southern man she believes will “overtake the precocity of convinced disapprobation regarding any and every thing with which could penetrate the walls of that house through the agency of any man, particularly her father” whose emotional abandonment creates the anxiety that lurks in her home, “that presbyterian effluvium of lugubrious and vindictive anticipation” (Faulkner 47). This anticipation of waiting for the man who will finally combine the sexual and gender classifications of a man and take her away as her sister’s husband had done creates mourning in Rosa “which she had worn for forty-three years” (Faulkner 3). Rosa’s 43 year mourning is made known to the reader in the opening paragraph, immediately signaling to the reader that something that has happened to create what the American Psychological Association defines as trauma:

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. (para. 1)

Psychiatrist Lisa Andermann reports that “developed western societies...define women and men’s identities as ‘something that is done’ as opposed to ‘biological sex ascribed at birth according to external genitalia’ and where women and men’s identity, behavior and expectations placed upon them reflect socially constructed ideas about femininity and masculinity” (Anderman 505). Rosa’s gender identity is “done” to her while she is left out of conversations between the adults in her life which could potentially enlighten her about her roles as female. Rosa’s inhibited construction of gender begins in childhood and sets into motion the 43 year anxiety that plagues the story.

The role of gender is an important part of a person’s identity, especially in binary cultures which Faulkner portrayed. Rosa’s confused gender construction plays a significant role in her mental state.

The social construction of gender is one of the underpinnings of mental health. Going beyond physical differences in brains and bodies, an exploration of the areas of culture and development, across the lifespan and across the globe, can provide some context for a better understanding of mental health...and the complex and varied social worlds that make up the lives of women and men, families and communities. (Anderman 501)

Being left out of adult conversations creates a trauma of perpetual childhood for Rosa, leaving her ignorant about the nuances of adult sexual roles. In her childhood, Rosa’s aunt and father should have exposed her to situations both at home and in the community in order to help her develop a healthy understanding of her role as female and feminine in each setting. Instead Rosa lurks in shadow in her own home and in the community “because her father...refus[ed] to allow her to take part in or be present with the other women and girls” (Faulkner 64). Minrose Gwin demonstrates the trauma “done” to Rose as she is forced to remain in the shadowy area between the light and dark:

[T]he young Rosa...lurks and eavesdrops outside closed doors in the “mausoleum” inhabited by father and aunt. As a girl she sits at the table with Sutpen and his family, her small body “with its air of curious and paradoxical awkwardness like a costume borrowed at the last moment and of necessity for a masquerade which she did not want to attend.” (Gwin 171)

Rose’s presence among the “light” of what has been told to her as the ideal feels unnatural because she does not have the necessary experience to participate outside of the dark mausoleum of her anxiety ridden home. She has been told how to behave in public as a Southern woman but has not been taken out enough to make the behaviors natural. Instead of being practice for being a Southern woman, being outside her home is a constant reminder of the ways she does not fit in with others, underscoring the dark tension of trauma in her home.

As Rosa ages, she begins to understand the way her childhood has stilted her development. “In examining the sexuality of *Absalom*’s treatment of characters like...Rosa Coldfield, we need to look away from the opening...and at the language in Rosa’s section itself” (Lurie 171). Indeed, the language in Rosa’s second section, the retelling of her adolescence, exposes the effects of her traumatic childhood. Rosa’s description of herself as “weaponed and panoplied as a man instead of hollow woman” indicates that though she has been raised as a female, she does not feel that she is fully a woman but imagines that she is more suited to be a man (Faulkner 117). Rosa demonstrates her understanding of her stilted and flawed development through similarly confused language:

(I was fourteen)—I will not insist on bloom, at whom no man had yet to look—nor would ever—twice, as not as a child but less than even child; at not more than child than woman but even as less than any female flesh. (Faulkner 115)

Rosa knows there was something preventing her from fully developing into the idealized trope of sun. Her description of herself as less than female flesh indicates that she feels that having been kept in the darkness has made her undesirable to any man who might notice her but would not look twice.

When Rosa returns to the narrative, telling about the summer of wisteria when Ellen’s son, Henry, brings home his college friend who becomes engaged to Ellen’s daughter, Judith, the reader is introduced to the implications of Rosa’s traumatic gender identity. Rosa sews the wedding trousseau, “those intimate young girl garments which were to be for her own vicarious bridal” (Faulkner 61). While it is Judith embarking on her wedding night, it is Rosa who is preparing for it. Besides sewing the wedding night attire, Rosa begins an imaginary romance with Judith’s fiancé. Gwin unveils the opportunity for Rosa to redefine her trauma by injecting herself into Judith’s relationship:

Rosa...seduces herself...thus becom[ing] the absence, the “airy space which that dream desires to fill, while at the very same time continuing, mistakenly, to construct herself as presence, as that sun” whose being is

the quintessential presence, central to all early life. What Rosa “writes”, then, in addition to female sexuality, is an intertext between female presence and female absence. And this intertext carries the chilling implication that, as a cultural presence, a woman can seduce herself into thinking that objectivity is subjectivity-- that she is "that sun" when she is actually nothing more than “airy space”. (Gwin 163)

This airy space is where Rosa’s self-seduction takes place, known only to her. She hides the fantasy in her own darkness, living it vicariously and taking away the potential for any further trauma from external ridicule of her disjointed gender identity in a culture defined by binary terms of sex. Reinventing her story allows her to escape the darkness of her binary mausoleum and occupy a place where she can be like the ideal, her sister. Rosa can be the sun with the possibility of fully developing and escaping to become the ideal matriarch in her fantastic, self-created feminine presence. With this possibility for wholeness within the structure of the South, Rosa creates a safe place for her bisexual gender, avoiding self-inflicted trauma in the binary terms of her own culture.

The language used by Rosa in telling her story not only displays the personal trauma of her childhood, but also serves to bring the reader into the trauma of her story. Greg Fortner’s article *Trauma, Literary Form, and Faulkner* explains the way narrative is used to convey trauma to the reader:

Critics deploying the category of trauma have stressed in particular the power of texts that seek less to *represent* traumatizing events—since representation risks, on this view, betraying the bewildering, imperfectly representational character of traumatic memory—than to transmit *directly* to the reader the experience of traumatic disruption. (Fortner 260)

The “emphasis [is] on traumatic textualities, in this sense—on texts whose significance lies in part in their cognitive indigestibility” (Fortner 260). The language Rosa uses to explain her understanding of her confused gender development puts even the audience off base, questioning their understanding of the language, creating a sense of doubt in themselves. Another description of herself as an adolescent demonstrates the way Faulkner employs traumatic textuality to bring the trauma into the present for the reader:

I which is the meed and due of all mammalian meat, became not mistress, not beloved, but even more than even love; I became all polymath love’s androgynous advocate. (Faulkner 117)

The complex language creates a trauma of its own for the reader who has to define the language and its meaning in order to see how Rosa has devalued herself only as “meed,” or necessary payment for services, of human sexuality. Her father’s emotional abandonment leads Rosa to believe she is unwanted; in the safe place Rosa creates for herself, she is wanted. She places herself in a role which is even more than love, without sex and its limitations leaving the reader wondering what, exactly, she understands her role to be having acknowledged that she is not the beloved of the relationship.

Faulkner does not rely on traumatic textuality alone; he also employs the narrative itself to convey trauma to the reader. Fortner explains the way Faulkner's prose transmits the trauma of events of *Absalom!*'s past, recreating a present trauma for the reader defined by Freud as repetition compulsion:

Reenactments in the present of psychic events that have not been safely consigned to the past, that retain the visual and affective intensity of lived (rather than remembered) experience, and that disrupt the unruffled present with flashbacks and terrifying nightmares, intrusive fragments of an unknown past that exceeds the self's (relatively) coherent and integrated story about itself. (Fortner 260)

As the story unfolds, narratives are interspersed, allowing the focus of the plot to be dropped to allow for the telling of another part of the same story which does not seem at all related. In this way, Faulkner forces *Absalom!*'s readers to recreate a "coherent and integrated story" from the flashbacks and fragments of an unreliable narrator. Because of her age at the time, Rosa could not have remembered the events surrounding her mother's death or her sister's wedding arrangements; they were told to her by her aunt to be interpreted in Rosa's young mind. Through Rosa's repressed narrative, she tries again to make sense of the emotionally charged spectacle surrounding Ellen's wedding. By the time Rosa attempts to recede her adolescence, the potential for her to attain psychic wholeness is derailed by the events of her life which she has not successfully relegated to her childhood:

[E]xperiences are repressed and apparently 'forgotten': the conscious mind remains more or less completely ignorant of them...where they achieve the status of what Freud calls 'foreign bod[ies]' in the psyche: heterogeneous memorial kernels that threaten to unleash unpleasurable affect if the mind's associations approach too closely. (Fortner 262)

As the narrative moves past Rosa, her experiences are all but forgotten to bring Sutpen's history to the forefront and allow the reader to connect details of previous narrators' versions of the story. The trauma of remembering the repressed details and ideas from Rosa's story is transmitted to the reader. In the telling of Sutpen's past, the psychic foreign bodies of Rosa's narrative are remembered, forcing the reader to make connections which "threaten to unleash unpleasurable affect" by broaching uncomfortable subjects, including gender confusion.

When Rosa's opportunity to have the feminine goal of being a wife and mother presents itself, Rosa ignores the part her fiancé, Sutpen, has played in her trauma and again imagines herself as the sun which can finally bring about bloom. Allowing herself to believe that her trauma makes her better able to relate to Sutpen, Rosa opens herself to the idea that forgiveness can allow her to take the place she was meant to have in her binary world:

*You see, I was that sun, or thought I was who did believe there was that spark, that crumb in madness which is divine...There was an ogre of my childhood which before my birth removed my only sister to its grim ogre-bourne...and I forgave it...I did more than just forgive; I slew it, because*

*the body, the blood, the memory which that ogre had dwelt in returned...and held out its hand and said 'Come' as you might say it to a dog, and I came.* (Faulkner 135)

Rosa sees that by forgiving Sutpen for the ungentlemanly role he has played in the lives of her sister, niece, and nephew, she can fit into her black and white society. Forgiveness can earn Rosa an acceptable binary place within her culture, allowing her to become a wife and mother, ultimately the feminine ideal she was meant to be. Seeing herself as the sun, Rosa believes that she is special, the one who is finally able to see the good in Sutpen and have him see the good in her that no one else has. In her fantastic world, she is able to bloom as she hadn't been able to before, slay the ogre who had destroyed their family, and finally have the fairytale ending that belongs to true Southern women and gentlemen.

Rosa is ultimately forced to come back into the real world when Sutpen offers a proposal contrary to the ideal of Southern womanhood and Rosa's place in her self-created world. Sutpen's indecent proposal underscores Rosa's inability to break the cycle of trauma. Infuriated by the latest repetition of betrayal, she can only say that Sutpen "*spoke the bald outrageous words exactly as if he were consulting with Jones or some other man about a bitch dog or a cow or mare*" (Faulkner 136). Plunging back to the darkness of Rosa's story and using obscure language, the reader is traumatized again by Faulkner's prose, realizing that the marriage Sutpen has proposed is contingent on Rosa becoming a mother to Sutpen's son first, but not a daughter, equating her value to that of a stud animal that can produce pedigree offspring. Having been seduced into the cycle of Rosa's traumatic experience during her romance with Sutpen, the reality of disappointment at the hands of the elders in Rosa's life is directly transmitted to the reader when he makes his conditional proposal.

Sutpen's trauma on the Coldfield family begins before Rosa's birth as Ellen's "not even a gentleman" husband, vile father to her niece and nephew, and outsider in her community. After learning about Sutpen's impact through challenging narratives, the reader is invested in Rosa's mature experience with the demon that is Sutpen. His proposal to Rosa of a situation which is more a gamble of her personhood than a proposition of marriage held the potential to force her to surrender all hope of being the ideal wife and mother. Instead of risking her chance to become the sun, she returns to the mausoleum to add her personal experience to the trauma of Sutpen on her family. Through the retelling of Rosa's story, Faulkner creates the confusing and disorienting emotions of trauma for the reader through traumatic textuality and repressed narrative, effectively conveying the confounding emotions of the characters who try to make sense of themselves in a fairytale where they are neither hero or villain.

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