**Introduction**

This dissertation focuses on Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* and Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* as two key examples in William Faulkner’s novels of women suffering unrelenting alienation. The Southern society Faulkner describes places several expectations and limits upon women, with Addie expected to engage with wife- and motherhood and religious fundamentalism, and Rosa having to execute her performance of womanhood immaculately for fear of public scrutiny and judgment. These obligations profoundly and bitterly compound the dismay both women experience. Not given an opportunity to verbalise their plight, their voices are silenced and they become culturally excluded and outcast. Both women are ultimately presented with a choice of either conforming to the expectations placed upon them or, alternatively, engaging in a rebellion that keeps them at the edge of society.

Faulkner’s representation of women in his work prior to *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is best exemplified bythe silent, voiceless Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury.* Though Caddy’s voice is heard in this novel, it is not heard independently but is, instead, rendered by her three brothers. As Faulkner states:

Caddy was to me too beautiful to reduce her to telling what was going on, it would be more passionate to see her through someone else’s eyes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Each brothers’ perspective of Caddy is hindered by their biases and desires which eclipse Caddy’s subjectivity. To Benjy, Caddy is an idealised, virginal, surrogate mother who ‘smelled like trees’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Quentin’s melancholia is worsened by not being able to fulfil his incestuous desires for her. Finally, Jason furiously persecutes Caddy after being denied a lucrative position at the city bank because of her promiscuity (‘Once a bitch, always a bitch’).[[3]](#footnote-3) Faulkner’s depiction of Caddy establishes several themes which recur throughout his fictions and which are of central concern to this thesis–the problematic, essentialist nature of his representation of women, the judgments inflicted upon women by Southern society, and the possibility for women to respond to or combat this oppressive silencing.

The discussion of Addie in Chapter One of this dissertation utilises Halberstam’s theory of “shadow feminism” which ‘speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, an antisocial femininity’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Addie’s chapter (the sole moment in the novel where her voice is heard independently, after her death) depicts a version of womanhood that embraces negativity, abjection and misery. What the discussion seeks to show is that, within Addie’s final reflections on her life in death, there is a virtue in subverting and destroying societal expectations and embracing the stigma that results from this.

Unlike Addie, Rosa finds no liberation in being enshrouded in the alienating ‘rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Drawing upon Anne Firor Scott’s history of *The Southern Lady,* this chapter argues that Rosa believes emphatically in the myth of the Southern Belle. She values the grandiosity and decadence of Thomas Sutpen, the righteousness and validity of the Confederacy, the subordination and submissiveness of women and the melodramatic, sentimentalised power of love. Rosa believes in these myths despite being alienated from and rejected by mainstream society that, ironically, her deceased sister Ellen was ingratiated into because of her marriage to Sutpen. Her language, for a majority of her speech in Chapter Five of *Absalom, Absalom!*, recapitulates her sustained, undiminished faith in these outmoded social codes and practices.

It is important to note that “alienation” is not a universal phrase, particularly when applied to Faulkner, and therefore Melvin Seeman’s multiform exploration of alienation is utilised during the analyses of Addie and Rosa. In Addie’s case, her alienation emerges from standing in opposition to a society that wants to possess her reproductive and spiritual rights, causing her to desire to escape this persecution. Rosa’s alienation results from being born into a family with a disillusioned father and mentally unravelling sister, living in a community preoccupied with gender rituals and which condemns those failing to conform to these practices.

Feminist criticism employed in this dissertation includes Butler’s gender performance theory, Irigaray’s comments about the subordination of a woman’s right to speak, and Cixous and Clément’s view of female speech as rebellion. These theories are important to apply to Faulkner’s works, which are saturated in a male-dominant vocal register. The “feminism” Addie espouses differs from the “feminism” Rosa does because Addie’s lower socio-economic background accommodates her embrace of negative feminism. Rosa, as sister to Judith and witness to Sutpen’s decadence, is faced with the obligation of correctly performing her gender in the South, and is thus more vulnerable to social scorn than Addie.

Finally, Addie and Rosa’s texts have been referred to throughout Faulkner criticism as “monologues”, characterised by a rich theatricality and embedded in a larger context of male voices. Voice in Faulkner’s work, Stephen Ross notes,

Interrogates the metaphysics of *individual consciousness,* revealing characters’ secret selves by immersing them into a *communal* discourse, making their private thoughts a function of how they hear, respond to, and render each other’s speech.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Being allowed to speak within these texts, given their own voices and the textual space to tell their stories, Addie and Rosa offer a unique perspective into the effects societal alienation has on the everyday lives of women in the South. Speaking in an uncensored, unmediated fashion, they find a form of feminine expression that resists the social structures they are subjugated by.

**Chapter One**

**“Tricked by words older than Anse or love”:**

**Addie Bundren's negative feminist speech in *As I Lay Dying***

Melvin Seeman defines “isolation” in relation to alienation in the following terms: ‘The alienated in the isolation sense are those who *assign low reward value to goals or beliefs that are typically highly valued in the given society*.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Speaking of isolation as a form of rebellion, Seeman writes:

This adaptation [rebellion] leads man outside the environing structure to envisage and seek to bring into being a new […] greatly modified, social structure. It presupposes alienation from reigning goals and standards.

(p. 789)

Seeman’s outline of isolation is applicable to Faulkner’s representation of Addie, especially when compared with Judith Halberstam’s theory of “shadow feminism”, ‘a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence’ (p. 124). At the beginning of her speech, Addie states:

In the afternoon when school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffling nose, instead of going home I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet and hate them.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Addie occupies a demarcated social position as a teacher, expected to ensure the futurity of the younger generation in her hometown. With her life structured around the school-day and the incessant demands of her pupils, the opening of her speech outlines her oppression; she is governed by several ideological superstructures (occupation, education, gender) which shape her life and deprive her of autonomy. Her life is not properly lived or experienced but conducted with a profound sense of inertia. The effects of her oppression and alienation are typified through her palpable hatred of her pupils, emphasising their ‘dirty snuffling’ physicalities. The children Addie is expected to rear and is constantly surrounded by are, in themselves, alien, threatening creatures that she cannot identify with in an emotional or quasi-maternal form. Instead, she considers them worthy of the utmost contempt. This mindset aligns her to Seeman’s definition of isolation and Halberstam’s shadow feminism as ‘a refusal to be or to become a woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy’ (p. 124). Addie desires to combat these oppressive ideological structures through language and in lived experience, refusing to yield to the expectations demanded of women in her society. As Faith Pullin writes, Addie ‘rejects life because she is unable to accept its limitations.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Hating her pupils and, later, rejecting Anse Bundren and his brood and engaging in an affair with Reverend Whitfield, every action Addie performs is an attack against her community. She does *not* desire to be an archetypically good Southern woman like Rosa does. Instead, her goal is to relish in rebellious acts that guarantee her an escape from a life of servitude.

In addition to her discontent at being a teacher, Addie is profoundly affected by the sentiment of her father ‘that the reason for living was getting ready to stay dead a long time’ (p. 98). Tormented by this viewpoint throughout life, Addie lives a corrupted, jeopardised existence as this ideology directly impacts her present-day situation. The ideology of the father looming over her life, Addie admits that:

When I would have to look at them day after day, each with his and her secret and selfish thought […] and think that this seemed to be the only way I could get ready to stay dead, I would hate my father for having ever planted me.

(p. 98)

Addie cannot fulfil the socially acceptable standards of womanhood and substitute motherhood being a teacher necessitates. The impression of the world her father gives her further alienates her from a sense of belonging, relegating her to the boundaries of humanity. Her hatred of her father causes her to wish to destroy his influence and renders her abject in her *own* opinion of herself. As Fred Botting, discussing selfhood in Southern Gothic fiction, argues:

The loss of human identity and the alienation of self from […] the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanized environments […] and violent, psychotic fragmentation. These disturbances are linked to a growing disaffection with the structures and dominant forms themselves, powerful and pervasive myths shaping the identities, institutions and modes of production that govern everyday reality.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The overwhelming influence of Addie’s father causes her to impose his worldview upon the pupils she rears, perpetuating the cycle of abuse that constituted her own upbringing, ensuring these children suffer as she suffers. She delights in acknowledging that:

I would look forward to the times when they faulted, so I could whip them. When the switch fell I could feel it upon my flesh; when it welted and ridged it was my blood that ran, and I would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me! Now I am something in your secret and selfish life, who have marked your blood with my own forever and ever.

(p. 98)

Enjoying inflicting corporeal punishment, she creates an abnormal bond between herself and her pupils, becoming detested and abhorred. Subverting her role as a teacher and a woman, she wishes to punish and damn herself*,* ensuring that she remains perpetually disconnected from humanity. In contrast to her later claims, Addie’s words *do* ‘fit what they are trying to say at’ (p. 99), because they reveal that Addie is a woman who hopes to destroy the prevailing image of Southern womanhood as gentle, loving and kind. Living life as a constant reproach, this negativity leads her during her life with Anse to accept alienation and negativity as her form of feminist expression.

Addie’s refusal to adhere to the rules of standardised Southern femininity is exemplified in her initial conduct with Anse, the man she marries and spawns four children with: ‘And so I took Anse. I saw him pass the school house three or four times before I learned that he was driving four miles out of his way to do it’ (p. 98). Neither here nor at any other point during her speech does Addie sentimentalise her relationship with Anse; the language she utilises cannot be compared to the courtship rhetoric Rosa employs during her relationship with Sutpen. Unlike Rosa, Addie is not enthralled with the romance and power that words connote, because these emotions signify nothing to her. Describing the initial stages of their relationship, Addie places herself in the dominant, autonomous position of power, relegating Anse to the submissive, courted position. She destabilises the myths the Southern community cultivates regarding the interrelationships between men and women. Brian Norman notes:

Addie’s revelations are surprising because they depart so thrillingly from the maternal image cultivated by the other narrators, not to mention ingrained in Southern conventions of womanhood.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Addie claiming that *she* ‘took Anse’ has, in the wider context of her representation in the novel, disturbing implications regarding her abject womanhood and the extent of her power within this marriage. Taking Anse, she wrought the hardship of her future life with him onto herself. Moreover, though she claims she took him, *he* initiated the courtship, coalescing within Addie’s life, invading her lived and spoken narrative. The intentions Anse has for Addie are, initially, not verbalised but heavily implied, attracting excessive social and communal attention (thereby jeopardising Addie’s pursuit of societal aloofness and disconnection). Nonetheless, when Addie is introduced to Anse, she is compelled to notice and acknowledge his grotesque physicality, ‘how he was beginning to hump–a tall man and young–so that he looked already like a tall bird hunched’ (p. 98). Despite the social intrigue Anse arouses, his physical deformities are, arguably, the reason why Addie chose him as her partner. Anse represents, as Botting describes, a ‘grotesque, irrational and menacing presence pervading the everyday’[[12]](#footnote-12) by not constituting the traditional definitions of Southern manhood enacted by men within Faulkner’s cannon such as Jason Compson or Sutpen. Choosing Anse, there is again a deliberate engagement with negativity and failure which both creates, in Halberstam’s terms, ‘more surprising ways of being in the world’ (p. 2), and compares to Addie’s own experiences in the South.

Anse’s perceived inability to perform his masculinity in a socially condoned manner, coupled with the social and biological pressures within Addie’s life, causes her to acquiesce to Anse’s presence and his desires for marriage. Engaging in conversation with Anse for the first time, Addie:

Looked up […] and saw Anse standing there in his Sunday clothes, turning his hat round and round in his hands, I said:

“If you’ve got any womenfolks, why […] don’t they make you get your hair cut?”

“I aint got none,” he said. Then he said suddenly, driving his eyes at me like two hounds in a strange yard: “That’s what I come to see you about.”

“And make you hold your shoulders up,” I said. “You haven’t got any? But you’ve got a house. They tell me you’ve got a house and a good farm. And you live there alone, doing for yourself, do you?” He just looked at me, turning the hat in his hands. “A new house,” I said. “Are you going to get married?”

And then he said again, holding his eyes to mine: “That’s what I come to see you about.”

(pp. 98-99)

The clarity and focus of Addie’s speech contrasts markedly to Anse’s inarticulate, staccato sentences. Addie actively interrogates Anse’s societal and gendered presence, not acknowledging him as an archetypal gentleman but instead focusing on and accentuating the negatives and disparities of his physicality. Addie parodies the judgments and scrutiny inflicted upon her constantly through life. She also projects *her own expectations* upon Anse of what he should be as a man and a husband (and, like Rosa, is momentarily subsumed into fantasy and mythmaking). Daring to speak in this manner reinforces her isolation from the realm of proper feminine etiquette; this estrangement from social conduct allows her to subvert the rules of her community and the overriding perception of women as subservient. She projects herself as Anse’s superior, forcing him to admit his sins and defects bluntly and honestly (hence his coarse, ungrammatical English (‘aint’, ‘none’)). However, Anse’s inability to behave in a gentlemanly fashion (‘driving his eyes at me like two hounds in a strange yard’, a gesture confirming his inner, animalistic sexual drive) implies that Addie finds within him a fellow sufferer of alienation and isolation, a man to whom she can submit to because of his own difficulties in life. Admitting that he has no ‘womanfolks,’ and that the lack of such female presences is ‘what I come to see you about’, Anse makes his intentions for Addie impossible to misunderstand, as he formulates a place and function for her in the design he envisages. Addie becomes the ‘shape’ Anse wishes to use to ‘fill’ the various ‘lacks’ within his life.[[13]](#footnote-13) Through her, he gains the titles of “husband” and “father”, transforming her into “wife” and “mother”, the roles she vehemently rejects throughout her life. This is the inverse of Richard Pearce’s opinion that ‘Anse would give her the identity of wife and mother […] of a woman whose life consisted of laying and dying.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Judith Butler, discussing gender performativity, theorises that:

To be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical ideal of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility.[[15]](#footnote-15)

From the beginning of his interest in Addie, Anse perceives her exclusively in terms of the plans he has for her. He negates and erases her autonomy, seeking to have a vessel that brings his desires into fruition, consequently silencing Addie’s needs and wants.

As their relationship progresses, Anse confesses:

“I aint got no people. So that wont be no worry to you. I dont reckon you can say the same.”

“No. I have people. In Jefferson.”

His face fell a little. “Well, I got a little property. I’m forehanded; I got a good honest name. I know how town folks are, but maybe when they talk to me…….’

“They might listen,” I said. “But they’ll be hard to talk to.” He was watching my face. “They’re in the cemetery.”

“But your living kin,” he said. “They’ll be different.”

“Will they?” I said. “I dont know. I never had any other kind.”

(p. 99)

Openly acknowledging his lack of familial support whilst emphasising his material possession and solid reputation, Anse attempts to sell himself to Addie, assuring her of his marital legitimacy and viability. Anse emphasises Addie’s needs and the benefits she will reap by forming a union with him. In doing so, he will ensure his own social mobility and progression, fulfilling the expectations of masculinity set by society. Anse’s motivations for marrying Addie can be further illuminated by Luce Irigaray who hypothesises that ‘in our social order, women are “products” used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, “commodities.”’[[16]](#footnote-16) The deference Anse pays to her ‘people’ reveals to Addie that he is acutely aware of his own inferior, subordinated position. The emphasis he places on Addie’s family counteracts a fear of having his attempts at completing himself through her thwarted by patriarchal members of her family. She engages in coy, manipulative linguistic play to test and mock Anse’s limitations and his fear of her relatives. Anse’s presence here affords her a self-liberation because she feels she can do with words as she pleases. Toying with Anse, she furthers her sense of alienation, limiting progression to a normative, conventional existence; Addie uses language as a metaphorical weapon against Anse. Yet revealing that she ‘never had any other kind’ of relative except those dead and buried within Jefferson, Addie inadvertently exposes her own weaknesses. Whereas Anse has various materials to assist him in attaining social progress, Addie is defined by what she does *not* have–family, support, happiness and, at the beginning of the novel, time to live. Admitting to Anse that she has no family, Addie submits to him, acquiescing to his schemes, creating a disparity between her repeated assertion that she ‘took’ Anse and her actual, lived reality.

The most significant disparity between what Anse promised during his courtship and what Addie actually received is children, especially her sons Cash and Darl, who are both unexpected, undesired by-products of their union:

So I took Anse. And when I knew that I had Cash, I knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it. That was when I learned that words were no good; that words dont fit even what they are trying to say at. When he was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had children didn’t care whether there was a word for it or not. […] I knew that it had been, not that my aloneness had been violated over and over each day, but that it had never been violated until Cash came.

(p. 99)

Addie ‘took’ Anse for marriage and property and not the possibility of childbearing or motherhood (a prospect not included in either Anse’s description of the marriage or Addie’s intentions for their lives together). Cash, like Anse before him, is inflicted upon Addie suddenly and, having formalised, refuses to depart. Anse’s words did not reveal to Addie that *this* was his intention at the outset of their relationship. Therefore, he deceived and manipulated her by failing to outline the full extent of her reality with him, especially because she feels that Anse ‘had tricked me, hidden within a word like within a paper screen and then struck me in the back through it’ (pp. 99-100). Anse’s duplicity reinforces the doctrine of her dead patriarch, revealing that the elements within a Southern woman’s life are base and corrupt. As Stephen Ross states:

Addie blames words for her dissatisfaction and for her failure to perceive, before she married and gave birth, Anse Bundren’s version of life. She feels tricked into the sterile void between the desired mystical union with life and the violation of herself that such a union entails.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Addie is no longer self-governing, her isolation and alienation no longer intact. The children Anse begets of her symbolise the irrevocable consequences of this compromise. Anse repeatedly attempts, as the fertile patriarch, to suture Addie into a framework of what motherhood should be, which conflicts with the unending reality she is confronted with. Words and speech become meaningless abstractions that inadequately describe her situation. Addie becomes captured in a prison of words given meaning by patriarchal society, and which she works within to destabilise. She clarifies this by stating:

Anse had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack.

(p. 99)

Addie’s speech becomes an evasion and challenge of Anse’s words out of revenge, initiating the final phase of her transition into a totally negative female presence who, as Halberstam argues, ‘makes peace with the possibility that alternatives dwell in a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal’ (p. 2). She diminishes the impact of Anse’s words through the spoken and textual fabric of her speech, rendering his delusions that his wishes are obediently fulfilled obsolete because, as André Bleikasten writes,

People think they can appropriate and master language and use it for their own ends, but it is language that uses them and makes game of them, urging them to act in ways they never intended.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The progression of events in Addie’s life, such as her suddenly discovering that ‘I had Darl’ (p. 99), are devoid of linguistic fluidity, with Addie not assigning events their proper name (such as ‘pregnancy’). Addie’s refusal to acknowledge the traditionally sentimentalised qualities of pregnancy emerge from her wish to shatter the definitions of womanhood and childrearing that society and men like Anse cultivate.

The ultimate manner in which Addie attempts to escape from subservient wife and motherhood is by making Anse vow to bury her in Jefferson after her death:

And when Darl was born I asked Anse to promise to take me back to Jefferson when I died, because I knew that father had been right, even when he couldn’t have known he was right anymore than I could have known I was wrong.

“Nonsense,” Anse said; “you and me aint nigh done chapping yet, with just two.”

(p. 100)

Death becomes a source of solitude from the demands and trials of Southern life, just as Goodhue Coldfield’s abandoned house becomes a sanctuary for Rosa after the dissolution of her engagement. Death is the realm where Addie relays the salient points of her autobiography, her words and speech emerging singularly and independently and presented as entirely her own at this sole point in the novel. The decision to explicate herself from the Bundren burial ground is to have in death what she could not have with Anse in life–an existence without him and his brood (as she later describes, ‘not-Anse’ (p. 100)). Being buried in Jefferson, Addie is freed from the Bundrens, standing independently and autonomously as “Addie” in death. Her ‘revenge’, which Anse ‘would never know I was taking’ (p. 100) is that the children she spawned with him *and* Anse himself are involved in extracting her from the Bundren family through the very act of burying her in Jefferson during the main narrative. Anse dismissing Addie’s request as ‘nonsense’ symbolises his cruel and corrupt nature which is devoid of his initial, seemingly chivalric manner. He neither loves nor respects Addie or aims to soothe her alienation and social dislocation. His insistence that he fulfil the promise Addie asked of him because ‘I gave her my word, it is sacred on me’ (p. 81) is not to honour Addie but, rather, a self-serving exercise to ‘get them teeth’ (p. 30). His negation and denial of her request so that they can continue chapping is a vulgar demonstration of the crude reality he imposes upon her, the antithesis of the love he apparently offers. Anse exclusively considers Addie as an animated womb that harvests his offspring. Therefore, as Jill Bergman says, ‘Addie’s monologue calls attention to an ideology that attempts to define woman by her reproductive function.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Having secured Addie, Anse concentrates on ceaselessly chapping with her. However, Anse forces readers to reconsider his earlier promises and assurances as his own form of linguistic “nonsense” which plunge Addie into misery.

Addie’s neighbour, Cora Tull, is the single communal voice that penetrates Addie’s speech, compounding her alienation and discontent during married life, along furthering her disillusionment with language:

And so when Cora Tull would tell me I was not a true mother, I would think how […] sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words. Like Cora, who could never even cook.

(p. 100)

Cora speaks *at* rather than *with* Addie, dictating how Addie should be with herself, her family and her spirituality, erasing her subjectivity. Defining Addie’s life in a private conversation as ‘God gave you children to comfort your hard human lot and for a token of His own suffering and love, for in love you conceived and bore them’ (p. 96), Cora lacks a personality outside the religious doctrine she espouses, judgmentally asserting her religiosity over Addie. Addie’s vocal tone at this stage is outraged at the audacity of Cora’s voice attempting to control her behaviour and refusing to engage in fair dialogue. Therefore, this passage constitutes Addie’s rejection of Cora’s stigmatisation, challenging her moral authority to speak these words when she has never experienced life as Addie has. Calling Cora by her full name, Addie implies that they are not friends but enemies; Addie cannot consider Cora a friend because Cora excessively criticises her based on her own ideological and personal worldview. Addie ardently resists behaving like a ‘true mother’ according to Cora’s definition that is inextricably linked to the word of the patriarchy that subordinates women. John Pilkington explains:

Cora is a religious person; Addie is not. Addie has no use for such words as lover, motherhood, sin, and salvation, for she had found out about living not through precepts but through experience.[[20]](#footnote-20)

As Addie asserts to Cora, ‘I know my own sin. I know I deserve my punishment. I do not begrudge it’ (p. 96). Addie embraces her sins and uses Cora’s religious doctrine against her, not allowing herself to be imprisoned by Cora’s words or attacks. Cora, defining what a woman should be through the lens of Christian fundamentalism, cannot help but project her ideology onto Addie. However, Addie’s subsequent affair with Reverend Whitfield (who Cora credits as having ‘singled out and strove with the vanity of her mortal heart’ (p. 96)) exemplifies that, given the people she is surrounded by, she has no choice but to work against these structures. Becoming a negative image of womanhood, Addie finds liberation in destroying the rules and limits imposed upon her.

Describing her affair with Whitfield, Addie:

Would think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the world’s face […] the sin more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created.

Addie does not directly name Whitfield in this passage, and yet her choice of him as her lover is an assault on the values Cora holds dear and uses against Addie to humiliate her. Addie’s behaviour is both a rejection of Cora’s zealous religiosity and a symbol of determination to subvert and destroy Cora’s influence. Addie uses Whitfield as the conduit through which she can challenge the word of God. Through her affair, she reveals that the words rendering her alienated, isolated and abhorred by her community are, in themselves, lies and falsities built upon blind faith. To Addie, sin is neither a curse nor a shame, but is instead ingratiated into her everyday life, leading to her only experience of sexual gratification. She uses Whitfield unapologetically to plumb the depths of the ‘dark voicelessness’ (p. 100) of her alienation, executing her revenge upon God, mankind, Anse, Cora and all.

However, the liberation and revenge Addie attains through her affair with Whitfield does not culminate in an all-encompassing, celebratory apotheosis. Instead, as Addie laments:

Then it was over. Over in the sense that he was gone and I knew that, see him again though I would, I would never again see him coming swift and secret to me in the woods dressed in sin like a gallant garment already blowing aside with the speed of his secret coming.

(p. 101)

Addie’s triumph comes to a halt, the repetition of the word ‘over’ striking with utmost finality. Whitfield’s abandonment of Addie mirrors the end of Rosa’s relationship with Sutpen, suggesting that certain men within Faulkner’s oeuvre treat women selfishly, disregarding their psychological stability. Addie cannot reconcile Whitfield’s abandonment; instead, she defines his actions by what she is deprived of–sexual pleasure and a privileged insight into the hypocrisy of her supposedly devout community. Their affair ended, Whitfield evades the truth of his actions, concealing himself in the sanctuary of lies he builds for himself and the holy book whose ideologies and sentiments he espouses. As Arthur Kinney argues, ‘it is Whitfield who can separate words from acts and so twist words that he can cleanse his conscience.’[[21]](#footnote-21) On Addie’s deathbed, Whitfield thanks God for having ‘restrained the tale from her dying lips as she lay surrounded by those who loved and trust her’ (p.104) or, in other words, for not revealing the truth of their affair. God does Whitfield’s bidding, perpetuating his sins and his masquerade as a devoted reverend. As such, Whitfield believes God extends the authority bestowed upon the patriarchy, keeping the female voice silenced, exemplifying Addie as a woman conspired against by the whole of society.

Anse’s verbal duplicity, Cora’s presumptuousness and Whitfield’s hypocrisy finally leads Addie to fully claim the doctrine and ideology of her father:

But for me it was not over. I mean, over in the sense of beginning and ending, because to me there was no beginning nor ending to anything then. […] Then I found that I had Jewel. When I waked to remember to discover it, he was two months gone.

My father said that the reason for living was getting ready to stay dead. I knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward. And so I have cleaned my house.

(pp. 101-102)

Addie resolves to give one final, illusory performance of housewifery and motherhood, not for her husband and children but so that she may find relief in death, with this family fulfilling her request. Accepting and fulfilling the doctrine of her father, she succumbs to the abjection and negativity that becomes her life’s fundamental principle. Addie’s speech ends with the following anecdote:

One day I was talking to Cora. She prayed for me because she believed I was blind to sin, wanting me to kneel and pray too, because people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too.

(p. 102)

Addie eradicates Cora’s self-righteousness, proving herself not blind to sin but, rather, accepting of this concept, enacting rather than verbalising her rebellion by engaging *in* sin. To the final moments of her speech and her life, Addie will not hypocritically engage in the practice she has spent her life rejecting in order to attain the abstract approval of a deity. She mocks and scorns Cora’s beliefs and the ideologies of her community to her last breath, ‘undoing, unbecoming, and violating’ (p. 2), in Halberstam’s words, what she is expected to be. Addie attains a lucidity which dismantles Cora’s mindset; her speech leaves a powerful reverberation that is felt to a devastating degree.

**Chapter Two**

**“*Lose him, weep him; caught a man but couldn't keep him*”:**

**Miss Rosa Coldfield's failed performance of Southern womanhood in**

***Absalom, Absalom!***

Miss Rosa Coldfield’s monologue in chapter five of *Absalom, Absalom!* begins *in-medias-res* and is characterised by Philip Weinstein as spoken in ‘an unspeakable Rosa-ese’ that ‘is neither processed through intermittent response nor punctuated by interrogation.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Discovering that her nephew, Henry, has murdered Charles Bon, his friend and his sister Judith’s fiancé (and, as revealed later, the abandoned, mixed-race son of Thomas Sutpen, Henry and Judith’s father) during the summer of 1865, Rosa describes her reaction to Quentin Compson forty-three years later in 1909 in the following terms:

*So they will have told you doubtless already how I told that Jones to take that mule which was not his around to the barn and harness it to our buggy while I put on my hat and shawl and locked the house.*[[23]](#footnote-23)

(p. 134)

There is an ambiguity about who Rosa refers to as ‘they’ here and throughout this chapter. Like Addie before her, Rosa is surrounded by a cacophony of judgmental social voices that constantly critique her. Rosa perpetually finds herself speaking with discomfort and ill-ease, and given her situation in 1865 (in late adolescence, living alone, her mother, father and sister deceased), her existence is marred by excessive self-consciousness. Rosa’s goal throughout the novel is to become an archetypal Southern lady, a figure defined by Anne Firor Scott as:

A submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up her children and manage his household. […] she was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Rosa’s self-consciousness is emphasised when she admits that she

*Had no need for either trunk nor bag since* […] *the garments which I had been fortunate enough to inherent from my aunt’s kindness* […] *were long since worn out, consisted of the ones which Ellen had remembered from time to time to give to me and now Ellen these two years dead.*

(p. 134)

Rosa characterises herself as lacking the necessary elements needed to execute her performance of Southern womanhood. She lives a clandestine existence within society, deprived of support from either her sister or her aunt, both of whom, ironically, mistreated her throughout life. The women she regards as models of the supremacy of Southern womanhood are presented by Faulkner as deeply faulty and unstable. Any attempts Rosa makes to be a Southern woman in the traditional sense will fail, despite her best efforts, leading to her “self-estrangement” forty-three years later in 1909, an alienation Seeman describes as:

Some ideal human condition from which the individual is estranged. […] To be self-alienated means to be something less than one might be ideally of the circumstances in society were otherwise–to be insecure, given to appearances, conformist.

(p. 790)

Though in 1865 Rosa attempts to repel social stigma, the downfall of the house of Sutpen causes her to effectively witness the end of the South as she knew it. Marvelling at the ‘*rotting portico and scaling walls*’ as she reaches the plantation, Rosa notes that ‘*it stood* […] *marred by no bullet* […] *but rather as though reserved for* […] *some desolation more profound than ruin*’ (p. 136). Rosa perceives the impact of the loss of Sutpen’s dominant presence within the community, a part of her cultural heritage lost and never to be regained. The desolation that the plantation is now characterised by matches the desolation Rosa experiences throughout her life, as Olivia Edenfield outlines: ‘The feeling of never being wanted or needed frames her life, and from the beginning of her existence, Rosa is left outside of a provided role.’[[25]](#footnote-25) Like the rotting plantation, Rosa’s alienation and dislocation from within Yoknapatawpha County is both immovable and morally and social repugnant.

Upon arriving at the plantation and demanding to see Henry and Judith, Rosa attempts to maintain her cultural heritage by asserting her racial superiority over Clytie, Sutpen’s daughter bred from a slave. Clytie refuses to ‘*remove her gaze from mine for the reason that she was not looking at me but through me* […] *musing upon the open door’s serene rectangle which I had broken*’. Rosa, furiously, orders Clytie to ‘*“Take your hands off me, nigger!”*’ (pp. 137-140) Despite Rosa’s vehement outrage, the fact that the South is on the brink of collapse due to the Civil War at the time of her racist speech and the events unfolding within the Sutpen household diminish Rosa’s attempts at asserting her racial superiority. Her utterance exposes her limited view and incompatible presence in this new context. Considering Clytie’s lament of her sudden arrival, *Rosa herself* is undesired within the space of Sutpen’s Hundred, becoming Clytie’s subordinate. Rosa has always been an intruder within Sutpen’s Hundred, functioning as a metaphorical alien presence. At one stage, Rosa reminisces:

*As a child, I would not even play with the same objects which she and Judith played with, as though that warped and spartan solitude which I called my childhood, which had taught me* […] *to listen before I could comprehend and to understand before I even heard, but also taught me to not only instinctively fear her, but to scorn the very objects which she had touched.*

(p. 140)

Rosa’s utterance is an assertion of white racial supremacy over Clytie, refusing to acknowledge her on any human level and denying any kinship between them. Yet, Rosa also emphasises her own inferiority to Judith in terms of both age and class. Her refusal to interact with Clytie and her self-deprecation and reticence with Judith furthers her dehumanisation and alienation, rendering her unapproachable and difficult to identify with. As Minrose Gwin acknowledges:

Rosa’s tragedy at nineteen is that she could not read the possibility of cross-racial female relationships which would dismantle white patriarchal constructs of racial interactions.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Nonetheless, Rosa’s speech is also characterised by an awareness of the abnormality of her childhood and the overall weakness and vulnerability of her existence, which she must not expose to a society that considers her an enemy outsider. Her self-awareness leads to brief, isolated episodes of lucidity and truth. Acknowledging that, in actuality, Clytie ‘*did me more grace and respect than anyone else I knew*’ (p. 139), Rosa reveals the futility of investing her life into Southern myths of race and femininity. Her alienation is multifaceted, as she is estranged from culture, sexuality, family, and material wealth. Her sentiments are inflected by ‘*the lost irrevocable might-have-been*’ (p. 137) and despite her occasional admissions of truth, she cannot undo the crimes and injustices of the past committed upon her, or that she herself has committed onto others.

The feelings of social and gendered inferiority Rosa experiences are shored against Judith’s engagement to the deceased Charles, and of her fantasies of ‘*the upraised and unfinished wedding dress’* which Rosa envisages Judith will *‘snatch up and hold before her as the door burst open upon her brother, the wild murderer*’ (p. 135). Rosa’s thoughts are constantly primed towards marriage and female autonomy being subsumed into a matrimonial economy. Murdering Charles, Henry irrevocably nullifies the engagement, barring Judith entrance into the matrimonial bed of sexual consummation (‘*that nuptial couch of love and grief*’ (p. 138)), obliterating Judith’s opportunities at love and marriage. Rosa fetishises marriage and the relation between men and women because, as Robert Dale Parker writes, ‘for Rosa, to never have been married is to never have been anything at all.’[[27]](#footnote-27) Transforming the dead Charles into an icon of love, ‘*a pale and bloody* corpse’, and making Judith a ‘*bowed and unwived widow*’ (p. 138) whose grief is an honourable female ritual, Rosa limits herself from gaining an objective insight into the reality of Henry’s crime. Her interiority being geared toward this rhapsodic, idealised image of mourning furthers Rosa’s alienation, reinforcing her single-mindedness. Declaring to Quentin that

*I found no grieving widow but Judith standing before the closed door* […] *in the gingham dress which she had worn each time I had seen her since Ellen died, holding* […] *the picture of herself in its metal case which she had given him.*

(p. 142)

The failure of her fantasy explicates the incongruence between the status Rosa perceives her as having (being the daughter of ‘the biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county’ (p. 72) and a bride-to-be, the inverse of the manless, orphaned Rosa) and the reality of Judith’s actual lived experiences. The widow role Rosa casts Judith in remains at the forefront of her psyche because this is the only role she envisages a woman of Judith’s social stature as performing. Rosa’s frustration at Judith not fulfilling her prescribed social obligations is explained by Joel Williamson’s view that repeatedly in his writings,

Faulkner seems to make the point that sex or gender roles in Southern culture were vastly exaggerated. Society required men to be too masculine, and women too feminine. […] The result was that society itself caused great confusion and frustration in matters of love, sex and marriage.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Rosa’s underdeveloped worldview is inflected by a need and desire to fetishise love and marriage in order to become the Southern woman outlined by Williamson or Firor Scott or that Judith is allocated by birthright. However, when she speaks to Quentin in 1909 aged sixty-three, she confronts with her abnormalities and social, cultural and personal deformities (her fantasies tinged by her own difficult ‘*particular kind of nineteen years*’ (p. 142)). The remainder of her chapter is characterised by a willingness to admit and recognise her failures as a woman and the failure of the myths of Southern female gentility more generally.

Indeed, Rosa has aspired to the myth of the Southern lady since she was fourteen, as she tells Quentin:

*Once there was (they cannot have told you this either) a summer of wisteria. It was a pervading everywhere of wisteria (I was fourteen then) as though of all springs yet to capitulate condensed into one spring, one summer: the spring and summertime which is every female’s who breathed above dust, beholden of all betrayed springs held over from all irrevocable time, repercussed, bloomed again.*

(pp. 143-44)

The social voices that continuously scrutinise Rosa cannot account for the emotional longings of this neglected, alienated, dispossessed woman, just as Cora cannot objectively acknowledge Addie’s plight. Exclusively considering Rosa as ‘*still a child*’ and never allowing her to ascend to the female ideal she craves, these voices cannot apply human compassion or empathy to her which, therefore, corrupts Rosa’s behaviour. Acknowledging the summer of wisteria, which David Paul Ragan argues is ‘the time when Rosa’s sexuality developed’,[[29]](#footnote-29) Rosa attempts to bring three-dimensionality and fullness to her flat, neglected existence. The wisteria symbolises both the infinite possibilities that could have awaited Rosa throughout life *and* the mature, blossoming Southern women that engage with life as Rosa cannot. Instead, she witnesses, records and craves, but never experiences firsthand. What Charles (‘*Charles Good, Charles Husband-soon-to-be*’ (p. 148)) and, later, Sutpen signify is a chance for Rosa to become a fully-developed Southern woman, a wisteria in her own right. It is not incidental that the summer of wisteria coincides with the summer of Judith and Bon’s engagement, ‘*the summer after that first Christmas that Henry brought him home*’ (p. 145). Through Judith’s relationship with Charles, Rosa becomes aware of what female adulthood leads to in seemingly idyllic circumstances. However, given Rosa’s ignorance of the fact that Charles is Henry’s mixed-race half-brother and that he is killed because of ‘*the miscegenation, not the incest, which* (Henry) *cant bear*’ (Ch. 8, p. 356), she again cannot perceive reality without her idealisms. Rosa’s assertion that ‘*I never saw him, I never even saw him dead*’ and that ‘*I did not love him; how could I? I never even heard his voice*’ (p. 146) implies that the image Rosa creates for Charles is artificial and self-serving. Her speech indicates her awareness of the non-existent interaction between them. Yet, there remains an overwhelming desire to have love which will diminish her oppression and alienation. Positioned at the edge of human existence, Rosa adapts traditional interpersonal performances to suit her desperate situation. As Linda Kauffman notes, Rosa is ‘acutely aware of the fictiveness of her desire and of her own highly self-conscious literary powers, for what she worships is not Bon but the idea of Bon and his very absence’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Rosa reveals that the picture of Charles Judith possesses is

*Seen by stealth, by creeping (my childhood taught me that instead of love and it stood me in good stead; in fact, if it had taught me love, love could not have stood me so) into the deserted midday room to look at it.*

(p. 147)

Consistently denied an outlet for her love, Rosa never actually comes to “know” what love is. Aware of the myriad myths within the Southern community, she enters alienation from the very beginning of her life, confronted with an accelerated need to develop like these women, echoing Butler’s theory that:

The act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Maintaining a clandestine, foreign perspective, exposed to false ideals of love and womanhood, Rosa naively fetishises these concepts. All her experiences compound her disconnection from proper courtly relationships and female camaraderie. This becomes the unavoidable reality of her situation as she is irrevocably doomed to fail.

During Charles’s funeral, Rosa exhibits outrage and puzzlement at losing a figure that could have potentially freed her from the prison of alienation, misery and isolation she is captured in:

*As we carried him down the stairs and out to the waiting wagon, I tried to take the full weight of the coffin to prove to myself that he was really in it. And I could not tell. I was one of his pallbearers, yet I could not, would not believe something which I knew could not but be so. Because I never saw him.*

(p. 151)

Attempting to carry his coffin’s weight, Rosa casts herself in the role of grieving widow she feels Judith did not properly fulfil, revering the dead patriarch and devoting herself to him in this one, isolated instance. Rosa wishes to correct her inability to have Charles and connect herself to the rituals and characteristics of the past, reestablishing decorum and decency. This leads to her remaining at the Hundred, waiting

*For Thomas Sutpen to come home. Yes, you will say (or believe) that I waited even then to become engaged to him; if I said I did not, you would believe I lied. But I do say I did not.* […] *(I never for once instant thought of marriage, never for one instant imagined that he would look at me, see me, since he never had. You may believe me, because I shall make no bones to say so when the moment comes to tell you when I did think of it.)*

(p. 154)

Rosa’s most profound error is precisely this waiting for Sutpen because of his significance to the myth of the South, having built his legacy around Southern standards of landownership, white supremacy and patriarchal influence. Though Rosa engages in the maintenance of Sutpen’s Hundred, keeping ‘*that garden growing, spun thread and wove the cloth we wore*’ (p. 155), she finds that the self-reliance and independence she adopts with Clytie and Judith is forced upon her. This life of ‘*endless tedious obligations*’ (p. 157) is *not* the life a Southern gentlewoman would conventionally lead, but the socio-political context in which these events occur are not conducive to allow these myths to be perpetuated. She does not keep the Hundred in functional order to elevate herself as an autonomous subject. Instead, her overarching political, philosophical and cultural standpoint regarding the status of women in the South concerns subordinating the female self to an all-powerful male authority figure. As Firor Scott writes, ‘Southern women sought diligently to attain the perfection and the submissiveness demanded of them by God and man’ (p. 8). Rosa becomes attracted to Sutpen because of his perceived dedication to his cause and the overarching ideology of the South. To Rosa Sutpen, fighting for the survival of the South during the war, salvages her chances at becoming one of the Sutpen clan, transforming herself into the idealised female figure she desires to become.

As Rosa describes it, a direct correlation can be made between Sutpen’s return, her presence on the plantation, and her subsequent engagement to him:

*And then one afternoon in January Thomas Sutpen came home; someone looked up where we were preparing the garden for another year’s food and saw him riding up the drive. And then one evening I became engaged to marry him.*

(p. 158)

Rosa’s presence, coinciding with the impending failure of Sutpen’s plans, allows Sutpen to momentarily maintain his design. Rosa’s servitude is fortuitous, therefore, as her marriage proposal is a metaphorical reward for helping prepare ‘*another year’s food*’. Though ‘*one of the thousand specious reasons good enough for women*’ that Rosa posits society cultivates to explain her engagement to Sutpen is ‘*the fear of dying manless which old maids always have*’ (pp. 158-159), this explanation is a reluctant admission of the truth. With Sutpen’s return, Rosa’s dreams of Southern womanhood are on the precipice of fulfilment. Her desire to have a man to fulfil her desires undoes much of the progress she made with Judith and Clytie on the Hundred. Unbeknownst to herself, Rosa, watching Sutpen ‘*ride up on that gaunt and jaded horse’* (p. 159), becomes a member of an authentic community of Southern women. This community reflects the profound changes occurring in the social fabric of the South, such as the rise of the ‘*carpet-bagger*’ and ‘*tales of negro uprisings*’ (p. 161). Nonetheless, Rosa’s astonishment at Judith’s tears which ‘*burst, as if that entire accumulation of seven months were erupting spontaneously from every pore in one incredible evacuation*’ (p. 159) as she describes Charles’s murder to her father implies that, unlike Judith, Rosa’s belief in the role and function of women leaves her emotionally redundant and inauthentic. This absence of maturity and insight is furthered when Rosa describes herself looking at Sutpen,

*The same face* […] *the same ruthless eyes, the hair grizzled a little now, and no recognition in the face at all until Judith said, “It’s Rosa. Aunt Rosa. She lives here now.”*

(p. 159)

There are absolutely no words exchanged between them here. Though Rosa builds an idealised fiction for Sutpen, as Richard Moreland explains, ‘in the name of that supposedly homogenous fiction she thinks they share’,[[32]](#footnote-32) to Sutpen Rosa means absolutely nothing. That they are reintroduced when his ‘ruthless’, ‘grizzled’ nature is palpable, his attempt at incorporating her into his life is not done under the auspices of love and sentimentality. At no point does Sutpen desire to know Rosa as a human being or placate her aspirations towards authentic Southern womanhood. Instead, Sutpen is interested in Rosa assisting him to fulfil *his own goals*. His view that ‘*if every man in the South would do as he himself was doing, would see to the restoration of his own land, the general land and South would save itself*’ (p. 161) signifies a determination to not wither in defeat. This refusal to surrender fascinates Rosa, and one could argue that her speech herepartly functions as a final opportunity to explain herself, refusing to decay and fade in the aftermath of Sutpen’s illicit proposal.

The context in which Rosa’s engagement to Sutpen occurs is by her perpetuating her new role as woman-servant around the plantation, serving a specific function:

*And then one afternoon (I was in the garden with a hoe, where the path came up from the stable lot) I looked up and saw him looking at me. He had seen me for twenty years, but now he was looking at me; he stood there in the path looking at me, in the middle of the afternoon.*

(p. 162)

As Sutpen gazes at Rosa, there is no outright admission of either his intentions or the purposes of his look. Instead, Rosa reads into Sutpen’s look the infinite possibilities and significations of such a gesture. However, she is also aware of the abnormality of his gesture, which furthers her alienation and dislocation. Aware that she is not an ideal woman, Sutpen’s look causes her to be highly self-conscious, her inadequacies on display. Rosa attributes his look to the impending loss of his plantation forty-three years after the event, admitting that ‘*it was not love: I do not claim that*’ (p. 163). Hence, there is a palpable anguish in Rosa verbalising that their relationship was built upon an absence and that it must be defined in contrast to the cultural fictions and gender fantasies she values. The lives of both Addie and Rosa are characterised by the unspoken desires and intentions of supposedly honourable, chivalric men. When Sutpen subsequently proposes to Rosa, putting ‘*his hand on my head*’ (p. 164), she feels that he communicates a need and desire for her that is greater than his passionless speech. His touch, characterised by her earlier view that ‘*there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering*’ (p. 139), promises sexual release and matrimonial closeness. Yet at no point does Sutpen illicit an emotional connection with Rosa, instead saying:

*“You may think I made your sister Ellen no very good husband. You probably do think so. But even if you will not discount the fact that I am older now, I believe I can promise that I shall do no worse at least for you.”*

(p. 164)

Sutpen does not acknowledge his faults during his proposal, but instead negates and disregards Rosa’s opinions, asserting himself as her social and gendered superior. Rosa allows herself to be consumed by her fantasies and Sutpen’s apparent chivalry because, as Williamson notes, ‘to not marry, for both men and women, was to live one’s life in an incomplete state, more or less tangential to the social circle.’[[33]](#footnote-33) Sutpen’s proposal renders her unaware of the irony and hypocrisy of ‘supplanting’ Ellen in her marriage-bed, just as she bitterly acknowledges Milly Jones will do to her (p. 134). Rosa subconsciously anticipates the impending utterance of Sutpen’s cruel words when she perceives that he was ‘*talking not about me or love or marriage but to the very dark forces which he had evoked*’ (p. 165). Even during the engagement when, as Dirk Kuyk acknowledges, ‘Rosa let her silence mean consent’ because ‘his needing her gave her life meaning’,[[34]](#footnote-34) she remains inconsequential to Sutpen, the same childlike woman she has always been. His ‘*restoration of* (Ellen’s) *ring*’ (p. 165) has not changed Rosa’s predicament or allowed her to ascend to the rank of authentic womanhood in the view of patriarchal society or Sutpen as the leader of the restoration of the South.

As Rosa describes to Quentin, ‘*One afternoon*’ Sutpen ‘*knew how much of his hundred square miles he would be able to save*’ to the extent that

*He would at least retain the shell of Sutpen’s Hundred, even though a better name for it now would be Sutpen’s One–called, shouted for me until I came down* […] *he stood with the reins over his arm (and no hand on my head now) and spoke the bald outrageous words exactly as if he were consulting with Jones* […] *about a bitch dog or cow or mare.*

(p. 168)

The circumstances surrounding the dissolution of the engagement is the complete antithesis of the afternoon of Sutpen’s gaze and the evening of his proposal. Sutpen’s speech reveals exactly what intentions he has for Rosa. The fact that she does not directly acknowledge what he said[[35]](#footnote-35) proves his words do not fit her design but instead, as Kuyk writes, ‘destroys her romantic, idealistic design of herself as his “sun.”’[[36]](#footnote-36) Sutpen’s speech unashamedly dehumanises Rosa, making her his property that he utilises to save his plantation and ensure his supremacy in Jefferson. His words are devoid of love and sentimentality, and her presence in his life only exists for her to serve her purpose to him. As Kauffman suggests, ‘Sutpen’s proposition to Rosa is most devastating […] because he makes no effort to reciprocate’ (p. 255). Becoming the victim of his words and the reality of his attitude towards her, Rosa cannot live in the realm of myth, illusion and fantasy any longer; she must acknowledge the meaninglessness of her presence in his life. Instead of becoming the archetypal Southern woman she always aspired to be, she remains a servant whose newest responsibility is not to tend the plantation but harvest the foetus of Sutpen’s child (as Addie does with Anse), ensuring the longevity of his design in the process. Like Henry destroyed Judith’s possibility at love and marriage by murdering Charles, Sutpen’s speech destroys the fantasies Rosa envisions since the summer of wisteria. Sutpen’s words are weapons which infiltrate Rosa’s life, dismantling, as Diane Roberts argues, her conception of herself as:

Part of a moral order and social structure, a potential upholder of the plantation system, a woman to be married or at least loved, and thus given status, moreover a woman whose voice is heard.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Rejecting Sutpen’s proposition, Rosa aborts the literal and metaphorical child that would have ensured that she remain in an abject position of servitude. Depicting Rosa’s oppression and plight, Faulkner’s strategy in this chapter is to emphasise that traditional constructions of Southern womanhood are ludicrous and incompatible with life in the decades following the end of the War.

The dissolution of Rosa’s engagement to Sutpen leads, according to Ragan, to Rosa becoming ‘the object of old maid ridicule.’[[38]](#footnote-38) Repeatedly throughout her life after leaving Sutpen, Rosa is targeted by taunts of this nature: ‘*Rosie Coldfield, lose him, weep him; caught a man but couldn’t keep him*’ (p. 168). These taunts frame her monologue, becoming what she lives her life by, propelling her existence in an irrevocably negative direction. These words are also emergent from Sutpen’s own ‘outrageous’ words to Rosa, becoming a by-product of his illicit proposition, infecting her desire to become one with mainstream society. These voices bombard her, resonating within her memory after forty-three years, corrupting the beauty and lyricism of her speech in this chapter. Through the eyes of society, Rosa is reduced to the lowest, most humiliating form of existence, seen ‘*before sun-up gathering greens along garden fences, pulling them through the fence since she had no garden of her own, no tools to work it with*’ (p. 169). Rosa becomes a mockery and a disgrace in the view of the populous, just as Miss Emily Grierson does in Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily’. After the failure of her engagement to Homer Barron, Emily is repeatedly dismissed as ‘Poor Emily’,[[39]](#footnote-39) her life mirroring Rosa’s own. Rosa’s greatest fears are now realised; though she remains faithful to the Confederacy, demonstrating her faithfulness through her poetry and attesting to the credibility and righteousness of the South, her devotion is not repaid. Instead, she suffers unimaginable torment, driven into the void she longed to escape, kept away from the heart of Southern society she dreamed she would one day reach. As Kauffman notes, ‘part of the intensity and tension of Rosa’s narrative is the result of the disparity between what she felt and what the gossips report’ (p. 260). What Rosa does by rejecting Sutpen’s proposition, as far as the community is concerned, is more bizarre then the words Sutpen spoke to begin with. Going back home, not allowing herself to be brutalised by this ‘*ogre*’ who ‘*was not owned by anyone or anything in this world’* (p. 171), Rosa foregoes the fulfilment of her desires and the expectations of her society. She is, perpetually, in a luckless, compromised situation. She both rejects Sutpen and poeticises her account of these events forty-three years later, implying that she still clings to her dreamlike love, adoration and idealisations of womanhood, love and marriage. She continues to desire Sutpen, exclaiming after she is told of his death at the hands of Wash Jones, ‘*Dead? You? You’re not dead; heaven cannot, and hell dare not, have you!*’ (p. 172). Yet when she tells Quentin her story, she is completely aware that despite her wish to quash her alienation, she can never do so.

Finally, in terms of the feminism of *Absalom, Absalom!*, one could argue that Rosa gains a sense of feminist objectivity in the years after she has been ‘thrown over’ by Sutpen. Rosa offers a tacit example of this when, after Sutpen gazes at her, she notes: ‘*he did not look at me during the meal; I might have said then, To what deluded sewer-gush of dream does the incorrigible flesh betray us, but I did not*’ (p. 163). Rosa’s objectivity emerges in hindsight, during her forced maturity and the failure of her societal aspirations. It is not an outlook that emerges naturally and without protest but, nonetheless, she acknowledges the facts of her engagement to Sutpen despite her bitter, alienated outlook. Verbalising her inconsequentiality to Sutpen to Quentin is as close to a feminist move Rosa can make at this point in 1909. Her feminism, much like Addie’s, emerges out of a direct confrontation of alienation and abjection, and is characteristic of Cixous and Clément’s concept of the “voice-cry”:

Agony–the spoken “word” blow to bits by suffering and anger, demolishing discourse: this is how she has always been heard before, ever since the time when masculine society began to push her offstage, expulsing her, plundering her.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Rosa, like Addie, owns her loss and betrayal, acknowledging her crimes of believing in the supremacy of the Southern patriarch and the infallibility of Southern gender customs. As a result, she gains a modicum of objectivity and empowerment. Ultimately, Rosa speaks in lamentation of the life and man she can never have, but nevertheless, as Roberts argues, ‘she insists on her story: *she wants it told*, Quentin thinks. It is her masterpiece, her *roman-à-clef*revenge against the world that has marginalized her.’[[41]](#footnote-41) She tells Quentin her story to suggest that her desires still remain, and to give them whatever sustenance and authority she can after an extended time of ‘impotent yet indomitable frustration’ (Ch. 1, p. 8). That Quentin ‘was not listening’ (p. 172) when her monologue ends, and that he and Shreve subsequently revise her story in the following chapter (beginning, ironically and tragically, with the news of Rosa’s death (Ch. 6, p. 173)) is the final symbol of her lifelong failure to become the idealised Confederate woman she ceaselessly longed to be.

**Conclusion**

This dissertation sought to demonstrate that the representation of womanhood in William Faulkner’s novels, typified by Addie Bundren and Rosa Coldfield, is characterised by a profound sense of alienation and social dislocation that both women experience. Analysing Faulkner’s fiction in relation to womanhood, alienation and speech helps readers and critics see that the stories Addie and Rosa tell are not evocative of freedom or liberation but, instead, depict womanhood in the South as tumultuous and oppressive. These points were illustrated through a close reading of the chapters where the voices of Addie and Rosa are directly and most explicitly heard and an examination of: their relationships to their societies and to the various ideologies they are exposed to, their relationships with men, and their experiences of love, marriage, childbearing, loneliness, scrutiny and betrayal. Through secondary criticism and literary theory, the significance of the alienation and hardship Addie and Rosa experience and the view that their arduous situations are a common, shared characteristic amongst women of all socio-economic and historical backgrounds was discerned.

In Chapter One, a close reading of Addie’s single chapter in *As I Lay Dying* through the lens of Halberstam’s theory of “shadow feminism”, it was argued that Addie’s hatred for Southern life is present from the very outset of her speech, as she is oppressed and alienated by the ideology of her father. Addie attempts to combat her alienation by marrying Anse Bundren, but finds that she had been deceived and used by him, and that her marriage deepens her disconnection from within the community and herself. What her experiences lead to is an embrace of the negatives in her life, accepting her failures and inadequacies and not working to rid herself of them but, instead, relishing her inability to be a Southern woman in a socially appropriate sense. Combating the scrutiny and judgment of her community and her society to her last breath, Addie finds liberation and autonomous expression in death. That the novel ends with Anse remarrying and bestowing the title of ‘Mrs Bundren’ onto his ‘duck-shaped’ bride (p. 149) is not merely Addie being written out and silenced forever. Instead, considering her need and desire for isolation and ‘aloneness’, Anse’s deed ironically grants her wish.

Chapter Two consisted of an analysis of Rosa’s central speech in *Absalom, Absalom!* Anne Firor Scott’s history of *The Southern Lady* illustrated Rosa’s desire to become this archetypal figure. However, considering her lack of family, her estrangement from mainstream society and her failed encounters with Charles and Sutpen, Rosa is never allowed to properly enact her role. Instead, she suffers continuously and unendingly, becoming a victim of social scrutiny and harassment, never forgetting her failures or the impact of Sutpen’s bald outrageous words. Telling her story to Quentin, she attempts to find a sense of escape and relief forty-three years after the events of her summer of wisteria. However, telling her story proves futile, as she remains the scorned, outcast woman she has always been, unable to alter the past or align her discourse with a fulfilment of her dreams.

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35. Quentin and his friend Shreve later hypothesise that Sutpen ‘suggested they breed a couple of dogs together’ (Ch. 6, p. 180). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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