

## Tyranny of Market: Thomas Sutpen and the Southern Economy in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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### I

On his central concern for the novel, Faulkner often emphasized the universality of characters in contrast with their sociological and historical background.<sup>1</sup> As for *Absalom, Absalom!*, he remarks that the germ of the novel involved “a man who wanted a son and got too many, got so many that they destroyed him” (76), suggesting its universal theme relevant to the novel’s title. Indeed, Thomas Sutpen, the central character of *Absalom*, gives us a strong impression of human’s avarice, obsession and cruelty. However, the novel unmistakably reflects southern background with considerable accuracy. Despite his mythic life, Sutpen is a man who normally comes across a society, tries to adapt to it and assimilates himself into it. If such, the meaning of his behavior and deed should be understood in context of the southern structure in which Sutpen’s heroism is displayed. Especially, in term of the economic aspect, it will be made clear that his so called “inhumanity” is a product of accumulated choices of his life influenced by the environment. It is this environment which makes Sutpen a demoniac character. Also, if Sutpen is not an exceptional character unrelated to the southern codes, but one who comes to strongly adhere to them, we may see him as an emblematic character and his story of downfall as not just personal tragedy but an indictment of the society which helped to form his inhuman personality. Based on

such a consideration, a closer inspection of Sutpen and his life will reveal the southern economic mechanism and nature connected to it.

Since his arrival at Jefferson Sutpen is depicted as a rigorous, enigmatic character. In his first five years, he keeps away from the people in Jefferson and just labors for his house. As Cleanth Brooks points out, Sutpen's earnestness reminds us Jay Gatsby who believes in American dream and becomes rich by his own talent and effort. But despite his similarity to Gatsby in absorption to the aim, he is absorbed also by the principle with which he executes the design, that is, the principle of exchanging. In early years Sutpen firmly refuses to make debt from others; he "did not drink . . . [because] he did not have the money with which to pay his share or return the courtesy" (25). And when he can afford to pay, he "drank of this [his guest's whiskey] with a sort of sparing calculation as though keeping mentally . . . a sort of balance of spiritual solvency between the amount of whiskey he accepted and the amount of running meat which he supplied to the guns" (30). So, Sutpen is no less ruthless to observing to this principle than to the aim. His inhuman impression derives from this principle. To seize it more accurately, we follow his life from his childhood.

In Sutpen's recollection, which was told to Quentin's grandfather (and later retold by Quentin and Shreve) while they hunted the escaped architect, the details of Sutpen's birthplace is recounted.

where he lived the land belonged to any body and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say 'This is mine' was crazy; and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to

take and keep, and only that crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for powder and whiskey. (179)

This circumstance of West Virginia where little Sutpen was brought up plainly suggests that of primitive communism, in which there is neither any proprietorship nor any exchanging between the individuals.<sup>2</sup> What dominates here is, in Karl Marx's words, genuine value or value in use, which was possible solely in one-person economy. In this economy, he/she "who produces an article for his immediate use, to consume it himself, creates a product, but not a commodity" (Marx 136). And since one-person economy has neither private ownership nor exchange, article's or people's genuine value is not occulted by a price. Labor is not divided so that neither mastery nor derogation exists; his/her value is measured solely by his/her use of labor in actual life without the interference of the market.

Such Eden-like circumstance begins to change when his family leaves West Virginia. As they move from hamlets to villages, then from towns to the county, Sutpen gradually learned "that there was a difference between white men and white men not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes" (183). That is, falling from the mountain, he no more lives in the society where one's value is estimated by the natural faculty independent from the social relationship but already enters into the capitalist society dominated by the operation of the market system.

Then, an unexpected episode brings little Sutpen the decisive change. He entered into a plantation to send his father's message and was turned away by a Negro butler in front of the door:

he [little Sutpen] stood there before that white door with the monkey niggers

barring it and looking down at him in his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes and . . . he never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told him, even before he had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back. (188)

Here what little Sutpen is awakened to through the Negro's insult is a new vision of value system. He is no longer estimated by his own ability such as "lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whisky you could drink then get up and walk out of the room" (183) but by "his patched made-over jeans clothes and no shoes." This leads Sutpen to find himself to be not in the society prevailed by the genuine value but that of capitalism which premises the value in exchange. In this society, once an article is exchanged, the factor that decides the value shifts from each person to the market itself. An article is instantly equalized its value with that of one it is exchanged with. Through such process, therefore, the genuine value articles essentially have is disguised from people's eyes. Also, people who engage in this society are devalued in accordance with this value-shift. Since exchanging necessarily promotes the division of labor, each people under the system is distributed into the labor processes and is assigned to the social classes: owner, laborer and slave. Thus, the measure which estimates Sutpen's value now is what he possesses or how he dresses, by which the Negro categorized him into the laborer and equalized him with every poor whites.

Heretofore, Sutpen enters the new system to match the plantation owner: "to combat them [planters] you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did" (192). Though the boy's sharp instinct detects the essence of the market system, there already lies the misconception which leads him to his tragedy. Sutpen's rage is

solely directed to the plantation owner in hammock, not to the market system which generates the division of labor and human estrangement; actually, the former is no more than the representation of the latter and both are inseparably at work as one whole. Whereas, Sutpen at once launches into the system and accepts the exchanging principle.

Thus, Sutpen works toward property accumulation through the exchanging; he gets the patent of the land from the Chickasaw Indian with "the gold Spanish coin" and makes his band of wild negroes and French architect work in building his house; then with "whatever the felony" he acquires the "chandeliers and mahogany and rugs" (33).<sup>3</sup> Such ruthlessness after the arrival at Jefferson is not traceable to Sutpen's innate character but to the capitalist system he entered. Its simple, plain principle at last leads him to the owner of "a hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land" (26) and the master of "the largest edifice in the county" (30).

However, the progress has a conflict which leads both Sutpen and the society to their limitation. The accumulation of wealth in the capitalist society is founded on the immoral exploitation of the lower classes and negation of the genuine value. Capitalist estimates laborers' value as low as possible to keep the wealth, suppressing their frustration. Therefore, economic progress "must constantly result in reproducing the working man as a working man and the capitalist as a capitalist," which should consequently increase a gap between the rich and the poor, the exploiter and the exploited (Marx 148). If Sutpen's rise embodies the capitalization, he reflects negative aspect of capitalism as well as positive one. Actually, in the process of building his house, we see Sutpen's exploitation and the violence to the people and the laborer. As

Europeans discovered and invaded America in old times, he pillages the virgin land from Chickasaw Indian, and abuses the French architect for two years, against which the architect attempts to escape. Also, he overuses the twenty Negroes "in the sun and heat of summer and the mud and ice of winter, with quiet and unflagging fury" (28). So, his house is founded no less on his ceaseless endeavor than on exploiting laborer and holding down their frustration; it reflects both the prosperity and fragility of the capitalism America has pursued on.

Furthermore, Sutpen himself is dimly aware of the defect of capitalism as his personal dilemma. What he notices before the completion of the house is contradiction the design originally contains: the process of carrying out the design, which violates people's humanity, has its root in the quite humanistic motivation. Sutpen sets about the design to "take that boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it: and not at all for mere shelter but so that that boy, that whatever nameless stranger, could shut that door himself forever behind him" (210). If Sutpen continues to follow the market system in agreement with the value in exchange, he will find himself doing what he was once done by the man in hammock and betraying his starting point. But if he tries to resume the humanistic attitude in regard of the genuine value, he should quit exploiting laborer so that the design is crippled.

Thus, getting bogged in the puzzling dilemma, Sutpen is temporarily reluctant to complete the house as well as to relinquish the design: "[t]hen he seemed to quit. He seemed to just sit down in the middle of what he had almost finished, and to remain so for three years during which he did not even appear to intend or want anything more"

(30). Such a social and ethical conflict continues to smolder in Sutpen as well as in the society, and will flare up again to more profound extent. But before assessing the reappearance of it, we should take account of another economic aspect which uniquely concerns the southern society, that is, the plantation system.

## II

Sutpen's avengement is, as we see above, directed to the white master in hammock, not the Negro butler, by whom little Sutpen is disdained directly. In his reminiscence of the scene in front of the door, we recognize Sutpen's re-discovery of the social relationship between the white and the Negro as well as the poor and the rich:

he [Sutpen] seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years they had lived there like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects in it and you turn and go back through the room again and look at all the objects from the other side . . . a certain flat level silent way his older sisters and the other white women of their kind had of looking at niggers, not with fear or dread but with a kind of speculative antagonism not because of any known fact or reason but inherited by both white and black, the scene, effluvium of it passing between the white women in the doors of the sagging cabins and the niggers in the road . . . (186)

Along with the predicament of the poor whites, the racial distinction is foregrounded; before the class line, there lies the color line as more fixed social assumption. Here lies the uniquely southern code independent from the northern market principle.

In the north, regardless of racial background, one may be a party of exchanging

contract as long as he/she possesses the object for exchange. And in the marketplace, whether as purchaser or seller, they share the belief in the individual as free, equal and autonomous unit. To this extent, critics who regard Sutpen as just an American dreamer seem a little superficial. Carolyn Porter, for instance, argues that, "conducted in the name of equality," Sutpen is dedicated to "vindicating the American dream itself" (222), or Cleanth Brooks, on whose claims diverse critics found their analysis, points out Sutpen is a self-made pursuer of an "abstract idea" which may be said to be "a characteristically American aberration" (299). But limiting the aspect of social circumstance in which Sutpen lives to the free, equal economy, these claims have scant concern for the southern plantation system.

In the plantation system, along with the exchanging principle, there prevails the norm of color line and each plantation binds its member as a total unit, about which W. J. Cash left suggestive observation:

The plantation tended to find its center in itself: to be an independent social unit, a self-contained and largely self-sufficient little world of its own. . . . once the forest was cut and the stumps grubbed up, once the seed were in a few times and the harvest home a few times, once he had a Negro or two actually at work—once the plantation was properly carved out and on its way, then the world might go hang. . . . Thus, freed from any particular dependence on his neighbors, the planter, as he got his hand in at mastering the slave, would wax continually in lordly self-certainty. (32-33)

The plantation, as a self-contained unit, deprives the Negro slaves of their humanity and allots them peripheral parts, assigning the owner the center of it. Here, opposed to



the whites, Negroes have neither the right of selling nor that of purchasing in the market unless they prove their free status, but rather, they are exchanged by whites as a kind of articles. Though in northern contract owners control workers' lives so far as they are related to production, in the plantation owners possess Negroes' whole lives.

The Negro butler, who expelled Sutpen from the front door is, therefore, nothing but a part of the total unit, representing the owner's wealth. It is the man in hammock who disdains little Sutpen from the center of the unit: "[B]ut I [Sutpen] can shoot him. (Not the monkey nigger. It was not the nigger anymore than it had been the nigger that his father had helped to whip that night. The nigger was just another balloon face slick and distended with that mellow loud and terrible laughing so that he did not dare to burst it . . .)" (189). To contest for the man in hammock Sutpen should not merely become the rich but own the plantation, and to fulfill that he should have "land and niggers and a fine house" (192). Consequently, while he arrives at the decision of becoming plantation owner, we observe Sutpen's unconscious reception of the double system: the market system owing to the exchanging principle and the slavery in the plantation.

Coming to Jefferson, Sutpen in fact fulfills "land and niggers and a fine house"; he arrives with twenty Negroes and acquires the land and then builds a fine house. But we also know that before arriving at Jefferson, Sutpen almost completed his design but quitted; he once won the plantation but abdicated it in Haiti. In Haiti, suppressing the revolt of sugar planter's slaves, he married the planter's daughter in recompense for the suppression and got a son, Bon. But as soon as he finds his wife, Eulalia, has a Negro blood, he discarded her and son, resigning "all right and claim to this

[compensation] in order that I might repair whatever injustice I might be considered to have deprived of anything I might later possess" (213). For Sutpen, this is not the divorce between the individuals as equals but a disposal of a kind of needless article, for, now becoming the Negress, the marriage contract with Eulalia turns out to be void and annulled. Also, Charles Bon, from the would- be successor of Sutpen's plantation, shifts to a part of plantation, since according to the plantation code, the Negro must merely be the peripheral parts of the whole, not the center.

"[O]vertaken by the added and unforeseen handicap of the fever also and fought through it at enormous cost" (24), Sutpen has to build his house from the start. Now we see on how strict principle the plantation and the edifice in Jefferson are produced; they are the outcome of the effort which quite sincerely observes the economic code and plantation code, or to put it other way, the plantation and the edifice are founded on the double negation: the negation of the human's genuine value (French architect and Chickasaw Indian) and that of the humanity of the Negro (Eulalia Bon, Charles Bon and bands of Negroes).

### III

Though Sutpen accomplishes his design by completing his plantation, conflicts between the wealth and humanity, value in exchange and the genuine value have always lingered in his mind. After thirty years has passed since Sutpen divorced Eulalia, he comes to Quentin's grandfather's office to find what the "mistake" is in his design: "he had long since given up any hope of ever understanding it, but trying to explain to circumstance, to fate itself . . . as if he were trying to explain it to an

intractable and unpredictable child" (212). But as we touched in the earlier chapter, it is difficult for him to respect both planter's wealth and the genuine value people essentially possess. In contrast to the planter's wealth, which is maintained by the ceaseless exchanging of the products with money, and money with the Negroes, genuine value is incomparable and unalterable, solely estimated by each individual's mind and kept as value by not being exchanged with other factors; although value in exchange depends on the market system, genuine value will lose its value if it is put into the market. Therefore, the more rich and aristocratic Sutpen becomes, the more ethical conflict he bears.

Such a conflict at last takes the form of boy figure, i.e., Charles Bon, who gets acquainted with Henry and returns to Sutpen's Hurdred:

he [Sutpen] stood there at his own door, just as he had imagined, planned, designed, and sure enough and after fifty years the forlorn nameless and homeless lost child came to knock at it and no monkey-dressed nigger anywhere under the sun to come to the door and order the child away . . . (215)

Repeating the same situation as that of fifty years ago, the situation looks quite ironical. About the problem of whether to receive Bon or not, Sutpen is forced to decide his basic attitude toward the human beings. In the plantation code, for his Negro blood, Bon is an article, the object of exchange.<sup>4</sup> But in general view, he is a boy who ought to be vindicated as Sutpen's son. Since Sutpen's design has its root in the idea that "he would take that boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it" (210), if he drives Bon away, he betrays his original aim. However, since Sutpen's plantation and the house are founded upon the

economic and the plantation code, if he takes Bon in the house and acknowledges him as the heir of Sutpen's Hundred, deviating from the codes, the plantation becomes no longer an authentic unit and the house will "come down like it had been built out of smoke, making no sound, creating no rush of displaced air and not even leaving any debris" (215). The choice Sutpen faces is, therefore, to do against the economic basis or to do against the moral basis.

In the face of such an ultimate choice, what Sutpen chooses is again repudiating Bon and observing the economic and plantation codes, for, through the years of endeavor and diligence in accordance with these codes, he has personalized them and came to be their incarnation. But by repudiating Bon, Sutpen throws his "conscience" (213) away as well as his primal aim for which his whole design has been carried out.

Sutpen's following decline and fall, therefore, can be interpreted as caused by the revenge of the people, who are negated their humanity and underrated.<sup>5</sup> First, Sutpen neglects Bon's humanity. Acknowledging neither as his son nor as a person, he prevents Bon from marrying Judith by using Henry as a bulwark; he announces Henry that Bon not only is his brother but has Negro blood. For Bon, it does not matter whether he marries Judith or not. What he sought is acknowledgement as son by Sutpen and vindication of his humanity, not of an article: "[h]e [Sutpen] should have told me. He should have told me, myself, himself. I was fair and honorable with him. I waited. . . . I gave him every chance to tell me himself. . ." (272). But repeatedly refused by Sutpen, who regards Bon just as an economic threat, his patience at last wears out and directs his anger at Sutpen just as little Sutpen did at the man in hammock: "*No, he has*

*never acknowledged me. He just warned me . . .*" (279). Bon's return to the Sutpen's Hundred to marry Judith, then, can be said to be his revenge on Sutpen's cruel treatment and, to enlarge upon that, on the plantation code, which deprives him of the human's dignity. His second attempt to enter into the house is hindered by Henry, for whom, having been bred in the southern society, it is intolerable to let his sister's miscegenation. Shooting Bon in front of the house, as it were, Henry barricaded the southern codes as well as his father's estate. As a result, by Bon's death and Henry's disappearance, Sutpen loses the heir to succeed his "dynasty."

Under the pressure of necessity to have a successor, then, Sutpen turns to Rosa, a sister of Ellen. But again, he fails for his insulting proposal, which arouses Rosa's fatal anger. For him, marriage is also a kind of exchanging contract, in which the price ought to be proportionate to the cost: the status of his wife is provided in return for the birth of a male child. What makes Rosa leave Sutpen's Hundred is not her antipathy against him from her infancy but the very proposal which negates her humanity, for, at first, she accepted him: "I saw that man return—the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims— . . . yet I agreed to marry him" (12). At the first time, Sutpen proposes to Rosa with an engage ring he once gave to Ellen, which shows his respect to her as an unalterable woman, one of "the Coldfields [who] are qualified to reciprocate whatever particularly signal honor marriage with anyone might confer upon them" (60). But the second proposal "that they breed together for test and sample and if it was a boy they would marry" (144) shows Sutpen's undisguised view of Rosa as an alterable one, reducing her whole value to just reproductive function. Such a mechanical view of course enrages Rosa since it nullifies her genuine value and

equalizes her with every other woman.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Rosa returns to her home to live the forty years of "*stubborn and amazed outrage*" (142).

Losing the opportunity, Sutpen at last approaches Milly, a granddaughter of Wash Jones. He attracts her with ribbons and beads for three years, and then impregnates her. But on the day she bears a child, Sutpen again inhumanly deserts her, disregarding Wash who has devotedly served him since Sutpen's manhood. The cruel treatment Wash receives is no less miserable than those given to Bon and Rosa. As a poor white, he worked under Sutpen and, after the Negroes went away with the outbreak of the Civil War, he helped the work of plantation, supporting Judith and Clytie. A comfort to his life has been a self-evaluation that "he (Wash) was looking after Kernel's place and niggers" (225) as well as his self-awareness of the white, not the Negro.<sup>7</sup>

Such a value Wash by himself estimated should be rewarded by marrying Milly to Sutpen and in consequence becoming Sutpen's father-in-law. This expectation, however, is totally betrayed by Sutpen's dismissive words to Milly when she bears a girl: "Well, Milly; too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable" (229). Now that Sutpen is completely assimilated to the economic code, for him Milly offers no value which deserves to be taken to his wife, for, in the south only the male child is regarded as an authentic family line. But in general view, his words pays no heed to Milly's humanity as well as to Wash's. In a fit of anger Wash kills Sutpen by scythe so that he clears off the moral debt he owes to Sutpen ever since. Thus, Sutpen's accumulated choices finally bring about his own ruination.

Though roughly speaking Sutpen's total behavior looks devilish, through the careful analysis we ascertain that Sutpen just makes his own choices in given

circumstance. Even if the circumstance is past, Sutpen's choices are recurrent, for his choices are, so to speak, between respect for the human being and respect for the social tradition. As Robert Penn Warren points out, the southern elements in Faulkner's works surely open our eyes to their relevance to the modern life, for they contain "issues common to our modern world" (86). And if Sutpen emblemizes the economic dynamics and its defect, his decline and fall stand as an indictment of the market system, which promotes the dehumanization, and warning to the modern times.

#### Notes

1. Asked if he were trying to picture the southern culture, Faulkner replied "Not at all. I was trying to talk about people, using the only tool I knew, which was the country that I knew. No, I wasn't writing sociology at all. I was just trying to write about people, which to me are the important thing" (Gwynn 9-10). And a large number of critics have discussed the novel's universality from diverse perspectives. For example, Hyatt H. Waggoner, tracing the four narratives and their difference in their contents, declares that such an unreliable way mystifies reader but at last makes them speculate on the people and leads to "the truth about human life" (150).

2. Olga W. Vickery also takes the mountain little Sutpen grows up to be a primitive paradise or natural Eden (93-94).

3. Ilse Duso Lind, identifying Sutpen with the plantation culture, claims that such things as the chandeliers, candelabra, the tapestries, linen and Damask "symbolize a sense of social grandeur and dignity" which had become so completely assimilated by the upper classes as to be projected (909).

4. Richard Godden also points out Sutpen's regard of Bon as an article in term of his naming, by which "[p]lanters were entitled to declare their title or property within a slave" and "deadened the slave's right by birth to human connections." By naming the child Bon, Godden says, Sutpen certifies the sense of possession: "Bon: good: goods—the pun is cruelly obvious and is recognized as apt by a tradition whose authority over labor extended to the naming of new slaves" (705).

5. Though my survey focuses on the economic aspect, of course there have widely been discussed from the more comprehensive view. Hillis Miller, for example, sorts out the ideological feature of the novel into three groups—class, gender and race—and argues that like Sutpen, characters around him—Eulalia, Bon, Ellen, Henry, Judith, Rosa, etc.—"share his ideological assumptions and are victims of them" (268).

6. About Rosa's rage, John T. Matthews makes a shrewd observation that she rejects Sutpen because "she celebrates a kind of love that defers sexual gratification and physical possession" and "imagines a special order of love that will leave her virginal isolation from experience intact, that will accomplish the necessary frustration of desire" (125).

7. Shirley Callen indicates that Wash's condescension and assimilation to Sutpen are psychological phenomenon typical to the poor white of postbellum south, where scorn for them was softened and attenuated by the sense of participation in the common brotherhood of white men: "Evincing little overt hatred even toward the Negroes who scoff at him, Wash enjoys Sutpen's patronage to the utmost" (31).



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