Absalom, Absalom! Reconsidered: A Story of Canadian Shreve

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Introduction

Although Shreve McCannon plays an important role of experiencing the Sutpen story vicariously, compensating its missing links, and giving it coherence in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), he has been considered as a mere outsider who distances himself exceedingly from the American South.[1] Shreve's position as an outsider can also be inferred from Faulkner's following words in the 1950s: "Shreve was the commentator that held the thing to something of reality. If Quentin had been let alone to tell it, it would have become completely unreal" (*FU* 75). It certainly cannot be denied that Canadian Shreve places himself at a distance as an outsider, geographically, to the people of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. However, Shreve's standpoint toward the Sutpen story seems to imply more than just a "commentator."

In relation to the American North, Hosam Aboul-Ela points out the regional similarity between the American South and Canada by referring to Immanuel Wallerstein's "semi-periphery" (493). Nevertheless, Aboul-Ela primarily stresses upon the geographical location and economical dependency of these semi-peripheral regions and does not specifically discuss the relationship between Canadian history and Shreve. Accordingly I will give renewed attention to Shreve's Canadian nationality and reconsider, from the perspective of Canadian history, the significance of his reconstructing the Sutpen story with Mississippi-native Quentin at Harvard University in Cambridge. This paper ultimately aims to demonstrate how this reconstruction process leads Shreve to reaffirm his Canadian identity.

1. History of Canada

The genealogy attached to the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* shows that Shreve was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 1890, attended Harvard

University from 1909 to 1914, stayed in France as a captain of the Royal Army Medical Corps of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces from 1914 to 1918, and later returned to Edmonton to become a practicing surgeon (309). This genealogy indicates that Shreve lives in Edmonton, Alberta, throughout his life except for the periods of Harvard University and World War I. In this regard, Shreve and Quentin share a common feature of attaching importance to their homelands in their life. If we consider the foundation of Shreve's characteristics and thoughts as having been shaped in Canada (particularly in Edmonton, Alberta) like Quentin, who was born and grew up in Jefferson, Mississippi, and is "not a being, an entity, [but] a commonwealth" (*AA* 7), Canadian history must have had a considerable influence on Shreve's life. I will then begin with the examination of Canadian history, primarily up to 1936 when the novel was first published.

According to *The History of Canada*, the Colonial Era of Canadian history starts when England laid claim to occupy Newfoundland in 1583. While France later colonized Acadia, England held all of the French settlements under its control after its conquest of New France in 1763. After the establishment of the United Province of Canada in 1841, the Dominion of Canada was formed in 1867, which subsequently attained a confederate system across the American Continent in 1873. At that time, Canadian society rapidly diversified due to the expanding land and increasing immigrants. Since Canada greatly contributed to the victory of the Allies in World War I, it started to gain recognition as a North American country and became a substantial independent nation according to the Statute of Westminster in 1931. Although the British influence drastically decreased afterwards, Canadians remained as British subjects until the Canadian Citizenship Act was approved in 1946. In the novel Shreve comments on the American South as "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn't it" (*AA* 176), but, having gone through the difficulties of a transition from a dependent colony to an independent country and a national integration of multiple races, his homeland Canada is no less unique than the American South.

Shreve and Quentin reconstruct the Sutpen story in a dormitory room of Harvard University in 1910. Canada at that time was in a difficult situation whether to encourage nationalistic feelings toward independence or to maintain the sense of belonging to be part of the British Empire. Given that Shreve holds

either Scots or Irish surname McCannon (MacKenzie in *The Sound and the Fury*), he must have fluctuated between these two opposite ideas. This was the time when imperialism prevailed among the world powers of the European countries and the United States, and Canada in those days was trying to find its way out of a subordinate, colonial situation and establish its national position. Nevertheless, Canada finally decided to continue the existing relationship with Great Britain and entered World War I on the Allies' side. Shreve, too, joins the war as a captain of the Royal Army Medical Corps of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces after graduating from Harvard University, which illustrates that his course of life corresponds exactly to Canadian history. Moreover, Faulkner enlisted in the Royal Air Force in Toronto, Canada, in July 1918 and stayed there until the same year of December (Blotner 61, 67). Through this experience, Faulkner must have had chances to become acquainted with the social conditions of Canada at the time.

Meanwhile, Alberta, where Shreve was born and grew up, became part of the Northwest Territories after the Dominion of Canada acquired the lands owned by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, and the Canadian government later granted provincial status to Alberta in 1905 due to the increase of immigrants (Gough 29). In Alberta, American cattlemen and British ranchers operated the largest livestock industry in Canada since the second half of the nineteenth century. At the end of the nineteenth century, a wheat boom arrived, and new fast-maturing wheat was developed in the early 1900s. With the interests of seeking free land and rich life, many people moved to the Prairies, including Alberta, from Europe, the United States, and other parts of Canada. Until a tremendous amount of oil was discovered in 1947, agriculture had been Alberta's main industry.

In his mind, perhaps Shreve is overlapping the development of a new society in Alberta, as represented in increasing immigrants and wheat farming, with the course of Thomas Sutpen's life, who suddenly appeared in Jefferson, Mississippi, to accomplish his "design" of holding a plantation, a large house, and black slaves. In Alberta, immigrants cultivated their own land by themselves, whereas the plantation system, based on slavery and sharecropping, took place in the American South. In *Absalom, Absalom!* when Shreve asks Quentin, "*Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*" (*AA* 142), this is not like the entertaining question

of other classmates at Harvard University, who merely want to become acquainted with the "another world." After immigrating to the Prairies, farmers started to make appeals to the dominant, central Canadian banks, railway companies, and manufacturing industry, and organized their own local political party (Francis 175-78). These farmers have a close resemblance to the rebellious Southerners against the Northerners up to the Civil War. The story of the American South that involves the racial and class issues, therefore, cannot be an unrelated and exaggerated fiction for Shreve, who was born and raised in the newly developing multiracial and multicultural society of Alberta.

While Alberta by and large expanded along with its agricultural development, Edmonton, the capital of Alberta where Shreve resided, had promoted urbanization and industrialization from its foundation in 1870. In fact, Edmonton was one of the five largest cities in the Prairies and the tenth largest city in Canada by 1921 (Gilpin 152-53). Cities of the Prairies, including Edmonton, held stores, factories, selling places for manufactured products, governmental offices, health facilities, universities, and cultural facilities, and these services were also provided to the surrounding rural areas (Francis 175).

However, instead of entering The University of Alberta, a provincial university located at his hometown Edmonton, Shreve has chosen Harvard University, one of the oldest and most prestigious American private universities in the New England area. This reality, in the same manner as Mississippi-native Quentin, must have fostered in Shreve an awareness of being a rural student.[2] When Quentin says, "They [Henry and Bon] were in the tenth graduating class since it [The University of Mississippi] was founded," Shreve replies to Quentin as "I didn't know there were ten in Mississippi that went to school at one time" (*AA* 288). Shreve apparently considers The University of Mississippi, founded in 1848 in Oxford, Mississippi, where "wisdom herself would be a virgin or at least not very second hand" (*AA* 249), as a small, anonymous university situated in the rural area of the American South. Nevertheless, considering that The University of Alberta was established in 1908, his negative reaction toward The University of Mississippi appears to imply both his sense of inferiority toward his hometown, as represented in the newly-established provincial university, and his sense of pride in attending the acclaimed Harvard University.

Furthermore, it is not surprising that Shreve becomes strongly aware of himself as a Canadian in studying abroad at Harvard University, although the

United States is a neighboring country and uses the same language of English. To be more precise, he is from a semi-peripheral region in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The dormitory room of the university, where Quentin and Shreve reside, is "not only dedicated to it [ratiocination] but set aside for it and suitably so since it would be here above any other place that it (the [Rosa's] logic and the [Sutpen's] morality) could do the least amount of harm" (*AA* 225). As in the case of Quentin's American South, the dormitory room is the place where Shreve is more or less free from "the logic and the morality" of Canada. Far away from home at Harvard University, Shreve can therefore confront his homeland Canada, which is achieving its national independence, and search for his Canadian identity.

2. Influence of the Civil War

Throughout the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve displays his broad knowledge of the classics and history. While Quentin basically constructs his language by combining the words of Rosa and Mr. Compson with his feelings toward the American South, Shreve, in contrast, makes free use of various metaphors—such as "Bayard" (*AA* 142), "Guinevere" (142), "Agamemnon" (144), "Faustus" (145), "Beelzebub" (145), "Coke and Littleton" (243), the "Sabine" (243), "Launcelot" (256), and "Lorraine duke" (273)—and embellishes his narrative. Moreover, Shreve is well informed about American history; he is familiar enough to point out that there existed no West Virginia in 1808 (*AA* 179). In a similar manner, when Quentin describes Pettibone's African Americans as "being housebred in Richmond," Shreve comments on Quentin's words by adding "[o]r maybe even in Charleston" (*AA* 188).

In particular, Shreve's narrative about the Civil War stands out in relation to the mystery of "why Henry killed Bon." One of the reasons why Bon's story in chapter 8 has its verisimilitude is found in the presence of Shreve's lively narrative grounded on the historical evidence. His narrative, for instance, makes the scenes of those days revive in a realistic manner:

> [In 1861] Lincoln elected and the Alabama convention [took place] and the South began to draw out of the Union, and then there were two presidents in the United States and the telegraph brought the news about Charleston and Lincoln called out his army and it was done, irrevocable

now . . . . (*AA* 272)

Other narrators, Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin, refer to the period of the Civil War, too, but it is Shreve in chapter 8 that primarily talks about the Sutpen story of those times, along with the historical evidence. Chapter 8 chiefly deals with the early years of Bon's life and the time when Henry renounces his birthright and disappears with Bon, and ends with Henry's shooting Bon in front of the Sutpen house. Interestingly, the period from Henry's disappearance to Bon's killing almost corresponds to the period of the Civil War from 1861 to 1865.

From here I will examine why Shreve is thoroughly familiar with the history of the Civil War by consulting, once again, the history of Canada.

The Civil War was not only the regional conflict between the Northern states (the Union) and the Southern states (the Confederacy) within the United States; it was also a significant factor for Canada to establish a definite identity as a nation ("American Civil War" 68). Even before the Civil War, every time the American Army attempted to invade Canada during the American Revolution (1775-83) and the War of 1812 (1812-15), Canada had reinforced its defense buildup along the American border. Since both Britain and British North America (Canada) expressed a sympathetic opinion toward the American South during the Civil War, the Northern army felt hostile toward both of them. As a result, Canada was exposed to the threat of the Northern army's invasion with an intention of annexing Canada to the United States.

The Civil War induced numerous border issues and diplomatic problems, and American hostility toward Canadians continued after the war ended in 1865. When the United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867 and further advanced the logic of the Manifest Destiny for the territorial expansion, it repeatedly tried to invade Canada (Kimura 169-70). One of the purposes of establishing the Dominion of Canada in 1867 was, therefore, to reinforce Canadian defense capacity toward the United States. The Civil War in effect provided an opportunity for Canada to strengthen its unity of each region.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve recognizes the mentality of the American South—a sense of defeat in the Civil War that is carried on from generation to generation—as "something my people [Canadians] haven't got" (*AA* 289). He further explains to Quentin that Canadians "dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves . . . and bullets in the dining room table and such,

to be always reminding us to never forget" (*AA* 289). Canada certainly did not lose in the Civil War; given that Canada had protected the border with the United States, we can even say that the country indirectly won the war. Additionally, Shreve's homeland Alberta did not exist on a map at the time of the Civil War. Meanwhile, there is a scene in *The Sound and the Fury* when Shreve watches a parade of the Grand Army of the Republic on Decoration Day (*SF* 82). Although this parade took place after the reconstruction of the Sutpen story, the scene demonstrates that Shreve has been interested in commemoration of the Civil War. We thus need to reexamine whether the Civil War is merely an old-time story for twentieth-century Canadians.

Subsequent to the conclusion of the Washington Convention in 1871, the relationship between Canada and the United States started to improve. When their relationship once again grew worse at the end of the nineteenth-century, however, an American threat toward Canada arose and lasted until approximately 1914. In other words, Canadians have always felt a sense of crisis of being merged into the United States until World War I. It was indeed in the 1920s, after World War I, that Canada established itself firmly as a North American nation. This was the decade when the British economy declined and the trade between Canada and the United States became active again. In order to reinforce a defense buildup for the American border, Canadians in the 1900s and 1910s, including Shreve, must have long kept the memory of the Civil War, even though they did not lose the field like the American South.

3. Shreve as a Canadian Narrator

Based on the histories of Canada and the Civil War previously described, this section will re-evaluate Shreve as a Canadian narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* In various places of the latter half of the novel, Quentin suggests that Shreve's presence and narrative remind him of other characters. For instance, he is strongly aware of the similarity between Shreve's and Mr. Compson's narratives in chapter 6. He repeats interior monologues, such as "*[Shreve] sounds just like Father*" (*AA* 147) and "*almost exactly like Father: that letter*" (*AA* 168), and starts to ponder over the resemblance as follows in chapter 7: "*[y]es, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father*

or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us" (*AA* 210).

It happens that in chapter 8 "save for the slight difference which the intervening degrees of latitude had inculcated in them [Quentin and Shreve] (differences not in tone or pitch but of turns of phrase and usage of words), it might have been either of them and was in a sense both" (*AA* 243). In the same chapter Quentin and Shreve, conducting "some happy marriage of speaking and hearing" (*AA* 253), become "not two but four . . . four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (*AA* 267). Furthermore, by the end of this chapter:

> [H]e [Shreve] had no listener . . . he had no talker either . . . . Because now neither of them [Shreve and Quentin] was there. They were both in Carolina and the time was forty-six years ago, and it was not even four now but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon, compounded each of both yet either neither. (*AA* 280)

These passages indicate that Shreve is trying to reconstruct the Sutpen story as if he were a Southerner of both the past and the present. In other words, Shreve starts to identify himself as a Southerner, beyond time and place, in the world of narrative, even though he and Quentin reconstruct the Sutpen story in "iron New England" (*AA* 141)—a place remote from the American South. At the same time, there can be little doubt that Shreve once again shows a detached attitude toward the Sutpen story at the end of chapter 9. Such a "transformation" of Shreve, I would argue, can be explained as resulting from his situation of being a Canadian narrator.

In examining Shreve's transformation, Tzvetan Todorov's study of understanding the others can provide a helpful suggestion. According to Todorov, the first phase of understanding the others is composed of "assimilating the other to oneself" (14). The second phase in turn results in "effacing the self for the other's benefit" (14). The third phase is "to establish a dialogue between myself and them [others]" (15). Lastly in the fourth phase "knowledge of others depends on my own identity. But this knowledge of the other in turn determines my knowledge of myself . . . . Since knowledge of oneself transforms the identity of this self . . ." (15). Todorov's four phases of understanding the others enable a person to develop his/her new self-awareness in the end.

While initially distancing himself from the Sutpen story, as John

Middleton suggests (117, 123), Shreve gradually identifies himself with other narrators and characters (the others) and reconstructs the Sutpen story through the dialogues with them. At the same time, these "others" do not only mean the people of Jefferson; there is also Charles Bon, a supposed mulatto who was born in Haiti and grew up in New Orleans, which demonstrates the complexity of including a wide range of characters as Shreve's "others." A shift in Shreve's attitude reflects that, bearing the histories of Canada and the Civil War in mind, he is assimilating other characters, including Quentin, to himself, and vice versa, while engaging in dialogue with them. After reconstructing the Sutpen story, Shreve becomes able to understand a larger "other"—the American South—in a broader perspective more than before.

When Shreve asks Quentin about the mentality of the American South—a sense of defeat in the Civil War that is carried on from generation to generation—in chapter 9, Quentin replies, "You cant understand it. You would have to be born there" (*AA* 289). When Shreve once again inquires, "Would I then?" and further, "Do you understand it?" (*AA* 289), Quentin at first answers, "Yes, of course I understand it" (*AA* 289) but later starts to admit that he does not know. Concluding that "Yes. You dont know" (*AA* 289), in contrast, Shreve seems to have deepened his understanding of others by relativizing the situations and values of himself and Quentin.

Furthermore, we can say that Shreve is searching for his Canadian identity through the interaction with the others. Returning to his original position as an outsider at the end of the novel is, therefore, simultaneously the process of reassuring his historical singularity as a Canadian through understanding the others as previously mentioned. At the end of chapter 9, Shreve predicts that "in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere" (*AA* 302). Since Jim Bond is a "nigger Sutpen" (*AA* 302), however, the unity implied here does not mean an integration to the conventional dominant cultures but to the subordinate cultures. Canadian history indeed shows that, despite the racial difference, developing Canada around 1910 was more or less in a similar situation to that of the subordinate cultures. Moreover, considering Jim Bond's mental disorder, the world even seems to be reduced to a chaotic state rather than achieving cultural integration.

At the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve tells Quentin that even though "the Jim Bonds" will gradually "bleach out," "[a conqueror of the western

hemisphere] will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (*AA* 302). What is important here is that Shreve has acquired quite a broad perspective by the end of the novel. The one who "will . . . have sprung from the loins of African kings" is not "us" (Quentin and Shreve) but only "me" (Shreve). Shreve's transformation thus suggests the potentiality of subordinate cultures, to which he more or less belongs, and the process of rediscovering his identity as a Canadian.[3]

Conclusion

Reconsidering Shreve's role as a narrator in the historical context of Canada, we can conclude that he is not merely positioned as an outsider in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and his presence in fact has a significant impact on the story's development. Faulkner in his later years says the novel is Sutpen's story, but "every time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he's actually telling his biography" (*FU* 275). Shreve's words are "not flippancy . . . . It too was just that protective coloring of levity behind which the youthful shame of being moved hid itself . . . [the] flipness, the strained clowning" (*AA* 225). At the time of reconstructing the Sutpen story, Canada was in a difficult situation of whether to promote national independence or colonial stability, and Alberta was rapidly developing as a multiracial province. Through the Sutpen story, Shreve not only deepens his understanding of the American South but also revalidates his Canadian identity.

Given this perspective, Shreve's inquiry to Quentin at the end of the novel, "Why do you hate the South?" (*AA* 303), after saying "The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years" (*AA* 301), simultaneously imposes the same question on Shreve himself about his feelings toward Canada. Shreve might have made a counterargument in 1910, as Quentin did, by repeating "I dont hate it" (*AA* 303), because of his mixed feelings toward his homeland. However, as he later returned to his hometown Edmonton as a practicing surgeon, his experience of reconstructing the Sutpen story at Harvard University proves invaluable and influential in reconfirming his identity as a Canadian, and offers direction to his later life.

Notes

1. According to Cleanth Brooks, Shreve reconstructs the Sutpen's past as if he were playing a fascinating game (312-13). François Pitavy assumes that Shreve is reconstructing a story of the American South in a broad, logical way (192). Thadious Davis states that Shreve is the outlander whose knowledge about the American South is the product of the melodramatic imagination and whose point of view is stereotyped and literary overstated (94-95, 101).
2. Susan Willis points out that both the Canadian (Shreve) and the Southerner (Quentin) go to "an elite Northern university," which demonstrates their own dependent situations to the overriding North (97).
3. There are also sections in *The Sound and the Fury* where Shreve emphasizes himself as a Canadian, such as "I'm glad I'm not a gentleman [of the American South]" (*SF* 101, 148).

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