

A Behavioral Analysis of Literature: The Trans-generational Verbal Community in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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Abstract

This article is part of an endeavor to bring the philosophy of the scientific study of human behavior and the analysis of literature together in a cohesive manner that demonstrates their compatibility. It uses B.F. Skinner's work in Verbal Behavior as a tool for the analysis of William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom! Wherever possible, given the parameters of the study, a thoroughgoing analysis of the text is given. Passages of text are reproduced in the article, and the subsequent analyses take into account the author's textual behavior and, more significantly, the written behavior of characters on both overt and covert levels. What is achieved is a multi-level analysis of the novel as a piece of static behavioral data, as well as a demonstration of the utility of behaviorism in application to literature.

Introduction

In *Verbal Behavior*, Skinner (1992) wrote his concern that literary criticism never made “a full frontal attack” on the behavioral implications of literature (p. 4). However, the expansive volume, originally published in 1957, never addressed literature from a literary standpoint. Thus, Skinner leaves the literary application of behaviorism to the literary theorist. He seemed to hope, as evidenced by the long list of books that he authored regarding the application of the scientific study of human behavior to all human affairs, that other disciplines would use behaviorism to inform new and useful studies. The complex nature of the verbal systems that Skinner outlines in *Verbal Behavior*, as well as the overarching social implications of behaviorism, are similar to Faulkner's works. Both authors, although they were separated by distance and discipline, delved deeply into the complexity of human relationships on societal and acutely interpersonal levels. It has been my intent to bring the work of Skinner and Faulkner together in a cohesive analysis that demonstrates the utility of behaviorism as the foundation for a method of analyzing literature that is socially significant and, more specifically, significant to the advancement of the study of literature¹ and human behavior.

Since *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel, it is important to take into account the fact that the entire work is the textual behavior of one individual with his own history of reinforcement. Faulkner (1951) presumably produced this novel with the hope that the text would have a specific effect upon the readership as a group and as individuals. As a writer, it can also be presumed that as he generated the text, the majority of the control for his written behavior came from private and intraverbal stimuli which were part of the reaction chains that were combined to form the novel. As Faulkner wrote, he was providing a record of private verbal behavior, while being continuously reinforced for his written behavior. Although the work is studied more as an account of the behavior of people coexisting in a verbal community, we must remember that the subject of analysis is truly the verbal behavior of one author.

This may be problematic for several reasons, but the most obvious is the concept that an analysis of a verbal community which is contained in a work of fiction can only be worthwhile inasmuch as the study of that work is concerned. The goal of this study is not only to provide a literary criticism that gives us additional insight into the work of an author to whom much literary discourse has already been devoted. Hopefully, it will also be useful in providing insight into the ways in which the verbal behavior of individuals and communities can be passed along in ways that allow it to control the behavior of members of subsequent generations.

¹ Faulkner and Skinner both acknowledged the problems inherent in producing their work. Some additional concerns can be found in “A Few Words of Caution” in Skinner's *About Behaviorism* (pp. 20-23) and in the “Two Personal Epilogues” appended to *Verbal Behavior* (pp. 453-460). I will note that I cannot write as “the behaviorist” or the literary theorist (*About Behaviorism*, 1976, p. 20). I have written this thesis in an attempt to open the literary discourse to include behaviorism as a utilitarian method for the analysis of literature.

Second, there is the issue that much of the behavioral work to be done regarding any novel must be largely speculative. There is no complete behavioral data to be analyzed. What the author writes of the characters is what must be studied. While the speculative nature of this work creates possible faults, the application to fiction could open new doors for the analysis of behavior by finding a safe intellectual arena for its initial application in literature. Herein, we shall see strong connections between life, literature and a system of analyzing verbal behavior.

Faulkner shows a treatment of the passing on of concepts from person to person and from generation to generation via vocal, written and textual behavior in *Absalom, Absalom!* Skinner's system for the analysis of verbal behavior elucidates Faulkner's treatment of the shaping of individual behavioral histories and the verbal community of Faulkner's design: Yoknapatawpha County. From the outset of *Absalom, Absalom!* there is description of behavioral events in the trans-generational verbal community:

From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead summer afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called her office because her father had called it that – a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and brighter on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them. There was a wistaria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts, making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away: and opposite Quentin, Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew... (p.7)

First, there is a description of the environment in which this verbal community exists. The conditions of the climate of Mississippi are undoubtedly capitalized upon in Faulkner's writing to communicate an atmosphere that influences the behavior of characters, or at least conveys a similar set of meanings. The afternoon is long, hot weary and dead, like the house and, presumably, the monologue being delivered to Quentin by Rosa Coldfield. This is defined in Skinner's (1992) *Verbal Behavior* as multiple causation.

The house could have easily been described as dim, or dismal, and the afternoon as hot. However, the writing shows evidence of the words functioning as descriptors for more than just the afternoon. Long was the afternoon, the story Rosa Coldfield was telling to Quentin, the time it took for the story to finally be told, and the history that led her to be the speaker. Thus, there are multiple variables at work in the prompting of Faulkner's word usage. While critics have been prone to labeling Faulkner's writing "stream of consciousness," a behavioral system reveals the compound variables that serve as discriminative stimuli for the writing of words and phrases that create "rich thematic interconnections in verbal art" (Skinner, 1992, p. 239).

Further along in that sentence, the terminology for the room in which they converse is explained. Since it is the first sentence of *Absalom, Absalom!* that provides evidence of the pervading nature of the verbal community in shaping the behavior of subsequent generations, the nature of the verbal community is established from the very beginning of the text. We gather that Rosa's father is deceased from the following sentence, and drawing inferences from this will lead us further into an analysis of the effects of the verbal community and the ways in which it establishes private behavioral contingencies that are the result of relationships which are often long since dissolved by life's circumstances.

Those who have read the passage might infer that Rosa had an attachment to her father that stayed with her into her later years. While there is no attempt to dispute the connection between parent and child here, regardless of age, a more definitive vocabulary will be of utility in illustrating a more definitive connection regarding the naming of the room. In the family dynamic, children usually obtain nearly all of their primary reinforcement from their parents. This usually has a lasting impact on the behavioral history of human beings. More importantly, the parents and some of their behavior must inevitably become discriminative stimuli for the behavior of their children. If the contingencies that begin to shape our behavioral history are the most profound early on in life, we can rightfully assume that Rosa Coldfield's behavioral history has been affected in like manner by her interactions with her father.

In this instance, we might imagine the father saying “office,” while in that particular room, to young Rosa, who repeats “office.” The father might then provide some verbal or/and nonverbal reinforcement to the child, such as saying “correct,” or giving a hug, or both, respectively. Skinner refers to the initial utterance as a “tact” – the naming of some object, organism, or action in the environment. For the tact, verbal reinforcement is delivered to the father when Rosa repeats it, presumably increasing the frequency with which he engages in this kind of behavior with her again. Most importantly from this process, we can see the emergence of systems in the verbal community. It is behavioral inasmuch as humans interact to provide reinforcement in a physical environment and a verbal community. That community becomes trans-generational when we are given the explanation of the term “office” for the front room being passed down from Mr. Coldfield to Rosa. Of course, these initial, partially speculative explanations are by no means complete as an account of the function of the verbal community.

Turning again to the passage of text with which *Absalom, Absalom!* begins, there is further description of the room: a tact on Faulkner’s part, as he provides the adjectives and the noun that help the reader “see” the office. However, what will prove most important to this undertaking is the explanation of the reason for which the blinds had been closed for forty-three summers: “when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat...” (p.7). Again there, we can observe the expression through Faulkner’s writing of traditions that are borne on words and reinforced with words, regardless of the lack of any supporting evidence for their prospective validity. That theme is of significant import to an examination of the nature of the verbal community in Yoknapatawpha County. Many concepts are passed along through generations via language, though they lack grounding in fact. They are further reinforced and thus become evident in social doctrines and written laws that strive to exert control over Yoknapatawpha County’s citizens.

Since Quentin is the “main character” in *Absalom, Absalom!*, much of that control is apparent in his behavior. Faulkner gives us important, though indirect information about Quentin’s relationship with his community in the first paragraph of the novel. His covert, verbal behavior, thinking of the dust as “flecks of the dead old dried paint... as the wind might have blown them,” is indicative of the intraverbal prompts that he receives from his environment. Quentin’s world is, indeed, a verbal environment inasmuch as it is explained, experienced and acted upon almost exclusively through complex chains of behavioral events that are characteristically verbal. The house and its atmosphere, the curtains and the dust are prompts for private, verbal behavioral events that are also prompted by private verbal stimuli in the form of a history of verbal behavior (memory). Quentin is essentially “reading” the house and responding verbally in his thoughts.

As the passage continues from Faulkner’s description of Quentin’s thoughts, there is description of the wistaria vine outside the window and the sparrows that periodically visit its branches. Here, Faulkner shows this living thing outside to the reader, but it would not have been visible to Quentin and Miss Coldfield. If we are to infer meaning from this, it might be that those within the verbal community, especially Rosa Coldfield and Quentin Compson, are controlled by dark and oppressive environmental variables rather than an environment that is blooming and full of life. In fact, in the office, Quentin and Miss Coldfield are shut off from all but the “dry vivid dusty sound” that the sparrows make: the least pleasing aspect of Faulkner’s description of the environment outside the house. The beginning of Faulkner’s description of Miss Coldfield shows her as a human representation of the interior of the house. She is clad in the color of death and mourning, as the atmosphere in the house is “dead.” Once again, we are provided with thematic interconnections as Faulkner ties together the themes of death, mourning, and the oppressive nature of the control exerted by the verbal community in this first passage from *Absalom, Absalom!*

Since the basis of the novel is truly the carriage of history through speech and listening, we need not look much further along in the text to discover more about the relationship between the two. Rosa Coldfield speaks “in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear...” (Faulkner, 1951, p.7-8). Here, Rosa’s behavior is indicative of the process of self-editing. Under the control of private stimuli – “hearing-sense” – her vocalizations would stop: “self-confound” (p.7). These initial indicators of the private events affecting speech are of significant import to the study of *Absalom, Absalom!* through the lens of Skinner’s work in *Verbal Behavior*. We know from subsequent passages that the conversation between Rosa and Quentin is rather “one-sided,” but it is not only the lack of direct vocal reinforcement from Quentin that halts Rosa’s speech. There are numerous private events that are probably controlling Rosa’s vocalizations. The apparition of the “object” is evidence of mnemonic recall as a private stimulus that has a significant effect upon her vocalizations.

As Rosa tells the story, her behavioral history acts upon her present behavior through private events that cause her to edit her speech. Some editing may come from social “grace,” knowing that a young man of twenty might not favor the act of listening to her for an extended period of time. However, there are more powerful elements of her learning by way of traumatic events and continued private reinforcement of private verbal behavior that are at work in the telling and, as we can see from the text, her editing as well.

Her editing and word choice begin to affect Quentin’s private verbal behavior as well, as his own history links to hers through an understanding of the greater verbal community. “He was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was – the two separate Quentins now talking to one another in the long silence of notpeople, in notlanguage...” (Faulkner, 1951, p. 9). As listener, Quentin’s behavior is not unusual. Faulkner’s description is of the processes of covert verbal behavior – what many would call an “inner dialogue” – that work as a function of both the past, present and supposed future. That is to say that Quentin’s history of reinforcement from the verbal community, his present circumstances and his thoughts about the future generate thoughts in language. While this is a simple, straightforward explanation, it is through Faulkner’s writing of the text of these private behaviors that we are given insight into their happening, and we may begin to understand the effects such a rapid, disjointed interior discourse has upon Quentin:

It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and daughter which – (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only – (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) – and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says – (Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson. (Faulkner, 1951, p. 9)

In that passage of private language, the “two Quentins” speak to one another in such a way that they can easily be categorized by past, present and future. The past in this case refers to what Quentin has learned from his history as a citizen of Yoknapatawpha County and a participant in its verbal community. The present is his environment as he sits in Miss Rosa Coldfield’s house. That environment is made up not only of the hot, dead interior of the office, but of Miss Rosa’s telling of the Sutpen story, which she relates in her own halting, disjointed monologue. The supposed future, to which we are not given great insight in this passage, would be Quentin’s thoughts of the story being passed on to he, who would carry it with him as Miss Rosa had.

If we take the passage of private dialogue in order, we can see how the “Quentins” act upon each other and the changes that take place in that action forming a set of interior verbal circumstances that shape behavior. “It seems that this demon” indicates the influence of Rosa Coldfield’s explanations upon Quentin’s private language, as Quentin would not have likely ascribed the term demon to a man with whose actions he was not acutely familiar. There, Miss Colfield’s telling is the discriminative stimulus that shapes Quentin’s own description of the Sutpen – (*Colonel Sutpen*). The parenthetical ascription of title to Sutpen is the action of both the history of the verbal community and the present circumstances, though it may be thought of in two ways at the beginning of the passage. The verbal community reinforces the naming of those who have held military rank in the Civil War by their rank and name, and it can be gathered that it punishes the naming of those people by name only. Rosa refers to Sutpen as Colonel Sutpen despite the fact that she loathes him, and Quentin corrects even his own private language, likely due to the fact that Yoknapatawpha County’s citizens are expected to acknowledge a social hierarchy based on military rank despite a person’s actions outside of military service.

As the novel progresses, in Faulkner’s typical style, the narrative voice shifts frequently, though in *Absalom, Absalom!* those shifts take place sometimes with staggering frequency and are often sharp alterations in the text, if not jarring to the reader. Arguably, Faulkner creates these abrupt changes in speaker and/or thinker to show the intertwining of characters on both public and private levels. They are linked with increasingly strong bonds by the effects that speech has upon their interior verbal behavior. What takes place is a progression by which Quentin is drawn completely into the world of Rosa Coldfield’s past. While much of this can already be seen in the passages that appear previously in this essay, the progression is illustrated well when Quentin begins to think certain phrases before Rosa says them:

She seemed to stand, to lurk behind the neat picket fence of a small, grimly middleclass yard or lawn, looking out upon whatever ogre-world of that quiet village street with that air of children born too late into their parents' lives and doomed to contemplate all human behavior through the complex and needless follies of adults – and air Cassandralike and humorless and profoundly and sternly prophetic out of all proportion to the actual years even of a child who had never been young. “Because I was born too late – a child to whom out of the overheard talk of adults my own sister's children's faces had come to be like the faces in an ogre-tale between supper and bed long before I was old enough or big enough to be permitted to play with them, yet to whom that sister must have at the last minute when she lay dying, with one of the children vanquished and doomed to be a murderer and the other doomed to be a widow before she had even been a bride, and say, ‘Protect her, at least. At least save Judith.’...” (Faulkner, 1951, pp. 21-22)

The beginning of this passage is written in Quentin's thoughts – the way he pictures Rosa as a young person. While there are several pieces of this excerpt from *Absalom, Absalom!* that are significant to an analysis of the work as a whole, the fact that Quentin thinks of Rosa as a child who was born too late, and Rosa says almost the same thing of herself when she speaks shows a significant connection between her vocalizations and Quentin's covert behavior. While there is no argument made herein regarding Faulkner's intent in writing this passage, the verbal behavior patterns that take shape between Quentin and Rosa in this passage are of critical import to the effects of Miss Coldfield's story on Quentin's behavior later in the novel. As he speaks with Shreve at Harvard, this type of thoughtful construction of tales upon tales about the South create a discourse that is both real and unreal on a variety of levels. What is most useful to note is that the history which is created by Rosa in her malleable thoughts and memories is now being passed on to Quentin, as is the method of creation that allows him to construct new aspects of the tales and new tales without ever developing an understanding of where and when the line between fact and fiction lies.

The construction and alteration of tales in *Absalom, Absalom!* is a testament to the behavior and behavioral history of the listener as the most crucial force in shaping verbal behavior which is then mediated in like fashion by subsequent listeners. This should leave us with the lasting impression that history is malleable, and that it is the product of its students more than it is the product of the past itself, though there are other themes which appear in the preceding passage that are useful in discerning the many layers of both overt and covert behavior. These are evident from several perspectives as we analyze Faulkner's textual behavior, Rosa's vocal behavior and Quentin's private verbal behavior (as listener and otherwise), respectively.

Faulkner's textual behavior in this passage, as is the case throughout the novel, shows evidence of multiple causation in writing. By describing Rosa as a young girl who seems “to lurk, behind the neat picket fence of a small middleclass yard or lawn,” effects similar to those in previously analyzed passages are achieved. Faulkner's depiction of Rosa in Quentin's thoughts gives us, at once, knowledge of Quentin's understanding of Rosa's character, knowledge of Rosa's role and place in the novel, and knowledge of Rosa's history as a character. Of course, we see all that Faulkner gives us through his varied methods of description via the thoughts and speech of his characters, so the formation of character is once again mediated by Faulkner, though students of literature will likely be interested in establishing a dialogue that maintains Faulkner's writing “through” a character.

For example, when Faulkner writes: “looking out upon whatever ogre-world of that quiet village street,” he is writing Quentin's thoughts². It is presumable that in writing from Quentin's point of view, Faulkner attempts to embody the character who he has created – to “be” Quentin as he writes Quentin's thoughts.

² Here, I explain part of this passage as Quentin's private behavior – his thoughts – though many readers may find this to be an inaccurate explanation. Because it is somewhat unclear whether Quentin's thoughts in *Absalom, Absalom!* appear only in italics or not, I take a literal stance based on Faulkner's textual behavior. Where Faulkner writes: “Quentin seemed to watch,” or “Quentin now thought,” or other such phrases indicating Quentin's covert behavior, I make the assumption in this essay that Faulkner intends for the reader to read those passages as Quentin's thoughts. However, I do make a differentiation between what appears in italics and what does not. The italicized thoughts that are attributed to Quentin are Quentin's private speech – often an internal dialogue between “the two Quentins.” The thoughts that appear in regular type are more similar to private textual behavior, as if Quentin is generating his own multimedia text, which includes words and pictures that form his understanding of events that he was not present to witness.

This is of particular interest because Faulkner provides such a great deal of insight into the created lives of characters by changing the narrative voice not only from character to character, but also by changing that voice from thoughts to inner dialogues to speech of the characters. For a behavioral study of *Absalom, Absalom!*, this provides a very complex literary stage upon which the behavior of characters takes place. There are few limitations to the aspects of human behavior that Faulkner explores, and the dense nature of this text challenges the scope of possibilities of behaviorism in application to literature.

Of the least initial challenge to performing an analysis of characters' behavior in the above passage is the portion which is written as the vocal behavior of Miss Rosa Coldfield. Notwithstanding the fact that it mimics Quentin's private textual behavior, what she says explains her own interpretation of herself and her relationship to others. According to Skinner: "it is social reinforcement which leads the individual to know himself... He comes to see himself as others see him, or at least as others insist that he see himself" (p. 140). By saying "I was born too late," Miss Coldfield expresses her view that from the outset of her life, something was wrong with the way she was destined to see the world. Of course, it is really impossible to be born too late, since we are born when we are born and "too late" would mean a person had not been born at all. However, the concept that she was born so late into the lives of the people who would have the most profound impact on her life that they were not able to fulfill certain roles in her upbringing is valid. The fact that Rosa's mother dies while giving birth to her is the most apparent evidence of the absence of people to provide important instruction and guidance in her youth. Rosa understands many of her other interactions and observations to have been what shaped her character, though.

The older people around her are those who are her would-be educators – those who teach her how to live – but they are more like characters in her own stories. Both Quentin's thoughts of her and her own vocalizations show her as a sort of outsider who looks at those around her as fictitious beings. Their speech and actions are those that she emulates in many ways, though she is never taught by them in ways that children are typically taught. From a behavioral standpoint, there are clear connections to be drawn between these aspects of her history and the actions and vocalizations that are displayed in her later years. The most important of these is the connection between the acquisition of behaviors, and their magnitude and topography throughout a person's history. Rosa explains much of her learning taking place through the observation of adults. Specifically, she observes them as they interact with one another, and herself, through speech. This process of observation and learning is most like the behavioral process of modeling, by which behaviors are prompted by other people engaging in them for the express purpose of assisting an individual in acquiring the behavior in question. The difference in this case is the fact that the adults surrounding Rosa were not intentionally engaging in behaviors with the express purpose of teaching her. They were modeling behaviors unintentionally, with Rosa as the onlooker.

Miss Rosa Coldfield sees and hears – experiences – the events within her verbal community, and, interestingly enough, her behavior is similar not only to that of the people she has grown up observing, but of the processes by which she has learned it. Most of what she experiences of people whom she has not met is the telling of tales by adults: ogres in the ogre-world if we take the liberty that Faulkner has in describing them. In keeping with that, her behavior as an adult in *Absalom, Absalom!* consists primarily of the telling of tales. While it is very rarely echoic, since her tale-spinning is separated by too great a period of time and most of what she says is not an exact replication of what she heard as a child, it does display the characteristic patterns of the verbal community.

The magnitude of Miss Coldfield's behavior is also apparent as we examine the effects of her behavioral history. It is notable because she waits so long to tell the stories. She lives for many years without expressing most of what she says to Quentin, and there are several possible explanations for that. One is that making most of the information she lives with public would be inappropriate in the verbal community. We may indeed assume that, since Southern society placed a great deal of importance upon propriety in public dialogue, and the vocalization of such material would likely have been punished. However, on the interpersonal level, we might assume that Miss Coldfield would have found a confidant before Quentin Compson turned twenty, not to mention the fact that Mr. Compson gives us most of her rationale in the previously cited parenthetical explanation to Quentin. The reasons she waits are all of those detailed by Mr. Compson, though we find excellent explanations to Miss Coldfield's waiting in *Verbal Behavior*.

According to Skinner (1992), "Verbal behavior is especially likely to drop below the overt level" – to decrease in magnitude – "because it can continue to be useful to the speaker in many ways" (p. 141). It is indeed useful to Rosa in this case, as she is waiting for the appropriate time to make the behavior overt.

Nearly all of it was acquired when it was overt behavior, though it was mostly the overt behavior of others, and Miss Rosa receives the same stimuli from its covert counterpart as she makes thinking about the events part of her repertoire of covert behavior. The reinforcing contingencies created by the verbal community make possible Rosa's responses to all of the events in her past, including the events that were acquired by others' descriptions of what happened before her birth, or entrance into the community. The community is thus responsible for creating the circumstances under which Rosa endures the delay of reinforcement for the telling of her tales until Quentin arrives as the appropriate agent of that reinforcement. For example, she has a memory that she will "carry [to her] grave" – save when she tells it to Quentin (Faulkner p. 23). (Skinner, 1992, pp. 142-3)

Skinner explains the attributes of this behavioral phenomenon well in the following statements: "reports of events in one's past are never very accurate or complete. Much depends upon the current stimuli which bring such responses about" (p. 142). This leads us back to Quentin's role as listener or, just as accurately described, stimulus for overt responses to past events that have become part and parcel of Rosa's repertoire of covert behavior. As he listens, Rosa is reinforced for relating past events to him. The influence of her telling, and of the conditioning of his verbal community and behavioral history within it cause him to generate covert responses. Thus, when he thinks of her as having an "air of children born too late into their parents' lives and doomed to contemplate all human behavior through the complex and needless follies of adults," he is forming a conditioned covert response which is too weak to be overt. The response also remains covert because in the contingencies formed by the community, interrupting an elder's speech would be unacceptable – a previously punished response. The effects of the verbal community coupled with Rosa's recounting of past events do become part of Quentin's overt behavior, both vocal and otherwise, though the appropriate reinforcement arrives later in *Absalom, Absalom!*

As Faulkner builds the verbal community around Quentin Compson through his father's and Miss Coldfield's stories, and the events of his own life, Quentin becomes consumed by the details of the community. The instances that have the most profound impact upon Quentin are difficult to decipher, as Faulkner shifts narrative voice abruptly from character to character and in and out of characters' thoughts. The process of Quentin's recognition of exactly what has taken place in the verbal community takes place at different periods in time though, following the text of the novel, it is from the receipt of the letter announcing Miss Colfield's death (Chapter VI) forward that the stories are once again reconstructed. While they have a profound impact upon Quentin each time they are told, it is through the reconstruction – most accurately, the reinvention – of the tales with Shreve that they begin to completely transcend time and place, and control most of Quentin's thoughts and speech. In performing an analysis of the function of the stories passed down in *Absalom, Absalom!* in shaping behavior, one key statement from Skinner's work seems to elucidate the nature of the oral tradition: "Reports of the events in one's past are never very accurate or complete" (p. 142).

As *Absalom, Absalom!* continues, we are shown the truth about much of what has occurred, which proves many things including the fact that many of the assumptions that Miss Rosa Coldfield makes and communicates as fact to Quentin are false. She is, however, not alone, as many of the people in Jefferson make the same assumptions, which go un-refuted by anyone in the community because they are known by few and Thomas Sutpen, embarrassed by his past, wants desperately for them to be kept a secret. The end result of all this secrecy is the inaccurate telling and compounded reinvention of tales that are comprised almost exclusively of speculation. That speculation is spoken as fact by those who create the new truth of the verbal community in Yoknapatawpha County and of the Sutpen legacy.

With specific regard to Miss Coldfield's telling of tales, several earlier passages will remind the close reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* of the patterns in Miss Coldfield's behavior. We will recall that Quentin and Rosa, as previously cited, sit in "the office" (Faulkner, 1951, p. 7). Although the room is a front parlor, Rosa carries on with the misnomer that has been passed down to her by the previous generation in her verbal community. These small pieces of insight into her character that Faulkner gives us help to ascertain the way in which she is reconstructing the past to suit her own private understanding of the Sutpen legacy. When Quentin thinks of her as "doomed to contemplate all human behavior through the complex and needless follies of adults," he only knows the present Miss Coldfield (p. 22). There we see Faulkner's multiple causation again, as Miss Coldfield is still interpreting all human action and motivation through needless follies. However, she has added her own misconceptions to build upon the pieces of stories that have been passed on to her and those that she has indeed lived herself.

Her experiences with Thomas Sutpen and her family by marriage prove to be the agents that she uses to interpret Sutpen's entire history, though there is little of it which she actually knows. Miss Coldfield adds her own follies to her misinterpretation and invention, and to the misinterpretations and inventions that have been handed down to her, to create her inaccurate and incomplete – or overly complete – rendering of the past. “Converting the speaker” (or listener) “into an interested bystander is certainly the direction in which an analysis of behavior will first move,” as many of the behavioral arguments for the recounting of tales and events may have seemed to do in this essay (Skinner, 1992, p. 311). However, the preceding line of inquiry establishes the verbal community and its effects upon speaker and listener. Acknowledging the functional relationships of factors within the verbal community upon speakers and listeners allows us to see the ways in which both are affected by different attributes of the community. As Faulkner writes the dialogue between Quentin and Shreve that reconstructs the Sutpen legacy and concludes the text of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the role of the verbal community becomes more apparent on the personal level. Additionally, the role of the verbal community becomes more personal. Thus, we see a unity of causation and individual as the analysis of verbal behavior and the novel progress.

According to Skinner, “the ultimate explanation of any kind of verbal behavior depends upon the action which the listener takes with respect to it” (p. 314). While this essay has largely been an explanation of the relationship between speaker and listener, as well as author and reader, the explicit implications of verbal relationships have not been explained in any culminating way. At present, we know that there is a significant relationship between what an individual says and what another individual hears on both covert and overt verbal and nonverbal behavior. Some explanations have also been given regarding the distortion of past events through private verbal behavior (memory and thought) under the control of a variety of environmental and private variables. Further explanations have also been delivered regarding the intraverbal nature of the telling and interpretation of stories as behavior.

Miss Coldfield's telling of stories, from a behavioral perspective, seems to make perfect sense. The circumstances of her childhood and the traumatic events that follow, involving her sister, niece, nephew, brother-in-law and others, are those that shape her subsequent behavior. The fact that Rosa waits to tell the story can be easily distilled to have simple causes within the verbal community. One that comes to thought is that as a child in that community, she would have been well-practiced in the art of silence as the only child surrounded by many adults: children are to be seen and not heard. The simplest explanation for choosing Quentin is that she considers him partly responsible because of his heredity.

Quentin is, of course, not responsible. However, he finds himself in the room at Harvard that is “dedicated” to the retelling of the Sutpen-Coldfield legacy, and while it is seemingly there that it can do “the least harm,” that room is the site of the transmission of the future harm of Miss Coldfield's storytelling (Faulkner, 1951, p. 280). She stays with the Quentin and his roommate, Shreve, as a ghost in stories. As Quentin and Shreve flesh out the stories that have been handed down by Miss Coldfield and Mr. Compson, the ghost is “somehow a thousand times more potent and alive” (p. 280). This is the nature of her effect upon Quentin as the doomed listener in *Absalom, Absalom!* Even the events that end the Sutpen legacy in the physical sense – the discovery of Henry in the mansion at Sutpen's Hundred and Clytie's arson – do not seem to be equal in their effect upon his behavior to the reinvented past that is put upon him by Miss Coldfield, nor to its further effects as he recreates it with Shreve.

As *Absalom, Absalom!* draws to its close, we are left with Quentin the tragic listener's last utterance to Shreve, followed by his retreat into those thoughts – that private verbal behavior – which are so important to his understanding of the misinterpreted past. When Shreve asks why he hates the South, he gives his firm reply: “I don't hate it,” and he gives it once more: “I don't hate it” (Faulkner, 1951, p. 378). What follows is Quentin trailing off into his own private verbal behavior with the mantra of his eventual suicide echoing, unheard by Shreve but with great volume in Quentin's thoughts: “*I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*” (p. 378)

References

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