Absalom, Absalom! Study Guide

Absalom, Absalom! by William Faulkner

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Introduction

Published in 1936, *Absalom, Absalom!* is considered by many to be William Faulkner's masterpiece. Although the novel's complex and fragmented structure poses considerable difficulty to readers, the book's literary merits place it squarely in the ranks of America's finest novels. The story concerns Thomas Sutpen, a poor man who finds wealth and then marries into a respectable family. His ambition and extreme need for control bring about his ruin and the ruin of his family. Sutpen's story is told by several narrators, allowing the reader to observe variations in the saga as it is recounted by different speakers. This unusual technique spotlights one of the novel's central questions: To what extent can people know the truth about the past?

Faulkner's novels and short stories often relate to one another. *Absalom, Absalom!* draws characters from *The Sound and the Fury,* and it anticipates the action and themes of *Intruder in the Dust.* Further, *Absalom, Absalom!* is one of Faulkner's fifteen novels set in fictional Yoknapatawpha County. This is the first of Faulkner's novels in which he includes a chronology and a map of the fictitious setting to better enable the reader to understand the context for the novel's events. The map includes captions noting areas where certain events take place. The map shows events that happen in *Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary,* and *Light in August,* as well as those that occur in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Despite Faulkner's roots in the South, he readily condemns many aspects of its history and heritage in *Absalom, Absalom!.* He reveals the unsavory side of southern morals and ethics, including slavery. The novel explores the relationship between modern humanity and the past, examining how past events affect modern decisions and to what extent modern people are responsible for the past.

Author Biography

William Faulkner was born on September 25, 1897, to a genteel southern family that had lost most of its money during the Civil War. Faulkner grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, which is recast as the fictional town of Jefferson in many of his stories. Jefferson is placed in fictional Yoknapatawpha County, the setting for fifteen of Faulkner's novels and many of his short stories.

As a child, Faulkner was a capable but uninterested student. He left school in 1915, prior to graduating, and went to work in his grandfather's bank as a clerk. A friend of Faulkner's, Phil Stone, went to Yale after graduation. Stone recognized Faulkner's literary ability, and when Faulkner briefly attended Yale Law School, the two enjoyed discussing literary theory and literary movements. With the outbreak of World War I, Faulkner decided to enlist but was turned away. (He was short and slightly built.) With Stone's help, he falsified papers in 1918 so he could join the Canadian Air Force. The war ended, however, before Faulkner completed his training.

Upon returning to Oxford with his uniform and fictitious war stories, Faulkner briefly attended classes at the University of Mississippi in 1919 before taking a job as the university postmaster. He read students' magazines before distributing them, and he was often so immersed in his writing that he ignored his responsibilities. In 1924, Faulkner resigned before he could be terminated. He then went to New Orleans to visit his friend Elizabeth Prall, who was married to author Sherwood Anderson. Despite Faulkner's desire to be a poet, he had come to realize that his talent was for prose, and Anderson encouraged him to pursue this craft. The following year, Faulkner and a friend traveled around Europe, returning home in 1926.

Over the next four years, Faulkner wrote a number of novels but garnered little commercial success. When he decided to stop writing for the public and focus on writing for himself, the result was *The Sound and the Fury.* From this point through the end of his career, his work became particularly complex and challenging to his readers, as he employed complicated structure, characterization, and fictional techniques.

Faulkner is considered one of the great American authors as well as one of the world's finest contemporary writers. In his fiction, Faulkner depicts people facing the problems of living in modern society. He believed that human beings possess the ability to overcome overwhelming challenges by drawing on qualities that are distinctly human, including virtue, love, loyalty, and humor. In 1949, he won the Nobel Prize for literature. A controversial choice for the Prize (his work was criticized as being both too innovative and too regional), Faulkner delivered a speech in which he proclaimed that the crux of his fiction is "the human heart in conflict with itself." The speech was so moving that many of his critics changed their minds about him. Faulkner also won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction twice: in 1955 for *A Fable* (which also won the National Book Award) and in 1963 for *The Reivers.*

Faulkner died on July 6, 1962, in Byhalia, Mississippi.

Plot Summary

The Main Story

The story of Thomas Sutpen is told by four different narrators during the course of *Absalom, Absalom!* First, Rosa Coldfield tells the story, then subsequent versions reveal added elements of Sutpen's story.

Thomas Sutpen arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, in 1833. An enigmatic figure, he never reveals much about his past or his reasons for choosing Jefferson as the site for his home. He comes with a group of "wild" slaves (presumably from Haiti), a French architect, and construction tools. Rumors abound about the mysterious Sutpen, and two years later, his plantation home is complete but empty. Sutpen's relationship with the community becomes friendlier when he begins inviting the men to come stay and hunt on his land. Nestled on one hundred square miles of land that he cheated out of a Native American, the estate is named Sutpen's Hundred.

Sutpen enjoys violent wrestling with his slaves. This sport, like his ambition to execute his great design for a plantation, indicates his drive to control and tame that which he perceives as wild. To everyone's surprise, he asks for Ellen Coldfield's hand in marriage. The Coldfields are a respectable family in Jefferson but have little money and are known for being righteous. Sutpen makes an arrangement (the details of which are never revealed to the reader) with Mr. Coldfield, and Sutpen and Ellen are married. They have two children, Henry and Judith.

Once married, Sutpen makes no effort to gain the community's approval. He does not attend church and continues to wrestle with his slaves. On one occasion, Ellen discovers, to her horror, that Sutpen has brought Henry to the stable to watch the wrestling, which the boy finds frightening and sickening. In contrast, Judith secretly watches the wrestling and is unfazed by the violence.

As a young man, Henry attends law school at the University of Mississippi where he becomes great friends with Charles Bon. Henry brings Charles home with him for a visit, and Charles and Judith fall in love. Despite Sutpen's objections to the union, the couple plans to marry. Their plans are interrupted by the Civil War because Charles, Sutpen, and Henry must all go and fight.

The men in Sutpen's unit lose faith in their commander and choose Sutpen as their new leader. Meanwhile, Henry and Charles fight together, cementing their bond. Henry and Charles discover that they are half-brothers. Before coming to Jefferson, Sutpen had lived in Haiti, where he married a woman and had a son. When Sutpen learned that his wife had black ancestry, he disowned her and his son and left Haiti. Years later, the son, Charles, enrolled as a student at the University of Mississippi. With this information, Henry insists that Charles tell him what he plans to do about his engagement to Judith. Charles will not say, and when the war is over, Charles and Henry return to Sutpen's

Hundred. As they come in sight of the house, Henry tells Charles that he cannot marry Judith. When Charles responds nastily that he will marry her, Henry kills him on the spot and then flees.

Sutpen returns from the war to an overgrown estate where his buildings are in shambles, his slaves are all gone, and his wife is dead. Although he plans to marry Ellen's much younger sister, Rosa, when she realizes that he expects her to produce a son before the marriage, she refuses. Sutpen then seduces Milly, the teenage granddaughter of Wash Jones, a poor man living on his land. She becomes pregnant, but when she has a girl instead of a boy (which Sutpen needs to create a dynasty), he becomes cruel toward Milly. Even though Wash has always admired Sutpen, he kills him for mistreating his granddaughter.

When Henry returns to Sutpen's Hundred years later, he stays in the abandoned estate with his sister and Clytie, the illegitimate daughter of Sutpen and one of his slaves. When Clytie thinks that the law is coming to capture Henry for murdering Charles, she sets fire to the house, destroying it and killing Henry and herself.

Characteristics of Rosa's Version

Rosa is the only narrator who lived during the events of the story. Still, her recollection is filtered through forty years of bitterness and hatred toward Sutpen. She refers to Sutpen as a demon, a *djinn* (similar to a genie), and a fiend. Her version of the story has an accusatory tone, and she blames Sutpen for all the miseries of the Coldfields. Further, she interprets the fall of the South as being the result of the influence of men like Sutpen.

In chapter five, the reader comes to understand why Rosa accepted Sutpen's marriage proposal. As a young woman, she was optimistic and perhaps romantic. Not knowing Sutpen very well, she thought of him as a mysterious, dashing, and intriguing man. When he crudely proposed to her and then abandoned her, she lost her innocence and optimism in the heartbreak. The reader may assume either that it was after this point that she began to hate him or that she disliked him all along but had no other marriage prospects.

Because Rosa hardly knew Sutpen, she speculates on his motivations. When Sutpen opposes the marriage plans between Judith and Charles, for example, Rosa believes he does so on a cruel whim. Faulkner never gives any indication that Rosa knows anything of Charles' background or lineage. It is, therefore, ironic when she refers to Henry's murder of Charles as being almost fratricide (because they were almost brothers-in-law), when in fact, it was fratricide.

Characteristics of Mr. Compson's Version

Mr. Compson's father was one of the first men in Jefferson to accept Sutpen, so this version is sympathetic toward Sutpen. Compson describes Sutpen as brave, strong,

determined, and individualistic. Compson finds it difficult, therefore, to understand why Rosa is so harsh in her denouncement of Sutpen.

Compson's version of the story introduces speculation regarding Henry's relationships with his sister and with Charles. Compson's account suggests that Henry had feelings for his sister that were beyond normal sibling affection. Although he does not say that Henry had incestuous desires, he implies it. Compson also seems to suggest that Henry had an unusual attraction to Charles. According to Compson, while Henry initially supported the marriage of Judith and Charles as a way to resolve his yearnings, his realization that Charles was partly black and his half-brother prevented Henry from allowing the union to take place.

Characteristics of Quentin's Version

Quentin is preoccupied with the Sutpen story as he attempts to make sense of his own past and better understand his role in the present. He has heard the story so many times that he feels like "a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts." Quentin's version contains some details of the story missing from the other versions. The reader later learns that Quentin's grandfather told Quentin things about the story that he had not told his own son (Mr. Compson).

When Quentin's roommate Shreve asks about the South, Quentin begins telling the Sutpen story. Although the story took place before Quentin's time in Jefferson, he feels a strong connection to the story and is compelled to uncover its meaning for his own life.

Characteristics of Shreve's Version

Shreve is introduced in chapter six and asks to hear about the South. As the chapter progresses, it becomes clear that Quentin has told Shreve the Sutpen story before. Shreve knows many of the events of the story but serves as sort of a spokesperson for the reader, asking questions the reader would like to ask. Because he is the furthest removed from the story, Shreve brings an objective view of the story to the novel and is in a position to question certain aspects of the narrative.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The cultural and historical setting of the novel is the post-civil war Deep South.

The main character, which narrates most of the story, is Quentin Compson, a young man who is preparing to leave to study at Harvard. Quentin's future lies in the North, at Harvard University, but the story in which he becomes involved seems to bind him more firmly to his present in the defeated South, which he describes as purgatorial (from *Purgatory*= a level between Heaven and Hell where sinners wait to be forgiven for their crimes). The first chapter introduces us to an old lady, Miss Rosa Coldfield, who has given Quentin the task of telling her dramatic family history.

At the beginning of the chapter, on a hot September afternoon in 1909, Quentin is seated in the dark and stuffy atmosphere of Rosa Coldfield's office. She begins to tell the story. As she does, Quentin's thoughts wander as he contemplates first the old, withered lady, and then the events of which she speaks. He thinks of Colonel Sutpen, who arrived suddenly in 1833 with a band of black slaves and built a grand house and plantation on the edge of town. Sutpen called this estate 'Sutpen's Hundred'. He considers some of the basic facts of the Sutpen family history: Rosa Coldfield's sister, Ellen, was married to Sutpen. They had two children, who died after a rupture of some sort between father and children.

Rosa shares her memories of Sutpen, and of the circumstances that led to the wedding. Sutpen was not a religious man, which is unusual for this period in history. Rosa also mentions that there is some doubt about his past, and about how he came to be rich. The Coldfield family was not rich, but was considered a decent Methodist family.

Rosa remembers that Sutpen had held wild carriage races on the way to church, and that the scandal of this meant he had stopped attending services. It emerges at the end of the chapter that Ellen's daughter, Judith, had especially enjoyed these races. Sutpen took to drinking on the Sabbath, and Ellen's father began to regret his daughter's marriage.

The races continued to be held on Sutpen's grounds. Ellen makes the horrific discovery, one evening, that Sutpen is holding matches in their barn, in which he and his son, Henry, fight Negro slaves. What Ellen does not realize is that Sutpen allows their daughter to watch these bouts with one of the slave children.

Rosa mentions that, as her sister lay dying, she entrusted her with the protection of the Sutpen children. After her sister's death, she became engaged to marry Sutpen. This chapter does not go into the detail of the events leading up to the engagement.

As Rosa is talking, Quentin realizes that the story of Rosa's family is also the story of the South itself. After his visit, he begins to widen his search for information about the

Sutpens. His father tells him that his grandfather, who seems to have had an important role in the government of the town, helped Sutpen establish himself in the town. These facts are inserted into the stream of consciousness, often interrupting between one section of Quentin's visit with Rosa and another, which can make it difficult for the reader to follow events.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Often, the title contains a clue as to what we can expect to happen in the course of the novel. Faulkner's title is a direct allusion to the Biblical Old Testament story of King David and his son, Absalom (II Samuel, chapters 13-18). The plot of the novel is loosely based on this tragic tale of incest, fratricide (the murder of one's brother) and parental loss. Absalom kills his half-brother Amnon for having an incestuous relationship with his sister, Tamar; he then rebels against his father and is killed in battle. The title therefore establishes key themes and plot elements, and provides clues as to the demise of the Sutpens.

The novel is an experiment in the stream of consciousness technique, as perfected by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The technique was developed during the 1920s and 30s (at the height of the Modernist movement), as a break from the convention of the nineteenth century realist novel. It is characterized by long sentences, irregular punctuation and occasionally awkward syntax (word order). Stream of consciousness also makes use of interruption and flashback sequences, diversions in the chronology (sequence) of the narrative, which are known as digressions, as well as sudden leaps from one object of contemplation to another. It is modeled on the random, non-linear pattern of human thought. Faulkner uses these leaps and disruptions to highlight the fact that all stories suffer from gaps and distortions in the memories of those concerned, and that the truth can be difficult to distinguish where there is more than one version of events.

Quentin Compson's viewpoint occupies the stream of consciousness at the beginning of Chapter 1. His thoughts form the basis of the story, and it is through these thoughts that we encounter other characters, and form our judgment of them. His thoughts are frequently interrupted, in the course of the entire novel, by letters that give clues to the history of the family, and by the speech of other characters, which add their own memories and experiences to the story. We can gain clues as to the character of the speakers and writers from the way in which they express themselves. Quentin's character is the central organizing force in the story: we can begin to look upon him as a sort of researcher and writer. As a Harvard student, we know that he is intelligent and well educated.

This chapter locates the decline of the Sutpen family within the wider decline of the South. Sutpen's violence and pride, and Rosa's consuming bitterness are representative of the wider moral climate of the South. The people who live in Jefferson appear within a context of physical decay and breakdown: Rosa Coldfield's body, and the home in which she lives, reflect the general moral degradation that afflicts the family,

and the population of the entire South in the post-Civil War era. The former glories of the South, in the form of its grand plantations and the clear divisions between social classes, give way to crumbling mansions and isolated, embittered spinsters. In a sense, Rosa is mourning for the dead customs and institutions of the South, as well as for those members of her family who are dead. Her comment on Quentin's plans to study at Harvard reveals the grim state of reality in the post-Civil War South. Young talent, the future of the region, is being lured away to the Northern universities. The South is thus afflicted by the loss of both its past glories, and its future.

Rosa is compared to a child, stunted by circumstances and incapable of outgrowing her disappointments. Quentin sees her sitting in a chair that is too large for her body, which symbolically suggests that she has never adequately fulfilled her role in life. To him, she looks like a "crucified child." This carries connotations of her unrealized potential, as well as her keen sense of self-sacrifice. This image of sacrifice relates to the condition of the South. Quentin thinks to himself that the story of Rosa's family will reveal "At last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth."

Rosa is the last surviving witness to the story of the family, which means that her account is crucial. Mr. Compson's contribution to the tale is second-hand, and beyond that, Quentin and Shreve are using artistic license to fill in the blanks. This is both structurally and thematically significant. Conflicting reports, incomplete stories and opinions combine to obscure events and persons, even as the narrative strives to reveal and clarify what happened. This chapter uses the metaphor of ghosts to represent the status of the narrative content. On one level, the main characters are dead, like the customs and institutions of the South itself. On another level, the stories are disembodied, removed from their original contexts, and lacking in substance or proof. Rosa herself discusses the ambiguous nature of memory.

It is Quentin's wandering imagination that gives shape to the personalities in Rosa's stories. Sutpen becomes a demonic presence, and his children inherit their monstrous character traits from him. It is Quentin that places the family in the Classical context of Niobe, Queen of Thebes, whose extreme pride (hubris), resulted in the total destruction of her fourteen children, and the suicide of her husband. Rosa is also figured in the story of Niobe, who became a weeping statue, turned into stone by grief and regret. Rosa has become a monument to her family tragedies. Quentin thinks of her as static, rigid and immobilized by grief and frustration. Later in the novel, we also learn that her female gender and lack of marriage compound her sense of immobility .

Quentin's narrative is driven by a sense of fatalism, by a belief that the Sutpen bloodline carries the means of its own destruction, and the means by which the sins of the parents' generation will be erased. The title and the various Classical figures are additions, as is the sense of parallel destiny between the family and the South. Therefore, we can see that Quentin and Rosa are both padding out the bare facts of the story in order to make it more complete, and in order to make a larger comment on the ills of their society.

The first chapter describes two incidents that reveal the emergent brutality in the Sutpen bloodline: first, the daughter Judith is implicated in the story of the wild carriage races that Sutpen held on the road between the Estate and the town church. Secondly, both she and her brother, Henry, are present at the barn fight on the Estate. Whilst Henry and a Negro boy fight, Judith gazes down from the attic, undisturbed by the violence of the scene.

In the customs of the old South, clothing denotes moral standards and social standing. Sutpen and the Negro slaves are seen to lack the proper standards of civilization. They live and work without proper clothing, their bodies covered by the filth of the swamps. The layer of filth, which Sutpen later replaces with fine clothing, seems to comment on the superficiality of such categories as racial difference and social class. During the fight scene, Henry and Sutpen are half-stripped and covered in blood, sweat, dust and vomit. They are symbolically pared down to their brutal elements. Judith's reaction is more sinister, for she is fully clothed and clean: her contamination is moral. Symbolically, Ellen enters this scene hatless, her head, and the tip of the moral degradation of her family, is exposed.

The way that Ellen is described in the story suggests that women were not considered the equals of men, and that their value to society took the form of house keeping and child rearing. Sutpen purchases respectability in the form of the wife and the furniture. The comparison of women to material objects will recur throughout the novel, as an expression of what we call the sexual division of labor, the traditional organization of women as disempowered, domestic objects, and men as public figures, property owners or soldiers. Rosa describes how she has suffered from this inequality in the past. Indeed, women seem to be just as restricted in the present as they were in the past within this novel. Rosa turns to a man to find the voice for her story, and it is his voice and his creative powers that shape the content of her story. On another level, the novel also places women in the immediate social context of slavery, and so underlines their lack of authority and liberty.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Quentin goes back over the facts he has learned so far. He thinks about Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson, which was only a small town at that time. His appearance had been rough, and haggard, as though he had recently recovered from some kind of illness. Nobody approached him to ask where he came from, so nobody knew that he had brought with him all that he owned, the clothes on his back, a smart suit in a bag, his guns and his horse.

On the third day after his arrival, he performed a stunt with his horse and guns, which seemed to keep any other enquirers at bay. He lived in the town guesthouse, and rode away each day on unknown business. Sutpen turns out to be riding to a secret cache of Spanish gold, which he used to buy a patent, and to buy the land on which he built his plantation. We later find out that he has tricked a Native American man into selling him the land for far less than its actual worth. According to Quentin's grandfather, the mysterious out-of-town business trips continued for five years, until the house was completed. During this time, Sutpen worked with a team of wild, naked and filthy Negroes, living in the swamp and hunting for game. For a time, he lived inside the bare shell of the house. At this time, he began holding the fights, and drinking whiskey.

Quentin's grandfather lent him the seed-cotton with which to establish his plantation. The town began to gossip about Sutpen's plan to take a wife and use the dowry to finish building his estate.

In order to find a suitable wife, he put on his fine suit and attended church, where he noticed Mr. Coldfield, the owner the local grocery store. On the day that he first called on Ellen at home, a group of townsmen gathered to confront him about his gains. They arrested him and took him to court, where later Mr. Coldfield, as his prospective father-in-law, arrived to sign a paper vouching for his character. Two months later, in June 1838, Sutpen and Ellen were married. She was distraught before and after the wedding, because most of the respectable townspeople did not attend, despite her Aunt's efforts in rounding them up on the day. A mob outside the church pelted the bride and groom with dirt and rotten vegetables.

Quentin's father says that Mr. Coldfield arranged for the wagons that brought fine furniture and fittings for Sutpen's new house. This raised the town's suspicions against Sutpen. Their son, Henry, was born nine months after the wedding.

Chapter 2 Analysis

There is rich symbolism in the building of Sutpen's Hundred. For three years, it remains a mere shell of a home, without fittings, furniture and contents. Sutpen himself sleeps on bare floorboards, before securing what he needs to complete his respectability: a

wife. The wife is the embodiment of the capital a husband needs to secure his future, in terms of both children and the financial settlement of a dowry. The contract of Sutpen and Ellen's marriage is agreed between Mr. Coldfield and Sutpen, as a front for a shady business deal. In the novel, women are merely a biological and material means to an end, and their lives are literally controlled and defined by the men around them. Ellen's father arranges her marriage, and her husband gives her wealth and security.

The wedding ceremony is a superficial procession, a product of the women's vanity. It resembles Sutpen's triumphant procession in the wagon with the Negro slaves and fine furniture. Both events are simply public displays of wealth. The wedding also foreshadows the final, tragic return of Charles Bon to Sutpen's Hundred. In this later scene, which we can describe as an inverted parody of the marriage ceremony, Bon walks up the drive (a symbolic substitute for the church aisle) to meet Judith, but is confronted by Henry. Judith then arrives at the door holding her unfinished wedding dress, to find her brother where she expected to see her fiancé. The conventions of the ceremony are reversed in this scene, because it is the groom who walks the aisle/path. Parody is to be understood as a distortion or ironic imitation, in this instance, characterized by the unconventional surroundings and poor substitute wedding dress.

The last sentence of Chapter 2 tells us that Ellen's wedding day serves as an indication of the tragic consequences of her marriage. The rain that falls on her wedding is metaphorical rain, which refers to her sense of wounded pride, but which also refers to the fatal events surrounding Judith's engagement to Bon. Ironically, Ellen provides the tears before and after her own, spoiled wedding. Judith never sheds a tear at the death of Bon.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Quentin continues his quest for explanation. Most of what he relates in this chapter comes from his father's memory of what he was told by Quentin's grandfather. Rosa's Aunt, the stern, interfering woman who was determined that Ellen's wedding should be a grand affair, left them suddenly before Rosa's tenth birthday. At this time, Mr. Coldfield began to distance himself from his eldest daughter's family, and before long, they ceased contact altogether.

Rosa's first sight of Charles Bon was during his first visit to Sutpen's Hundred, in 1860. She saw him riding his horse through town. Henry has brought him from university in Mississippi, where the two have met and become friends. The narrative compares Bon to his father, Sutpen. It is through the larger perspective of Quentin's father that we recognize this relationship. Rosa was unaware of his identity. She mistook him for his father. That same summer, there was a secret meeting between Bon and Sutpen in New Orleans. This chapter does not give details of what happened during this meeting. Only Clytemnestra (Clytie, the daughter of one of Sutpen's Negro slave women and half-sister to Judith and Henry) and Quentin's grandfather knew of this meeting.

Bon became involved with Judith during his vacation at Sutpen's Hundred. Ellen saw him as a useful connection for her children, because he had a wealthy legal guardian. On their third visit, at Christmas 1860, Henry had an argument with his father, after which he renounced his birthright, and left town with Charles Bon. Ellen has been spreading rumors around town that Judith and Bon are formally engaged to be married. Although she has been out of contact with Ellen and Judith, Rosa has begun secretly stealing material from her father's store to sew Judith's bridal undergarments.

War breaks out in early 1861. Sutpen left to fight the war in Virginia, second in command of a local regiment. Ellen died shortly after his departure. Meanwhile, Henry and Bon join the university regiment in Mississippi.

At the outbreak of war, Mr. Coldfield shut himself in his attic to escape the draft. Rosa sent food up to the attic in a basket suspended outside the window. He died in 1864, still barricaded inside the attic room. After his death, Rosa moved to Sutpen's Hundred to take care of Judith. She was twenty years old at this point, and Judith was twenty-four. Sutpen returned from war in 1866 to find Clytie, Judith and Rosa living and working on the ruined plantation. Rosa's engagement to Sutpen was cancelled, and she never spoke to him or visited the plantation for the rest of his life.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Faulkner describes the activity of women in the old South, which is restricted by society to the arrangement of courtships and marriages. Female company is compared to

"masonry," a secretive, ritualistic system embedded within the structure of society. For Faulkner, and for the men who are concerned with the telling of this story, it appears that women, and the petty conventions of female company, are an impenetrable mystery, full of rituals that men cannot comprehend. This chapter also likens the Coldfield domestic scene to a mausoleum, a lifeless tomb in commemoration of Rosa's mother, who died in childbirth, and to the unfulfilled potential of the Coldfield women. Mr. Compson likens Rosa's female guardian and mother figure, the aunt, to the Greek mythological heroine, Cassandra, who was cursed by the God Apollo for spurning his advances. Under the curse, her true prophecies were dismissed as lies. The analogy refers to the aunt's spinster status, to her lack of authority, and her lack of voice in a world ruled by men. In Compson's version of the story, the Coldfield house is full of her unheeded whispers. Rosa is very much associated with this theme of repression.

Judith's mother and Aunt Rosa prepare for her marriage. Her mother spreads rumors of her engagement, and buys clothes for Judith's married wardrobe (the trousseau), and Rosa hand-sews the undergarments for Judith's wedding night. The creation of this last, more intimate set of items, suggests that Rosa is anticipating the (incestuous) sexual union even in advance of the engagement. Both women are acting to promote the marriage, because as women they are only empowered to carry out domestic tasks and spread gossip. Rosa's contribution is also an amusing and ironic rebellion against her father, whom she resents as the cause of her birth, and her mother's subsequent death. She steals the cloth to make the underwear for Judith's wedding night from her father's shop. These clothes most vividly represent the attainment of womanhood in Rosa's society – as a wife Judith will have higher status, and will be considered to have fulfilled her role. Rosa takes the material from her father in a symbolic gesture to the unfulfilled role and lesser status she has enjoyed because of the strict solitude of her upbringing. Her behavior also reveals that the life of women in this era is dominated either by marriage, or by fantasies of marriage. The only pleasure in Rosa's single life is vicarious, by which we mean that she experiences it second hand, through the actions of her cousin, but cannot have any real pleasure.

This chapter introduces us to Clytemnestra, Sutpen's daughter by one of his Negro slave-women. In Greek mythology, Aphrodite, goddess of love, placed a curse on Clytemnestra, who was half-sister to Helen of Troy. She and her two sisters were doomed to be adulteresses, their lives ruined by love affairs with men. Sutpen seems to have deliberately chosen the name to suggest promiscuity (sexual excess and adultery), but without knowledge of the dramatic irony that it will be his sexual promiscuity that will ruin his family.

Mr. Coldfield's voluntary imprisonment is the first sign that the civil war threatens to destroy the very fabric of life in the South. He and his Methodist ideals are enclosed within a tiny enclave. Outside, father figures are leaving for war, mothers are dying and children are involved in incestuous courtships. Amidst all this, Bon's arrival sets in motion the chain of events that will destroy the family. The fate that awaits the Sutpen children is part of the larger fate of the South.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In this chapter, Quentin tries to make sense of what he has learned. He guesses that Sutpen must have found out in New Orleans that Bon had a mistress and child, and forbidden the marriage to Judith. From here, he guesses that Bon may have deliberately backed off so that he could watch and manipulate the situation, and begin plotting a way to marry Judith despite the opposition.

He knows that there was no actual courtship between Bon and Judith during the vacations. There is, however, an old love-letter from Bon to Judith, in which he said he intended to return and marry her. It is the only surviving communication between the two, written towards the end of the war.

Quentin thinks that Henry cared so much for Bon that he gave up his claim as the heir to his father's Estate. He also thinks that Bon must have loved Henry, and the ideal, country lifestyle that Henry represented. He concludes that Sutpen must have told Henry, during their argument at Christmas 1860, that he and Charles were half-brothers. Henry might have decided to enlist with Bon as a way of delaying the inevitable confrontation. Henry suggested the absence as a period in which Charles should commit himself to marrying Judith by first legally dissolving his existing marriage. Quentin seems to believe that Henry's concern was to save his sister's honor, but also to protect Bon and keep secret the knowledge of their relationship.

Bon understood that Henry knew of his marriage to a Negro woman. During their trip from Jefferson to the university, Quentin thinks he would have taken the opportunity to explain about this marriage. Quentin imagines the long debate the men would have had, with Bon explaining that this wife was a sort of slave bought for sex and companionship. He showed Henry a brothel, and argued that the men who use prostitutes are no more married in the eyes of the law than he was to his Negro woman.

Quentin is of the opinion that if Judith had learned of the obstruction to her marriage, it would have made no difference to her. The two men traveled back to Sutpen's Hundred, where Henry shot Bon dead at the gate before Judith could answer the door.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter underlines the similarities between father and son, Sutpen and Bon. They both have a child from a previous marriage. They are both described as calculating, worldly and inhumane. Bon's mother is a colored woman, which places him in the middle of the moral spectrum of the novel (where color superficially represents good and bad / wild and civilized etc). He is neither unquestionably immoral, nor irreproachably good, as his name might suggest (*bon* is from the French word meaning "good").

In New Orleans, Bon's arguments show that he does not share traditional, simple values. He compares his wife/mistress to the whores, arguing that each is financially rewarded for their services. He reminds him that, in his own Southern society, there are "Ladies, women and females – the virgins who gentlemen someday married, the courtesans to whom they went while on sabbaticals to the cities, and the women upon whom that first caste rested…"

Bon, who is studying law at college, tries to use logical argument to remove the obstacle to his marriage with Judith. He argues that the ceremony was not valid. For Henry, whose moral sense is simple and traditional, the ceremony is binding. This chapter begins to unravel the motivations of both men. Bon is cast in the role of a gambler and manipulator, using logic to explain his actions.

The letter from Bon to Judith fails to clarify his motives, although it certainly states his intention to marry and commit bigamy. It is worth pointing out, however, that this chapter contains conflicting accounts as to whether or not Bon was officially married. In this period, the fact that he had a son by a Negro woman would provide moral and social reasons why Judith should not accept Bon's proposal.

As there are no documents or reports to back up the content of Bon and Henry's discussion, nor even to prove what happened after they left Sutpen's Hundred, we can credit Quentin with the invention of these details. Through these additions, Quentin gives thematic unity to the story. The sense of doom encompasses all three Sutpen children at this point. The chapter lurches forward from the writing of the letter, in which Bon says ironically that he believes he and Judith have a shared destiny, to the confrontation between Henry and Bon. The issue of Bon's previous marriage is unresolved, and they are all three doomed by their bloodline to conclude the matter.

In this chapter, the letter is a first-hand source, a declaration from Bon. The narrative that surrounds the letter is constructed out of Quentin and Mr. Compson's effort to explain and discover motive. The suggestion that Henry intended to use the war as a period of probation, a chance for Bon to renounce his first wife, comes from Quentin. The words of the tragic confrontation, and the detail of their trip to New Orleans, are also invented. It is significant that the narratives of Quentin's imagination should encircle the testimonial of the letter. Structurally, this illustrates the dominance of Quentin's imaginative contribution to the story. The broken narrative logic of stream of consciousness further obscures the facts of the story, which we, as readers, must try to retrieve from the various conflicting accounts. Perhaps Faulkner means to suggest that in all storytelling, there is an element of falsehood, especially where the power of the memory is concerned.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Rosa remembers the summer after Bon's first Christmas visit to Jefferson, when she was fourteen. Looking back, she sees this as a formative period in her growth, when she lived for a time with her sister at Sutpen's Hundred, at the same time as Ellen began to encourage her daughter to accept Bon. The old Rosa looks on this summer as a time when she began to feel that she should have been born male. She describes how she imagined Bon in detail, and invented a kind of obsession with him, having secretly gone into Judith's room to look at his picture. She explains how she fantasized that she herself was Bon's lover, as a way of providing what she felt was lacking in Judith's attitude to Bon.

According to Rosa, Sutpen's servant, Wash Jones, came to tell her what had happened at the plantation. Arriving at the Estate, Rosa is met by Clytie, who tries to stop her from going to Judith. She carries on upstairs, imagining that she will find Judith bent silently over her parents' bed, and the corpse of Bon. Instead, Judith comes to meet her, holding the photograph of herself, which she gave to Bon. Rosa talks about the strange, hypnotic state in which she moved as she became aware of the situation.

Rosa never actually saw Bon's body. Judith stood blocking the doorway. She calmly ordered Clytie to prepare a meal for them and their visitor, and arranged for the burial.

They carried on living in the house together, and seven months later, Sutpen returned from the war. Judith cried for the first time as she confirmed that Henry killed Bon. Sutpen immediately set about restoring the Estate. Three months after his return, he proposed to Rosa, but the engagement was cancelled. Rosa moved back to her father's house, and stole from neighbors' gardens to feed herself. Quentin suddenly interrupts Rosa's story. He has realized that there is someone living on in the house at Sutpen's Hundred.

Chapter 5 Analysis

After four chapters of delay, the second meeting with Rosa seems to bring us closer to the truth. Yet Rosa's stream of consciousness contains personal distortions of the facts, in the form of a wounded sense of propriety, which colors her perception. For example, she is keen to emphasize her poverty and reduced circumstances, and mentions her disgust at sharing the buggy with Wash Jones after the shooting. This man represents the demise of her family, because, as a member of the servant class, he should be forbidden access to the respectable front entrance to the Estate, but since Ellen's death, he has entered by the front and even slept in his master's bedchamber. To Rosa, he is also a symbol of her broken engagement, because his young granddaughter is Sutpen's next target.

"Brute progenitor of brutes whose granddaughter was to supplant me, if not in my sister's house at least in my sister's bed to which (so they will tell you) I aspired…"

We are reminded by the phrase in brackets (parenthesis) that each account of the story is driven by particular concerns and motivations. The facts are obscured by her sense of injustice, which compels her to address herself against the opinion of the townspeople. She begins with a reference to the general townspeople's version of events, in which she seems to have had the composure to put on her hat and shawl (remember: clothing as an index to the respectability and morality of the wearer), before locking her house. She is also preoccupied with the physical state of the house and gardens at Sutpen's Hundred.

Rosa's stream of consciousness collapses the conventional barriers of narrative logic and chronology (the normal sequence of events), leaping between past and present, and creating images that fuse the two periods together. She refers to Judith as the "unwived widow," and to the house as a place of birth, fertility and death. These descriptions bring together past and present, in a moment of tragic recognition (catharsis), which symbolize the fulfillment of the family destiny. Yet, these are Rosa's images. Her mind recasts the events of the past in a tragic light, and her imagination that adds the element of fatalism. The children would of course have lacked the vital knowledge of future events that Rosa uses to give unity to her story, and to emphasize Sutpen's part in the tragedy.

Memory is related to similar themes of interpretation and representation that run throughout the novel. There are two versions of what happens when Rosa reaches the house. One belongs to her imagination and expectation, and the other belongs to reality. The romantic version, in which Judith weeps desperately beside the corpse of her lover, is contrasted with the strange, emotionless reality, in which Judith calmly greets Rosa, orders a meal and arranges for the burial as if settling some small domestic matter. For a moment, the two versions co-exist, just before Rosa becomes fully aware of the situation. From her aged perspective, she is able to explain that "Living is one constant and perpetual instant when the arras-veil between what-is-to-be hangs docile and even glad to the lightest naked thrust, were we brave enough (not wise enough: no wisdom needed here) to make the rending gash."

Rosa describes the barrier been present and future, the constant passage between one moment and the next, like a thin curtain, a division between realities. The arras alludes to the fatal scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, when Hamlet sets in motion a series of tragic events by mistakenly stabbing Ophelia's father through a curtain. The veil carries connotations of female modesty and virginity. It also denotes innocence and partial awareness. The image therefore represents the many divisions in Rosa's narrative, between innocence and adulthood, between past and present, between past and future, and between reality and fantasy. In the novel, these divisions are not always easy to identify, just as in life, it can often be impossible to separate fact from fiction.

Rosa contemplates the summer spent at Sutpen's Hundred in the light of these divisions. She describes the only love she has ever experienced as a sort of phantom

love for Bon on Judith's behalf. She has never met Bon, but she bases her fantasy of ideal girlhood on him. She believes that this fantasy also had a deeper purpose: to provide all the appropriate girlish behavior in place of her cousin's apparent disinterest. Rosa's story creates a great deal of uncertainty around the motivation of Judith at this point. For someone who has the chance to marry an attractive, exciting man, she seems to lack emotion.

Sutpen's proposal to Rosa is significant, because it is not phrased, as a typical proposal should be, in the form of a question. From her mature perspective, she knows the engagement is doomed, so she associates it with death (*effigy* = a stone cast in the shape of the body, usually set on the lid of a tomb). This image also reminds us of the statue imagery from the story of Niobe. We can think of the gravestones and monuments within the novel as symbols of the impenetrable nature of human characters. We know from records when and where they lived and died, and whom they married, but we can only guess at their motivations, and imagine their personalities.

Marriage, in as far as the novel represents it as a legal farce and a material contract between unequal parties, seems to form a parallel to the political union that binds South and North. Men disregard their wives, commit adultery and plot to commit bigamy, and in one case, a sham, common law marriage is proposed (that is, a personal agreement to live like man and wife, without the confirmation of a legal or religious ceremony). Similarly, the Union between the South and North is dissolved and later re-instated by force: the ruined South re-enters the Union with decreased status. The novel may be suggesting that legal contracts between men are arbitrary — created to protect certain interests, and therefore subject to change as those interests develop. In the search for Bon's motive for marrying Judith, perhaps Quentin and Shreve are attempting to describe a marriage that is based on higher ideals than mere financial interest. They are trying to imagine an authentic marriage that is not merely a front for respectability, or merely a means for "Inventing with fiendish cunning the thing which husbands and fiancés have been trying to invent for ten million years: the thing that without harming her or giving her grounds for civil or tribal action would not only blast the little dream-woman out of the dovecote but leave her irrevocably husbanded…with the abstract carcass of outrage and revenge."

This passage describes the conventional femininity, the role of women in the Deep South, as a set of values that could be fixed and molded by men for their benefit. The imagery describes women of marriageable age and status as the prey of their prospective husbands. Marriage, especially the unofficial type proposed to Rosa by Sutpen, is a form of social death: she will be wed in the eyes of the outraged community to her husband, but will have neither legal defense nor respectability. Under these conditions, a marriage ceremony is a sort of symbolic funeral, in which a woman is bound to a mere corpse, a man without any living human features, who gives her nothing, but from whom she cannot escape. Rosa's connection to Sutpen would appear to have married her to a powerful feeling of resentment, a disappointment that has outlived the broken engagement.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Quentin is at Harvard, where a letter arrives from his father to tell him that Rosa has died. He and his college friend, Shreve, are both obsessed with the story of the Sutpen family. Shreve goes back over the cause for the broken engagement. They conclude that Sutpen had suggested that he and Rosa should try to produce a male heir before they marry. Sutpen's plantation was due to be reduced by federal taxes and penalties, and he saw an opportunity to use the Coldfield store to bankroll the restoration of his Estate, as well as the chance to replace his lost son and heir.

After Rosa refused the offer, he simply found a replacement. Wash Jones's teenage granddaughter fell pregnant by Sutpen, but she had a daughter, whom he refused to recognize. Wash attacked him, and he died of his wounds. By this time, Judith, who was thirty, was running the Coldfield store, which she eventually sold to pay for a tombstone in 1870.

There are five tombstones in the grounds of the plantation, two of which were bought by Sutpen, for Ellen and himself. The third belongs to Bon. One day, Bon's wife/mistress and son visited the third grave. Clytie went to collect the twelve-year-old son after the death of his mother. She brought him to live at Sutpen's Hundred.

When Judith was forty, Bon's son, Charles, got into a brawl at a Negro ball, and he was arrested. Quentin's grandfather got him out of prison, and gave him money to leave Jefferson. He left with the money, but showed up at the Estate a year later with a Negro wife. In 1884, Charles caught yellow fever. He was brought to the Estate, where Judith also contracted the disease and died shortly before him.

Chapter 6 Analysis

By the end of this chapter, we know to whom the five tombstones on the Estate belong: Ellen, Bon, Sutpen, Judith and Bon's son, Charles. There is some confusion as to the mysterious presence at Sutpen's Hundred. Clytie is still living at the Estate with Bon's grandson, the colored boy Jim Bond. In the previous chapter, Clytie was described as Cerberus, the mythological three-headed hound that guarded the entrance to the underworld. She delays Rosa when she arrives after the shooting, and there is a surviving sense that she and the grandson are guarding the identity of the house's mysterious occupant.

With Rosa's death, the text is deprived of its authorial figure. In her absence, Quentin and Shreve become substitute authors. When we hear that Rosa broke her engagement because Sutpen suggested they first test her ability to provide a male heir, we cannot be certain Shreve and Quentin did not invent this detail, for the sake of narrative cohesion (unity).

The epitaphs on the gravestones can be seen as fragments of narrative – pieces of the story in their own right. Sutpen's stone does not include his birth date or origin, or even the manner of his death, whilst Judith's inscription is a fatalistic comment on the situation, ordered by Rosa ("Pause, Mortal; Remember Vanity and Folly and Beware"). Sutpen's stone was made before his death, and carried back to the Estate by him, before standing in the hall like a symbol of his fate. Judith's was made with the benefit of hindsight, as a final remark upon the cause of the tragedy.

The chapter closes without revealing who lives on at Sutpen's Hundred. As Quentin builds towards the final scene of his visit to the house, Shreve delays the discovery in order to return to the past to add detail to the sparse history of Sutpen and his Estate. This heightens the suspense as the plot builds towards the final return to Sutpen's Hundred.

The theme of Sutpen's fate concludes with the double irony of his murder at the hands of the enraged servant, Wash Jones, whose granddaughter has given birth to Sutpen's child. Wash kills Sutpen (and the girl and her daughter) with a rusty scythe, an agricultural tool used in the harvesting of crops. Previously, the metaphor of planting, sowing seeds and harvesting crops has been used to illustrate Sutpen's attitude to women, whose fertility he relies upon for the survival of his family line and Estate. In addition, the scythe commonly represents the figure of death. The rusty state of the scythe denotes the sense of delay, the suspense that has built up around the approaching destiny of the Sutpen family.

Quentin and Shreve create links between the various sordid facts in this chapter, to try to explain what lay behind the decisions that shaped the events leading up to Sutpen's demise and Rosa's departure from the Estate. They imagine his psychological state after the end of the war. He acts as if he is undefeated, even although he is now an old man, who has been defeated by circumstances. Sutpen is characterized as immobilized by his losses, and by the rage he feels. Symbolically, he is impotent: his heir, the future of his family and his Estate, has gone. His wife, who might have replaced his lost son, is dead. His plantation is in ruins, which means that his prospects are low, because he cannot hope to attract another wife whilst he has no security to offer. His story is not unique in the South: the future of the family mirrors the state of poverty and ruin in which the South exists after four years of Civil War and naval blockade. Quentin and Shreve construct Sutpen's character out of the objects and events that surround him. From his isolation and losses, they create a portrait of a desperate, immoral man, plotting to hold onto his Estate.

They imagine that Sutpen's only wish is that his son should carry on the legitimate line of his family. Therefore, Sutpen is envisaged as a controlling force on the destiny of his family, who works to prevent his illegitimate son, Bon, from contaminating his line, whilst his hope is that Henry should take his place as head of the family. Henry's absence represents the end of the family line, the idea that the heir might have a child by some random woman rather than marrying to carry on the family line. Quentin and Shreve are using events to contribute towards the characterization of Sutpen. He emerges as a man totally consumed by material ambition. His children are merely objects with which

to accomplish his ambition. Never do the 'authors' (Quentin and Shreve) consider that there might have been an emotional dimension to his character.

We know that Quentin and Shreve are educated, well-read young men, so we can assume that the comparison of Sutpen to Dr Faustus comes from them. The literary allusion is to Goethe's (pronounced GER-TUH) *Faust* (also Christopher Marlow's play, *Dr Faustus*). They believe that the figure of Faustus, who sells his soul to the devil in return for temporary supernatural powers, accurately describes Sutpen. In some ways, he does resemble Faustus, who was pursued by his fate even at the height of his powers. Sutpen has been trying to evade his fate, but at this stage in the novel, it is closing in on him. The allusion suggests the extent of Sutpen's ruthless ambition, his gambling spirit and inflated sense of personal power, but it presents an exaggerated picture of the ageing Sutpen. His body is withering in an external expression of his private corruption. Faustus suffers a moment of tragic recognition, or catharsis, in which he suddenly realizes his error and repents, but there is nothing in all the reports of Sutpen's character to suggest that he might have regretted his choices.

Sutpen's history, the information that might explain his actions, exists in the novel in the form of hearsay, in conversations passed down from Quentin's grandfather. His headstone does not record his date or place of birth: he lacks the most basic information about his past, and thus his character is symbolically unformed. It is worth noting that the Chronology at the end of the novel provides this information as a final commentary on the sequence of events, the births, marriages and deaths that form the basic plot. However, these facts offer no great insight into the characters and motivations. We conclude that it has been necessary to invent such details as might tie the story together.

Compare the vision of Bon's first wife, who is later characterized as a deeply bitter woman. She visits his grave at Sutpen's Hundred, in a scene that resembles something from the plays of Oscar Wilde. Quentin and Shreve try to imagine this scene, using what they understand from literature to create the dramatic scene. They invent this scene as the first link in a chain of events that eventually brings Bon's illegitimate son to live at Sutpen's Hundred with Judith and Clytie. In this way, Quentin and Shreve resemble the sceneshifters from Wilde's play, who set the stage and provide the props that drive the plot forward. We can understand this as a symbol of Quentin and Shreve's artistic license. They manipulate the bare facts of the story to create a more continuous stream of events. The particular allusion to Wilde's garden scenes is ironic, because the connections between the characters in the grave scene do not support a vision of polite, upper-class society.

In the absence of detail, which might explain the actions of the main characters, Quentin must rely on vague and incomplete information for his characterization. Judith, who has been previously described as cold and emotionless, is reduced to an expressionless face between a homemade dress and sunbonnet. The technical term for the representation of a character or object by a single part or feature is synecdoche. In this instance, the synecdoche denotes the nature of Quentin's project as storyteller. He has no access to the intimate thoughts of Judith, Henry or Bon, and so he must draw

conclusions from small scraps of information. His whole account of the story rests upon these uncertain grounds for characterization.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Quentin and Shreve explore Sutpen's past and his early days at Sutpen's Hundred. Some of the detail emerges from conversations between Sutpen and Quentin's grandfather, which took place during the hunt for the escaped architect, when the house was still unfinished.

Sutpen grew up in the Virginian mountains, and then later, on the road with his family and alcoholic father. He was turned away from the door of a Plantation mansion by a Negro servant, and later left the country, determined to make his fortune. He went to work as an overseer on a plantation in the West Indies, where later he helped to put down a slave uprising. He married the owner's daughter, who he later discovered is half-colored. He paid this wife to renounce their marriage, and left her.

The pact between Sutpen and Mr. Coldfield is described as an illegal way of increasing profits from Coldfield's stock. Quentin imagines that Henry must have met with his father before the end of the war. He also imagines that Clytie and Judith helped set up the association between Sutpen and Wash Jones's granddaughter. After he killed Sutpen, Jones murdered his granddaughter and the newly born child.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Many competing strands of information and voices occupy the stream of consciousness in this chapter, from Quentin and Shreve, to Quentin's father and the imagined words of Wash Jones. Mr. Compson repeats the story told by Quentin's grandfather, in which Sutpen reveals clues about his origins.

The family exists on the lowest social scale, beneath even the Negro servants, who wear fine uniforms. Sutpen begins to resent this lack of status when he is ordered not to approach the front of the Plantation property by a Negro Butler. This seems to be the most significant moment in the formation of Sutpen's character. At this point, the young boy's character splits into two opposing entities, the reasonable, innocent boy and the brute element. An internal argument rages within the boy's mind. Quentin inserts this psychological division in retrospect, as a means of inquiry into Sutpen's mental background. From now on, facts, in the shape of tombstone engravings and letters, are surrounded and penetrated by the details that Shreve and Quentin invent by way of explanation. Quentin literally creates the script of Sutpen and Wash Jones's argument.

In this chapter, women are directly compared to horses. Sutpen refers to his unwanted daughter as a mare, a possession of little use to him given that women are legally not permitted any rights to property. Sutpen clearly considers women only as a means of producing heirs, although he has ironically renounced the first son, Bon, because of his mother's racial heritage (non-whites are also forbidden from owning property, so

Sutpen's son must be white in order to inherit the estate). Lack of legal status is a feature that links women to slaves in the old South.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The chapter follows Quentin and Shreve's efforts to explain the story. Quentin knows, through his grandfather's connection to Sutpen, that the plantation owner in the West Indies tricked Sutpen into marrying his daughter (Bon's mother) by saying she was Spanish.

Shreve and Quentin invent a character in order to explain the actions of Bon, and to add detail to the relationship between Bon and Henry. They imagine a lawyer, who handled the settlement with which Sutpen has paid off his first wife. The lawyer has been lying to Bon's embittered mother in order to prolong his contract. He hoped to manipulate the parties into a situation from which he can profit. He has been keeping a log of Sutpen's new life, of his wife and children, and of the potential value of a new settlement. The Lawyer arranged for Bon to attend the same school as Henry, and made sure that they were introduced.

Shreve and Quentin imagine the meeting. Henry was impressed by Bon's elegance and worldliness. Bon recognized his features in Henry's face, and began to suspect a connection, a reason for the lawyer's suggestions.

They think about the meeting in New Orleans, after Bon's first summer visit to Sutpen's Hundred. At this point, they believe that Sutpen and Bon's mother were present, but that Bon himself was not. Instead, they imagine that during the Christmas visit Bon tried unsuccessfully to get recognition from his father.

They change their minds about the New Orleans meeting: this time, it involves Bon, Bon's mother, Henry and the lawyer. They guess that Henry and Judith's letters to Bon had been kept hidden by the lawyer.

During the war, Sutpen met Henry and found out that Henry's was going to allow Bon to marry Judith. Bon sent the letter to Judith, but, as we know, he never reached the house.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The lawyer and the events that he manipulates become part of the indistinct mixture of fact and invention. His role is to provide explanation for the extreme coincidence that brings the half-siblings together. Although he is never given a voice in the narrative in the way that other characters are, Quentin and Shreve bring him to the surface at this late stage in the text, as a sort of evil creative genius, a force that has been working to reunite the family from the beginning.

"The lawyer behind the desk (and maybe in the secret drawer the ledger where he had just finished adding in the last year's interest compounded between the intrinsic and the love and the pride at 200%)."

The ledger may be seen as a symbol of creative license, and ultimately of the secret personal motivations of the story's characters. Without a single living witness to the events, the text develops from factual history to imaginative fiction. The invention of the lawyer allows the friends to recast Bon in a more sympathetic light. Quentin imagines him challenging the lawyer to a duel, and of the lawyer's theft of his mother's fortune, later in the chapter. Shreve's voice disrupts the stream of consciousness, which is now also playing host to the imagined script of Henry and Bon's last conversation before the letter to Judith.

A war injury once attributed to Bon is instead assigned to Henry. Quentin imagines him begging to be allowed to die, so that he does not have to play his future part in the family drama. At this point, he is bound by brotherly love to his half-brother and sister, but also obliged by his moral sense to act as the final barrier to their marriage.

The war, which has ripped apart the fabric of union and which is now destroying the reality of Southern life, causes Henry to re-evaluate the situation. For as long as he is able, he maintains his family amidst the turmoil of war, by preventing Bon from writing to Judith. In the meeting with Sutpen, for which the text has provided no proof, Henry's wounding at Shiloh is mentioned. For the purposes of the story, Quentin refers to the blood tie between father and son, which reasserts the theme of inescapable family destiny. The changes made by Quentin and Shreve at this late stage begin to tie the story of the family more closely to the destruction of the South.

Bon realizes that Henry's objection has been based on racial prejudice, the Southern hostility towards miscegenation (inter-racial sexual relations). The full outrage of Southern racial attitudes is here laid bare. It seems incredible that a brother should consider the matter of race more significant than incest. Shreve suggests that the photograph of the Octoroon (the first wife/mistress) and her child was intended by Bon as an apology for the circumstances of his birth. He imagines Bon telling Henry that the discovery of the picture would console Judith by showing her that, as a colored man with a colored mistress and child, he is not good enough for her. This invented message provides explanation for Judith's lack of emotion on his death. It also forms a sort of final comment on the issue of racial hatred. In this way, the racial issue is fully implicated in the entire tragedy of the family, and of the South.

There is a strange symmetry between the past and present. Henry and Bon, and Quentin and Shreve are college friends, united by their platonic love for each other. By platonic, we mean an ideal, purely psychological love, higher than physical, sexual attraction. Quentin and Shreve may have been inspired by the nature of their own friendship to guess that his love for Bon that led Henry to choose his course of action. The parallel between the two sets of college friends is another clue to the origin of certain details in the characterization of the Sutpens.

Henry is described as aping (copying) the clothing style of Bon, and even of changing his course of study to match Bon's. Their love is an innocent sort of admiration, just like Quentin and Shreve's is described as chaste (lacking in sexual passion) and natural. In the context of the women of the novel, who gossip about engagements and anticipate the sexual union of marriage by making undergarments before the engagement is formally announced, these masculine relationships stand out as examples of ideal love. Rosa's silence in response to Sutpen's proposal is significant. Firstly, we can compare her sudden shock at being seen, being visually appraised by a man who has previously taken no notice of her, to the young Sutpen's anger at being ignored by the Negro butler. We can conclude that women exist in this society to be looked at, and that their power resides in being attractive. In contrast, the men exist to be heard. They have the power to command and influence. Secondly, Rosa's lack of response illustrates the supremacy of Sutpen's will: he simply informs Rosa that they will marry, and her silence reveals her lack of resistance. From her perspective, she mentions that there were plenty of possible reasons for her lack of resistance, but she does not single out any one explanation. It is as if her reasons are totally insignificant to the story, as if her own will is stifled by Sutpen's all-encompassing will.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Quentin tells the story of his and Rosa's final visit to the Estate. He finds Henry Sutpen lying in an upstairs room. He has gone there to die. Three months later, Quentin discovers that Rosa has returned to the house with an ambulance, hoping to save Henry, but before they arrive, they see that the house has burned to the ground. Rosa is restrained by the ambulance attendants, and is taken to hospital, where she lapses into a coma and dies.

Quentin recalls a passage from his father's letter. In a piece of frozen earth from the grave, he sees a red worm, which has survived the harsh winter conditions. It emerges that Clytie is responsible for setting the fire. Bon's grandson, Jim Bond, disappears from the area and is never heard of again. Shreve tells Quentin that miscegenation is the future for racial integration, and that Negroes will gain power and influence by interbreeding with whites. Quentin realizes that he does not hate the South.

Genealogy: the names, dates of births and deaths are recorded. There is no record of Bon's first marriage, but he is described as having had a mistress, whose name is not mentioned.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The house, which is conventionally a symbol of masculine power (patriarchal authority) has been guarded by Clytie, a mixed-race female, and has been the refuge of the sole surviving heir to Sutpen's Hundred, Henry. It is ironic that he should choose the symbol of his father's rule and of all that has gone wrong throughout its history, for his final resting-place. This, added to Shreve's prediction about the future of racial politics, symbolically draws a line under the racial prejudice, which Quentin's reworked text has established as the root cause of the tragedy that envelops family and country. With the deaths of Rosa and Henry, and the disappearance of Jim Bond, the South is redeemed, as per the prophecy at the beginning of the novel. Those who have shed blood through racial hatred are gone, and those who must take up new roles in the reunited country have taken advantage of their liberation, and symbolically escaped from the reach of the Sutpen connection.

Faulkner's parting shot hints towards the survival of racial hatred, and to continuing antagonism between the peoples of the United States. The Red-worm could be understood as a symbol of violence or hatred, which is able to endure the harshest environments. Shreve's comment (that it takes two Negroes to kill a Sutpen) carries connotations of racial violence, and of persisting white attitudes. With Quentin's repeated realization that he does not hate the South, the story closes on the theme of

absolution (forgiveness). Through the act of telling this story, Quentin has purged the South of the shame of racial hatred.

The rotting house at Sutpen's Hundred (1909) symbolizes moral corruption, and the disintegration of what the house represents the power of the father (patriarchal authority), and the Southern way of life (White supremacy, slavery, agricultural economy).

The fire that destroys the house symbolically purges the land, and the South, of the stains that have blotted its history. The South is symbolically cleansed of its sins.

The genealogy is a device that seeks to redefine the basic elements of the story, as a counter to the invention and expressive license that has served to obscure the 'facts' of the novel. Bon's entry confirms that it was the weight of the racial issue that blocked his marriage to Judith: it states that he was not legally married to Charles's mother, and therefore discounts the objection as it appeared earlier in the novel.

Characters

Charles Bon

Charles is Thomas Sutpen's son by his Haitian wife. Although Sutpen abandons Charles and his mother, Charles' path later crosses Sutpen's when he attends law school with Sutpen's son Henry, and the two become great friends. Charles falls in love with Henry's sister, Judith, and they plan to marry, but their plans are interrupted by the Civil War. As Henry and Charles fight together, they learn more about each other. When Henry realizes that he and Charles are half-brothers, Charles refuses to tell his friend what he plans to do about his engagement to Judith. After the war, Charles tells Henry, quite nastily, that he is going to marry Judith, and Henry kills him immediately.

Charles wants only the slightest acknowledgment from Sutpen that he is his son but never gets it. Charles knows that his plan to marry Judith means that Sutpen will either have to accept him as a son-in-law or admit that he is his son to stop him from marrying his daughter. Although in life, Charles never receives the acknowledgment he wants from Sutpen, he is buried in the family plot.

Charles Etienne Saint Valery Bon

This character is Charles Bon's son by a one-eighth black woman.

Jim Bond

Jim is the mentally-handicapped son of Charles Etienne Saint Valery Bon (who is Charles Bon's son) and his black wife. Jim is, in the end, the only survivor of Thomas Sutpen's family.

Clytie

Clytie (Clytemnestra) is the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Sutpen and a slave woman. She stays in the Sutpen house during and after the Civil War. When Henry returns, she thinks the law is chasing him for killing Charles, so she sets the house on fire, killing herself and Henry.

Ellen Coldfield

Ellen is Sutpen's wife in Jefferson, Mississippi. She is proper and innocent with a disposition in stark contrast to her husband's wild nature. She has two children with Sutpen, Henry and Judith. During the Civil War, she dies, and in her last moments, she asks her sister Rosa to protect Judith.

Goodhue Coldfield

Goodhue is Ellen's father. Thomas Sutpen chooses him as a father-in-law (perhaps more than he chooses Ellen as a wife) because of his righteousness and respectable standing in the community. There is some arrangement between Mr. Coldfield and Sutpen, the details of which are never revealed, but Mr. Coldfield apparently comes to regret it.

Rosa Coldfield

One of the novel's narrators, Rosa is Ellen Coldfield's sister. Rosa is twenty-seven years younger than Ellen, so she is closer in age to her niece Judith than to Ellen. When Mr. Coldfield dies, Rosa goes to live at Sutpen's Hundred. After Ellen's death, Sutpen asks Rosa to marry him. She agrees but is abandoned by Sutpen before they can marry. She lives the rest of her life bitter and alone and, in the end, she calls for Quentin so she can tell him Sutpen's story.

Rosa starts out a typical, optimistic young woman, but the Civil War and the ruin of her family turn her into a resentful and lonely woman. In her youth, she was the town's poetess laureate. Her mother, because of her age at the time of Rosa's birth, died in childbirth, and Rosa resents her father for her mother's death. Throughout her life, her focus is on her family, and as each member is taken away, she is forced further into solitude.

General Compson

Quentin's grandfather, General Compson was one of the first men in Jefferson to accept Thomas Sutpen into the community. Because he personally knew Sutpen, he tells his son Jason and his grandson Quentin much about him.

Mr. Jason Compson III

One of the novel's narrators, Mr. Compson is Quentin's father. His telling of the story reveals his deterministic and cynical views of the world. He admires Sutpen greatly and is struck by his failure. Compson imagines that if a courageous and hardworking man like Sutpen could fail so thoroughly, his pessimistic view of the world must be correct. Compson believes that fate and destiny rule the course of people's lives and that there is little they can do to change the course set for them.

Quentin Compson

One of the novel's narrators, Quentin is a student at Harvard who comes from the small town of Jefferson. Faulkner describes Quentin as a young man torn between two

selves: an educated Harvard man full of promise and potential and a native of the South who has much in common with people like Rosa. He struggles to make sense of his southern heritage, and when asked by his roommate to tell about the South, Quentin tells Sutpen's story. Because the Sutpen story is so integral to the town of Jefferson and, in Quentin's mind, to the South, he searches the saga for answers to life's questions.

Faulkner's chronology at the end of the novel reveals that Quentin commits suicide just after the events of the novel.

Major de Spain

Major de Spain is the sheriff who investigates Sutpen's murder. When he discovers that Wash Jones is responsible, the sheriff kills him.

Milly Jones

Milly is Wash Jones' fifteen-year-old granddaughter. Sutpen, who desperately wants a son, seduces her. When Milly has a girl, Sutpen insults her, and Wash kills Sutpen, Milly, and the child.

Wash Jones

Wash is a poor man who is a squatter on Sutpen's land during the Civil War. He is a great admirer of Sutpen, yet he kills Sutpen, Milly, and their child when Sutpen abuses Milly.

Shreve McCannon

Quentin's roommate at Harvard, Shreve (Shrevlin) not only listens to Quentin's account of Sutpen but also tries to help Quentin fill in the blanks in the story. Because Shreve is Canadian, he has few preconceptions about the South and its history.

Eulalia Bon Sutpen

Eulalia is Thomas Sutpen's wife in Haiti. She bears him a son, Charles, but when Thomas discovers that a small portion of her heritage is black, he leaves her and Charles in Haiti.

Henry Sutpen

Henry is the son of Thomas Sutpen and Ellen Coldfield. When Henry attends law school, he befriends Charles Bon, who then falls in love with Henry's sister Judith.

Charles and Judith plan to marry, but the men are called to fight in the Civil War. Henry fights alongside Charles and discovers that he is the son Thomas Sutpen left behind in Haiti. This means that Charles is the half-brother of Henry and Judith. Despite Henry's insistence on knowing how Charles plans to handle his engagement to Judith, Charles will not tell.

After the war, Henry returns to Sutpen's Hundred with Charles, and as they approach the house, Charles reveals that he intends to marry Judith. Henry responds by immediately killing Charles and then running away. Many years later, Henry reappears at Sutpen's Hundred, where he is taken in by his sister and Clytie. He later dies there.

Judith Sutpen

Judith is the daughter of Thomas Sutpen and Ellen Coldfield. Judith has her father's hardy nature and does not flinch at witnessing violence. When she meets her brother's college friend Charles Bon, the two fall in love and plan to marry. Henry later kills Charles in front of the house, and Judith never marries.

Thomas Sutpen

Thomas Sutpen is the main figure in the story that is retold throughout the novel. Many critics note that Sutpen represents the work ethic of the South, along with its decline and failures. Sutpen comes from a poor family and is unconcerned with wealth until one day when he takes a message to a large estate. The uniformed servant informs him that he should go to the back entrance on future visits. After this incident, Sutpen decides that, some day, he will own a large estate and be in a position to tell people to go to the back. Part of his master plan is to have sons, a preoccupation that leads to ruin. (One son kills another, and the killer later dies in Sutpen's mansion; Sutpen's anger at not having a son by Milly brings about Sutpen's own death.)

As a young man, Sutpen travels to Haiti, where he marries a plantation owner's daughter, and they have a son. When he learns that his wife has remote black ancestry, he disowns her and their son. He returns to the United States, where he chooses Jefferson, Mississippi, as the site for his mansion in the wilderness. With the help of a French architect and a group of "wild" slaves (presumably from Haiti), Sutpen clears land and builds an estate that he names Sutpen's Hundred. Next, he marries into a respectable family and has two children, Henry and Judith.

Sutpen is a power-hungry man who seeks to create and control his environment. When he leaves to fight in the Civil War, he soon becomes his unit's leader. Upon returning to Sutpen's Hundred after the war, he finds his estate in ruins and his slaves gone. Further, his wife has died, and his son has run away after killing Charles Bon. Although he crudely asks his wife's sister to marry him, he abandons her and seduces the teenage granddaughter of a poor man living on his land. She bears him a child, but not the son Sutpen wants. His cruelty to the girl provokes her father to kill him.

Themes

The American South

In *Absalom, Absalom!,* Faulkner openly criticizes the ethical and moral practices of the American South. The story of Sutpen is analogous to the story of the South, and Faulkner suggests that they ultimately fail for the same reasons. By building its success and comfort on the enslavement of another race, the South is doomed to fail because an immoral design is not sustainable. Both Sutpen and the South believe that it is possible to set aside morality at times to pursue a larger social goal. Rosa comments to Quentin that the South was doomed to lose the war because it was led by men like Sutpen, whom she perceives as dishonest, cruel, and manipulative. She remarks in chapter one:

Oh he was brave. I have never gainsaid that. But that our cause, our very life and future hopes and past pride, would have been thrown into the balance with men like that to buttress it□men with valor and strength but without pity or honor. Is it any wonder that Heaven saw fit to let us lose?

The novel contains references to the Civil War and the destruction of the South in the war's aftermath. Rosa tells Quentin that she suspects that after he graduates from Harvard, he will practice law somewhere besides in his hometown of Jefferson because "Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man." Mr. Compson explains to Quentin that he should listen politely to Rosa's story because long ago the South made its women into ladies, and then the war made the ladies into ghosts. He adds, "So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?"

Truth

Each version of Sutpen's story is different because it is told through the memories and perceptions of each narrator. When the reader reaches the end of the novel, the basic facts are in order, but there is uncertainty regarding many aspects of the story. None of the narrators is completely reliable, which poses a problem to the reader accustomed to depending on at least one trustworthy narrator.

Faulkner shows his reader that there are limits to how fully people can know the truth about the past. Truth seems to be in the eye of the beholder, as is evident with each telling of Sutpen's story. The challenge is for the reader, then, to make decisions about which narrators are reliable in which instances. Then, the reader must speculate about other aspects of the story. Because no two narrators tell the exact same story, and different readers can interpret the story in different ways, knowing the truth about

Sutpen's story becomes impossible. Add to that the exceedingly complex narrative structure, and the events told in the novel become even more uncertain and difficult to manage. Thus, Faulkner uses both form and content to demonstrate the limited capacity people have to know the truth of past events.

The Past

In his character portrayals, Faulkner expresses his belief that people should be aware of the past and learn what they can from it, but they should not allow it to shape their lives. Each narrator has a different relationship with the past. Rosa finds the past to be a source of bitterness and disappointment, yet she is unable to live in the present. Mr. Compson finds in the past evidence that his fatalistic view of the world is correct. He also believes that past generations were greater than the present generation, so while he may draw inspiration from the past, he must live in the present, which is discouraging for him. Quentin feels deeply connected to his heritage, and because Sutpen's tale is legendary in his hometown of Jefferson, he becomes obsessed with making sense of the story. At the beginning of chapter two, the narrator comments that in Jefferson, Quentin breathes the same air and hears the same church bells as Sutpen did in the past. Because Quentin feels so connected to the South, he has difficulty coming to terms with his love for his region and the shame of its past. He is burdened by his responsibility for events of long ago and struggles to understand his role as a modern-day man of the South.

Characters within the story are also affected by their pasts. Sutpen is driven by his need to distance himself from the poverty of his past. He seeks to reinvent himself so that his past will have no hold on him. When he leaves Haiti, he is certain that he is leaving another segment of his past behind, but he later realizes that his past has found him in the person of Charles. Charles is also motivated by events from his past. He is wounded by his father's sudden departure in his childhood, and he seeks to be validated. When he encounters his father in America, he longs to heal his past by reconnecting with him. His determination to be accepted by Sutpen, however, leads to his death. Charles insists that he will marry Judith, even though she is his half-sister. Although it is not clear, the reader assumes that he hopes that either he will be accepted as a son-in-law (if not a son) by Sutpen or Sutpen will be forced to tell the real reason he objects to the marriage, thus claiming Charles as his son. Charles does not take into account the possibility that Henry will kill him rather than allow him to marry Judith.

Style

Narrative Structure

Absalom, Absalom! is considered to be one of Faulkner's most difficult novels because of its complex narrative structure. In a sense, the story becomes part of an oral tradition among the residents of Jefferson and, as Shreve becomes involved, people living beyond Jefferson. Many of Faulkner's characteristic structural innovations are employed in *Absalom, Absalom!,* such as long sentences, flashbacks, and multiple points of view describing the same events. Because the narrative structure is so unusual, the reader is kept off balance from the opening pages to the end of the novel and must learn how to read it as the book unfolds.

There are four characters narrating the story, and a fifth omniscient narrator also occasionally speaks to the reader. The challenge is often determining who is speaking at any given time because Faulkner switches from narrator to narrator without always signifying the change. The reader must be particularly adept in chapter five when the narration switches between Quentin and Shreve and then back to Quentin as he tries imagining how Shreve would tell the story. Further, the novel's overall design is not clear until the end of the book. There is no introductory paragraph to provide a framework for the reader. Instead, the book begins with Rosa talking to Quentin with Quentin wondering why she called for him. This lack of context is very perplexing to readers, and navigating the headwaters of the novel requires a great deal of effort. Additionally, readers expect a novel to start at the beginning of a story and move through a series of events toward a satisfying end. In *Absalom, Absalom!,* however, there is no true beginning or end, so the reader must submit to hearing each narrator's version of the same story and come to understand what the story means on individual and social levels.

Of the four characters who narrate the story, none of them is completely reliable. Each has his or her own bias, and it is up to the reader to determine what the biases are and how they affect the telling of the story. In her old age, Rosa experiences the memory of the events differently than she experienced the events when they happened. For this reason, she is an unreliable narrator. Mr. Compson knows the story from his father, who admired and respected Sutpen. This, coupled with the fact that Mr. Compson did not witness the events of the story himself, makes him an unreliable narrator. Quentin is even further removed from the story than his father is, and he seeks answers to some of life's big questions, so he is also unreliable. Shreve is not invested in the story at all and hears the story after it has come through various people's biases (General Compson's, Mr. Compson's, Rosa's, and Quentin's), so he is also unreliable. Many critics note that because of the burden on the reader, he or she essentially becomes a narrator, hearing the story numerous times and being forced to make assumptions about missing or conflicting information.

Faulkner also tends to mention new characters in passing, as if the reader knows who they are. Not until later does the reader learn how they fit into the overall story and structure. Then, the reader struggles to recall what was said earlier in the novel about the various members of the growing cast of characters.

Regionalism

Absalom, Absalom! is regional in scope although its themes extend well beyond the South. Except for the room that Quentin and Shreve share at Harvard (where they sit and tell the story of Sutpen), all the action of the novel takes place in the South; the concerns of the characters are confined to the small southern town of Jefferson, Mississippi. Although there are no dialects, the novel portrays the manners, habits, and lore of the South. As with any truly regional novel, *Absalom, Absalom!* would not work in any other setting. Its characters would not be believable in another geographic area, and its depiction of the consequences of slavery is unique to the South.

Literary Devices

Faulkner employs a variety of literary techniques throughout *Absalom, Absalom!,* notably several significant instances of irony. He uses irony when Rosa speaks of Henry's murder of Charles as being almost fratricide. (She is not aware that the two men were half-brothers.) Another instance of irony is when, after all his failed efforts to be accepted by Sutpen as his son, Charles is buried in the family graveyard. Another even more disturbing example of irony is the fact that Charles, who has black ancestry, fights as an officer for the Confederacy.

A simile appears near the beginning of the novel where Faulkner writes that Sutpen came upon "a scene peaceful and decorous as a school prize water color." And, describing Quentin, Faulkner employs a metaphor, noting that

his very body was an empty hall echoing with
sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity,
he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks
filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering.

Through various literary techniques, Faulkner creates a mythic atmosphere for Sutpen's saga. The reiteration of the story is reminiscent of the legends and folktales kept alive by oral tradition. Rosa describes Sutpen in supernatural terms including ogre, *djinn,* fiend, and demon. In fact, she believes that his evil is so intense that he brings curses on those with whom he comes in contact. In this way, Sutpen becomes almost a supernatural figure. Further, the grand scale and headstrong ambition of Sutpen's plans align him with mythical and heroic figures.

Biblical and classical allusions appear throughout the novel. Ellen is likened to Niobe, a character in Greek mythology who is turned to stone while weeping for her children. Rosa is compared to Cassandra, the daughter of the King of Troy who possessed

prophetic powers, according to Greek mythology. The book's title is a biblical reference to David's mournful cry at the death of his son Absalom.

Historical Context

The Civil War Aftermath

Almost one-third of the southern men who went to fight in the Civil War (1861-1865) died, and almost as many suffered serious injuries. Because slaves were available to perform work, nearly eighty percent of eligible (by age and health status) white southern men were able to fight in the Civil War. They all brought home emotional, if not physical, scars. During the war, thousands of refugees in the South, black and white, lost everything they owned and faced uncertainty and terror about the future. Many families were forced to seek ways to get by without their fathers, husbands, and brothers to support them. Children who grew up without men in their families felt incomplete, and they often grew up thinking that they could never achieve the bravery and nobility of their fallen relatives.

To make matters worse, the South was in financial ruin at the end of the war. Railroads, manufacturing equipment, farm machinery, and livestock were destroyed. The destruction was so severe that industry in the South was set back a full generation. During Reconstruction (1865-1877), the North and South struggled to come to terms with the new legal and social parameters of the nation. The central concerns of the Reconstruction Period were: defining the relationship between the former North and the former South; determining who was responsible for the Confederate rebellion and whether punishment was in order; deciding which rights would be granted to former slaves; and conceiving a recovery plan for the southern economy. The transition was tense and arduous because Southerners were angry and uncooperative in the wake of their defeat. Memorials to the war in the South were slow coming, but, in time, Southerners renewed their sense of regional pride.

Southern Social Life

In the South, gender roles were specific and were taught at an early age. According to *Encyclopedia of American Social History,* a young man in the North entered adulthood by undertaking religious training or an apprenticeship and by reading works by English moralists, while young men in the South read traditional courtly works and planned their futures with a focus on the land. Young southern men demonstrated their manhood to their families by working hard to show that they would be good providers for their future families. Social structure and habits in the South were rooted in chivalry and hierarchy, and the prevailing code of honor sometimes included the aristocratic tradition of dueling. In contrast, the ideology of the North was based on ethics and conscience. The courtly foundation of many southern traditions extended to its treatment of women. Women were regarded as delicate creatures to be admired for their beauty and grace. They were expected to avoid competition and to prepare for romantic, submissive love relationships with their future husbands. Young people were taught to respect their

elders, a characteristic exhibited by Quentin when he insists that Shreve refer to Rosa as "Miss Rosa," not as "Aunt Rosa" or as an "old dame."

During the Civil War, women were given an opportunity to be more independent and to adopt formerly masculine roles as nurses, factory workers, farmers, and clerks. At the end of the war, however, women returned to their positions as domestic figures, except that their status was reduced because of the absence of slaves. Now, women were expected to do more work in their homes and to occupy the most submissive position in the house.

Although their duties were concentrated on domestic affairs and their power was non-existent, southern women symbolized the virtue and goodness of the South. When men returned from the war, they depended on their women to provide reassurance and comfort. The southern patriarchy quickly reestablished itself, and the women were integral in helping men recover from the horrors of war and the humility of defeat.

Naturalistic and Symbolistic Period in American Literature

The Naturalistic and Symbolistic Period in American Literature extended between 1900 and 1930. Early in the century, the country witnessed a rise in journalistic exposés, and a movement toward unflinching realism in literature was seen in the works of Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London. After World War I came the emergence of the Lost Generation, a group of writers disillusioned by American idealism. These writers longed for something new and innovative and found it in French symbolists like James Joyce and Marcel Proust. They rejected many aspects of American culture, in some cases creating a new polished style of writing, in other cases writing satire, and in still other cases recalling simpler times in American history when society was more structured and had a sense of tradition. In this last group were many prominent southern writers, including Faulkner.

Critical Overview

At the time of its publication, *Absalom, Absalom!* encountered mixed responses to its unorthodox narrative structure. Some critics regarded the novel's structure as overly confusing and involved, deeming it ineffective. Over time, however, scholars have come to universally commend Faulkner as a genius who was able to fuse content and form perfectly in this novel. The existing body of criticism covers virtually every aspect of the novel, from obvious themes and techniques to subtle relationships between characters and the psychological motivations behind the action of the story.

The structural complexity of the novel presents a unique set of challenges to the reader although critics regard time spent unraveling the novel well spent. David Minter of *American Writers* observed that Faulkner specialized in fragmented narratives that demonstrate little interest in traditional, continuous forms. "As a result," Minter added, "the role of the reader would necessarily be enlarged and made more creative as well as more challenging." The writer Cleanth Brooks commented in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* that *Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner's greatest work, but it is also the least understood because of the challenges in reading it. For this reason, Brooks maintained that the novel is highly subject to interpretation and thus can be meaningful to a wide audience. He noted:

The property of a great work, as T. S. Eliot remarked
long ago, is to communicate before it is understood;
and *Absalom, Absalom!* passes this test triumphantly.
It has meant something very powerful and important
to all sorts of people, and who is to say that, under
the circumstances, this something was not the thing
to be said to that particular reader?. . .Yet the book
has its own rights, as it were, and in proportion as
we admire it, we shall want to see not merely what
we can make of it but what it makes of itself.

Scholars consider the regional elements of *Absalom, Absalom!* to be realistic and vibrant. In *The Achievement of William Faulkner,* Michael Millgate commented that the novel's tragic power

derives both from this profoundly localized sense of
social reality and from a poignant awareness of the
proud and shameful history of the courageous, careless,
gallant, and oppressive South. At the same time,
to concentrate too exclusively on this aspect of his
work is to be in danger of mistaking means for ends
and of seeing Faulkner as a lesser figure than he really is.

Faulkner's novel is not simply about the South, and critics readily praise the author's ability to portray universal themes and experiences in the southern context he knew so

well. In fact, some critics have marveled at Faulkner's ability to portray such profound and universal ideas, given his isolated, regional background. Many critics admire the way Faulkner seamlessly wove his various themes together into a cohesive whole and made them relevant to modern life. Faulkner's idea that history's truths are not completely knowable was addressed by Brooks, who remarked:

Most important of all, however, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a persuasive commentary upon the thesis that much of 'history' is really a kind of imaginative construction. The past always remains at some level a mystery, but if we are to hope to understand it in any way, we must enter into it and project ourselves imaginatively into the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures.

The characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* are also the subjects of much critical attention. Rosa is considered by some to be a typical southern woman who is quiet and easily dismissed. After all, the argument goes, she lacks social influence in the small town of Jefferson and never moves into the accepted female roles of wife and mother. On the other hand, some feminist critics point to evidence in the novel of her importance in preserving Sutpen's story, adding that her account is so valuable that it is offered first and provides the basis for the discussion between Quentin and Shreve. Brooks called the introduction of Shreve into the novel a stroke of brilliance, as it acknowledges the modern- day reader's cynicism and rationalism regarding localized tales. Brooks also described Judith as "one of the most moving [characters] that Faulkner has ever written" because of the endurance of her basic humanity in the face of misfortune.

Absalom, Absalom! is revered by numerous scholars as Faulkner's best work or, at the very least, one of his top three novels. Brooks found it to be Faulkner's most memorable novel, writing:

Absalom, Absalom! is in many respects the most brilliantly written of all Faulkner's novels, whether one considers its writing line by line and paragraph by paragraph, or its structure, in which we are moved up from one suspended note to a higher suspended note and on up further still to an almost intolerable climax. The intensity of the book is a function of its structure. . . . There are actually few instances in modern fiction of a more perfect adaptation of form to matter and of an intricacy that justifies itself at every point through the significance and intensity which makes it possible.

BOOKRAGS

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she examines Rosa's, Mr. Compson's, and Quentin's versions of the Sutpen story, determining what each narrator brings to the telling of the story. She also considers what is at stake for each narrator that may account for the differences in their perceptions of the story.

The complex narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* presents a major challenge for William Faulkner's readers. The story does not unfold in a familiar way; the reader must learn how to read it as the story is told and retold, piecing together elements of the Sutpen story and then trying to understand Faulkner's underlying design. Because the novel consists of different narrators telling the same story (a story that occurred in the past and is, therefore, more subject to interpretation than a story happening in the present), variations arise that provide insights into the characters who serve as narrators. To better understand the novel, a close examination of these variations is extremely useful. Each narrator has something at stake in the story, and each, therefore, perceives the characters and events differently. Each narrator also belongs to a different generation, and this, too, affects each one's view of the story.

Rosa is the first narrator to tell the story of Thomas Sutpen, a mysterious stranger who arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, one day and forever changes the lives of many of its residents. Rosa is the oldest of the narrators and was living at the time the events took place. Over forty years have elapsed, however, and her longstanding hatred for Sutpen is a major influence in how she remembers the events. She recalls simpler, happier days in her family and believes that its downfall began when Sutpen married Rosa's older sister, Ellen. Rosa tells the story in a bitter and accusatory tone that places all blame for her family's demise on Sutpen, whom she describes as a demon, an ogre, a *djinn* (similar to a genie), and a fiend. Over the years, she has convinced herself that he was so evil that he brought curses upon those with whom he came in contact. By imagining that Sutpen possessed an almost supernatural evil, Rosa is able to color her memories in sharp black and white, with no shades of gray and nothing open to alternative interpretations.

After Rosa's sister died, Sutpen crudely proposed to Rosa but then suggested that they have a son before marrying. It was clear that Sutpen had no intention of going through with the marriage unless Rosa was able to produce a male heir. Rosa's dignity and optimism were shattered, and Sutpen moved on to find someone who would go along with his plans. Consequently, Rosa lived out the rest of her life alone and bitter, watching each member of her family die over the years. Readers are often surprised that Rosa would accept the proposal of a man she deems so reprehensible, but there is reason to believe that she began to feel this way after he abandoned her to spinsterhood. In fact, Rosa seems to have been an optimistic and romantic young woman; she wrote poetry and was active in her community. Even after her sister married Sutpen, Rosa saw little of him and may have seen him as a heroic and exciting

man. Thus his bad treatment of her would have come as a shock and crushed her hopes for a happy ending, leaving her cynical about life's opportunities. Forty years later, Rosa has nothing to look forward to and little to enjoy in the present, so she is stuck in the past. The way her life has turned out - what she has become and has not become - is a result of Sutpen's story. She must find in the story a way to understand and interpret her life. She has allowed her life and personality to be determined by events that happened over forty years ago, so when she is described as a ghost, it is a fitting metaphor.

The second narrator is Mr. Compson, the son of General Compson. General Compson was among the first members of Jefferson to accept Sutpen, so the version of the story he told his son was undoubtedly complimentary rather than reproachful. As a result, Mr. Compson's descriptions contrast with Rosa's, as he portrays Sutpen as a strong, brave individual with an ironclad work ethic. It becomes clear to the reader that Mr. Compson, from having heard the story so many times and from the laudatory accounts of his father, is carried away with the legend. He sees Sutpen not as a demon, but as a heroic and mythic figure who breathed life and adventure into the small town of Jefferson. Mr. Compson tells how Sutpen cleared a large tract of land and built a stunning mansion in the wilderness. He also emphasizes that when Sutpen went to fight in the Civil War, he was bold, and his men looked to him for leadership.

Mr. Compson overlooks the less admirable aspects of Sutpen's story, such as the fact that he cheated a Native American out of the land on which he built his estate. He interprets Sutpen's unbending determination as an admirable quality rather than as the driving force behind his mistreatment of people around him. There is a reason that Mr. Compson is compelled to find in Sutpen's story the saga of a great man who ultimately fails. Mr. Compson believes in a world dictated by destiny in which men and women have no control over their fates. Despite his admiring account of Sutpen's life, Mr. Compson is deeply cynical and fatalistic. Sutpen's story is, for Mr. Compson, proof that his worldview is correct; even a great man like Sutpen was unable to escape his fated doom. Perhaps Mr. Compson feels that he has not achieved much in his own life and seeks reasons to believe that he is right to not take risks or to not try to do great things. He believes that past generations were greater and more impressive than his own (a view that certainly is supported by the mythology of Sutpen's story), so he feels inferior to Sutpen. For Mr. Compson, his way of seeing and interpreting the world is at stake in the Sutpen story. He emphasizes those elements of Sutpen's story that confirm his beliefs and glosses over elements that would challenge them.

Except for Shreve, Quentin is the narrator furthest removed from Sutpen's story, yet he feels a deep connection to it. When Shreve asks Quentin about the South, Quentin chooses to tell him about Sutpen. This indicates that Quentin equates this story with the story of the South. All of Quentin's information comes from primary sources, but Quentin himself can never be more than a secondary source. Unlike his father, however, Quentin receives information from a variety of sources. Besides having heard the story from his father and Rosa, Quentin has also heard details of the story from his grandfather, who shared information with Quentin that he did not share with his own

son. In a sense, Quentin becomes an archivist for the Sutpen story although his personal investment in the story is profound.

For Quentin, the story potentially contains the answers to his questions about how he should live his life in the modern world. He grew up in Jefferson, hearing about Sutpen throughout his childhood and youth, and his connection to the town and its folklore is a defining element of his personality. This may be difficult for some modern readers to understand, but at the beginning of the book, Quentin is preparing to leave his comfortable hometown to go to Harvard. Additionally, the year is 1909, a time when young people felt more involved in their communities and often formed their identities around their hometowns. This need to understand his past is intensified by the fact that he comes from the South, a region where people are deeply aware of and still closely connected to a tragic and shameful history. Quentin feels a degree of responsibility for the past, which affects how he carries himself in his present-day world. Making sense of the Sutpen story becomes critical to his understanding of himself and his role in the world; he searches for answers and lessons that he can apply in his own life. This aspect differentiates Quentin from the other two narrators because they are recalling events as they know them while Quentin becomes obsessed with the story and seeks details and information from all possible sources.

Quentin is at times impatient when he feels that he is hearing information he has already heard many times. He is searching for new insights, which is why he agrees to visit Henry, who is dying. After he sees Henry, who is frail and torn down by life, Quentin rides away like he is being chased. Rosa's grim account of the story and the tragedy that befell everyone involved seems to be accurate. This creates an emotional and urgent reaction in Quentin, who desperately seeks something hopeful and logical in the story because he sees it as the story of his own past and as a key to his present and future. Although Rosa sees Sutpen as an evil force and Mr. Compson sees him as a victim of fate, Quentin sees him as a representative of all that was good and bad in the Old South. Quentin admires Sutpen, but with reservations; he sees the admirable qualities in the man, but he also sees the immorality of his decisions. Quentin alone sees Sutpen as a human being who was complicated and fallible. For Quentin, his view of himself in the world is at stake in Sutpen's story. If he cannot find guidance in the story, he has nowhere else to turn. The chronology at the end of the book indicates that Quentin committed suicide just after the events of *Absalom, Absalom!,* which suggests that he either did not find the answers he was seeking or found answers that left him hopeless.

The story of Thomas Sutpen looms large in the life of each of these residents of Jefferson - Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin. They seek understanding of their past, present, and future lives in the narrative, so it is not surprising that they interpret the story in unique ways. The dramatic tale takes on new dimensions with each generation of storytellers, yet the true meaning of the story remains elusive.

One of Faulkner's themes in the novel is the ultimate incapacity to know the truth about historical events, and the narrators' variations of the story support that theme. At the same time, Faulkner demonstrates the importance of trying to understand the past and

the validity of personalizing stories in the pursuit of personal and social insight. Such insight can never be perfect, but it can, nevertheless, be instructive.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *Absalom, Absalom!,* in *Novels for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Brooks examines "the quality of Sutpen's innocence" to "understand the meaning of his tragedy."

Absalom, Absalom!, in my opinion the greatest of Faulkner's novels, is probably the least well understood of all his books. The property of a great work, as T. S. Eliot remarked long ago, is to communicate before it is understood, and *Absalom, Absalom!* passes this test triumphantly. It has meant something very powerful and important to all sorts of people, and who is to say that, under the circumstances, this something was not the thing to be said to that particular reader?. . .

Harvey Breit's sympathetic introduction to the Modern Library edition provides a useful - because it is not an extreme - instance of the typical misreading that I have in mind. Mr. Breit writes:

It is a terrible Gothic sequence of events, a brooding
tragic fable. . . Was it the "design" that had devoured
Sutpen and prevented him from avowing the very
thing that would have saved the design? Was it something
in the South itself, in its social, political, moral,
economic origins that was responsible for Sutpen and
for all the subsequent tragedy? Quentin can make no
judgment: Sutpen himself had possessed courage and
innocence, and the same land had nourished men and
women who had delicacy of feeling and capacity for
love and gifts for life.

These are questions which the typical reader asks. Shreve, the outsider, implies them. But it is significant that Quentin does not ask them. The questions are begged by the very way in which they are asked, for, put in this way, the questions undercut the problem of tragedy (which is the problem that obsesses Quentin). They imply that there is a social "solution." And they misread Sutpen's character in relation to his society and in relation to himself.

It is the quality of Sutpen's innocence that we must understand if we are to understand the meaning of his tragedy, and if we confuse it with innocence as we ordinarily use the term or with even the typical American "innocence" possessed by, say, one of Henry James's young heiresses as she goes to confront the corruption of Europe, we shall remain in the dark. Sutpen will be for us, as he was for Miss Rosa, simply the "demon" - or, since we lack the justification of Miss Rosa's experience of personal horror, we shall simply appropriate the term from her as Shreve, in his half-awed, half-amused fashion, does.

Faulkner has been very careful to define Sutpen's innocence for us. "Sutpen's trouble," as Quentin's grandfather observed, "was innocence." And some pages later, Mr.

Compson elaborates the point: "He believed that all that was necessary was courage and shrewdness and the one he knew he had and the other he believed he could learn if it were to be taught." It is this innocence about the nature of reality that persists, for Sutpen "believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out." That is why Sutpen can ask Quentin's grandfather, in his innocence, not "Where did I do wrong" but "Where did I make the mistake. . . what did I do or misdo. . . whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate? I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family - incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man."

This is an "innocence" with which most of us today ought to be acquainted. It is par excellence the innocence of modern man, though it has not, to be sure, been confined to modern times. One can find more than a trace of it in Sophocles' Oedipus, and it has its analogies with the rather brittle rationalism of Macbeth, though Macbeth tried to learn this innocence by an act of the will and proved to be a less than satisfactory pupil. But innocence of this sort can properly be claimed as a special characteristic of modern man, and one can claim further that it flourishes particularly in a secularized society.

The society into which Sutpen rides in 1833 is not a secularized society. That is not to say that the people are necessarily "good." They have their selfishness and cruelty and their snobbery, as men have always had them. Once Sutpen has acquired enough wealth and displayed enough force, the people of the community are willing to accept him. But they do not live by his code, nor do they share his innocent disregard of accepted values. Indeed, from the beginning they regard him with deep suspicion and some consternation. These suspicions are gradually mollified; there is a kind of acceptance; but as Quentin tells Shreve, Sutpen had only one friend, Quentin's grandfather, General Compson, and this in spite of the fact that the society of the lower South in the nineteenth century was rather fluid and that class lines were flexible. Men did rise in one generation from log cabins to great landed estates. But the past was important, blood was important, and Southern society thought of itself as traditional.

That Sutpen does remain outside the community comes out in all sorts of little ways. Mr. Compson describes his "florid, swaggering gesture" with the parenthetical remark: "yes, he was under-bred. It showed like this always, your grandfather said, in all his formal contacts with people.". . . Yet though Sutpen's manners have been learned painfully, Sutpen has complete confidence in them. "He may have believed that your grandfather or Judge Benbow might have done it a little more effortlessly than he, but he would not have believed that anyone could have beat him in knowing when to do it and how."

Mr. Compson is not overrating the possession of mere manners. More is involved than Miss Rosa's opinion that Sutpen was no gentleman, for Sutpen's manners indicate his abstract approach to the whole matter of living. Sutpen would seize upon "the traditional" as a pure abstraction - which, of course, is to deny its very meaning. For him the tradition is not a way of life "handed down" or "transmitted" from the community, past and present, to the individual nurtured by it. It is an assortment of things to be

possessed, not a manner of living that embodies certain values and determines men's conduct. The fetish objects are to be gained by sheer ruthless efficiency. (Sutpen even refers to "my schedule.") Thorstein Veblen would have understood Sutpen's relation to traditional culture. . . The New York robber baron's acquiring a box at the opera did not usually spring from a love of music, and one is tempted to say that Sutpen's unwillingness to acknowledge Charles Bon as his son does not spring from any particular racial feeling. Indeed, Sutpen's whole attitude toward the Negro has to be reinspected if we are to understand his relation to the Southern community into which he comes.

It would seem that the prevailing relation between the races in Jefferson is simply one more of the culture traits which Sutpen takes from the plantation community into which he has come as a boy out of the mountains of western Virginia. Sutpen takes over the color bar almost without personal feeling. His attitude toward the Negro is further clarified by his attitude toward his other part- Negro child, Clytie. Mr. Compson once casually lets fall the remark that Sutpen's other children "Henry and Judith had grown up with a negro half sister of their own." The context of Mr. Compson's remarks makes it perfectly plain that Henry and Judith were well aware that Clytie was indeed their half-sister, and that Clytie was allowed to grow up in the house with them. This fact in itself suggests a lack of the usual Southern feeling about Negroes. . .

After Sutpen has returned from the war, Clytie sits in the same room with Judith and Rosa and Sutpen and listens each evening to the sound of Sutpen's voice. When Sutpen proposes to Rosa, he begins, "'Judith, you and Clytie' - and ceased, still entering, then said, 'No, never mind. Rosa will not mind if you both hear it too, since we are short for time.'" Clytie is accepted naturally as part of the "we." She can be so accepted because acceptance on this level does not imperil Sutpen's "design." But acceptance of Charles Bon, in Sutpen's opinion, would. For Sutpen the matter is really as simple as that. He does not hate his first wife or feel repugnance for her child. He does not hate just as he does not love. His passion is totally committed to the design. . .

As for slavery, Sutpen does not confine himself to black chattel slavery. He ruthlessly bends anyone that he can to his will. The white French architect whom he brings into Yoknapatawpha County to build his house is as much a slave as any of his black servants: Sutpen hunts him down with dogs when he tries to escape.

The trait that most decisively sets Sutpen apart from his neighbors in this matter of race is his fighting with his slaves. Sutpen is accustomed to stripping to the waist and fighting it out with one of his slaves, not with rancor, one supposes, and not at all to punish the slave, but simply to keep fit - to prove to himself and incidentally to his slaves that he is the better man. Some of Sutpen's white neighbors come to watch the fights as they might come to watch a cockfight. But it is significant that they come as to something extraordinary, a show, an odd spectacle; they would not think of fighting with their own slaves. To Miss Rosa, Sutpen's sister-in-law, the ultimate horror is that Sutpen not only arranges the show but that he enters the ring himself and fights with no holds barred - not even eye-gouging.

Sutpen is not without morality or a certain code of honor. He is, according to his own lights, a just man. As he told Quentin's grandfather with reference to his rejection of his first wife:

suffice that I. . . accepted [my wife] in good faith,
with no reservations about myself, and I expected as
much from [her parents]. I did not [demand credentials]
as one of my obscure origin might have been
expected to do. . . I accepted them at their own valuation
while insisting on my part upon explaining
fully about myself and my progenitors: yet they deliberately
withheld from me one fact which I have
reason to know they were aware would have caused
me to decline the entire matter.

But Sutpen, as he tells General Compson, "made no attempt to keep. . . that [property] which I might consider myself to have earned at the risk of my life. . . but on the contrary I declined and resigned all right and claim to this in order that I might repair whatever injustice I might be considered to have done [in abandoning my wife and child] by so providing for" them.

Moreover, Sutpen is careful to say nothing in disparagement of his first wife. Quentin's grandfather comments upon "that morality which would not permit him to malign or traduce the memory of his first wife, or at least the memory of the marriage even though he felt that he had been tricked by it." It is Sutpen's innocence to think that justice is enough - that there is no claim that cannot be satisfied by sufficient money payment. Quentin imagines his grandfather exclaiming to Sutpen: "What kind of abysmal and purblind innocence would that have been which someone told you to call virginity? what conscience to trade with which would have warranted you in the belief that you could have bought immunity from her for no other coin but justice?"

Sutpen thinks of himself as strictly just and he submits all of his faculties almost selflessly to the achievement of his design. His attitude toward his second wife conforms perfectly to this. Why does he choose her? For choose he does: he is not chosen - that is, involved with her through passion. The choice is calculated quite cold-bloodedly (if, to our minds, naïvely and innocently). Ellen Coldfield is not the daughter of a planter. She does not possess great social prestige or beauty and she does not inherit wealth. But as the daughter of a steward in the Methodist church, she possesses in high degree the thing that Sutpen most obviously lacks - respectability. Mr. Compson sees the point very clearly. He describes Mr. Coldfield as "a man with a name for absolute and undeviating and even Puritan uprightness in a country and time of lawless opportunity, who neither drank nor gambled nor even hunted." For Sutpen, respectability is an abstraction like morality: you measure out so many cups of concentrated respectability to sweeten so many measures of disrespectability - "like the ingredients of pie or cake."

The choice of a father-in-law is, in fact, just as symbolically right: the two men resemble each other for all the appearance of antithetical differences. Mr. Coldfield is as definitely set off from the community as is Sutpen. With the coming of the Civil War, this rift widens to an absolute break. Mr. Coldfield denounces secession, closes his store, and finally nails himself up in the attic of his house, where he spends the last three years of his life. No more than Sutpen is he a coward; like Sutpen, too, his scheme of human conduct is abstract and mechanical. "Doubtless the only pleasure which he had ever had. . . was in [his money's] representation of a balance in whatever spiritual counting-house he believed would some day pay his sight drafts on self-denial and fortitude."

This last is Mr. Compson's surmise; but I see no reason to question it or to quarrel with the motive that Mr. Compson assigns for Coldfield's objection to the Civil War: "not so much to the idea of pouring out human blood and life, but at the idea of waste: of wearing out and eating up and shooting away material in any cause whatever." Mr. Coldfield is glad when he sees the country that he hates obviously drifting into a fatal war, for he regards the inevitable defeat of the South as the price it will pay for having erected its economic edifice "not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage."

Some critics have been so unwary as to assume that this view of the Civil War is one that the author would enjoin upon the reader, but William Faulkner is neither so much of a Puritan nor so much of a materialist as is Mr. Coldfield. The truth of the matter is that Mr. Coldfield's morality is simply Sutpen's turned inside out. Faulkner may or may not have read Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism;* but on the evidence of *Absalom, Absalom!* he would certainly have understood it.

Sutpen is further defined by his son, Charles Bon. Bon is a mirror image, a reversed shadow of his father. Like his father, he suddenly appears out of nowhere as a man of mystery: "a personage who in the remote Mississippi of that time must have appeared almost phoenix-like, full sprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time." Like his father, Bon has an octoroon "wife," whom he is prepared to repudiate along with his child by her. Like his father, he stands beyond good and evil. But Bon is Byronic, rather than the go-getter, spent, rather than full of pushing vitality, sophisticated, rather than confidently naïve.

Sutpen is the secularized Puritan; Bon is the lapsed Roman Catholic. Whereas Sutpen is filled with a fresh and powerful energy, Bon is world-weary and tired. Bon is a fatalist, but Sutpen believes in sheer will: "anyone could look at him and say, *Given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything."* Bon possesses too much knowledge; Sutpen on the other hand is "innocent." The one has gone beyond the distinction between good and evil; the other has scarcely arrived at that distinction. The father and the son define the extremes of the human world: one aberration corresponds to - and eventually destroys - the other. The reader is inclined to view Bon with sympathy as a person gravely wronged, and he probably agrees with Quentin's interpretation of Bon's character: that Bon finally put aside all ideas of revenge and asked for nothing more than a single hint of recognition of his sonship. Faulkner has certainly treated Bon with full dramatic sympathy - as he has Sutpen, for that matter. But

our sympathy ought not to obscure for us Bon's resemblances to his father, or the complexity of his character. Unless we care to go beyond Quentin and Shreve in speculation, Charles Bon displays toward his octoroon mistress and their son something of the cool aloofness that his father displays toward him. If he is the instrument by which Sutpen's design is wrecked, his own irresponsibility (or at the least, his lack of concern for his own child) wrecks his child's life. We shall have to look to Judith to find responsible action and a real counter to Sutpen's ruthlessness.

These other children of Sutpen - Judith and Henry - reflect further light upon the character of Sutpen - upon his virtues and upon his prime defect. They represent a mixture of the qualities of Sutpen and Coldfield. Judith, it is made plain, has more of the confidence and boldness of her father; Henry, more of the conventionality and the scruples of his maternal grandfather. It is the boy Henry who vomits at the sight of his father, stripped to the waist in the ring with the black slave. Judith watches calmly. And it is Judith who urges the coachman to race the coach on the way to church.

Henry is, of the two, the more vulnerable. After Sutpen has forbidden marriage between Bon and Judith and during the long period in which Henry remains self-exiled with his friend Bon, he is the one tested to the limit by his father's puzzling silence and by his friend's fatalistic passivity. But he has some of his father's courage, and he has what his father does not have: love. At the last moment he kills, though he kills what he loves and apparently for love. It is the truly tragic dilemma. Faulkner has not chosen to put Henry's story in the forefront of the novel, but he has not needed to do so. For the sensitive reader the various baffles through which that act of decision reaches us do not muffle but, through their resonance, magnify the decisive act.

Henry's later course is, again, only implied. We know that in the end - his last four years - he reverted to the course of action of his grandfather Coldfield, and shut himself up in the house. But there is a difference. This is no act of abstract defiance and hate. Henry has assumed responsibility, has acted, has been willing to abide the consequences of that action, and now, forty years later, has come home to die.

If it is too much to call Henry's course of action renunciation and expiation, there is full justification for calling Judith's action just that. Judith has much of her father in her, but she is a woman, and she also has love. As Mr. Compson conjectures:

And Judith: how else to explain her but this way?
Surely Bon could not have corrupted her to fatalism
in twelve days. . . No: anything but a fatalist, who
was the Sutpen with the ruthless Sutpen code of taking
what it wanted provided it were strong enough. . .
[Judith said] *I love, I will accept no substitute; something has happened between him and my father; if*
my father was right, I will never see him again, if
wrong he will come or send for me; if happy I can
be I will, if suffer I must I can.

It is Judith who invites Charles Bon's octoroon mistress to visit Bon's grave. It is Judith who, on his mother's death, sends to New Orleans for Bon's son and tries to rear him. Some years later she also tries to free him (as Quentin conjectures) by promising to take care of his Negro wife and child if he will go to the North to pass as white, and Quentin imagines her saying to him: "Call me Aunt Judith, Charles." But Quentin's conjectures aside, we know that Judith did take him into the house when he was stricken with yellow fever, and that she died nursing him. The acknowledgment of blood kinship is made; Sutpen's design is repudiated; the boy, even though he has the "taint" of Negro blood, is not turned away from the door.

Both Henry's action, the violent turning away from the door with a bullet, and Judith's, the holding open the door not merely to Bon, her fiancé, but literally to his part-Negro son, are human actions, as Sutpen's actions are not. Both involve renunciation, and both are motivated by love. The suffering of Henry and Judith is not meaningless, and their very capacity for suffering marks them as having transcended their father's radical and disabling defect. . .

One must not alter the focus of the novel by making wisdom won through suffering the issue. But the consequences entailed upon Judith and Henry have to be mentioned if only to discourage a glib Gothicizing of the novel or forcing its meaning into an over-shallow sociological interpretation.

Miss Rosa feels that the Coldfields are all cursed; and certainly the impact of Sutpen upon her personally is damning: she remains rigid with horror and hate for forty-three years. But it is Miss Rosa only who is damned. Judith is not damned; nor am I sure that Henry is. Judith and Henry are not caught in an uncomprehending stasis. There is development: they grow and learn at however terrible a price. . .

Sutpen, as has been pointed out, never learns anything; he remains innocent to the end. As Quentin sees the character: when Charles Bon first comes to his door, Sutpen does not call it "retribution, no sins of the father come home to roost; not even calling it bad luck, but just a mistake. . . just an old mistake in fact which a man of courage and shrewdness. . . could still combat if he could only find out what the mistake had been." I have remarked that Sutpen's innocence is peculiarly the innocence of modern man. For like modern man, Sutpen does not believe in Jehovah. He does not believe in the goddess Tyche. He is not the victim of bad luck. He has simply made a "mistake." He "had been too successful," Mr. Compson tells Quentin; his "was that solitude of contempt and distrust which success brings to him who gained it because he was strong instead of merely lucky.". . . Sutpen resembles the modern American, whose character, as Arthur M. Schlesinger has put it, "is bottomed on the profound conviction that nothing in the world is beyond [his] power to accomplish." Sutpen is a "planner" who works by blue-print and on a schedule. He is rationalistic and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious.

We must be prepared to take such traits into account if we attempt to read the story of Sutpen's fall as a myth of the fall of the Old South. Unless we are content with some rather rough and ready analogies, the story of the fall of the house of Sutpen may prove

less than parallel. The fall of the house of Compson as depicted in *The Sound and the Fury* is also sometimes regarded as a kind of exemplum of the fall of the old aristocratic order in the South, and perhaps in some sense it is. But the breakup of these two families comes from very different causes, and if we wish to use them to point a moral or illustrate a bit of social history, surely they point to different morals and illustrate different histories. Mr. Compson, whose father, General Compson, regarded Sutpen as a "little underbred," has failed through a kind of over-refinement. He has lost his grip on himself; he has ceased finally to believe in the values of the inherited tradition. He is a fatalist and something of an easy cynic. His vices are diametrically opposed to those of Thomas Sutpen, and so are his virtues. . . Indeed, Sutpen is at some points more nearly allied to Flem than he is to the Compsons and the Sartorises. Like Flem, he is a new man with no concern for the past and has a boundless energy with which to carry out his aggressive plans.

Yet to couple Sutpen with Flem calls for an immediate qualification. Granting that both men subsist outside the community and in one way or another prey upon the community, Sutpen is by contrast a heroic and tragic figure. He achieves a kind of grandeur. Even the obsessed Miss Rosa sees him as great, not as petty and sordid. His innocence resembles that of Oedipus (who, like him, had been corrupted by success and who put his confidence in his own shrewdness). His courage resembles that of Macbeth, and like Macbeth he is "resolute to try the last.". . .

Up to this point we have been concerned with the character of Thomas Sutpen, especially in his relation to the claims of the family and the community. We have treated him as if he were a historical figure, but of course he is not. More than most characters in literature, Thomas Sutpen is an imaginative construct, a set of inferences - an hypothesis put forward to account for several peculiar events. For the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* does not merely tell the story of Thomas Sutpen, but dramatizes the process by which two young men of the twentieth century construct the character Thomas Sutpen. Fascinated by the few known events of his life and death, they try, through inference and conjecture and guesswork, to ascertain what manner of man he was. The novel, then, has to do not merely with the meaning of Sutpen's career but with the nature of historical truth and with the problem of how we can "know" the past. The importance of this latter theme determines the very special way in which the story of Sutpen is mediated to us through a series of partial disclosures, informed guesses, and constantly revised deductions and hypotheses.

Young Quentin Compson, just on the eve of leaving Mississippi for his first year at Harvard, is summoned by Miss Rosa Coldfield and made to listen to the story of her wicked brother-in-law, Thomas Sutpen. Sutpen had been a friend of Quentin's grandfather, General Compson, and as Quentin waits to drive Miss Rosa out to Sutpen's Hundred after dark, as she has requested, Quentin's father tells him what he knows about the Sutpen story.

Nobody had really understood the strange events that had occurred at Sutpen's Hundred - the quarrel between Thomas Sutpen and Henry, the disappearance of Henry with his friend Charles Bon, the forbidding of the marriage between Judith and Bon, and

later, and most sensational of all, Henry's shooting of his friend Charles Bon at the very gates of Sutpen's Hundred in 1865. Mr. Compson makes a valiant effort to account for what happened. What evidently sticks in his mind is the fact that Charles Bon had an octoroon mistress in New Orleans. Presumably Judith had told General Compson or his wife about finding the octoroon's picture on Charles Bon's dead body. But in any case the visit, at Judith's invitation, of the woman to Charles Bon's grave would have impressed the whole relationship upon General Compson and upon his son, Mr. Compson. Mr. Compson thinks that it was the fact of the mistress that made Thomas Sutpen oppose Bon's marriage to his daughter, but that Henry was so deeply committed to his friend that he refused to believe what his father told him about Bon's mistress, chose to go away with Charles, and only at the very end, when Charles Bon was actually standing before his father's house, used the gun to prevent the match.

It is not a very plausible theory. For, though it could account for Sutpen's opposition to Bon, it hardly explains Henry's violent action, taken so late in the day. Mr. Compson does the best that he can with this aspect of the story and says: "[Henry] loved grieved and killed, still grieving and, I believe, still loving Bon, the man to whom he gave four years of probation, four years in which to renounce and dissolve the other marriage, knowing that the four years of hoping and waiting would be in vain." But Mr. Compson has to concede that, after all, "it's just incredible. It just does not explain. . . Something is missing."

Quentin's other informant about the Sutpens is Miss Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law. Miss Rosa clearly does not understand what happened. She exclaims that "Judith's marriage [was] forbidden without rhyme or reason," and her only theory for accounting for the murder is that Sutpen was a demon, and as a demon, dowered his children with a curse which made them destroy themselves. Even Judith evidently did not know why her marriage was forbidden nor did she know why her brother killed Charles Bon. After the murder and Henry's flight, Judith tells Mrs. Compson, the General's wife, that the war will soon be over now because "they [the Confederate soldiers] have begun to shoot one another." The remark indicates her bafflement as well as her despair.

By the time we have reached the end of section 5 - that is, halfway through the book - we have been given most of the basic facts of the Sutpen story but no satisfactory interpretation of it. We know the story of Sutpen's life in the Mississippi community pretty much as the community itself knew it, but the events do not make sense. The second half of the book may be called an attempt at interpretation. When section 6 opens, we are in Quentin's room at Harvard and Quentin is reading a letter from his father telling about the death of Miss Rosa Coldfield. From this time on until past midnight, Quentin and Shreve discuss the story of Sutpen and make their own conjectures as to what actually happened. In this second half of the book there are, to be sure, further disclosures about Sutpen, especially with reference to his early life before he came to Mississippi. Sutpen, it turns out, had once told the story of his early life to General Compson, and his information had been passed on to Quentin through Mr. Compson. As Shreve and Quentin talk, Quentin feeds into the conversation from time to time more material from his father's and grandfather's memory of events, and one very brilliant scene which he himself remembers: how, hunting quail on a gray

autumn day, he and his father came upon the graves in the Sutpen family graveyard and his father told him the touching story of Judith's later life. But as the last four sections of the book make plain, we are dealing with an intricate imaginative reconstruction of events leading up to the murder of Charles Bon - a plausible account of what may have happened, not what necessarily did happen.

If the reader reminds himself how little hard fact there is to go on - how much of the most important information about the motivation of the central characters comes late and is, at best, vague and ambiguous - he will appreciate how much of the story of Sutpen and especially of Sutpen's children has been spun out of the imaginations of Quentin and Shreve.

Absalom, Absalom! is, indeed, from one point of view a wonderful detective story - by far the best of Faulkner's several flirtations with this particular genre. It may also be considered to yield a nice instance of how the novelist works, for Shreve and Quentin both show a good deal of the insights of the novelist and his imaginative capacity for constructing plausible motivations around a few given facts. . . Most important of all, however, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a persuasive commentary upon the thesis that much of "history" is really a kind of imaginative construction. The past always remains at some level a mystery, but if we are to hope to understand it in any wise, we must enter into it and project ourselves imaginatively into the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures. . .

To note that the account of the Sutpens which Shreve and Quentin concoct is largely an imaginative construct is not to maintain that it is necessarily untrue. Their version of events is plausible, and the author himself - for whatever that may be worth - suggests that some of the scenes which they palpably invented were probably true: e.g., "the slight dowdy woman. . . whom Shreve and Quentin had. . . invented" and who was probably "true enough." But it is worth remarking that we do not "know," apart from the Quentin-Shreve semi-fictional process, many events which a casual reader assumes actually happened.

To provide some illustrations: Charles Bon's telling Henry "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear" is a remark that rests upon no known fact. It is a conjecture, though a plausible one. Again, Bon's agonized waiting for his father to give him the merest hint of a father's recognition and Bon's comment that this was all that Sutpen needed to do to stop his courtship of Judith are both surmises made by Quentin and Shreve. So too is the scene in which the boys imagine the visit of Bon and Henry to New Orleans and hear Bon's mother's bitter question, "So she [Judith] has fallen in love with him," and listen to her harsh laughter as she looks at Henry. The wonderfully touching scene in which Judith asks Charles Bon's son to call her "Aunt Judith" is presumably an imaginative construction made by Quentin.

One ought to observe in passing that in allowing the boys to make their guesses about what went on, Faulkner plays perfectly fair. Some of their guesses have the clear ring of truth. They are obviously right. On the other hand, some are justified by the flimsiest

possible reasoning. For example, notice Shreve's argument that it was Henry, not Bon, who was wounded at the battle of Shiloh.

One of the most important devices used in the novel is the placing of Shreve in it as a kind of sounding board and mouthpiece. By doing so, Faulkner has in effect acknowledged the attitude of the modern "liberal," twentieth century reader, who is basically rational, skeptical, without any special concern for history, and pretty well emancipated from the ties of family, race, or section. . .

Shreve teases Quentin playfully and even affectionately, but it is not mere teasing. When Shreve strikes a pose and in his best theatrical manner assigns a dramatic speech to Wash, Faulkner, in one of his few intrusions as author, observes: "This was not flippancy. . . It too was just that protective coloring of levity behind which the youthful shame of being moved hid itself.". . .

The last sections of the novel tell us a great deal about Shreve's and Quentin's differing attitudes toward history and of their own relation to history. Shreve has been genuinely moved by the story of Sutpen. For all of his teasing, he is concerned to understand, and late in the evening he says to Quentin: "Listen. I'm not trying to be funny, smart. I just want to understand it if I can and I dont know how to say it better. Because it's something my people haven't got." And though he cannot suppress his bantering tone in alluding to the Southern heritage - it is "a kind of entailed birthright. . . of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge" - Shreve's question is seriously put. What is it that Quentin as a Southerner has that Shreve does not have? It is a sense of the presence of the past, and with it, and through it, a personal access to a tragic vision. For the South has experienced defeat and guilt, and has an ingrained sense of the stubbornness of human error and of the complexity of history. The matter has been recently put very well in C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History:* "The experience of evil and the experience of tragedy," he writes, "are parts of the Southern heritage that are as difficult to reconcile with the American legend of innocence and social felicity as the experience of poverty and defeat are to reconcile with the legends of abundance and success."

In remarking on how little of hard fact one has to go on, we should bear in mind particularly the question of Bon's Negro blood and of his kinship to Henry. Quentin says flatly that "nobody ever did know if Bon ever knew Sutpen was his father or not." Did anyone ever know whether Bon knew that he was part Negro? In their reconstruction of the story, Shreve and Quentin assume that Bon was aware that he was Henry's part-Negro half-brother (though a few pages earlier Quentin and Shreve assume that Bon did not know that he had Negro blood). If in fact Bon did have Negro blood, how did Shreve and Quentin come by that knowledge? As we have seen, neither Judith nor Miss Rosa had any inkling of it. Nor did Mr. Compson. Early in the novel he refers to Bon's "sixteenth part negro son." Since Bon's mistress was an octoroon, his son could be one-sixteenth Negro only on the assumption that Charles Bon was of pure white blood - and this is evidently what Mr. Compson does assume. Mr. Compson, furthermore, knows nothing about Bon's kinship to Henry.

The conjectures made by Shreve and Quentin - even if taken merely as conjectures - render the story of Sutpen plausible. They make much more convincing sense of the story than Mr. Compson's notions were able to make. And that very fact suggests their probable truth. But are they more than plausible theories? Is there any real evidence to support the view that Bon was Sutpen's son by a part-Negro wife? There is, and the way in which this evidence is discovered constitutes another, and the most decisive, justification for regarding *Absalom, Absalom!* as a magnificent detective story. Precisely what was revealed and how it was revealed are worth a rather careful review.

In the course of his conversation with Quentin, Shreve objects that Mr. Compson "seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-five years." Quentin confirms the fact that his father *had* got delayed information - had got it from Quentin himself - had got it, indeed, the day after "we" (that is, Quentin and Miss Rosa) had gone out to Sutpen's Hundred. A little later, when Quentin tells Shreve of Sutpen's long conversation with General Compson about his "design" and about the "mistake" that Sutpen had made in trying to carry it out, Shreve asks Quentin whether General Compson had then really known what Sutpen was talking about. Quentin answers that General Compson had not known; and Shreve, pressing the point, makes Quentin admit that he himself "wouldn't have known what anybody was talking about" if he "hadn't been out there and seen Clytie." The secret of Bon's birth, then, was revealed to Quentin on that particular visit. Shreve's way of phrasing it implies that it was from Clytie that Quentin had got his information, but, as we shall see, it is unlikely that Clytie was Quentin's informant. In any case, when Shreve puts his question about seeing Clytie, he did not know that another person besides Clytie and her nephew was living at Sutpen's Hundred.

Miss Rosa has sensed that "something" - she does not say *someone* - was "living hidden in that house." When she and Quentin visit Sutpen's Hundred, her intuition is confirmed. The hidden something turns out to be Henry Sutpen, now come home to die. Presumably, it was from Henry Sutpen that Quentin learned the crucial facts. Or did he? Here again Faulkner may seem to the reader either teasingly reticent or, upon reflection, brilliantly skillful.

We know from the last section of the book that after Miss Rosa had come down from the upstairs room with her "eyes wide and unseeing like a sleepwalker's," Quentin felt compelled to go up to that room and see what was there. He does go, though Faulkner does not take us with him into the room. He descends the stairs, walks out of the house, overtakes Miss Rosa, and drives her home. Later that night, however, after he has returned to his own home and is lying sleepless, he cannot - even by clenching his eyelids - shut out his vision of the bed with its yellowed sheets and its yellowed pillow and the wasted yellow face lying upon it, a face with closed, "almost transparent eyelids." As Quentin tosses, unable to erase the picture from his eyes, we are vouchsafed one tiny scrap of his conversation with Henry, a conversation that amounts to no more than Quentin's question "And you are - ?" and Henry's answer that he is indeed Henry Sutpen, that he has been there four years, and that he has come home to die. How extended was the conversation? How long did it last? Would Henry Sutpen have volunteered to a stranger his reason for having killed Charles Bon? Or would

Quentin Compson, awed and aghast at what he saw, put such questions as these to the wasted figure upon the bed? We do not know and Faulkner - probably wisely - has not undertaken to reconstruct this interview for us. (It is possible, of course, that Henry did tell Miss Rosa why he had killed Bon and that Miss Rosa told Quentin in the course of their long ride back to Jefferson.)

At all events, the whole logic of *Absalom, Absalom!* argues that *only* through the presence of Henry in the house was it possible for Quentin - and through Quentin his father and Shreve and those of us who read the book - to be made privy to the dark secret that underlay the Sutpen tragedy.

At the end of the novel Shreve is able to shrug off the tragic implications and resume the tone of easy banter. His last comment abounds with the usual semi-sociological clichés: the Negroes "will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds. . . In a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings." Though the spell of the story has been powerful enough to fire his imagination and involve all his sympathies, he is not personally committed, and we can see him drawing back from the tragic problem and becoming again the cheery, cynical, commonsense man of the present day. In the long perspective of history, how few issues really matter! The long perspective is anti-historical: make it long enough and any "sense of history" evaporates. Lengthen it further still and the human dimension itself evaporates.

From his stance of detachment, Shreve suddenly, and apropos of nothing, puts to Quentin the question "Why do you hate the South?" And Quentin's passionate denial that he hates it tells its own story of personal involvement and distress. The more naïve reader may insist on having an answer: "Well, does he hate it?" And the response would have to be, I suppose, another question: "Does Stephen Daedalus hate Dublin?" Or, addressing the question to Stephen's creator, "Did James Joyce hate Ireland?" The answer here would surely have to be yes and no. In any case, Joyce was so obsessed with Ireland and so deeply involved in it that he spent his life writing about it.

At this point, however, it may be more profitable to put a different question. What did the story of Sutpen mean to Quentin? Did it mean to him what it has apparently meant to most of the critics who have written on this novel - the story of the curse of slavery and how it involved Sutpen and his children in ruin? Surely this is to fit the story to a neat and oversimple formula. Slavery was an evil. But other slaveholders avoided Sutpen's kind of defeat and were exempt from his special kind of moral blindness.

What ought to be plain, in any event, is that it is Henry's part in the tragic tale that affects Quentin the most. Quentin had seen Henry with his own eyes and Henry's involvement in slavery was only indirect. Even Henry's dread of miscegenation was fearfully complicated with other issues, including the problem of incest. In view of what we learn of Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury,* the problem of incest would have fascinated him and made him peculiarly sensitive to Henry's torment. Aside from his personal problem, however, Sutpen's story had for Quentin a special meaning that it did not have for Shreve.

The story embodied the problem of evil and of the irrational: Henry was beset by conflicting claims; he was forced to make intolerably hard choices - between opposed goods or between conflicting evils. Had Henry cared much less for Bon, or else much less for Judith, he might have promoted the happiness of one without feeling that he was sacrificing that of the other. Or had he cared much less for either and much more for himself, he might have won a cool and rational detachment, a vantage point from which even objections to miscegenation and incest would appear to be irrational prejudices, and honor itself a quaint affectation whose saving was never worth the price of a bullet. Had Henry been not necessarily wiser, but simply more cynical or more gross or more selfish, there would have been no tragedy. . . But Shreve is measurably closer to the skepticism and detachment that allow modern man to dismiss the irrational claims from which Quentin cannot free himself and which he honors to his own cost.

The reader of *Absalom, Absalom!* might well follow Quentin's example. If he must find in the story of the House of Sutpen something that has special pertinence to the tragic dilemmas of the South, the aspect of the story to stress is not the downfall of Thomas Sutpen, a man who is finally optimistic, rationalistic, and afflicted with elephantiasis of the will. Instead, he ought to attend to the story of Sutpen's children.

The story of Judith, though muted and played down in terms of the whole novel, is one of the most moving that Faulkner has ever written. She has in her the best of her father's traits. She is the stout-hearted little girl who witnesses without flinching scenes which force poor Henry to grow sick and vomit. She is the young woman who falls in love with a fascinating stranger, the friend of her brother, who means to marry him in spite of her father's silent opposition, and who matches her father's strength of will with a quiet strength of her own. She endures the horror of her fiancé's murder and buries his body. She refuses to commit suicide; she keeps the place going for her father's return. Years later it is Judith who sees to it that Bon's mistress has an opportunity to visit his grave, who brings Bon's child to live with her after his mother's death and, at least in Quentin's reconstruction of events, tries to get the little boy to recognize her as his aunt and to set him free, pushing him on past the barriers of color. When she fails to do so, she still tries to protect him. She nurses him when he sickens of yellow fever, and she dies with him in the epidemic. She is one of Faulkner's finest characters of endurance - and not merely through numb, bleak stoicism but also through compassion and love. Judith is doomed by misfortunes not of her making, but she is not warped and twisted by them. Her humanity survives them.

Because Henry knew what presumably Judith did not know, the secret of Bon's birth, his struggle - granted the circumstances of his breeding, education, and environment - was more difficult than Judith's. He had not merely to endure but to act, and yet any action that he could take would be cruelly painful. He was compelled to an agonizing decision. One element that rendered tragic any choice he might make is revealed in Henry's last action, his coming home to die. One might have thought that after some forty years, Henry would have stayed in Mexico or California or New York or wherever he was, but the claims of locality and family are too strong and he returns to Sutpen's Hundred.

Absalom, Absalom! is the most memorable of Faulkner's novels - and memorable in a very special way. Though even the intelligent reader may feel at times some frustration with the powerful but darkly involved story, with its patches of murkiness and its almost willful complications of plot, he will find himself haunted by individual scenes and episodes, rendered with almost compulsive force. He will probably remember vividly such a scene as Henry's confrontation of his sister Judith after four years of absence at war - the boy in his "patched and faded gray tunic," crashing into the room in which his sister stands clutching against her partially clothed nakedness the yellowed wedding dress, and shouting to her: "Now you cant marry him. . . because he's dead. . . I killed him." Or there is Miss Rosa's recollection of the burial of Charles Bon. As she talks to Quentin she relives the scene: the "slow, maddening rasp, rasp, rasp, of the saw" and "the flat deliberate hammer blows" as Wash and another white man work at the coffin through the "slow and sunny afternoon," with Judith in her faded dress and "faded gingham sunbonnet. . . giving them directions about making it." Miss Rosa, who has never seen Bon alive and for whom he is therefore a fabulous creature, a mere dream, recalls that she "tried to take the full weight of the coffin" as they carried it down the stairs in order "to prove to myself that he was really in it."

There is the wonderful scene of Thomas Sutpen's return to Sutpen's Hundred, the iron man dismounting from his "gaunt and jaded horse," saying to Judith, "Well, daughter," and touching his bearded lips to her forehead. There follows an exchange that is as laconically resonant as any in Greek tragedy: "'Henry's not - ?' 'No. He's not here.' - 'Ah. And - ?' 'Yes. Henry killed him.'" With the last sentence Judith bursts into tears, but it is the only outburst of which Judith is ever guilty.

The reader will remember also the scenes of Sutpen's boyhood and young manhood - perhaps most vivid of all of them, that in which the puzzled boy is turned away from the plantation door by the liveried servant. Sometimes the haunting passage is one of mere physical description: the desolate Sutpen burial ground with the "flat slabs. . . cracked across the middle by their own weight (and vanishing into the hole where the brick coping of one vault had fallen in was a smooth faint path worn by some small animal - possum probably - by generations of some small animal since there could have been nothing to eat in the grave for a long time) though the lettering was quite legible: *Ellen Coldfield Sutpen. Born October 9, 1817. Died January 23, 1863."* One remembers also the account of something that had taken place earlier in this same graveyard, when Bon's octoroon mistress, a "magnolia-faced woman a little plumper now, a woman created of by and for darkness whom the artist Beardsley might have dressed, in a soft flowing gown designed not to infer bereavement or widowhood. . . knelt beside the grave and arranged her skirts and wept," while beside her stood her "thin delicate child" with its "smooth ivory sexless face."

There is, too, the ride out to Sutpen's Hundred in the "furnace-breathed" Mississippi night in which Quentin shares his buggy with the frail and fanatical Miss Rosa, and smells her "fusty camphor-reeking shawl" and even her "airless black cotton umbrella." On this journey, as Miss Rosa clutches to her a flashlight and a hatchet, the implements of her search, it seems to Quentin that he can hear "the single profound suspiration of the parched earth's agony rising toward the imponderable and aloof stars." Most vivid of

all is the great concluding scene in which Clytie, seeing the ambulance approaching to bear Henry away, fires "the monstrous tinder-dry rotten shell" of a house, and from an upper window defies the intruders, her "tragic gnome's face beneath the clean head rag, against a red background of fire, seen for a moment between two swirls of smoke, looking down at them, perhaps not even now with triumph and no more of despair than it had ever worn, possibly even serene above the melting clapboards."

These brilliantly realized scenes reward the reader and sustain him as he struggles with the novel; but it ought to be remembered that they are given their power by the way in which the novel is structured and thus constitute a justification of that peculiar structure. . .

Absalom, Absalom! is in many respects the most brilliantly written of all Faulkner's novels, whether one considers its writing line by line and paragraph by paragraph, or its structure, in which we are moved up from one suspended note to a higher suspended note and on up further still to an almost intolerable climax. The intensity of the book is a function of the structure. The deferred and suspended resolutions are necessary if the great scenes are to have their full vigor and significance. Admittedly, the novel is a difficult one, but the difficulty is not forced and factitious. It is the price that has to be paid by the reader for the novel's power and significance. There are actually few instances in modern fiction of a more perfect adaptation of form to matter and of an intricacy that justifies itself at every point through the significance and intensity which it makes possible.

Source: Cleanth Brooks, "History and the Sense of the Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom!,*" in *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Robert Penn Warren, Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1996, pp. 186-203.

Adaptations

Audio adaptations of *Absalom, Absalom!* have been made by Everett/Edwards in 1977 and Books on Tape in 1993.

Topics for Further Study

Think of a story that is told in your family, especially by the older members. Write three versions of the story as told by three very different members of your family.

Faulkner died in 1962, just as the civil rights movement was gaining momentum. Evaluate the modern-day South and prepare a speech or essay containing what you believe would be Faulkner's views on the results of the civil rights movement.

Create a multimedia character study of either Thomas Sutpen or Rosa Coldfield from a psychological perspective. To complete this project, you will need to conduct basic research on psychological theories of personality and behavior.

Research the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. Prepare a comparison of his relationship to Ireland and Faulkner's relationship to the South. Be sure to explore how these relationships are expressed in the men's writing and to pay particular attention to each writer's attempts to create a mythology for his land.

Examine the various mythic elements of the Sutpen story. In what ways does Faulkner create a mythical setting and characters? Look for allusions, themes, techniques, and other connections to myth. Present your findings in an essay.

Faulkner originally planned to entitle the book *Dark House.* Why would this have been a good title, and how would it have altered your reading of the novel? Also consider why *Absalom, Absalom!* is a good title. Review the biblical story of Absalom's death in Samuel 18:2 and how it affects David. Which of the two titles do you think is the better choice?

Some readers believe that Henry kills Charles because he cannot allow his sister to marry her own half-brother. Others maintain that he kills Charles because he cannot allow his sister to marry a man who has black ancestry. Hold a debate in which one side argues for the first motivation, and the other side argues for the second motivation. The strongest arguments will come from the action of the novel, the character of Henry, and the cultural context of the story.

Compare and Contrast

1800s: Heroes are drawn from legends and from stories of people (usually men) demonstrating great bravery and wisdom.

1900s: Heroes are often men who figured prominently in the Civil War, such as Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant. Often, soldiers, returning to their hometowns after the war, become local heroes.

Today: Heroes are more often celebrities than historical figures, and hero status is more a product of success than of bravery. Professional athletes, captains of industry, and entertainers are most often named as heroes. A person who commits an act of courage is often a hero for a short while, usually because of press coverage. The effect of the media on hero status is profound; few people who remain out of the public eye are idolized as heroes.

1800s: Social status is primarily the product of lineage. In early America, social status often dictates marriage choices, occupational decisions, and political affiliation.

1900s: Social status is the product of lineage and wealth. In the South, where many "respectable" families fall on hard economic times, the ability to build wealth brings more social influence.

Today: Social status is primarily the product of wealth. While there are privileged "dynasties" in some major cities, anyone who can acquire enough wealth can move up in society. Social status, however, is less a determining factor in people's lives than it was in the past.

1800s: Slavery provides the backbone of economics in the South. Slaves are the source of labor for everything from farming to domestic duties.

1900s: With the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, slavery is outlawed. Slaves are given their freedom, but their struggles are far from over as they seek to support themselves and their families in a culture that fears and despises them. Racism is harsh and overpowering.

Today: African Americans continue to grapple with the pain, injustice, and indignity of their history in America. Although the civil rights movement of the 1960s made great strides for minorities in terms of rights and liberties, racism is still a divisive force that serves as a grim reminder of the past.

What Do I Read Next?

Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is tangentially related to *Absalom, Absalom!* because it shares several characters. Besides being one of Faulkner's most widely read books, *The Sound and the Fury* is one of his many Yoknapatawpha novels, all of which are interrelated to varying degrees.

Roots, Alex Haley's 1976 masterpiece, tells the story of the author's ancestors, beginning with the African slave Kunta Kinte. Haley recounts his family's history in an effort to bring them to life for the reader and to understand his own identity.

The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor (1971) provides a collection of short fiction that continues to reach readers through its universal themes and depictions of black and white relations in the South.

The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty (1980) contains the short fiction of Eudora Welty, one of Mississippi's most respected authors. Welty is known for her distinctly southern storytelling style, and her work is a must for students of southern literature.

Further Study

Backman, Melvin, *Faulkner, The Major Years: A Critical Study,* Indiana University Press, 1966.

Backman reviews Faulkner's major writing, both novels and short stories, and provides a critical overview of the author's development and contribution to American letters.

Brooks, Cleanth, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond,* Yale University Press, 1978.

Respected literary critic Cleanth Brooks focuses on Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha stories, exploring why they are important to Faulkner's writing as a whole and what importance they have in the American literary tradition. Brooks evaluates early influences and innovations made by Faulkner over the course of his writing career.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board membersducational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535