

**THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: DISTORTION AND TRUTH
IN THE FOUR NARRATIVES OF FAULKNER'S
ABSALOM, ABSALOM! ***

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PART I

THE PROBLEM OF NARRATIVE

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is the story of Thomas Sutpen's dream, his partial achievement and his downfall, as viewed by four narrators: Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson and Shrevelin McCannon. The first two, Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson, are witness-narrators: they bear witness to the controvertible facts in Sutpen's story that they have either seen or heard of. Miss Rosa is an old woman related to Sutpen by kindred bonds and by the fact that for a short time she was engaged to him. Mr. Compson is the son of Sutpen's only friend, General Compson, who provided him with information about Sutpen's background. The third narrator, Mr. Compson's son and General Compson's grandson, is Quentin, a twenty year-old who feels closely related to Sutpen's story.

It was a part of his twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man Sutpen; a part of the town's — Jefferson's — eighty years' heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed... (1).

The last narrator, Shrevelin McCannon, is the only one of the four who does not belong to the South and who is in no way related to Sutpen. He is Quentin's Canadian roommate at Harvard University; and, together with him, he tries to guess, to interpret and reinterpret, to imagine and recreate scenes and conversations in order to make sense of the pieces of information they have from the two previous narrators.

The narrators project their own distortions and prejudices upon their narrations. However, it is by means of Quentin, "the novel's 'medium'," ² to use Michael Millgate's words that the reader hears the voices of men and women who are either absent or dead. He circles "back and back over so many of

(1) William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: The Modern Library, 1951), p. 11. Subsequent references will be included in the text.
(2) William Faulkner (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1961), p. 53.

the same details concerning the Sutpen story"³ that the narrative becomes more and more intense with each return, each time bringing new information. It gains in intensity and achieves, therefore, some

improvement in perspective, so that the motion was one of a spiraling ascent... All those improvements in perspective bring Quentin (and with him the reader) to the ultimate vantage point only when Quentin and Shreve collaboratively perform their own creative process of imagining fictions within the fiction (4).

The aim of this thesis, in a larger sense, is to relate the two earlier narratives concerning the dream and the downfall of the man Thomas Sutpen to Quentin's and Shreve's reconstruction of the same story. Here, it aims at originality in proceeding to an analysis of the overall narrative structure provided by the historical research and recreation of the last two narrators. It describes the way they circle back over the same well-known details, the way they imagine the sequence of the events that swirl Sutpen, Henry, Bon, and Judith, and the way the narrative is made understandable to the puzzled reader. It also deals with what makes Quentin and Shreve imagine the events the way they do; and, finally, it considers whether or not the reader must accept their imaginative reconstruction of the story.

Undoubtedly, a sign of Faulkner's greatness as a writer lies in the fact that the continued study of his work reveals more and more of the significance of that work. Several critics have taken up the problem of narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* It will be helpful to review briefly the most important of these studies.

An early essay is Conrad Aiken's "William Faulkner: The Novel as Form."⁵ He studies the structure of Faulkner's novels, their difficulty, and the laborious evolution of form and idea. This study was soon followed by Warren Beck's well-known "William Faulkner's Style",⁶ which is a study of prolixity, diction, colloquialism, sentence structure, rhythm, and narrative method in Faulkner's novels. Three years later

(3) Lawrence Thompson, *William Faulkner* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1964), p. 56.

(4) *Ibid.*

(5) *A Reviewer's ABC* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), reprinted by Robert Penn Warren in *Faulkner*, (N. J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 46-52.

(6) *American Prefaces*, (Spring, 1941), pp. 195-221, reprinted by Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery in *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism* (Michigan State University, 1960), pp. 142-156.

William R. Poirier's "Strange Gods in Jefferson, Mississippi: Analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*"⁷ stated that the attempt of Quentin to create history is both the story of Sutpen and the conscious effort of Quentin as its narrator. It presents a detailed analysis of Miss Rosa, stressing the polar equalities between Sutpen and her.

Another writer who deals with Faulkner's style is Robert H. Zoellner in his "Faulkner's Prose Style in *Absalom, Absalom!*"⁸ He writes about the connections among formal devices such as syntactical ambiguity, time alternations, delayed modification, suspension and enclosure, dramatic periodicity, and the meaning of the novel. Cleanth Brooks studies Sutpen's character in "History and the Sense of the Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom!*"⁹ He analyzes Sutpen's character in relation to his society and to himself, but gives a somewhat shallow sociological interpretation of the meaning of the novel and of the implications of an author's attempt at recreating history. In the same year appeared "The Myriad Perspectives of *Absalom, Absalom!*"¹⁰ by Arthur L. Scott. He also studies the structure of this novel, calling attention to its Futuristic Cubism, its grotesque style, and its prismatic form. The following year, Ilse Dusoird Lind provided more information about the structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* in section three of her essay "The Design and Meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!*"¹¹ She asserts that the most remarkable achievement in the novel is the maintenance of suspense and the cause-effect sequence worked into all the action and characterization.

In 1959 Hyatt H. Waggoner published his essay "Past as Present: *Absalom, Absalom!*"¹² He considers once again the relationship of the novel's form to its meaning, and he takes up Faulkner's attempt to interpret history. Next, in "Thomas Sutpen: The Tragedy of Aspiration"¹³ John Lewis Longley, Jr. studies the dramatic quality of the novel, analyzes Sutpen as a modern tragic hero, and compares the methods by which meaning is conveyed in *Absalom, Absalom!* with those of *Light*

(7) *Sewanee Review*, LIII (Summer, 1945), pp. 343-361, reprinted by Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery in *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism* (Michigan State College Press, 1951), pp. 217-243.

(8) *American Literature*, XXX (January, 1950), pp. 486-502.

(9) Condensed from his *William Faulkner* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 295-322, and reprinted by Robert Penn Warren in *Faulkner* (N. J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), pp. 186-203.

(10) *American Quarterly*, VI (Fall, 1954), pp. 210-220.

(11) *PMLA*, LXX (December, 1955), pp. 887-912.

(12) *From Jefferson to the World* (University of Kentucky Press, 1959), pp. 148-169.

(13) *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes* (University of North Carolina Press, 1963), pp. 206-218.

in August. In "The Four Narrative Perspectives in *Absalom, Absalom!*"¹⁴ Lynn Gartrell Levins states that the distinction among the four narrative perspectives in the novel is not stylistic, but formal. He differentiates the viewpoints by shaping each perspective after a different literary genre. Miss Rosa shapes her narrative to Gothic mystery; Mr. Compson relates his narrative as a Greek tragedy; Quentin expresses his narrative in the framework of chivalric romance; and Shreve relieves the intensity of the preceding viewpoints by means of the humor of the tall tale. Finally, M. E. Bradford's "Brother, Son and Heir: The Structural Focus of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*"¹⁵ emphasizes the recurrent subject in Faulkner's novels and short fiction: the young man coming into his majority and, as its thematic corollary, pride. He analyzes Sutpen's children showing the similarities between Charles Bon and Sutpen, and the differences among Henry, Judith, Clytie and Sutpen. He also points out the way Quentin and Shreve explore in depth what it means to endure or not to endure.

Almost every critic who has had anything to say about Faulkner's novels turns to their narrative structure. One reason for this is that in this area Faulkner's demands on the reader are particularly high. His novels do not admit a casual reader. There is in his best work such a complex relationship between structure and meaning, that even a careful reader will fully realize its difficulties only when he tries to analyze that relationship.

This thesis provides an analysis of the interplay of distortion and truth in the four narratives of *Absalom, Absalom!*, and an explanation of how that interplay contributes to the overall meaning of the novel.

PART II

THE FOUR NARRATORS: DISTORTION AND IMAGINATION

1. Miss Rosa's Narration

In listening to Miss Rosa's narration Quentin cannot help noticing how immature she is emotionally. During the long lonely years of her childhood and those of her womanhood in

(14) *PMLA*, LXXXV (January, 1970), pp. 35-47.

(15) *The Sewanee Review*, LXXVIII (January-March, 1970), pp. 76-98.

which she makes herself an outcast of the Jefferson community she does nothing but pile up hate, hate, hate. Born to middle-aged parents, she can never forgive her father for her mother's death in childbed "and was never to be permitted to forget it" (p. 59). She hates her father without knowing it. Her childhood was spent "in a grim mausoleum air of Puritan righteousness and outraged female vindictiveness" (p. 60). Due to the inflexibility and severity of her character she has not learned how to forgive and, therefore, cannot forget what happened. It is this old lady wearing eternal black, talking of old ghost times in a "grim haggard amazed voice" (p. 7) that Quentin has to listen to during one "long still hot weary dead September afternoon" (p. 7).

According to her, Thomas Sutpen "wasn't a gentleman" (p. 14). This she sees as Sutpen's capital sin. Being a Southerner brought up in a society where blood and heritage are the facts that really count,¹⁶ she cannot accept a man who

came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own any more than the horse was his own or even the pistols, seeking some place to hide himself, and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it (pp. 14-15).

She cannot forgive the city for having accepted him, and, most of all, she cannot forgive her father, a modest Methodist Steward, "a man with a name for absolute and undeviating and even Puritan uprightness in a country and time of lawless opportunity" (p. 43), for marrying his daughter Ellen to Sutpen.

Miss Rosa does not know what dark past would be hidden behind the respectability Supten is looking for. Her suspicion is based on the fact that no young man would clear a virgin land and establish a plantation in a new country just for money. Her suspicion is strenghtened by observing his Negroes: she realizes anyone could tell they came from "a much older country than Virginia or Carolina, but it wasn't a quiet one" (p. 17).

At first she excuses her sister Ellen for marrying him because she was young and inexperienced at the time. Later, she cannot forgive her for going on with him when she is no longer young and inexperienced but "almost a recluse, watching

(16) In "Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*: The Discovery of Values", *American Literature*, XXXVII (November, 1965), pp. 291-306, Donald M. Kartiganer provides a very good analysis of this aspect of Miss Rosa.

those two doomed children growing up whom she was helpless to save" (p. 18).

If Sutpen is not accepted by her for not being a gentleman, with Charles Bon the situation is quite the opposite: she accepts him without ever knowing him and falls in love with him even before seeing his photograph. Bon stands for Miss Rosa as the example of sophistication, grace, charm and gentleness represented by New Orleans' culture in opposition to Sutpen's crudeness, ruthlessness, violence and insensibility. In accepting Bon as Judith's fiancé she allies her Southern prejudice of judging a man by his name and breeding to her romantic fantasy.

In the narrative she recalls memories of a barren childhood, empty of love. Her girlhood was no different from her childhood. Longing to love and to be loved, she, "who had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love — that fond dear constant violation of privacy, that stultification of the burgeoning and incorrigible I which is the meed and due of all mamalian meat" (p. 146), turns in her romantic fantasy to the image of Bon to compensate for her loveless life "not out of any real love, [but] doubtless out of the name itself with its quality of breeding, or the stories she probably heard of his New Orleans' sophistication."¹⁷

She knows no more about Bon's past than she does about Sutpen's. However, in her hurry to condemn Sutpen with the intensity of her hatred, she never realizes that fact.

Miss Rosa fails to understand why Sutpen forbids Judith's marriage "without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse" (p. 18). She does not understand Sutpen's relationship to Bon and is unable to realize what makes "Henry repudiate his home and birthday" (p. 18).

She emerges from the years of Civil War like "a young woman emerging from a holocaust which had taken parents' security and all from her" (p. 19), and is suddenly awakened from this trauma, powerless to understand what makes Henry "practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown" (p. 18).

This same Rosa who cannot help hating her brother-in-law, "the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims" (p. 18), agrees to marry him. Probably the fact

(17) Kartiganer p. 298.

that he had fought during four years "for the soil and traditions of the land where she had been born" (p. 19) makes her consider him an unknown foreigner no longer, but one of "them": a Civil War Colonel, emerging from the same holocaust in which they all had suffered. He now acquires the "stature and shape of a hero" (p. 19). Presumably because of his bravery in the war she could now rank him in the list of gentlemen: a gentleman who could provide her with the respectability that she and he really cared for. However, her "impotent yet indomitable frustration" (p. 7) is due to the fact that she can neither forgive nor revenge herself upon the old insult, the outrageous proposal Sutpen makes to her, for the very reason that he dies soon afterwards.

Her flaw lies, first of all, in the lack of one fundamental Christian principle: charity. Quentin also realizes she is so blinded by the impotency of her revenge that she fails to try to understand the reasons that lead the characters to act the way they do. She is wholly incapable of sensing Sutpen's motives, drive and dream. The irony is that if she knew of Bon's Negro blood her whole attitude would change. She is also caught up in hypocrisy covered by formal rectitude. She plays to win Sutpen, but is enraged by the cold bargaining of his response, i.e., she wants a mate, but cannot bear to be treated as nothing more than a "mate." To suit her Sutpen would have to play the game of Southern courtliness. Therefore, her limited knowledge, distorted by prejudice, cannot be accepted by Quentin, who too readily sees the effects of her enormous solitude, her huge hatred, and her immeasurable unforgiveness.

2. Mr. Compson's Narration

In telling Quentin of his interpretation of the same events mentioned by Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson throws some light on the Sutpen-Henry-Bon relationship. Free from some of her prejudices and from her unforgiveness, he can give a more objective and a much saner version of Sutpen's fall.

He confirms Miss Rosa's version of Sutpen's unknown origin and purposes. Unlike Miss Rosa, who sees Sutpen as a runaway "from opposite of respectability too dark to talk about" (p. 17), Mr. Compson sees him as a man who was sick:

Not like a man who had been peacefully ill in bed and had recovered to move with a sort of diffident and tentative amazement in a world which he had believed himself on the

point of surrendering, but like a man who had been through some solitary furnace experience which was more than just fever, like an explorer say, who not only had to face the normal hardship of the pursuit which he chose but was overtaken by the added and unforeseen handicap of the fever also and fought through it at enormous cost not so much physical as mental, alone and unaided and not through blind instinctive will to endure and survive but to gain and keep to enjoy it the material prize for which he accepted the original gambit (p. 32).

Mr. Compson's picture of Sutpen is much more human than Miss Rosa's: he can discern the sufferings of this man whom he seems to understand better than she does. A man who comes to a city and stirs people's curiosity by not telling them his purposes is sure to be the object of their constant inquiry, their amazed speculation and suspicion. At first Mr. Compson's narrative concentrates on the society of Jefferson's relationship to Sutpen, rejecting him when they felt they were getting involved with "whatever the felony which produced the mahogany and the crystal" (pp. 44-45), and finally accepting him. His whole narrative is concerned with the social aspects of events, whereas Miss Rosa's is a moral interpretation of the same events.

He complements her narrative by providing Quentin with details about Sutpen's five years in Jefferson before he married Ellen. This side of Sutpen's personality, which Miss Rosa does not dare to reveal to Quentin (years in which she heard

"at second hand what he was doing, and not even to hear more than half of that, since apparently half of what he actually did during those five years nobody at all knew about, and half of the remainder no man would have repeated to a wife, let alone a young girl" (p. 18),

emphasizes the striking differences between Sutpen and Mr. Coldfield, Rosa's father: Sutpen, the unknown ambitious foreigner without a name or a past, fond of drink, cards, hunts and fights with Negroes, and Mr. Coldfield, the Methodist Minister "of modest position and circumstances" (p. 42) rooted in Jefferson, who neither drank nor gambled nor hunted. Unable to understand the reasons that brought these two men together, Miss Rosa takes it as a curse on her family, whereas Mr. Compson turns to fatalism to explain it.

Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson's versions agree as to the picture of Ellen the crying newlywed bride and Ellen the recluse wife absent from the world. It is Mr. Compson, however, who gives an exact description of Ellen at the time Bon went

to Sutpen's Hundred: "she seemed not only to acquiesce, to be reconciled to her life and marriage, but to be actually proud of it" (p. 68), escaping "into a world of pure illusion... wife to the wealthiest, mother of the most fortunate" (p. 69).

There is a similarity between Ellen's and Miss Rosa's attitudes in accepting Bon. By accepting him, both of them seem to make up for their loneliness, for their empty lives, and for their romantic ideas about love. Ellen wakes up to the world and rises "like the swamp-hatchet butterfly... into a perennial bright vacuum of arrested sun" (pp. 69-70); Miss Rosa, daydreaming, follows Bon's footprints, imagining him as the chivalrous lover:

'What suspiration of the twinning souls have the murmurous myriad of this secluded vine or shrub listened to? what vow, what promise, what rapt bidding fire has the lilac rain of this wistaria, this heavy rose's dissolution, crowned?' (p. 148).

Ellen goes shopping with her daughter Judith, buys her trousseau, spreads the news of the engagement which "so far as Jefferson knew, never formally existed" (p. 98), in short, she seems to live the life she should have lived when she herself was going to get married. Rosa falls in love with Love, and tries to undergo all the feelings, sensations and ecstasies of that experience.

Mr. Compson throws a light on Sutpen's relationship to Bon and Henry which Miss Rosa cannot grasp. According to him, Sutpen reveals to Henry the existence of Bon's octoroon mistress and son, but Henry continues to follow his friend, rejecting inheritance and everything "out of love and loyalty" (p. 106). In his imagination Mr. Compson reconstructs the events historically. He sees Bon as the shrewd man, the "mentor", the "corrupter", the "seducer", in opposition to Henry as the youth of provincial soul and intellect, the innocent, the "seduced", the "corrupted". He imagines Bon taking "the innocent and negative plate of Henry's provincial soul and intellect" and exposing it "by slow degrees to this esoteric milieu, building gradually toward the picture which he desired it to retain, accept" (p. 110). According to Mr. Compson, Bon hopes to convince Henry to accept his New Orleans' way of life. He leads him carefully: first, he wants Henry to accept the presence of his Negro mistress, which is not very difficult for him to do because "to a youth with Henry's background" (p. 109) the other sex is classified into ladies, women and females, i.e., the fact that a man has a mistress is not against Henry's principles. Bon knows that and also knows that Henry

is going to "balk at" the fact that there had been a ceremony, a formal contract. "Bon knew that that would be what Henry would resist, find hard to stomach and retain" (p. 113). Mr. Compson imagines Bon trying to break through Henry's Southern puritanism by telling him the ceremony is just a "formula, a shibboleth meaningless as a child's game" (p. 117); however, he is not successful. Henry remains faithful to his puritan's provincial mind. According to Mr. Compson, Henry waits four years "for Bon to renounce the woman and dissolve the marriage which he [Henry] admitted was no marriage" (p. 119).

In his picture of Judith waiting for something to happen, "not knowing for what, but unlike Henry and Bon, not even knowing for why" (p. 126), Mr. Compson stresses once more the fatalism that led these persons to the final tragedy from which they could not escape. He even reconstructs the murder in his imagination: he sees Henry giving Bon the ultimatum "Do you renounce?" and Bon saying "I do not renounce" (p. 132), and then the murder at the gate, caused by Henry's destructive puritanism.

Although Mr. Compson's narrative is more balanced than Miss Rosa's, Quentin feels that his father does not grasp the kernel of the events. He does not consider Sutpen's ambition and obsession. He tries to explain why Judith is bent on marrying Bon, a man she hardly knows, and waits for him not knowing whether he is still alive or not. He tries to explain why Sutpen, who sees Bon only once, goes to New Orleans to investigate his past and to discover what he already suspected in order to forbid the marriage. He tries to explain why Bon, apparently "without volition or desire" (p. 100), becomes engaged to Judith and four years later forces Henry to kill him to prevent the marriage. The more he tries to explain these events, the more helpless he becomes:

It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Choctaw; ... Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing (pp. 100-101).

Mr. Compson's interpretation of Sutpen's story fails to grasp that "something" which would clarify the Sutpen-Henry-

-Bon relationship because he concentrates on the social aspects of the story without acknowledging the importance of Sutpen's dream.

Mr. Compson's attitude is determined by his commitment to the power of fate in its classical sense. Due to his cynical unbelief "only the calculations of expedience and distinctions of social and anti-social behavior remain."¹⁸ He is unable to try to clarify this mystery with the eyes of Christian faith. This is why he sees "only effective or ineffective behavior in relation to immediate goals, goals as much created and destroyed by time as the actions they dictate."¹⁹

Quentin realizes that Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson are not trustworthy narrators. Miss Rosa's interpretation cannot be relied upon because it is distorted by her hatred Mr. Compson's explanation of the Sutpen-Henry-Bon relationship is not reliable either. He himself confesses his inability to understand what is missing in the story and which makes it "inexplicable".

Quentin cannot accept Miss Rosa's explanation: the curse on her family. Nor can he accept Mr. Compson's allegiance to fate. He realizes that there are other reasons which made Henry, Sutpen and Bon do what they did.

3. Quentin And Shreve's Roles As Narrators

There are good reasons for Quentin's involvement in Sutpen's story. At first, he himself keeps wondering why Miss Rosa invites him to her office that afternoon, tells him her personal story and asks him to go to Sutpen's Hundred with her. It is his father who, late in the evening, tells him she might consider him responsible for what happened to her family because

if it hadn't been for your grandfather's friendship, Sutpen could never have got a foothold here, and that if he had not got that foothold, he could not have married Ellen. So maybe she considers you partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family through him (p. 13).

But more important than this distant relationship is the fact that Quentin is implicated in the events because he is a Southerner: all the events took place in Jefferson, his home, and became a part of the town's history. Besides, in the beginning

(18) Hyatt H. Waggoner, *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the world* (University of Kentucky Press, 1959), p. 47.

(19) Waggoner, p. 47.

the mystery that involves the main characters stirs up his feelings of curiosity, and afterwards it fosters his neurotic search for self-identity when he comes to identify himself with Henry, even to the projection of the same guilty incestuous feelings (as we find out in Faulkner's earlier novel, *The Sound And The Fury*).

The South, with all its traditions and prejudices has always been a source of interest to different persons. In order to explain to Shreve what the South is like, what they do there, why they live there, why they live at all, Quentin decides to tell him what he knows about Sutpen's story and what he has heard so far.

It is not at random that Faulkner brings in as an additional narrator a young man who is neither a Southerner nor is related to Sutpen by any bond. There are reasons why Shreve is able to help Quentin reconstruct Sutpen's story. First of all, he is an outsider both in time and space. He has not lived under the pressure of Southern tradition or prejudice, and is, consequently, free from the specific hatreds and concepts which might damage an otherwise objective analysis of character: in short, he is able to judge all personages impartially. Second, his temperament is shown to be the opposite of Quentin's. Shreve is the "child of blizzards and of cold," while Quentin is the "morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat" (p. 346): one counterbalances the other, emotionally and spiritually.

Without Shreve's cooperation Quentin would hardly find out the "truth" that underlies the lives of the members of the House of Sutpen. His presence makes possible the endless circlings around the events in order to reach the core of the dilemma. Since he is an outsider it seems quite natural for Quentin and for the reader to allow his speculations and to credit them with validity.

Beginning as an interpretive listener, Shreve then becomes a partial narrator of the Sutpen story completely identifying with Bon and Henry, only to return to his former role of interpretive listener at the very end. His very name, Shreve, suggesting absolution and forgiveness, explains his attitude when he shifts in the narrative from an interpretive listener to active collaborator, and later when he gives up his role as partial narrator. In both cases he is ironic. It is the way he controls the tone of the novel: his irony follows and makes

palatable "discoveries" which would otherwise turn out to be oppressive and unbearable.

As an interpretive listener, Shreve's collaboration with Quentin in reconstructing Sutpen's story occurs in many ways. He makes revealing comments now and then while Quentin is retelling what he has heard. For instance, when he clarifies things for the reader by pointing out that only by going to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa that night is Quentin able to discern the meaning of the mistake in Sutpen's design, a meaning that was unintelligible to both Quentin's father and grandfather. He shows irony when he interferes in the narrative with references to "Aunt Rosa" or "the demon," or when he summarizes Sutpen's desire:

"So he just wanted a grandson... That was all he was after. Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn't it" (p. 217).

Passages like this bring Shreve's irony face to face with the inscrutable complexities of the South. There are times when Shreve's amazement is also the reader's, for example, in his reaction to the revelation about Milly's baby:

"Wait," Shreve said. "You mean that he got the son he wanted, after all that trouble, and then turned right around and —"
.....
"Will you wait?" Shreve said. "— that with the son he went to all that trouble to get lying right there behind him in the cabin, he would have to taunt the grandfather into killing first him and then the child too?"
"—What?" Quentin said. "It wasn't a son. It was a girl" (p. 292).

In these two passages the reader can identify with Shreve, and both of them, outsiders, become the incredulous and astonished spectators who watch the procession of events, trying to reach the core of the characters' attitudes in order to grasp their meaning and their truth whatever those may be. Shreve also imagines the reasons that impelled the characters to act, for instance, when he hazards a guess at to why the architect ran away from Sutpen's Hundred. His presence is most emphatic in passages like the one below when he corrects Quentin the moment he states that Sutpen was born in West Virginia:

(Not in West Virginia," Shreve said. — "Wait?" Quentin said. "Not in West Virginia," Shreve said. "Because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808 be-

cause —" "All right," Quentin said. "— West Virginia wasn't admitted —" "All right all right," Quentin said. "— into the United States until—" "All right all right all right," Quentin said.) (pp. 220-221).

Shreve is shown as both critical and ironic in the following passage where he refers to Mr. Compson's attitude as a narrator:

He seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-five years. If he knew all this, what was his reason for telling you that the trouble between Henry and Bon was the octoroon woman? (p. 266).

These remarks convey some idea of how Quentin and Shreve work together in their search for the truth hidden behind the bare facts of Sutpen's rise and downfall. Shreve's comments lend Quentin's narrative an authenticity which is undeniable. Shreve's presence assures the reader that no historical mistake will be made if he can help it. As for Quentin, at times he replies to Shreve's comments, at other times he does not answer at all. Now and then he reacts to Shreve's impatience with a "wait!", or he becomes involved in the obsessive soliloquies that reflect his tormented consciousness: "Am I going to have to hear it all again . . . I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again . . ." (p. 277).

After Shreve has heard all that Quentin knows about Sutpen, he too is amazed. From now on, these two young men try to imagine what really happened, that is, they try to reach the heart of the truth. In dropping his role of interpretive listener to become a partial narrator, Shreve is not ironic, critical or amazed any longer. Now he and Quentin create and recreate dialogues based on the fragmentary versions of Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson; they reconstruct what they think might have been the course of the events; and they even identify with Henry and Bon. Shreve's collaboration here is emphasized. In perfect agreement with Quentin, he feels that he is able to understand and to interpret Bon. It is an interpretation made possible by empathy and immersion. Identification with Henry and Bon is natural for Quentin, the modern Southerner, because, in his tormented consciousness, he is as involved in incestuous guilt as the old Southerner Henry. As for Shreve, the Canadian who does not know the South but who wants to understand it, somehow his identification with Bon is also possible. These two young men are so involved in the story, so fully identifying

with Bon and Henry, that it makes no difference whether it is Quentin's or Shreve's voice that is heard recreating the events.

... it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it; performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other — faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived... (p. 316).

Peter Swiggart points out that this identification transports "the two ante-bellum Southerners into the twentieth century and the narrators into the past."²⁰ However, Quentin and Shreve become not only the link between present and past, but also the link between the reader and the characters, as well as the link between Faulkner and the reader. These two twentieth-century young men become so involved in Sutpen's story that in transporting themselves to the nineteenth century milieu in their search for the truth they help the reader come closer to the characters, thereby destroying the halo of unreality that surrounds them. They are also the "medium" through which Faulkner, little by little, clears away the complexity and obscurity of Sutpen's tragedy.

At first the reader knows only Miss Rosa's and Mr. Compson's versions. In the early chapters Faulkner makes both narrators interweave their fragmentary narratives about Sutpen's coming to Jefferson, his building a house, his marriage to Ellen, his two children, Judith's engagement to Bon, Henry's murder, and Miss Rosa's brief engagement to Sutpen. Mr. Compson in the witness-narrator who knows more details of the tragedy, although he does not understand them. These details are revealed to Quentin after his visit to Sutpen's Hundred, but they are not delivered to the reader at once. They are inserted in the last chapters through Quentin's flashbacks, through the dialogues between Quentin and Shreve, and through Shreve's summaries. In doing so Faulkner counterbalances both Miss Rosa's and Mr. Compson's interpretations, showing the reader, besides these two different versions of the same events, with all their limitations and personal distortions, the countless possibilities of human imagination in creating truth through the exercise of the imagination.

(20) *The Art of Faulkner's Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963), p. 76.

Faulkner also makes the story gain intensity and suspense by bringing in more and more information as Quentin and Shreve proceed on their endless search. Also, he starts with what seems to be the least relevant material working slowly toward the center of the tragedy. This is also the way he makes Quentin, the "medium" of the novel, remember events, retell them, interpret them, and imagine them when the facts are neither sufficient nor reliable in order to reconstruct the story.

Everytime Quentin and Shreve circle back on the same events a new increment of information is provided. Each discovery either contradicts an old conception or gives meaning to a hint or clarifies an otherwise ambiguous interpretation. It is a slow, groping, painstaking task. The reader becomes confused with the constant shifts from present into past, by the transmutation of Quentin's and Shreve's voices into the voices of other narrators, and by the abrupt intrusion of voices into the labor of the imagination in its endless searching.

4. Quentin and Shreve Circling Back Over The Events

Quentin feels all along that the crucial point in the whole tragedy lies behind the door that Henry entered to see his sister after the murder. To get at a solution to this mystery Quentin and Shreve go back to each of the fragments they have received. Revelation then proceeds progressively.

Shreve circles back over the details of Miss Rosa's engagement to Sutpen. The reader then learns the nature of the outrageous proposal Sutpen has made to her: he suggested that they "breed together for test and sample and if it was a boy they would marry" (p. 177). Miss Rosa could not understand why he proposed this to her. Hurt, humiliated and inconsolable, she spent the rest of her life asking why he did it. Shreve, however, reveals a new side of Sutpen: the man who came back from the war to find "his chances of descendants gone" (p. 179) and who became engaged to Miss Rosa "in order to replace that progeny" (p. 179). But Sutpen chose for his purpose "the last woman on earth he might have hoped to prevail on" (p. 180). Miss Rosa expected him to court her according to the Southern code of deference and courtesy, while Sutpen expected her, out of her passion, to accept his proposal without legal marriage.

Shreve's circling back enables Quentin to recreate Sutpen as "the mad impotent old man" facing the problem of his old age when everything he has built is gone: his son Henry gone after spoiling his life by the crime he committed, his daughter Judith "doomed to spinsterhood" (p. 180), and Miss Rosa lost. In his despair and urgent need to restore his line of descendants he had turned to Milly, Wash Jones' slatternly and submissive granddaughter. Only at this point of the narrative does the reader discover what happened to Milly: she was delivered of a child by Sutpen. The reader also learns that in going to her pallet Sutpen looked down at both mother and child and said the inhuman words that betrayed his despair and impotency: "Well, Milly, too bad you're not a mare like Penelope. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable" (p. 185). As Sutpen turned from the pallet, Jones, scythe in hand, blocked his passage and killed him.

At this point Shreve reminds Quentin of the rainy day when he and his father, shooting quail, came to the graveyard where they saw the tombs of the dead Sutpens. By means of an association of ideas Quentin retells what Mr. Compson told him about General Compson's testimony on the day he met the octoroon mistress crying at Bon's tomb. The narrative turns to the late years of Judith, a subject which has been completely unknown to the reader up to this point. The reader hears Quentin telling Shreve what he has learned from his father, who got it from General Compson, the latter testifying to what he had witnessed. Quentin, therefore, brings in information about Judith's efforts to raise Bon's son, Charles Etienne, as a real son, and her inability to love him even as a nephew. Judith could not stand the fact that he had a "sixteenth-part black blood" (p. 194). Like Miss Rosa, she had unchangeable Southern attitudes. She also classified men according to their blood and background, rather than their personal qualities. She was therefore unable to accept Charles Etienne fully because of his Negro blood. Miss Rosa acted the same way toward Judith's mullato sister Clytie. Miss Rosa's and Judith's failure to achieve true communion with Clytie and Charles Etienne was revealed by their reactions to their touch. We learn that Miss Rosa stopped dead when Clytie touched her:

I know only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too soon and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh (p. 139).

And Judith cannot help feeling that "every touch of the capable hands seemed at the moment of touching his [Charles Etienne's] body to lose all warmth and become imbued with cold implacable antipathy" (pp. 197-198). However, Judith's efforts to try to love him remove, in part, her inability to really come to love him. The irony lies in the fact that her attitude towards Bon would also have changed completely had she known that he was part-Negro.

In recalling his grandfather's picture of Charles Etienne, Quentin retells how the latter turned to the Negroes. He looked for them because, at the time, he felt comfortable among them, as if he knew that his place was among them. However, his attitude would change completely when he grew older. Then he would have to face the problem of being an outcast from both the Negro and the white cultures.

Although a friend of the Sutpen family and one implicated in some of their problems, General Compson felt powerless to explain certain situations and to hazard a guess at what must have happened between Charles Etienne and Judith the night he came back to Sutpen's Hundred bringing his "coal black and ape-like woman" (p. 205) far gone with child. Quentin, however, has great sympathy and large imaginative capacity. He easily imagines the scene. He sees Judith trying to convince him that the marriage license is just a paper that can be put aside. Quentin's imaginative reconstruction of these events is similar to that of Mr. Compson when he reconstructed the figures of Henry and Bon facing the problem of Bon's contract with the octoroon mistress. Henry's and Bon's attitudes were Mr. Compson's invention, just as Judith's and Charles Etienne's now are Quentin's. Both Mr. Compson and Quentin imagine Bon, Henry, Judith and Charles Etienne facing the same situation and reacting the same way. Although in Mr. Compson's imaginative reconstruction Bon was the one who wanted to stress the insignificance of the marriage license so that Henry would not prohibit his marriage to Judith, in Quentin's reconstruction it is Judith who does so in order to face Charles Etienne's defiance in marrying a black woman. Since he too is a Southerner, Quentin is able to substantiate his father's imagining of the attitude of these two Southern puritan siblings. Neither Henry nor Judith was able to accept the legality of marriage to Negroes. Truly representative of a culture in which Negroes had no rights, they could dispense with them easily. Henry and Judith were really Sutpen's children in that they reflected their father's moral blindness. The

Southern code of honor and the profound sense of justice and decency were not extended to Negroes. Both Henry and Judith were the embodiments of the prejudices of the Southern culture which excluded the Negro from the brotherhood of mankind. However, in trying to help Charles Etienne, Quentin makes Judith's actions human.

Charles Etienne, like his father Charles Bon in Mr. Compson's historical reconstruction, would not give up his Negro wife. These two (perhaps because they were part-Negro) were loyal to their families. Surely this was one of the deep human values which Sutpen lacked, for he easily put aside anyone who did not fit his purpose. In portraying Bon's and his son's loyalty, both Mr. Compson and Quentin showed their revulsion at Sutpen's lack of human values.

Quentin now recalls how, after his son Jim Bond was born, Charles Etienne lived like a hermit and consorted "with neither white nor black" (p. 209). Here his attitude is similar to that of Joe Christmas in *Light in August* in that they both are doomed men from their birth and, by their birth, victims of heredity, upbringing and society. Torn between the two sets of values, white and Negro, they resist acceptance by either race. Although Charles Etienne's doom was not amplified to the point of tragedy like Joe Christmas', the way they accomplish their doom is the same. If Joe Christmas says that he is a white man when among Negro people, and states he is a Negro when among white people, Charles Etienne achieves the same effect among negro stevedores,

who thought he was a white man and believed it only the more strongly when he denied it; the white men who, when he said he was a negro, believed that he lied in order to save his skin... (p. 206).

Now Quentin retells how Charles Etienne's health decayed through his constant, suicidal drinking. Sickening, he was nursed by Judith, the same Judith who did not accept him fully as a fellow creature. Contracted yellow fever, she died before he did.

Undoubtedly, what Mr. Compson meant when he called Miss Rosa's, Judith's and Clytie's lives "beautiful" (p. 191) was the way these Southern women accepted life and its duties, the way they annihilated themselves, living for others even when they hated them (Miss Rosa and her father) and despised them (Miss Rosa and Clytie, Judith and Charles Etienne), the way they carried the burden of their lives without complaint

(Clytie and Bond, Clytie and Henry), going on living until they had to face death and, even then, resigning themselves to death. Truly human actions of women who felt torn between feelings of impotent hatred and the desire to help.

In an extended flashback Quentin's memories now turn to Miss Rosa, who had been living on charity. He sees her manage with Judge Benbow to order Judith's grave. Their vanity is another side of the character of these women. They give tremendous importance to their graves, "the little puny affirmations of spurious immortality" (pp. 191-192), as if it were more important to state their immortality than to live by moral values such as love and forgiveness.

Quentin remembers how he had been to this grave more than once "in the rambling expeditions of boyhood" (p. 213). He also remembers the day he and some boys went to Sutpen's Hundred and saw Jim Bond. This recollection of childhood binds him to the historical characters of this story, that part of his twenty years' heritage, although he is far from them both in time and space.

Only now does the reader learn that Jim Bond, Bon's grandson, is an idiot. Raised by Clytie, he has lived in Sutpen's Hundred for twenty-six years.

Quentin's recollections of all these events provide the reader with information as to what happened after Bon's murder. Miss Rosa's narrative and Mr. Compson's previous one were incomplete because they did not "enter" the door to Judith's room.

Suspense is created when Shreve, cutting off Quentin's recollections, shifts from the haunted vision of Jim Bond and Clytie in Quentin's childhood to a consideration of the day Quentin and Miss Rosa went to Sutpen's Hundred. Shreve can hardly believe what he guesses about Quentin's dreadful discovery. Just like Shreve, the reader becomes more and more upset and, out of his astonishment, he also cries: "For God's sake wait" (p. 216). Nothing more is said about this visit because the scene is aborted at this point. The reader feels lost and confused, as he faces a puzzle which becomes more and more complicated and which he can hardly understand. However, the suspense created is released in the continuing reconstruction of the Sutpen's story.

The narrative now turns to Sutpen. Quentin once more relies on his father's memory as to what he heard from his

grandfather about that distant day when the French architect ran away before finishing Sutpen's mansion and when Sutpen organized a real human hunt to run down the architect as if he were an animal, demonstrating how ruthless he was toward all those associated with him. While hunting the architect Sutpen told Quentin's grandfather something of his past.

Only now does the reader learn that Sutpen was born a poor white in the mountains. His most striking and painful memory was of the day he had to go to the white man's house with a message. When he went to the front door, a "monkey-dressed nigger butler" (p. 231) barred his passage as a ragged nonentity, as a member of a shiftless, worthless group. He felt his small innocent world crumble. His reaction was both physical and psychological. Physically, he went to a cave in the woods to order his thoughts. Psychologically, he realized that to kill the black man would do no good. He decided finally that he must fight not the black man but the white man, and the only way was "to have what they have" that makes "them do what the man did" (p. 238). He now learned that a man has to fight for his own recognition, for his own importance and respectability. Sutpen's design was born at this moment. It embodied all the things that constitute preeminence in the Southern culture. However, Sutpen never realizes that he could have reached recognition, importance and respectability by rebelling against that "door" instead of agreeing to be one of the rich plantation owners. He was never aware of this fact, and that was the greatest irony of his life. Had he belonged to a culture other than the Southern he would have been aware of it.

The reader is told that Sutpen had gone to the West Indies. There he had helped the family of a rich plantation owner in Haiti by subduing the slaves in a siege. He then became engaged to the planter's daughter.

The narrative, however, is not delivered as directly and as simply as this. Quentin recalls the way Sutpen and his Negroes hunted the architect, then he shifts into the more distant past in Haiti, and also into the time of the Civil war, thirty years later than that human hunt, the day Sutpen went home with the tombstones and called at General Compson's house. In this part of the narrative three different historical times are interwoven.

Now the reader is told that Sutpen put aside his first wife because "she was not and could never be, through no

fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design" (p. 240) which he had in mind. This is one of the many times where the cause-effect sequence is reversed in the novel. Undoubtedly, such reversals suggest the process of researching and writing history. The causes of the historical deeds are neither revealed nor judged the moment they occur. They are always studied, analyzed and commented on at a time when it is possible for the historian to look back at them and to analyze them under the calm light of dispassion. Here, the same process occurs. Consideration of causes is postponed and events are presented first, so that the reader knows what happened before knowing the reasons that led the characteres to do what they did.

This is all that the reader is told up to this point concerning the "dark" past of Sutpen that Miss Rosa reported in her narrative and the hardships that Mr. Compson sensed when he first saw him.

In inquiring about the dealings that Sutpen must have had with Goodhue Coldfield, Shreve makes Quentin circle back over the circumstances that brought these two men together. The reader then knows that Sutpen and Mr. Coldfield had been engaged in a business dealing which failed. Mr. Coldfield insisted "on taking his share of the blame as penance and expiation" (p. 259) for having always had that kind of business in mind. This piece of information which Quentin heard from his father clarifies three important points: first, here lies the truth about what brought these two different men together — a fact that Miss Rosa was never able to understand; second, this fact explains why Mr. Coldfield, who had nothing in common with Sutpen, agreed to give him Ellen's hand in marriage (it was part of that same act of "penance and expiation" that he imposed upon himself); and third, here also is the explanation for Mr. Coldfield's attitude during the Civil War when he hid himself in the attic of his house to be fed there by his daughter Rosa — he hated his conscience, the country that created it and that offered opportunities of making money which he had to decline because of that same conscience. He came to consider the defeat of the South as the price Southerners paid "for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (p. 260). Besides, this blind Puritanism of Mr. Coldfield illuminates, once more, the nature of Miss Rosa's upbringing, and it makes the reader

understand her severity. Mr. Coldfield and Miss Rosa are cast from the mold of an inflexible culture.

Quentin now turns to Sutpen's design. The time is thirty years later. Sutpen now had everything required by his design: money, land, house, wife, children. However, he knew that he had made a mistake and could not understand where he had made it. He looked back in his past and could find no mistake. He confessed that his conscience had bothered him a little when he left his first wife and son, "but he had argued calmly and logically with his conscience until it was settled" (p. 262). He therefore rationalized and even found some merit in his action, for he could have deserted them completely, though he did not.

Ironically, he never suspected that his rationality in formulating and pursuing his design was responsible for its first failure, i.e., the rejection of his first wife and son. His "code of logic and morality, his formula and recipe of fact and deduction" (p. 275), did not allow him to see that he failed to respond emotionally and humanely to life. In his blind obsession he refused to recognize the simple human virtues of love, charity and pity. Christian morality was completely alien to him. In his "innocence" he denied people's humanity. He dealt with them as he dealt with objects and things: they were nothing but instruments to be preserved if they served his purpose, and to be rejected if they failed. This was his rationale for ridding himself of his first wife and child. Thus, Sutpen committed his first major sin against humanity. His goals were wealth and respectability, together with everything this respectability implied: position, heirs, a name to be carried through future generations of Sutpens. This was why he could not explain where his design failed.

The narrative proceeds. Shreve reminds Quentin of the Christmas eve at Sutpen's Hundred when Henry brought Bon home, the day "the demon looked up and saw the face he believed he had paid off and discharged twenty-eight years ago" (p. 265). It is at this point of the narrative that the impact of the revelation strikes the reader: Bon is Sutpen's rejected son. The puzzled reader now realizes that the problem in the Sutpen-Henry-Bon-Judith relationship which Miss Rosa did not understand and which Mr. Compson would not explain was incest. He now understands that Henry killed Bon to save his sister Judith. The story here achieves the stature of tragedy: father against son, son against father, brother against brother.

Provided with what Quentin revealed after his visit to Sutpen's Hundred, Mr. Compson had to correct his own historical reconstruction, for he now knew that the octoroon mistress was not the reason Henry killed Bon. Circling back over Bon's arrival at Sutpen's Hundred, Quentin tells Shreve what Mr. Compson imagined must have happened. He imagined Sutpen's unbelief at seeing Bon's name in the letters written by Henry. He imagined his recognizing Bon when they were introduced. He saw Sutpen going to New Orleans to find out the truth for himself. He envisioned Sutpen telling Henry at Christmas what he "found out". He also saw Sutpen keeping an eye on both Henry and Bon during the years of war, knowing, therefore, everything about Henry's probation.

Now Quentin circles back around the day Sutpen took the tombstones home and went to General Compson's to see if his old friend could "discover that mistake which he believed was the sole cause of his problem" (p. 271). The viewpoint then shifts from Quentin to General Compson through Mr. Compson. The reader is told about Sutpen's dilemma: he had to choose between destroying his design with his own hands or doing nothing, letting things take their course naturally and successfully, an attitude that would betray the boy who "approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away" (p. 274).

Quentin now knows that Sutpen did not betray that boy. He recalls how one morning Sutpen went to General Compson's regiment, asked permission to talk to Henry, was allowed to do so, and then went away.

Quentin's thought now turns to the day Sutpen went back home two years later. He had come home to face for the second time the failure of his design: his son Henry was a fugitive from justice for having killed his brother; Judith was condemned to spinsterhood; his plantation was destroyed and his house ruined. In his blind inhumanity, in his cold calculation and rationalization, he did not realize that he had himself spoiled his family by destroying his sons. He was beaten for the second time. The image of an old and desperate man who had destroyed with his own hands what he had planned and built for thirty years, he was not aware of what he had done.

Quentin now remembers what Mr. Compson said about the following years when Sutpen faced the problem of his old age and the possibility of starting anew for the third time. Quentin retells what the reader has been told over and over

about Sutpen's affair with Rosa, then his affair with Milly, and finally his despair when he saw that his last chance to make his design come true was lost forever. He had played his last card and had realized that he was beaten for the third time. The inhuman words he said to Milly suggest his suicidal tendencies.

In circling back around the day Milly's baby was born Quentin recalls Mr. Compson's testimony about Wash Jones' position in the Southern culture. He was the poor white who had worked for the Sutpen family the better part of his life, and whose very entrance in their mansion was denied. He was the poor white proud of the master he came to consider a God: "If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that's what He would aim to look like" (p. 282), and who yet, observing this world where his God lived, realized sadly how the Negroes "that the Bible said had been created and cursed by God to be brute and vassal to all men of white skin, were better found and housed and even clothed than he and his granddaughter" (p. 282). He was the servant who had been loyal to his master, and had found that his master was different from anyone else because of his bravery. This is the picture of Wash Jones, humble, faithful, slavish. However, when his most precious possession, his granddaughter's humanity, was trodden upon, he could not forgive Sutpen. More information is introduced. After the murder, Wash enters Milly's room, kills both mother and child, and, leaving his house, forces the men to kill him.

Shreve's reaction to such a revelation is also the reader's. This is the moment when Quentin reveals that Milly's baby was rejected because it was a girl. Sutpen desperately wanted a son to continue his line of descendants through generations to come. In rejecting Milly's humanity, Sutpen repeated the same sin of the past. For Wash Jones this was the unforgivable offense by his "God": to reject Milly's humanity was to reject his own humanity. The "God" he saw in Sutpen failed. It was the limit of his strength. Nothing more mattered.

At this point of the narrative both Shreve and the reader have been provided with all of Quentin's information: the fragmentary version of Miss Rosa, the fragmentary version of Mr. Compson enriched by General Compson's testimony as to Sutpen's past and to life in Sutpen's Hundred after Henry's crime, Mr. Compson's second historical reconstruction which attempts to solve the mystery that surrounds Sutpen's prohibi-

tion of the Judith-Bon marriage. This reconstruction was possible only by means of Quentin, who, due to his sympathetic imagination and his obsession, circled back around Sutpen's dream and design so as to draw a more convincing conclusion about Sutpen's downfall than the suggestion that it was a curse on his family and on the South as Miss Rosa had, or that it was the result, according to Mr. Compson's first recreation, of the citizen Sutpen's superficial social relationships.

From this point on, Quentin and Shreve try to see the other side of the story. They imagine the dilemma of Bon when he faces his situation as a rejected son, and Henry's attitude towards his half-brother. Both Quentin and Shreve are completely identified with Henry and Bon. And it is together with Shreve that the reader, from now on, crosses time and space and is placed in Sutpen's Hundred, on that Christmas eve, some forty years ago. Shreve then imagines Sutpen telling Henry that the Bon-Judith marriage cannot take place because they are siblings.

Next Shreve imagines what must have been Bon's and his mother's lives after Sutpen left them. In his imaginary reconstruction he portrays Bon first as an innocent child, and then as a careless young man ignoring everything about his father. As for his mother, Shreve portrays her as a woman whose only aim in life was to take revenge for the old offense of rejection.

Testing one hypothesis after another, Shreve realizes that there must have been a lawyer who handled the situation, thinking of the money he might extort from Sutpen. Both the mother and the lawyer, each one thinking of his own interests, would have agreed that Bon was the instrument by which they could blackmail Sutpen.

Shreve imagines the lawyer planning everything. Bon was sent to the university where Henry was. The whole management had only one aim: to make it possible for Bon to go to Sutpen's Hundred and to fall in love with Judith.

Bon is then seen as the son who would make Sutpen's children, his brother and sister, pay for the crime Sutpen committed: the son who, according to the old Biblical law, would bear the burden of his father's iniquities.

In Shreve's imagination, both the lawyer and the mother failed to understand that in doing so the most vulnerable one is Bon himself. They did not think of him as a human being

who could really come to love his father, brother, and sister, but only as a means by which Sutpen and his family could be destroyed. Thus, Bon's mother and the lawyer imitated the ruthlessness with which Sutpen achieved his purposes. Bon was only an instrument to serve their purposes.

Shreve decides that Bon would recognize Henry as his brother as soon as he sees him. They became friends. The cosmopolitan New Orleans man was aped in clothes, speech and attitudes, admired by the bucolic Mississippian who confessed that if he had a brother he would have to be older than he, and just like Bon.

Now Shreve imagines Bon agreeing to go to Sutpen's Hundred. However, it is not of Judith that he had been thinking — no, not Judith; Bon thought of Sutpen, his father.

Shreve sees Bon as the son who came to his father and asked for nothing but recognition, a recognition he searched for desperately during his ten days in Sutpen's Hundred, while writing to Judith, hoping for some signal, while going back to Sutpen's Hundred for the second and third times. And even after he ran away with Henry, that Christmas eve during the Civil War when Sutpen told Henry that the wedding could not take place because it would have been incest, Bon waited for nothing but a signal that would have let him know that his father recognized him as his rejected son.

Shreve imagines a touching picture. Bon waits for Sutpen to recognize him as a son. Henry gives him time to decide whether he rejects the incestuous love or not, and if he does not reject it, to get used to the idea. Sutpen expects Henry to recognize him as a son. Henry gives him time to decide waits for Bon's news and for his final decision to marry her. And the four of them hope that if time fails there will still be the possibility that war will shape the curve of events and settle everything.

In Shreve's imagination Bon's excuses for Sutpen's ignoring him are pathetic. In his rationalizations he tried to explain the delay of the signal that would make him leave Judith, protect his sister from incest by renouncing her — renouncing love, renouncing heredity, in short, renouncing everything. In his obsession he turned out, ironically, to be Sutpen's truest son.

The narrative now shifts to the day of Quentin's and Miss Rosa's visit to Sutpen's Hundred. It is Shreve's voice

that the reader still hears summarizing the events of that September night long ago. He reminds Quentin of how all of a sudden he knew the secret kept by Clytie.

And now, in their imaginative reconstruction, both Quentin and Shreve are in Carolina, forty years earlier. They imagine the scene vividly. Sutpen went after Henry and made a puzzling revelation. Sure that Henry would not prohibit the incestuous marriage, he now played his last card by telling Henry that Bon had Negro blood in his veins.

Quentin and Shreve then imagine the major factor in the frustration of Sutpen's design: miscegenation. Sutpen rejected his first wife because he discovered that she was part-Negro. Sutpen prohibited Judith's marriage to Bon mainly because it would result in miscegenation rather than incest. The impact of this imagined revelation is sickening to them. Turning out to be completely inhuman in his responses, Sutpen considers miscegenation more outrageous to human dignity than incest.

Quentin and Shreve imagine a scene in which Henry tells Bon what he has learned from his father. Bon's reaction is as puzzled as the reader's: "So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear..." (p. 356).

This imaginative revelation changes Quentin's and Shreve's understanding of the whole situation. Henry, who had loved and admired Bon deeply, who had agreed to let his sister marry Bon, who had even let Bon write Judith for the first time since they left Sutpen's Hundred that Christmas eve, now viewed him for the first time as a Negro. Henry was Sutpen's true son now: both Sutpen and Henry demonstrated the monstrosity of their spiritual depravity in considering miscegenation more sinful than incest. As to Bon, things were also changed. The man who for four years had been giving his father a chance to renounce everything did not give up the idea of marrying Judith. In his obstinance he was also Sutpen's son. Undoubtedly, in Quentin's and Shreve's imagination Bon's obstinacy implied his deliberately suicidal nature. Knowing that Sutpen would never recognize him as a son, he cared for nothing. That was why he could challenge Henry: "I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry" (p. 358). And Bon knew that Henry would stop him. They went back to Sutpen's Hundred, and Henry killed him before he crossed the gate.

In Quentin's and Shreve's reconstruction Judith and Clytie hear the shot. They carry Bon's body into the house.

Judith picks up the metal case she had given him, but it is not her photograph she sees in it but that of the octoroon and her son. Shreve has an explanation for this also. It stresses Bon's moral values as a human being. Bon did not want Judith to grieve for him. It was his message: "I was no good; do not grieve for me" (p. 359).

If in Quentin's and Shreve's imagination Sutpen turns out to have been inhuman, Bon, on the other hand, turns out to have been deeply human. Bon was the brother who loved Henry, who saved him from death when he was wounded during the war, who thought of Judith as a human being even when he faced his tragedy — that of a man searching for human recognition. Bon stands for all positive values in opposition to Sutpen's lack of values. As Donald M. Kartiganer points out,²¹ Bon's and Sutpen's differences are striking: Bon is the part-Negro who stands for the values of love and forgiveness, the man who represents a new time, a new kind of order, the image of lushness and extravagance, of the sophistication, grace and charm related to New Orleans, the man who represents passiveness, near resignation, softness, gentleness, humanity, compassion, loyalty; Sutpen is the pure white man who stands for Puritan inflexibility, crudeness, brutal candor, the man who represents the granite, puritanical severity of Sutpen's Hundred, the image of violent action, fate-defiance, ruthlessness and insensitivity.

Only now does the reader finally begin to understand. The complex, mysterious, obscure and incomplete meaning of the story disappears, and he can see everything. Now that he understands Sutpen and he realizes the monstrosity of the tragedy that befell him, he is also able to sympathize with the man Sutpen, to pity him in his icy rationalization, and to forgive him as one who spreads unhappiness and destruction among everyone related to him. Only through Quentin's and Shreve's imaginative reconstruction can the reader fully understand the downfall of a man who has a dream, makes it come true, and destroys it with his own hands by once again ignoring the lesson of his failures and the causes for those failures. His greatest tragedy is that he neither reproaches himself nor repents because he simply does not know where he has sinned.

Now Quentin has only to reveal what he found out in Sutpen's Hundred the night he accompanied Miss Rosa. The

(21) pp. 302-303.

postponement of his revelation creates a great deal of suspense. In the beginning of the book the reader is told about Quentin's visit to Sutpen's Hundred. All through the novel, in flashbacks, Quentin recollects the impact of the visit. However, only now does he reveal what he found there. He circles back over that night and remembers how he mounted the stairs only to meet Henry an old, sick and dying man. Quentin also recalls the way he came across Jim Bond while running away from the house, how, three months later, Miss Rosa sent an ambulance to fetch Henry to a hospital where he could be nursed, and how, before they reached the house they saw that it was on fire. Both Clytie and Henry burned to death.

Ironically, Bon's grandson, the Negro idiot, was the only survivor. This is everything that remained from the dream of a man: a nigger Sutpen to haunt the nights in Jefferson and to haunt Quentin's remembrances as well. Hence, the irony of the name Bond: the guarantee that the race would not disappear, that if Sutpen's dream had vanished his nightmare would not, that an heir had been provided to perpetuate the Sutpen generations but, quite unlike Sutpen's design, it was the Negro element that would survive.

PART III

Meaning And Truth

We have looked at the complex way in which the story of the House of Sutpen unfolds before the reader. The novel's difficulty derives primarily from two factors: its narrative structure and the author's decision to withhold meaning deliberately.

It has been said that the first fifty pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* are the hardest for the reader to grasp, and that he is more than once tempted to give up his reading. Reading the overly elaborate and, paradoxically, concentrated sentences for the first time, the reader is struck by their impassivity and mystery. Clauses trail one after another in apposition. Parentheses are inserted within parentheses. It seems as if Faulkner has decided to tell the reader everything all at once and to present each sentence as a microcosm. Now and then the reader has to pause, analyze the sentence, search for a verb to go along with the subject, and even at times, analyze

clause after clause to sort out meaning. Often the reader realizes that the obscurity of a given passage was not nearly so important after all to the chapter's overall meaning as he at first thought. What is most striking is that instead of giving the whole thing up the reader becomes more and more immersed in the novel. By means of repetition — words, sentences, events — Faulkner hypnotizes the reader, who simply has to go on reading until the very last sentence has been dropped away from him.

Sudden shifts of point of view are baffling. Points of view are trailed one after another in apposition. One or more points of view are inserted within an encapsulating point of view. One consequence of this device is that the time-scene shifts backward and forward, forward and backward. This manipulation of point of view matches the manipulation of awkward sentence structure. Between them they give the novel its characteristic shape. Conrad Aiken says that the persistent and continuous offering of obstacles has a purpose:

“to keep the form — and the idea — fluid and unfinished, still in motion, as it were, and unknown, until the dropping into place of the very last syllable” (22).

The narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* is basically circular. The reader finds no beginning and no ending. He is told about the end of Sutpen and that of his children before knowing the very facts that give meaning to this tragedy. However, what he is told about their end is incomplete until he reaches the end of the novel, and what he is told about the beginning of the story of Sutpen in the last chapters could not be understood by the reader any earlier than the end of the novel. There is no other alternative. The reader has to submit to Faulkner's circlings, but at every moment he must do so from a new angle and from a different point of view. What is “real” at one stage of the unfolding of the novel turns out to be “unreal” from a different point of view. It is an endless trick.

The technique used by Faulkner to delay telling and to withhold meaning has a threefold purpose. In the first place, it creates suspense, a device that is responsible for the reader's constant and urgent need to go through the book rapidly in order to find some meaning to what he has been reading.

(22) P. 48.

Second, it is the way Quentin progressively prepares Shreve and the reader to accept the terrible culmination of the Sutpen story by means of a direct confrontation with the living past. And third, it is the painstaking way in which Quentin conducts his search for the truth.

Faulkner prevents the reader from getting directly at the facts. The same events are retold several times, each time bringing in new information. These pieces of information are provided in crescendo. The suspense increases gradually. As the reader goes from one subclimax to another subclimax, and on up to the final climax, the intensity of the novel increases unbearably. The result is that the gradual, sustained, enriched revelation of the meaning gives vigor, power, and significance to the great scenes. It is a perfect adaptation of form to content.

When Quentin starts telling Shreve what he knows about Sutpen's story, he is already acquainted with the catastrophe into which all the descendants of Sutpen have plunged. He has seen Henry with his own eyes and has talked to him. He knows about the burning down of Sutpen's house, the death of Henry and Clytie, and the hauntings of Jim Bon. However, he will not make these revelations until the very end of his narration. In this aspect *Absalom, Absalom!* resembles a detective story: its meaning is disclosed in the very last pages with the saving-it-up-till-the-end method. Quentin puts off telling about his only personal experience with Henry because he wants to motivate both Shreve and the reader to confront the living past.

The knowledge about Henry at the end was the shock that brought about Quentin's search for understanding. Although Shreve implies that Clytie revealed the dark secret that underlay this tragedy (i.e., the secret of Bon's birth), the logic of the novel suggests that it was the presence of Henry in Sutpen's Hundred that allowed Quentin to know it. Faulkner does not clear up this point. He does not allow the reader to enter Henry's room with Quentin. Did Henry reveal the secret to Quentin, a stranger? Or did he reveal it to Miss Rosa, his aunt, who then revealed it to Quentin during their trip back home? Anyway, it is really beside the point whether Henry revealed it to Quentin or to Miss Rosa. What stands out is that their meeting represents the most obvious proof that the past is real.

Since the known "facts" of the Sutpen story do not explain the characters' actions, Quentin will not rest until he finds out what is more important for him to know: the reason for Henry's murder. He wants to fill in the gaps between the characters' motives and their actions. Therefore, in the first half of the book (chapters one, two, three, four, and five) he interweaves two different versions of the Sutpen story. In the second half of the book (chapters six, seven, eight, and nine) he and Shreve conduct an attempt at interpreting the known "facts". Striking disclosures, informed guesses, constantly revised deductions and hypotheses take place. It becomes quite evident that to transfer the lives of persons who are either absent or dead, persons that exist through words and voices and nothing else, it is necessary to proceed to an imaginative reconstruction. An act of imagination and faith is indispensable if one is to get at a meaningful "truth", even when the price to be paid for it is to sacrifice certainty. The result is neither a fantasy nor a flippant illusion, but a creatively discovered "truth". This is one of the themes of *Absalom, Absalom!*: the nature of historical truth and the problem of how one can "know" the past.

The "truth" turns out to be so convincing that the reader feels that there is more lifelikeness in what the two imaginative young men create than in the known "facts". Judith, Bon, Henry, and Sutpen stop being haunted ghosts from a distant past and become flesh and blood beings whose sufferings and drives are entirely meaningful.

Most remarkable is the participation of the reader in the search for the "truth". He, too, is able to imagine events and meanings and he, too, can share creative discovery. He makes up his mind to go to work and to cooperate with both Quentin and Shreve. His reward lies in the fact that there is a meaning to be extracted, and that half the fun of it is in watching the gradual and progressive evolution of idea and form.

Quentin's report of Miss Rosa's and Mr. Compson's narratives in the first part of the novel, and his and Shreve's attempt at reconstructing history imaginatively in the second part of the novel, are also meaningful for total structure. What he does, in fact, is to present three different interpretations of history, three different ways of searching for the "truth" beyond and behind distortion.

Miss Rosa's is the first mode of interpretation, the thesis. It is both subjective and morally inflexible. Her vision of rea-

lity is incredible and untrue. Her misguided romanticism and her exaggerated subjectivism do not solve the mysteries of the historical past. On the contrary, due to her traditional and morally inflexible Puritan conception of history, she explains history as a punishment of God, a curse on the South, on Sutpen, and on all those related to him.

The second mode of interpretation is Mr. Compson's, the antithesis. It is both objective and fatalistic. Mr. Compson, almost a nihilist, is something of a cynic and materialist. He has ceased to believe in the values of inherited tradition. He denies any intelligibility of the past. The past is a mystery, and as a mystery it must be accepted.

Quentin's and Shreve's interpretation of the past is the synthesis. It contains features of the two previous modes of interpretation. The recreation of history encloses both moral judgement and man's freedom to act. It rejects the excessive Puritanism of Miss Rosa and the exaggerated materialism of Mr. Compson. However, the meaning of history is "neither given nor entirely withheld."²³ It must be achieved with the help of imagination and faith: a truly Christian recreation of an uncertain past. An act of imagination, of interpretation, of judgement, is necessary to reach the "truth". Otherwise, the past is meaningless. Cleanth Brooks points out 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... (24).

In a sense, it can be said, the whole meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!* emerges from such a leap of the imagination.

The narrative structure of this novel also conveys an insight into the novelist's imaginative ability in building up a story that gives meaning to a certain number of known "facts". In this aspect, the opening paragraph of the detective story "Monk" stresses the idea of a novelist at work when Faulkner says, in the mouth of Charles Mallison,

I will have to try to tell about Monk. I mean, actually try — a deliberate attempt to bridge the inconsistencies in his brief and sordid and unoriginal history, to make something out of it, not only with the nebulous tools of supposition and

(23) *Waggoner*, p. 168.

(24) P. 196.

inference and invention, but to employ these nebulous tools upon the nebulous and inexplicable material which he left behind him. Because it is only in literature that the paradoxical and even mutually negating anecdotes in the history of a human heart can be juxtaposed and annealed by art into verisimilitude and credibility (25).

This describes one of the roles of a novelist. To give the inconsistent, dark, and mysterious "facts" some meaning, he has to suppose, to infer, and to invent persons, dialogues, scenes and events. Otherwise, the "facts" will remain improbable and incredible.

In Quentin's and Shreve's imaginative reconstruction of the Sutpen story the reader has an instance of a novelist at work. Consequently, *Absalom, Absalom!* can be viewed as an allegory for the novelist creating a fiction.

The other meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!* has to do with the meaning of Sutpen's career. What Quentin and Shreve envision in the story of Sutpen has plausibility but lacks certainty. There is no solid proof for the "truth" recreated. It all depends on the reader's willingness to accept it as "true" or not. Since the result of their imaginative inquiries explains the events that the reader has found incomprehensible, he is unlikely to doubt the validity of their conclusions. He actually feels that their version of the development of the events is plausible, and probably "true" enough. However, theirs is largely an imaginative reconstruction, and as such it is necessary to consider the "reality" of Sutpen's story and the invention of the events that complete and explain the fragmentary versions of the narrators.

The truth about Sutpen is that he goes to Haiti, marries, has a son, divorces his wife, moves to Jefferson, buys a piece of land, builds a mansion, has a daughter by a slave. Later, he marries Ellen Coldfield, has two children, Henry and Judith, and he becomes a rich plantation owner. Some twenty years later he prohibits Judith's marriage to Charles Bon. He goes to war, fights bravely, and comes back home to find his family destroyed by Bon's murder, his plantation ruined, and his house decayed. Soon afterwards he becomes engaged to his sister-in-law Rosa Coldfield, quickly alienates her, takes up with Milly, and is killed the same day Milly's child is born. These are the only "events" that are really known in Sutpen's story.

(25) William Faulkner, *Knight's Gambit* (New York, Random House, 1949), p. 39.

The only "facts" that are known about Bon are these: he is Henry's older friend, and whom Henry brings home. He meets Judith and becomes engaged to her. At the end of the war he is killed by Henry.

In Quentin's and Shreve's imaginative reconstruction the "facts" that fill in the gaps of the fragmentary account are as follows — Sutpen prohibits the Judith-Bon marriage because Bon is his rejected part-Negro son; Henry follows Bon to prevent incest; Bon waits four years for Sutpen's recognition; and finally, Bon goads Henry into killing him when he realizes that miscegenation is more outrageous to both Sutpen and Henry than incest.

Bon, then, turns out to be a creation of Quentin's and Shreve's imagination. There is no proof that he is Sutpen's rejected son: there is a coincidence of the family name "Bon," which is Sutpen's first wife's surname, but there is no certainty that he is Eulalia's son.

If Quentin and Shreve are right in their imaginative reconstruction of the meaning of the Sutpen story, this conclusion is to be drawn: *Absalom, Absalom!* stresses the tragedy of Sutpen, the human values of Bon, and the human actions of Judith and Henry.

Sutpen's failure comes from his refusal to recognize his part-Negro son. He does not hate Bon, just as he does not hate his first wife. They simply are not acceptable because they imperil his grand design. The proof is that Clytie, his half-Negro daughter, is not rejected. She grows up in the same house in which her half-brother and half-sister grow up, and she is naturally accepted as a part of the family. What distinguishes Clytie from Bon is the fact that she is not dangerous to Sutpen's design.

His tragic pattern starts when having received a mortal insult, he makes up his mind to match courage and strength, self-denial and persistence, to erase that insult. His passion is committed to his design. It does not matter whether his is a good or a bad design. Whoever and whatever menaces his rigid determination to make it come true must be put aside. He never allows anyone to thwart his will. Consequently, his pride destroys him. It is the same pride that annihilates Joanna Burden in *Light in August*, and that warps Emily Grierson in "A Rose For Emily."

Arrogance, selfishness, and blindness force Sutpen to persist in his line of conduct. He does not, for a single mo-

ment, think of changing his attitude. He fails and cannot imagine where he has made his mistake. His reality is established in terms of calculating, weighing, and measuring. He is not able to proceed as Quentin and Shreve do in their recreation of the past. To know the things that are worth knowing an "unscientific" act of imagination and even of faith²⁶ is required. Therefore, Sutpen is incapable of discerning "reality." He grants reality only to things that can be known with abstract rational clarity. By doing so he exploits and violates the humanity of all persons related to him.

Sutpen, then, takes shape as an authentic modern tragic hero. Had he been more human, and had he been able to acquire a sense of self-knowledge, he would have had all the tragic virtues that are to be found in a classic tragic hero.

Quentin and Shreve imagine Bon in terms of positive values while they imagine Sutpen in terms of negative values. To deny this is to deny the human values of the novel. To quote Donald M. Kartiganer once more,

The most vital truth of "Absalom, Absalom!" is that the possibility of value depends entirely on the ability of the human imagination to create it... The values of Charles Bon exist solely because Quentin and Shreve are capable of conceiving their existence; these values live because the human imagination — even in the wasteland — is capable of creating them (27).

In Quentin's and Shreve's historical recreation Bon asks for nothing but recognition. Sutpen, however, is incapable of acknowledging him as his son. He would have to infuse humanity in the "ingredients" of his design. He does not realize that Bon is demanding the same sort of recognition that was denied him as a boy at the plantation door.

During the four years of endless waiting, Bon gives Sutpen several opportunities to correct his "mistake". But he is blind, ambitious, too proud to understand the nature of his mistake and to change his line of conduct. Bon turns out to be another victim of his abstract "desing". In his desperate rationalization, incest with his half-sister or death at the hands of his half-brother are the only ways in which he can identify himself as Sutpen's son. Quentin and Shreve make him achieve an ultimate recognition of his son-ship.

(26) Waggoner, p. 167.

(27) p. 301.

From the moment Quentin decides to analyze, to interpret and to judge the past, his involvement in the story of Sutpen is personal. However, it is not the man Sutpen that obsesses him. What he is really obsessed by is Henry's and Judith's part in the tragedy.

Judith is portrayed as the image of renunciation and endurance. All her actions prove that she is a stout-hearted woman. She falls in love with Bon and is capable of opposing her father's will with a quiet strength. She endures the horror of Bon's murder, and summons the courage to bury him. She goes on living when everything around her has crumbled: her love dream buried, her brother gone, her parents dead, the old order of the South destroyed by the war. Her actions are motivated by love, even when she feels repulsion. Thus, she holds open the door for the wife, the part-Negro son, and the grandchild of Charles Bon. She transcends her father's inhumanity through suffering.

The recreation of Henry's compelling human actions, however, is what affects Quentin more deeply. Henry has to endure the knowledge of Bon's birth while Judith is completely ignorant of it. He also has to endure, during four years, his father's perplexed silence and his half-brother's self-resignation and passive fatalism. He is aware of the fact that whatever decision he is forced to make will be an agonizing one. He loves Bon and is led to kill him, apparently for love.

Both Judith's and Henry's actions are human, and motivated by love. Sutpen's actions are inhuman, and love is absent from his "design". Through their suffering they are able to transcend their father's flaw.

By recreating the circumstances that lead to Bon's murder Quentin discovers something of himself. In *The Sound and the Fury* he has failed to defend his sister's honor and to commit incest, although he claims he has. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, at different times, he identifies himself with Bon who feels compelled to threaten incest, and with Henry who must kill Bon to prevent it and the accompanying dread of miscegenation.

Quentin and Henry would have to have had a different background to prevent the catastrophe of self-annihilation in Quentin's case, and murder in Henry's case. Had both been able to care less for their sisters, or had they been more cynical, more selfish, or more detached, they would have had different reactions: Quentin would consider honor an affectation whose

saving was not worth the price of his life, and Henry would consider miscegenation and incest irrational prejudices.

Because Quentin is a Southerner he has a "sense of the presence of the past, and with it, and through it, a personal access to a tragic vision"²⁸ of the South that Shreve does not have. The evils of greed and usury and the evils of Negro slavery corrupted the South from within. The Civil War and the period of Reconstruction completed the destruction of the old South from the outside. Old aristocrats personally destroyed themselves by trying to continue to live according to an order that had lost all its meaning.

Quentin is able to discern this cultural failure in Sutpen. For him, Sutpen's story is the story of the South. Sutpen's failure to recognize the simple human needs of the human beings in whose lives he is implicated is the failure of the South too; Sutpen's refusal to regard the Negro as a human being is also the refusal of the South. Sutpen's failure as a man, as a father, as a master, and as a plantation owner, ultimately turns out to be the failure of the Southern white man, of the Southern family, of the Southern social class, and of the Southern culture as well.

Sutpen's dream is symptomatic of such a cultural failure: the path to achievement is to build a big house, to marry advantageously, and to found a dynasty. This dream must be fulfilled, no matter how. Humanity, love, faith, forgiveness, compassion, loyalty are not taken for granted. As a result, man isolates himself from all human commitments, violates the sanctity of the individual human heart, and destroys himself and the lives and hearts of all those related to him.

Sutpen is unable to learn the lesson that Isaac McCaslin learns in "The Bear". Isaac realizes that the ownership and exploitation of both land and persons has brought evil to the South. In order to reconcile himself with nature and with people, and to break the pattern of inherited injustice, he renounces his hereditary plantation, and he learns through suffering how to cultivate honor, pride, pity, justice, courage, and love.

Isaac understands that man cannot be isolated in himself, free from all commitment. He must live in community, sharing the anonymity of brotherhood.

(28) Cleanth Brooks, p. 197.

Sutpen is like Isaac's grandfather. He is incapable of saying "my son" to a nigger. Had he acquired the self-knowledge and the capacity of renunciation that Isaac did he would neither have destroyed himself and his children, nor would he have died ignoring the meaning of the life that had been his. But Sutpen was not Isaac McCaslin, and his tragedy, uniquely his, was never to see the nature of his own fate.

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