

THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN FAULKNER'S

THE SOUND AND THE FURY AND

ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
I. THE SOUTHERN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY.....	4
Wealthy Families in the Pre-War South .....	4
Life in a frontier society.....	5
Assumption of aristocratic bearing.....	5
Falseness of aristocracy.....	6
Means of obtaining wealth.....	6
Idea of Aristocracy.....	7
Arbitrary class distinctions.....	7
Withdrawal of wealthy families.....	8
Importance of family.....	8
Decline of Aristocratic Families.....	9
Retention of sense of aristocracy.....	9
Decline of Compsons.....	10
Decline of Sutpens.....	11
Obsession with the Past.....	12
Responsibility of child to ancestors.....	13
Obligation of Quentin to ancestors.....	13
Obligation of Henry to ancestors.....	14
Influence of Negro.....	14
Sexual relations between Whites and Negroes.....	15

Protection of White women.....	16
Caddy as Southern lady.....	16
Necessity of maintaining purity of line.....	17
Guilt feelings of Southern Whites.....	17
Legend of Old South.....	18
Inheritance of sons.....	19
II. THE COMPSONS IN <u>THE SOUND AND THE FURY</u> .....	21
Importance of Family in <u>The Sound and the Fury</u> .....	21
Mr. Compson as head of the family.....	21
Quentin as eldest son.....	22
Influence of Mr. Compson.....	22
Reality and Order in <u>The Sound and the Fury</u> .....	23
Order in Benjy's section.....	24
Order in Quentin's section.....	24
Order in Jason's section.....	25
Order in the final section.....	25
Result of Quentin's sense of order.....	26
Mr. Compson in His Children's Eyes.....	26
Mr. Compson in Benjy's section.....	26
Father on day of Damuddy's death.....	27
Respect of children for father.....	28
Mr. Compson as mediator.....	28
Mr. Compson's affection for Caddy and Benjy.....	29
Mr. Compson's attitude toward his wife....	29
Quentin's relationship with his father....	29
Benjy's opinion of father.....	30

Mr. Compson in Jason's section.....	31
Similarity to Benjy's picture of father....	32
Mr. Compson's alcoholism.....	32
Mr. Compson's attitude toward Caddy and Quentin.....	32
Mr. Compson in the final section.....	33
Mr. Compson in Quentin's section.....	33
Complexity of Quentin's Father.....	33
Comparison with Father in Benjy's section.....	34
Mr. Compson's view of time.....	34
Time against Quentin's moral code....	35
Time against morality and meaning....	35
Time against sin.....	36
Quentin's Puritan sense of time.....	37
Pessimism in Mr. Compson's philosophy.....	37
Influence of Mr. Compson on Quentin's suicide.....	38
Quentin's Inability to Love.....	38
Quentin's Obligation Toward his Mother.....	39
Quentin's Feelings for his Mother.....	39
Differences between Quentin and His Father.....	40
III. THE COMPSONS IN <u>ABSALOM</u> , <u>ABSALOM!</u> .....	42
Quentin and His Father in <u>Absalom</u> , <u>Absalom!</u> .....	42
Similarities to <u>The Sound and the Fury</u> .....	43
Interest of Compsons in the Sutpens.....	43
Psychology of narrators.....	44

Sources for Quentin's narration.....	45
Mr. Compson as Narrator.....	46
Attitude of chivalry toward women.....	46
Relating of Sutpen story as classical tragedy.....	47
Worship of past.....	47
Interest in Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon.....	48
Reasons for Bon's murder.....	49
Identification of Quentin with Henry.....	49
Identification of himself with Bon.....	51
Similarities between himself and Bon.....	52
Quentin as Narrator.....	53
Differences between Quentin and Shreve as narrators.....	54
Quentin's personal involvement.....	54
Identification with Henry.....	55
Bon's search for a father.....	56
Mr. Compson's influence.....	56
Difference between narratives of Shreve and Mr. Compson.....	57
Comparison of Quentin of <u>Absalom, Absalom!</u> with Quentin of <u>The Sound and the Fury</u> .....	58
IV. THE SUTPENS IN <u>ABSALOM, ABSALOM!</u> .....	60
Uniqueness of Colonel Sutpen's Moral Code.....	60
Lack of Southern traits.....	61
Values of early life.....	62
View of meaning of property.....	62

Understanding of rules of Southern	
society.....	63
Adequacy of Sutpen's morality.....	63
Sutpen's moral innocence.....	64
Morality of Sutpen's sons.....	64
Henry as typical Southerner.....	65
Denial of Negro.....	65
Comparison of Sutpen and Henry.....	65
Bon as typical of New Orleans.....	66
Search for recognition of father.....	67
Adherence to morals of his society.....	67
Conflict between Sutpen and sons.....	67
Failure of Sutpen's design.....	68
Henry's love for Bon.....	68
Sutpen's lack of responsibility for Bon...	69
Sutpen's lack of love.....	69
Conflict of Sutpens a result of clash of	
societies.....	69
CONCLUSION.....	71
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	77

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between fathers and their sons is a frequently recurring theme in William Faulkner's novels which deal with the society of Yoknapatawpha, the mythical Mississippi county he created and populated. In Absalom, Absalom! this theme is central; the plot revolves around the conflict between Thomas Sutpen and his two sons, Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon. The Sound and the Fury deals with the efforts of the three sons of Mr. Compson (Jason Lycurgus Compson III) to reconcile family problems which have been set off by the rebellion of their sister, Caddy. Go Down, Moses reveals the relationship of various members of the McCaslin family to the heritage of their fathers. Joe Christmas in Light in August has an adopted father who seriously affects his concept of himself and the course of his whole life. The earliest of the Yoknapatawpha county novels, Sartoris, concerns the problem of a young man seeking desperately to live up to the example set by his grandfather. Faulkner evidently placed great importance on the role of the father and the responsibility of the son in these novels.

Most of the fathers and sons belong to the upper class. Some middle and lower class families in Yoknapatawpha, such as the McEacherns of Light in August, place importance on the position of the father, but most follow the example of

the notorious Snopses, who although they multiply rapidly apparently have little feeling for family dignity. In the upper class families, though, the position of the father is one of great authority. Absalom, Absalom! from its very title is concerned largely with the relationship between the father and his sons. Significantly, two of the four narrators of that novel are also a father and son, Mr. Compson and Quentin. These two narrators are intensely interested in the Sutpen story because it closely parallels their own as revealed in the book devoted exclusively to the Compsons, The Sound and the Fury. These two works were chosen for this study, then, because they deal with the theme of the relationship of fathers to sons. Light in August, Go Down, Moses, and Sartoris were rejected because, although the problems of the characters are in many ways similar to those of the Compsons and Sutpens, substitutes replace the actual biological father. In Sartoris the great-grandfather and the family tradition he established extend the influence over the son, rather than the actual father. In Go Down, Moses Ike McCaslin feels similarly the influence of his grandfather, but the immediate example is that of his mentor, the half-Indian Sam Fathers. And Joe Christmas's actual father is only a shadow in the book; his adopted father is the real influence.

The Yoknapatawpha novels present an accurate picture of actual conditions in the South, past and present. In The Sound and the Fury and in Absalom, Absalom! the fathers and

sons differ in their attitudes toward Southern convention and out of this difference arises the conflict between generations. Both Thomas Sutpen and Mr. Compson have, by the time their sons reach adulthood, discovered a moral code, an ideal against which to judge men's actions, which is quite different from the typical morality of their Southern neighbors. But each father fails to fulfil the normal role of the father. He fails to impart his system of values to his son. The sons, therefore, have no choice but to adhere to the traditions of the society around them. They inhale their values from the air of Yoknapatawpha. Faulkner effectively suggests in each case that the mother has almost no personal force with which to influence her son. So, because the father deviates from the cultural norm and the son returns to it, a conflict of values is set up. And the fathers Sutpen and Compson and the sons Henry and Quentin, especially, all fail because they refuse to be flexible. Each of these characters is deeply obsessed with his own problem and is incapable of compromising his values to meet the human situation. This inflexibility destroys: Sutpen and Quentin meet violent deaths, Mr. Compson destroys himself in alcohol, and Henry disappears for years after murdering his brother.



# I

## THE SOUTHERN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY

Faulkner presents in The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! the histories of two families in which the fathers and sons follow separate systems of values. Both Mr. Compson and Thomas Sutpen develop an individual and independent moral code while their sons adhere firmly and with youthful ardor to the traditional Southern values. This conventional morality of the sons is exactly that of the real South found in the history and sociology books. Quentin and Henry, especially, of the sons of these two families try to live by the Southern code which is the result of several important historical factors influencing the South. The aristocratic class which the Compsons and Sutpens belong to, first of all, was unstable and short-lived and lacked the security of position necessary to the development of a humanistic attitude. The decline of the great aristocratic families of the South was almost inevitable, and usually set in after only a few generations. Nevertheless, partially because of its insecurity, the family was an institution of great importance to the upper-class Southerner. The presence of the Negro and the common practice of sexual relations between white men and Negro women made even more precarious the position of the wealthy families. But sexual relations between white

women and Negro men were never possible, and the white women were carefully protected to ensure the racial purity of the family line and to maintain white supremacy. An attitude and a system of values were developed which were uniquely Southern. This Southern code required the suppression of the Negro, the protection of the white "lady," and the maintaining of the power of the white upper-class families.

The Sutpens and the Compsons represent the upper-class Southerner. Faulkner presents in the stories of these families not the myth of the old South, in which the ruling class is a group of cultured and enlightened transplanted Europeans, but the reality. "Scratch the veneer of the aristocrat of the Deep South and you would find a frontiersman."<sup>1</sup> The pre-war South was largely a frontier society. Although owners of the tobacco plantations in Virginia had developed wealth and a certain amount of culture by the end of the eighteenth century, portions of the South further inland were barely settled by the time of the Civil War. The westward expansion went on at a rapid pace in the South as elsewhere in North America, but there was a vast amount of land to cover.

The fertile lands and mild climate of the Southern colonies had from the time of the earliest settlements promised agricultural wealth. From the first, the South was dominated by the large plantations, and the small farmer never became

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<sup>1</sup>Melvin Backman, Faulkner, The Major Years: A Critical Study (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 94.

of any real importance to the economy; whereas, in the more difficult farming conditions of the North he was in the majority and the large landowner was the exception. The South retained an almost feudalistic society, complete with slaves, and the tobacco growers of Virginia tried to model their lives on those of the aristocratic families of Europe. But the European ancestors of these families were rarely anything more than middle class. These tidewater plantation owners with their imitation European culture set the tone for the upper class of the South as wealth spread rapidly westward. They lived the part of the feudalistic lord, but their aristocratic bearing was spurious. They did not have the generations of power and education behind them to develop a truly humanistic tradition.

The falseness of the Southern aristocracy is a frequent theme in Faulkner's works. Backman makes clear that only in the Sartorises do we find an upper-class family blessed with the virtues which popular legend attributes to the Southerner; his other wealthy families are more realistic and are founded by strong and ruthless self-made men.<sup>2</sup>

These self-made men were frontiersmen like Sutpen, who took advantage of the growing economy of the South and became its aristocratic class. Land could be obtained cheaply. Cotton, which had replaced tobacco as the principal crop, could be grown and marketed easily with the help of the growing number of Negro slaves, and a man with little or no

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<sup>2</sup>Backman, p. 95.

capital could amass a good deal of wealth in a single lifetime.

New plantation owners were quick to imitate the ways of the older landowning families. The idea of aristocracy, of a wealthy, cultured, and gentlemanly ruling class, had survived the trans-Atlantic voyage and settled in Virginia and Carolina. People of generally undistinguished backgrounds but ambitious of wealth, moving into the new country and becoming the new landowners, carried the idea with them. Arthur W. Calhoun in his history of the American family points out that in Mississippi, for instance, before 1830 there were few distinctions in class; after that time, with the coming of the slave and the plantation system, sharp differentiation was made between the poor white laborers and their wealthy land- and slave-owning neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

But these class distinctions were arbitrary. Often only a few years or at most a generation or two separated the new aristocracy from the old penniless settlers. This new upper class, probably because of the awareness of the insecurity of its position, quickly established traditions and stubbornly adhered to them. The rigidity of the allegiance a member of a wealthy family like Quentin pays to these traditions is based on his knowledge of their falseness. The Southern aristocracy could never compromise its code because of the fear that the code would fail. Only a few of Faulkner's

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<sup>3</sup>Arthur W. Calhoun, A Social History of the American Family From Colonial Times to the Present (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1918), II, 351.

aristocrats manage to rise above this fear, notably Ike McCaslin because of the unusual education he receives from the wilderness and Sam Fathers.

These newly rich landowners of the South, furthermore, often tried to make the difference between them and their poorer neighbors more apparent by withdrawing from the social life of the lower classes. This tendency was increased by the fact that the Southern plantation was economically a completely self-sufficient unit. In addition to cotton, the plantation raised all the food required by the family and slaves, and it imported from the North what implements were needed.<sup>4</sup>

This self-sufficiency of the plantation tended to strengthen the Southerner's idea, already inherited from his Scotch and Irish forebears, of the importance of the family. W.J. Cash in The Mind of the South says that here family ties "acquired a strength and validity unknown in more closely settled communities."<sup>5</sup> Calhoun, too, states that families were because of their isolation "bound together by closest ties of affection, dependence, and economic interest," and that "every economic and social force contributed to family solidarity."<sup>6</sup> This family solidarity is seen quite clearly in The Sound and the Fury, although the Compsons are by 1940 declining in wealth and family dignity.

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<sup>4</sup>Wilbur J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Cash, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup>Calhoun, p. 330.

The decline of the aristocratic families like the Compsons was almost inevitable. Frontier economy in the South as elsewhere in America was based on exploitation of natural resources, and the land planted in cotton gave out quickly. The awareness on the part of the wealthy families of this pattern of declining fortunes often resulted in a stubborn allegiance to the past. Most large estates remained in the possession of one family for not more than three or four generations before the land deteriorated or the Civil War intervened. Bankruptcy was rather frequent. The poor and industrious farmers were always in the background waiting to take the places of the wealthy who failed. The descendants of the aristocratic families subsisted on the charity of friends, and the poverty they experienced was "very dissipating to hereditary breeding;" degeneracy took over after a few generations.<sup>7</sup>

Although decline of wealth was the rule for these upper-class families, poverty did not remove their sense of aristocracy. Families like the Compsons were typical of the South after Reconstruction when, according to John Crowe Ransom, "Poverty and pride overtook the South; poverty to bring her institutions into disrepute and to sap continually at her courage; and a false pride to inspire a distaste for the thought of fresh pioneering projects, and to doom her to an increasing physical enfeeblement." He describes the Compsons aptly when he says, "Unregenerate Southerners were

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<sup>7</sup>Calhoun, pp. 333-334.

trying to live the good life on shabby equipment, and they were grotesque in their effort to make an art out of living when they were not decently making the living."<sup>8</sup> The wealthy families held tenaciously to their traditions as aristocrats in spite of the fact that their lower-class neighbors often lived in greater comfort and financial security.

The Compsons as they appear in both The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! are just such a family. Loss of wealth has forced them to sell most of their land, but they retain the house and manners of the upper class. The earliest Compson in Yoknapatawpha county had obtained a square mile of Mississippi land from the Indians for the price of a mare. Here he built a large house surrounded by "slavequarters and stables and kitchengardens and the formal lawns and promenades and pavilions."<sup>9</sup> His son was a governor and his grandson a Civil War general. With this general decline of wealth began to set in, forcing him to begin to sell the land piece by piece. Quentin's father sold the last parcel to finance Quentin's year at Harvard. With Jason, Quentin's brother, the decline is complete. Upon the death of their mother, which leaves Jason and Benjy the last Compsons, he sells the house. But the events of the novel center around this last generation while they are still acting the part of the upper-class family.

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<sup>8</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," in I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1962), pp. 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> William Faulkner, Appendix to The Sound and the Fury (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 407.



The decline of the Sutpen family in Absalom, Absalom! is even more dramatic; the rise to wealth and the fall to degeneracy occur almost entirely in the space of two generations and are observable in one lifetime. Indeed, the life of Thomas Sutpen, the founder of the family, is often seen by critics as an allegory of the history of the South: he has the humble origin typical of the people who settled the frontier, he obtains his land cheaply and carves out of the wilderness a successful plantation with the help of Negro slaves, and he exhibits a typical Southern obsession with family line. Sutpen is born into a penniless family in the Virginia mountains, but upon the death of his mother the family moves to the tidewater region. Here the young Sutpen, sent on an errand to the owner of a large plantation, is denied entrance at the door by a Negro slave. Greatly hurt, Sutpen realizes for the first time the class distinctions that separate men, and he determines upon a "design" for his life. He will become one of the wealthy. He goes to Haiti where he marries the daughter of a sugar plantation owner only to discover soon after the birth of their son that she has a small portion of Negro blood. Knowing that he can never establish a Southern dynasty with Negro blood, he gives her money, divorces her, and soon afterward appears in the wilderness of Yoknapatawpha with a group of Haitian Negroes. He procures land, builds a home, and marries the daughter of a well-respected businessman. He has gained wealth and a son and daughter have almost reached adulthood when his design falls down on his head. The son of his first wife,



Charles Bon, reappears and becomes engaged to Sutpen's daughter. When Sutpen, in order to stop once again the threat of Negro blood in his family, tells his second son Henry of Bon's background, Henry, after an interlude of four years in which all the male Sutpens serve as Confederate soldiers, shoots and kills Bon. Sutpen's dream of establishing a Southern dynasty is at an end.

Faulkner is always careful to present the histories of his aristocratic families, which are like the histories of the real Southern families, and to carry their lineage back in time to the founder of the family wealth and position. Indeed, Faulkner has often been accused of being obsessed with the past, but it is the traditionally conservative South which exhibits the obsession and not Faulkner. Cash points out the historical perspective of the Southern people: "The mind of the section . . . is continuous with the past. So far from being modernized, in many ways it has actually marched away, as to this day it continues to do, from the present toward the past."<sup>10</sup> The publication of the famous book I'll Take My Stand, in which a number of prominent and intelligent Southerners advocate a return to the rather idealized agrarian society of the past and lament the slow emerging of an industrial economy in the South, amply proves Cash's point. Faulkner's characters have a typically Southern view of the past, for each member of his upper-class families must live under the shadow of his family's history.

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<sup>10</sup>Cash, pp. x-xi.

Quentin, whose obsession with the past becomes almost hysterical in his relating of the narrative of the Sutpen family, commits suicide rather than live with the knowledge that the traditions of the South which he reveres are in danger of disappearing.

The child in the modern Southern family, like Quentin, is taught responsibility to all his parental ties, and this responsibility is greater to the more ancient ancestors. In the control of their children "parents are responsible to grandparents and to great-grandparents. This authority of the older generations, furthermore, does not cease with the death of a forebear. In a sense, it becomes more binding in that it becomes unalterable."<sup>11</sup> Children are also taught that they have to behave in a certain way not to retain their own social status but because they have an obligation to the whole family to do so.<sup>12</sup>

This obligation to the whole family is what Quentin feels so strongly. He wants to take responsibility for Caddy's behavior and to rectify it because he feels she has betrayed the family honor. And it is his own failure to live up to this exaggerated sense of honor that drives Quentin to suicide. He feels his own failure intensely because he has a rigid and predetermined standard of conduct. He tries to measure his own and Caddy's actions according to

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<sup>11</sup>Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner, Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class, abridged edition (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1965), p. 94.

<sup>12</sup>Davis, p. 91.

the yardstick provided by Southern and family tradition. In his romantically youthful understanding he sees Governor Compson and General Compson entirely as heroes. He lacks the warmth and insight necessary to see through his father's pose of cynicism and feels that Mr. Compson has failed to uphold the family honor; so, he sees his own responsibility as even greater.

Thomas Sutpen's obsession to maintain the family line, like Quentin's despair over his sister's dishonoring the family, is the result of a feeling for tradition, typical of the South, hardened into an absolute intolerance for anything which refutes or threatens family solidarity. Henry struggles against this intolerance but finally gives in, despite his love for Bon, and kills him to insure the racial purity of the family. The Southerner's refusal to violate the dictates of the past eventually destroys all the Compsons and Sutpens.

The presence of the Negro also had an influence on the family as it did on every aspect of Southern life. Not only was the economy which allowed the development of Southern aristocratic families based on slavery, but personal contacts with Negroes had considerable effect upon members of the upper class. Sexual relations between white men and Negro women were frequent. Calhoun insists that the practice was almost universal, and cites instances of people who left the South to escape from it.<sup>13</sup> In the modern South there is no

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<sup>13</sup>Calhoun, pp. 294-295.

taboo preventing sexual intercourse in spite of the absolute taboo against marriage.<sup>14</sup> But children of mixed blood, no matter what the ratio of black to white, are always considered black.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Sutpen's refusal to recognize his partly-Negro son and Henry's murdering of his brother are more easily understood if the strong taboos that exist in the South against the admixture of black blood into white families are clear. Henry feels the same necessity for adhering to the Southern code that Quentin does. Henry's father rejects Bon because of the need for playing the role of Southern gentleman, but Henry shoots Bon because he believes that the Sutpens are Southern gentlemen and Judith a Southern lady who must be protected from rape by the Negro.

Sexual relations between whites and Negroes were sanctioned, at least to a degree, in the portion of the South that Bon was raised in. In New Orleans and Charleston there arose as a sidelight to the practice of miscegenation a class of women of mixed blood who commonly sold themselves into concubinage. These women were not slaves, but were legally free. Mothers trained their daughters for the career of mistress to a white man, and the girls were often better trained as wives than white women. There were formal balls at which the white men could meet them and bargain with their mothers for their services. But the relationships thus established were almost never lasting; abandonment was

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<sup>14</sup>Davis, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup>Davis, p. 7.

the rule, not the exception. The mulatto women were generally cast off when their white partners married respectable white girls although some relationships continued after the man's marriage.<sup>16</sup> Charles Bon in Absalom, Absalom! has such a mistress and actually goes through the ceremony of marriage with her, but does not consider this marriage in the least binding or detrimental to his plans to marry Judith.

The sexual freedom which white males enjoyed with their Negro slaves and mulatto mistresses not only did not apply to blacks, but most certainly did not apply to white women. The virtue of young unmarried women was most assiduously guarded, and no white girl was allowed to be alone with a young man until she was safely married to him.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the white woman was idealized as a thoroughly virtuous, even saintly, creature. She was pictured in the popular myth as a person of grace and refinement, modesty, and patience, but in actuality she was shown only surface respect, the "gallantry of the harem."<sup>18</sup> She was expected to remain silent about her husband's promiscuity among their slaves although his half-caste children were often obvious about the plantation.

Quentin tries to force Caddy into the role of the Southern lady, a role which she refuses to play. But it is one

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<sup>16</sup>Calhoun, p. 298.

<sup>17</sup>Calhoun, p. 312.

<sup>18</sup>Calhoun, p. 323.

which Ellen Coldfield, as Sutpen's wife, falls into easily. She even raises Sutpen's Negro daughter, Clytemnestra, in the house with her own children. Mrs. Compson, too, plays the part of the Southern lady and even exaggerates her part because she is aware that her middle-class origins do not really entitle her to it.

Of course the reasons for the great respect shown white women were very complex and stemmed partially from the sense of guilt the white male felt as a result of his sexual freedom. But another reason of great importance was the fear of sexual relations between black men and white women and the necessity of maintaining the purity of the white lineage. This fear is still very strong in modern Mississippi:

One control which acts to maintain the endogamous system is the taboo existing on relations between Negro men and white women. Not only is there a formal law which prohibits intermarriage, but the society also seeks to prohibit any sexual intercourse outside of marriage between white women and colored men. Any Negro man who makes advances toward a white woman, even though she be a professional prostitute, has broken the strongest taboo of the system and risks terrible punishment. Furthermore, since he is regarded as a primitive being, emotionally unrestrained and sexually uncontrolled, the Negro man is thus thought by the whites to be always a potential rapist.<sup>19</sup>

Thorpe believes that the South was largely hedonistic and sees the sexual freedom that upper-class white males enjoyed as a great asset in Southern culture and an expression of the American code of freedom.<sup>20</sup> And, he says, not

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<sup>19</sup>Davis, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup>Earl E. Thorpe, Eros and Freedom in Southern Life and Thought (Durham, North Carolina: Seeman Printery, 1967), p. 10.

only the white but the Negro male enjoyed this freedom due to the breakdown of Negro family traditions through the interference of the whites.<sup>21</sup> But the South was not free to enjoy this sexually unrepressed activity he claims for her: "On one side of her nature, the Old South was deeply Calvinist, and the guilt which she felt over slavery probably derived more from the fornication and adultery which the institution evoked than from the denial of freedom to the black man."<sup>22</sup>

The South and its great interrelated institutions, family and slavery, were attacked, then, not only from the outside from more progressive cultures but also from within by its own sense of guilt. The more the Southerners were reproached in the period just after the Civil War, the more they insisted upon the greatness of their pre-war heritage. According to Cash "while the actuality of aristocracy was drawing away toward the limbo of aborted and unrealized things, the claim of its possession as an achieved and essentially indefeasible heritage, so far from being abated, was reasserted with a kind of frenzied intensity."<sup>23</sup> Thus, out of guilt and repression was the legend of the Old South born. In the twentieth century that legend still lives, not only in its popular form but in a slightly more sophisticated tradition exemplified by the Agrarian testament I'll Take My

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<sup>21</sup>Thorpe, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup>Thorpe, p. 27.

<sup>23</sup>Cash, p. 124.

Stand and stated perfectly by the Southern novelist Andrew Lylte when he says that life in the antebellum South "seemed to me what was left of the older and more civilized America, which as well retained the pattern of its European inheritance. The Civil War had destroyed that life; but memory and habit, manners and mores are slow to die."<sup>24</sup>

It is this complex and backward-looking society that the sons in Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury inherit. Perhaps Quentin's and Henry's allegiance to the precepts of Southern morality is so strong and undivided because they feel their fathers to be deviates from that society. The sons see this deviation as failure and set about to rectify it in a typically Southern manner--through violent action. What the sons do not see is that their fathers have tested Southern values and found them wanting. Sutpen saw the failure of Southern society in his boyhood when he was rejected at the door of the landowner's house, but he saw the necessity for playing the game in order to achieve respect and a position of importance in Southern society. His entire life is not, as many critics have supposed, an allegory of the South but rather a parody of it. Mr. Compson, too, remains apart from Southern society, but instead of overacting the part of Southern gentleman as Sutpen does, he refuses to act at all. Seeing the sham of Southern life, he retreats and criticizes from the sidelines.

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<sup>24</sup>Andrew Lylte, "The Working Novelist and the Mythmaking Process," Daedalus, 88 (Spring 1959), 326.



The sons of these two men, then, being perhaps too young to do otherwise, believe in the values of Southern society and try to assume the position of Southern gentlemen when their fathers fail.

## II

### THE COMPSONS IN THE SOUND AND THE FURY

The Southern tradition of the importance of the family is the foundation for The Sound and the Fury, although this foundation is understood and never explicitly stated. The Compsons obviously fit the common pattern of Southern degenerate aristocracy, and in so presenting them Faulkner expects his audience to attach to them the proper background and history. He himself supplies some of this history in the appendix to The Sound and the Fury written for The Portable Faulkner many years after the publication of the novel. The author thus indicates how important he feels this background is to understanding the Compsons. Their family was prominent in the early history of Yoknapatawpha county from the time of the earliest settlers of the frontier community to the Civil War. Their fortunes had declined steadily, however, until by the early twentieth century and the generation of Caddy and Quentin they were impoverished and forced into selling their land piece by piece.

Mr. Compson, as the father of an aristocratic if no longer wealthy family, is in a position of importance. He fails to carry out his responsibility, and his influence on his sons Jason and Benjy is negligible. Quentin, however, feels his father's influence strongly but as a negative

force. Mr. Compson fails to figure significantly in the life of Benjy, his retarded son, whose mind centers on Caddy as the most loving and concerned member of the family. Mr. Compson also has virtually no influence on Jason, who is from the first like his mother in character and outlook and receives most of his education and encouragement from her. Quentin, though, is very sensitive to his father's presence although he ultimately rejects his values in favor of more conventional ones.

As the oldest son, Quentin feels responsibility for the welfare of the family and its continuity. He has inherited and made a fetish of the Southern concept of honor. He apparently learned this code from Southern culture generally, and to a lesser degree from his mother. She, being from a family of slightly lower social status than the Compsons, is extremely aware of the social prominence of her husband's family and constantly reminds Quentin and the other children of it. Her principal desire is to live as a Southern "lady." Faulkner presents her as physically weak, selfish, and morally narrow. She has little personal influence on Quentin's character, but she does see that he grows up in an atmosphere of conventional Southern morality.

The influence of Quentin's father is much more complex than that of his mother. His father does not condone Southern values; indeed he often ridicules or refers satirically to them. Although Mr. Compson is cynical and even nihilistic, he does not lack warmth and honestly tries to help Quentin in his moral crisis over Caddy's behavior. But his son

misunderstands his characteristically negative approach. Quentin is unwilling to abandon the Southern code he pays allegiance to, the code which Mr. Compson tries to refute, because he cannot accept his father's implicit statement that this code lacks meaning. If Mr. Compson could offer any substitute system to satisfy Quentin's need for order, his son might have been able to accept it. But Quentin cannot substitute nihilism for a Southern sense of honor as his father has done. Nevertheless, we may surmise that Mr. Compson at one time probably did have some part in the forming of Quentin's moral character. There is evidence that Mr. Compson at the time of Quentin's death is different from Mr. Compson during Quentin's youth. The father, however, is extremely difficult to assess because of the style of the novel, a style which reflects Faulkner's ideas about reality and meaning in life.

Faulkner's principal preoccupation in The Sound and the Fury is with the meaning of reality. Olga Vickery finds the theme of this novel "the relation between the act and man's apprehension of the act, between the event and the interpretation."<sup>1</sup> There are three monologues presented by Mr. Compson's three sons, each of whom is obsessed with discovering the reality, and thus the meaning, of his life. Each fails, however, for Quentin, Benjy, and Jason equate order with meaning, an equation which results in a false concept

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<sup>1</sup>Olga Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner: An Interpretation (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1959), p. 29.

of reality and ultimately leads to extinction. A corollary of Faulkner's theme that the act obtains its meaning through the human interpretation is that order has no meaning, and the will to impose order, seen most clearly in Quentin, causes suffering and ultimate destruction. The order Quentin seeks to force upon his life is built upon the Southern concept of honor, and the rigidity of it, rather than the order itself, destroys.

The structure of The Sound and the Fury demonstrates Faulkner's idea that reality lies in the relationships of the act to the individual consciousness, not in any external source. Each of the four sections gives a different view of the same events and themes, none of which is more true or real than the others. The first section presents the events of several significant days, past and present, in the life of the Compson family, through the consciousness of Benjy, who is incapable of drawing the parallels, abstractions, and generalizations that give meaning to the ordinary human mind. Nevertheless, Benjy's mind imposes a pattern upon the external world through its concentration on certain pleasure-producing images: Caddy and those items and events associated with her, such as her slipper; fire, and its reflected image in the mirror; and the pasture.

The second section provides a somewhat similar view of reality, for Quentin remembers many of the same events that Benjy concentrates upon, and his consciousness, like that of Benjy, centers on Caddy. But Quentin organizes his reality

around abstractions rather than physical images,<sup>2</sup> especially the abstract notion of family honor. Thus Quentin sees the realities of the significant events of the Compson family quite differently from the way Benjy sees them. The intelligent and sensitive Quentin seems much more human and his reality much more plausible than Benjy's, but the fact that Quentin's reality necessitates his own self-destruction emphasizes that it is not final, at least not any more final than Benjy's.

Jason's view of reality is, like Quentin's and Benjy's, prejudiced by his personal needs, his self-pity and hatred of others. His section, though more revealing in its details than the two preceding ones, presents a view of the world at least as distorted by lack of perception as Benjy's.

The final section abandons the interior monologue and employs the omniscient author's point of view, thus presenting still another kind of reality. But Faulkner refrains from making any clear statement of theme, and the question of meaning in the novel remains as uncertain as it was in Benjy's section. In this final part, as in other sections and in other novels, "the world is so designed that meaning must be found or made by man."<sup>3</sup> Each of the characters in the final section continues to pursue his own compulsion toward truth to the exclusion of other views of reality.

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<sup>2</sup>Vickery, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Gold, William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism from Metaphor to Discourse (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p. 38.

Only Dilsey can accept the possibility of other realities than her own, and because she does so, because she does not try to impose an inflexible order on others, she is morally superior. She survives.

Both Mr. Compson and Quentin do not survive. The meanings they try to impose on the world are rigid, and rather than change them, they destroy themselves, Quentin in water and Mr. Compson in alcohol. Mr. Compson disbelieves in an absolute reality, but he goes beyond a flexible acceptance of relative and intuitive meaning in life and defines a rigid position of meaninglessness. His philosophy, or at least the version of it we get through Quentin's consciousness, will allow not only for no other meaning of life but for no meaning whatever. His version of reality is as uncompromising as that of any of his sons and ends in destruction.

Mr. Compson, however, does not have a section devoted to him; like Caddy he is seen only through the filtering consciousnesses of the others. That his influence on Quentin is powerful can be demonstrated by merely counting the references to father in Quentin's section. In the sections devoted to the other sons there are far fewer references to father. Still, at least a shadowy impression of his character and the influence he holds in the family is discernible through the children's references to him.

Mr. Compson does not play a very important role in Benjy's section. He does not have the important place in Benjy's mind that Caddy does, or even that their mother

does, and does not figure so frequently in Benjy's memory as the Negro guardians or the other children. But the quality of the relationship between father and children is made abundantly clear, as it is not in the other sections. Most of the references to father occur on the days Benjy remembers from his childhood, although there are a few references to Mr. Compson on later days. When the children are young, they have respect and concern for their father, who displays gentleness and affection in dealing with them. The later, sardonic father we meet in Quentin's section is almost totally absent.

The central remembered event in Benjy's section and the embryonic episode of the entire novel occurs on the day of Damuddy's death when Caddy and Quentin get their clothes wet in the creek. Benjy remembers several things his father said and did on that day, and these not only indicate his attitude toward his father but also give the reader the clearest and most objective picture of Mr. Compson in the entire book. When the children return at dusk to the house, expecting punishment for their wet state, they meet their father waiting for them.<sup>4</sup> He is quiet, and when Jason blurts out the news of their fight, the reaction is subdued. Their father's seriousness has a sobering effect on the children, and, although they continue their bickering as the meal

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<sup>4</sup>William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 27. All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition.



proceeds, they do so with an awareness of serious and mysterious events taking place elsewhere in the house.

The children obviously respect and are expected to obey their father. Caddy looks to her father for protection of Damuddy's body: "How can buzzards get in where Damuddy is. Father wouldn't let them" (p. 43). She also expects the others to obey her since Father told them they had to (p. 28).

Mr. Compson seems to act as mediator between the children and their mother, and his function on the day of Damuddy's death is to keep them quiet. Later that night, as they go into their room to bed, Mr. Compson, watching them pass his wife's room, admonishes them: "'You must all be good tonight.' Father said. 'And be quiet, so you won't disturb Mother.'" (p. 76). After they have been put to bed, Mr. Compson comes into the room to say goodnight. The episode is in a position of importance; it closes the day of Damuddy's death and Benjy's section:

We could hear the dark.

It went away, and Father looked at us. He looked at Quentin and Jason, then he came and kissed Caddy and put his hand on my head.

"Is Mother very sick." Caddy said.

"No." Father said. "Are you going to take good care of Maury."

"Yes." Caddy said.

Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door, and then the door turned black again. (p. 92)

In both important episodes on that day involving Mr. Compson, he appears to Benjy standing in shafts of light. He is shadowy, silhouetted by light, with the details obscured. His character as it is revealed in this section is also

shadowy and the details obscured, but it looms importantly in Benjy's life and the life of the family.

Mr. Compson's obvious affection for Caddy and his concern for Benjy are suggested in this section. He instructs Caddy to care for Benjy (p. 92), and he gives her command of the whole group earlier at supper (p. 28). Father's tenderness for all his children is demonstrated in another scene on the evening when Benjy's name is changed:

Caddy and Father and Jason were in Mother's chair . . . Caddy's head was on Father's shoulder. Her hair was like fire, and little points of fire were in her eyes, and I went and Father lifted me into the chair too, and Caddy held me. (p. 88)

Quentin is not included in this group because he is studying.

Mr. Compson's attitude toward his wife is similar to his attitude toward his children. He is kind to her and humors her in her many illnesses. He acts as mediator, protecting her from the children, especially Benjy. But as the children grow older his attitude changes. At the time of Caddy's first sexual experience, he tries to protect his daughter from his wife's condemnation (p. 84). And the gentle, considerate father and husband is seen turned into the bitter, disillusioned skeptic of Quentin's section as he comments ironically on Mrs. Compson's brother, Maury (p. 52). But this one instance is the only time Benjy's Father displays the cynicism that Quentin's Father does.

Quentin's relationship with his father is hinted at in Benjy's section, when they discuss a fight Quentin had at school. Quentin's sense of honor and his feeling of responsibility are already present:

"It was all right," Quentin said. "He was as big as me."

"That's good," Father said. "Can you tell me what it was about?"

"It wasn't about anything," Quentin said.

"He said he would put a frog in her desk and she wouldn't dare to whip him."

"Oh," Father said. "She." (p. 83)

Mr. Compson reveals his cynical attitude toward women in just two words, "Oh. She," but he also indicates with these two words that he understands that Quentin feels compelled to fight to protect the honor of Southern womanhood, even on so small a scale. This conversation is the predecessor of many discussions Quentin and his father are to have on the subject of women.

For the most part, however, Benjy pictures his father as a source of gentle and humane guidance for all the children who is only occasionally embittered. Absalom speaks of Mr. Compson's "indifference to moral values,"<sup>5</sup> and Richardson says he is "unwilling to act humanely or even act at all because to act is to risk something of himself,"<sup>6</sup> but they are speaking of the Father of the Quentin section and forgetting the Father of the Benjy section, who certainly does act humanely, with love, toward his wife and toward his children, and is not unconcerned with moral values, in so far as they are based on respect and love for one's fellow humans. Absalom is right in suggesting that each member of the family

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<sup>5</sup>H.P. Absalom, "Order and Disorder in The Sound and the Fury," Durham University Journal, 58 (1965), 37.

<sup>6</sup>Kenneth E. Richardson, Force and Faith in the Novels of William Faulkner (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1967), p. 28.

is judged according to his attitude toward Benjy, but says "Mr. Compson's bonhomie towards his son is fitful and unsacrificial, corresponding with his general cynicism."<sup>7</sup>

Although Mr. Compson does not figure predominately in Benjy's consciousness, each time he treats his idiot son with gentleness and care, and we are expected to gain an impression of him from the first as a gentle and humane man. Brooks points out that there is plenty of evidence that his is a loving nature although by 1910 he was a ruined man.<sup>8</sup> Benjy, as Lawrence Thompson has shown, serves as a mirror for the other characters, and Benjy's mirror image of his father is definitely favorable.<sup>9</sup>

Jason's picture of his father is quite different from Benjy's. Jason makes fun of his mother's reverent attitude toward the family name (p. 225), and she breaks into the ever-present tears at the thought that he could "speak bitterly of your dead father" (p. 226). Mrs. Compson, of course, is not expressing love or admiration for her husband but merely her wish that Jason would observe the conventions of Southern family pride which are so important to her, rather than give vent to his feelings of disrespect toward his father, as he so often does.

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<sup>7</sup>Absalom, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 335.

<sup>9</sup>Lawrence Thompson, "Mirror Analogues in The Sound and the Fury," in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960), p. 214.

Yet Jason gives considerable support to Benjy's picture of Mr. Compson as a loving man. He relates how Mr. Compson accepts Caddy's daughter with great kindness and tries to stifle his wife's imputations of moral guilt (pp. 246-247). Jason also reveals in a later conversation with his mother that Mr. Compson was "trying all the time to persuade you to let her come home when Herbert threw her out" (p. 274), for Mr. Compson apparently felt that Caddy should be treated with sympathy.

From Jason we get the clearest picture of Mr. Compson's final degeneracy into alcoholism:

after a while Father wouldn't even come down town anymore but just sat there all day with the decanter I could see the bottom of his nightshirt and his bare legs and hear the decanter clinking until finally T.P. had to pour it for him and she says you have no respect for your father's memory and I says I don't know why not it sure is preserved well enough to last. (p. 290)

But Jason has no sympathy or understanding for his father's position. In this passage he goes on to congratulate himself on the fact that he does not drink despite the example presented him by his father. Mr. Compson tries to ignore the fact of his drinking and refuses to see a doctor about it in spite of his wife's request.

Jason quotes a conversation with his mother in which she reveals Mr. Compson's attitude toward their difficult children, Caddy and Quentin: "'He was always saying they didn't need controlling, that they already knew what cleanliness and honesty were, which was all anyone could be taught'" (p. 325). This passage is one of the most

enlightening about Mr. Compson. He expresses faith in his children, faith that their background and moral training will enable them to overcome their problems. Perhaps he was naive.

Mr. Compson is hardly mentioned in the final section of the book. He is now a part of the past, and the focus in this section is on the present though it is a present ravaged by the past. So Mr. Compson's influence is felt in the horror of Miss Quentin's life and the sadistic and bitter cruelty of Jason's.

Quentin's section, though, is dominated by his father. It opens with a recollected conversation with his father in reference to his grandfather's watch, whose ticking is the first thing Quentin is aware of on the day of his suicide. Although the section closes with a mindless reiteration of the events just before the suicide, a conversation with his father on their favorite subject, honor, comes just before the final paragraph. Throughout the day of his suicide Quentin's mind repeats long fragments of discussions, real or imagined, with his father. Apparently Mr. Compson is a very strong influence on Quentin, and the son receives many of his ideas directly or indirectly from the father.

The father that Quentin quotes is a very complex personality. He is no longer the kind and benevolent man pictured by Benjy, but neither is he the despicable failure Jason knows; rather, he is both and something more besides. He is ever present in Quentin's conscience, and Quentin struggles to reconcile his father's philosophy with his own sense of values.

As Olga Vickery has pointed out, there are many parallels between Benjy's and Quentin's sections; for instance, both sons live according to rigid patterns, and Caddy is essential to both worlds.<sup>10</sup> Both Benjy and Quentin express outrage at the destruction of this rigid order, Benjy at going around the square the wrong way and Quentin at Caddy's flaunting of his moral order.<sup>11</sup> Quentin's concept of his father, his refusal to see any part of him except the nihilism, is a part of this rigid pattern. We get a different view of Mr. Compson from his other children. Mr. Compson is less a father and friend to Quentin than he is a "voice which can juggle words and ideas while insisting upon their emptiness."<sup>12</sup>

Quentin's section opens with his fall into time again, upon awakening in the morning, and his first thoughts are of his father. His mind finds close connection between time and his father, for he is trying to escape both. The watch with its arbitrary dividing of time into man-made hours and minutes becomes a symbol of Quentin's inflexibility. It is significant that the watch has come to Quentin from his grandfather, just as his moral code comes from his Southern ancestors. Mr. Compson was the owner of the watch for a time, but he developed an unsouthern moral nihilism which denies importance to time. So, no longer needing the watch

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<sup>10</sup>Vickery, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup>Vickery, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup>Vickery, p. 40.



and the values of Southern gentlemanliness it comes to stand for, he relinquishes it to Quentin.

Mr. Compson refers to the watch as the "mausoleum of all hope and desire" (p. 93), and it is Quentin's belief that time will kill and bury his despair for Caddy that finally prompts him to suicide. His father, he remembers, said "no battle is ever won . . . they are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools" (p. 93). Quentin's suicide, which he has already determined upon as he starts what is to be his last day, is a silent acknowledgement of his belief, in spite of himself, in his father's words. His belief that he can do nothing, that he cannot heal the wound caused by Caddy's dishonor, drives him to his death. To allow time to heal the wound, as his father says it will, would result in the defeat of his moral code, would be to acknowledge that he was wrong about the importance of his family and about himself. To kill himself, however, would be to win the battle, to prove that life has meaning and that meaning lies in the narrow moral code he has constructed.

Time is always the victor in Mr. Compson's philosophy. He says "Christ was not crucified: he was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels" (p. 94). Mr. Compson sees time opposing morality and meaning, and he pretends to accept time's defeat gracefully as he expects Quentin to do. The father has by the time of Caddy's rebellion forsaken the values of the society around him, but he has failed to



substitute any others. He has forsaken the characteristic warmth and humanity which he exhibited when the children were small. He is like his son in that he cannot accept a flexible moral code based on the human needs of the people around him. Instead, he must retreat into despair, alcoholism, and a rigidly-defined philosophy of meaninglessness.

The defeat of morality by time is a constant theme in Quentin's section, and he quotes his father many times on the subject. Quentin's claim that he and Caddy have committed incest meets a response from their father on the same theme: "people cannot do anything that dreadful they cannot do anything very dreadful at all they cannot even remember tomorrow what seemed dreadful today" (p. 98). Just as time defeats honor, so it defeats sin and thus destroys the meaning of man's actions. Mr. Compson strives to comfort Quentin in his moral agony over Caddy's rebellion, but succeeds only in destroying Quentin's hope of somehow making things right again. Quentin is not strong enough to live outside the moral code he has been taught--he is dependent upon his conscience. He is a person incapable of love; he must depend on some other force to give his life direction. Because Caddy can love, she can escape rigid rules, and, though she suffers, she survives. Mr. Compson was once a loving man, but he is a weak man and his ability to love cannot survive the problems of his life. He both creates and is destroyed by the state of mind which also destroys his son.

Cleanth Brooks sees Quentin as one of Faulkner's many Puritan figures.<sup>13</sup> Certainly Quentin has a Puritan sense of time, for he recognizes that his damnation is foreordained and does not believe, or resists his father's efforts to make him believe, in the changes of the future. Jean Paul Sartre, in his famous essay on The Sound and the Fury, has said that the true theme of the novel is "time is your misfortune," and for Quentin, "the present does not exist, it becomes; everything was."<sup>14</sup> Quentin's obsession with the past is equivalent to having no future.<sup>15</sup> Because he secretly fears that his father is right, that the future will change his attitude toward Caddy and, therefore, his rigid moral code, Quentin must destroy his future. To go on living would be to admit that his morality is wrong.

Mr. Compson presents a very pessimistic philosophy to Quentin. "Father said a man is the sum of his misfortunes. One day you'd think misfortune would get tired, but then time is your misfortune" (p. 129). But almost all of the phrases Quentin quotes seem to come from a few, or perhaps just one, conversation on the subject of Caddy's loss of virginity. Mr. Compson is apparently trying to soften the blow for Quentin, to loose him from the intensity of his moral vision. The father apparently loves and feels concern

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<sup>13</sup>Brooks, pp. 329-331.

<sup>14</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, "Time in William Faulkner: The Sound and the Fury," in Hoffman and Vickery, pp. 226-228.

<sup>15</sup>Brooks, p. 329.

for his son, but his own bitterness, ironically, turns out to be true when the philosophy which was supposed to comfort Quentin leads to his suicide. Quentin is just one more failure in Mr. Compson's life, and we can surmise that the son's suicide contributed greatly to the father's death from alcoholism a year later.

Mr. Compson, in trying to help Quentin, virtually assures that he will go ahead with his announced plan of suicide when he reminds Quentin that "every man is the arbiter of his own virtues whether or not you consider it courageous is of more importance than the fact itself" (p. 219). Mr. Compson is again mistakenly trying to console Quentin, to assure him that to have thought of suicide is enough; he does not have to complete the act. But once again they miscommunicate, and Quentin takes his father's words at face value. He sees his father's assurances as affirmation of his conviction that he should destroy himself.

But Mr. Compson apparently understands his son fairly well. He sees that Quentin cannot accept the healing power of the passage of time, cannot accept the blows fate deals without fighting back: "but you are still blind to what is in yourself to that part of general truth the sequence of natural events and their causes which shadows every man's brow even benjy's" (p. 220). He recognizes that Quentin still cannot accept the naturalness of Caddy's sin but insists on seeing it as a violation of the abstract code Quentin has built his life upon. Quentin cannot accept that time will change his feelings: "you cannot bear to think

that someday it will not hurt you like this" (p. 220). Mr. Compson sees clearly that it is not the loss of Caddy or of the family honor that Quentin fears so much as the possibility that time will win: "no man ever does that [kills himself] under the first fury of despair or remorse or bereavement he does it only when he has realized that even the despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to the dark diceman" (p. 221). But Mr. Compson continues to believe that Quentin will not kill himself because he feels that "you will not do that until you come to believe that even she was not quite worth despair" (p. 221). Mr. Compson fails to recognize that in spite of all their similarities, he and his son differ in one important trait: the ability to love. Mr. Compson is able to stave off at least the worst of the despair he expresses in words because he loves his children. But Quentin is devoid of love; his morality is strict and puritanical for that reason.

Mr. Compson reminds Quentin that, according to his own code of honor, he must go to Harvard and become successful because that is his mother's dream and "no compson ever disappointed a lady" (p. 221). Mr. Compson knows Quentin's morality and makes this appeal perhaps ironically and certainly in desperation to try to stay Quentin's decision to suicide.

Quentin and his father hold a similar attitude toward Mrs. Compson. Quentin partially blames her for their troubles, and says his sister might have avoided her fate if she had had a mother to guide her (p. 117). Mr. Compson

humors his wife, and defends her before Quentin, no matter what he may think of her privately. Only rarely does he oppose her although he does refuse to allow her to have Caddy spied upon (p. 118). He then defends her to Quentin, attributing her behavior to her sex: "Women are like that . . . they are just born with a practical fertility of suspicion . . . they have an affinity for evil" (p. 119).

Quentin sums up his moral code and the way he feels about his family in one statement which he makes not in one of his reveries about the past but in the present time, on the day of his suicide: "Father and I protect women from one another our women" (p. 119). He sees himself and his father as moral arbiters of the family honor, and judges his father not on what he says but on what he does. Quentin does not see the difference, is not even aware of any difference, between morality based on arbitrary laws and morality based on love. The first is inflexible, as Quentin is, but the latter can be altered as necessary to fit the situation. Mr. Compson makes a distinction between these two types, calling the betrayal of love sin and the betrayal of the code immorality, and recognizes that Quentin does not understand the difference: "you are confusing sin and morality women don't do that your Mother is thinking of morality whether it be sin or not has not occurred to her" (p. 126). Mrs. Compson is incapable of love; so the idea of sin is completely beyond her. But Mr. Compson has faith in his son and believes he can tell the difference because he does love Caddy. Unfortunately, he is misjudging his son.

For, as Faulkner says in the appendix, Quentin loves not his sister "but some concept of Compson honor" (p. 411).

### III

#### THE COMPSONS IN ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

Absalom, Absalom! was published in 1936, seven years after The Sound and the Fury. Faulkner chose Quentin Compson as the principal narrator of the later book and his father as one of the lesser narrators. He must have felt that these two characters, whose problems and personalities already had been well explored in the earlier novel, had much to offer as narrators of the Sutpen story. The similarities of character between the Quentin and Mr. Compson of one book and those of another are indeed striking, though a perfect consistency cannot always be expected. As Cleanth Brooks has said:

Since Absalom, Absalom! was written years after The Sound and the Fury, we must exercise caution in using the Quentin of the later novel to throw light upon the Quentin of the earlier. But Faulkner, in choosing the character Quentin for service in Absalom, Absalom!, must have deemed the choice a sound one. He must have felt that the experiences that Quentin was to undergo in talking with his father about the Sutpens and on his journey out to Sutpen's Hundred would be compatible with, and relevant to, what he had Quentin undergo in The Sound and the Fury.<sup>1</sup>

A thorough study of Quentin in each novel, and his relationship to his father, reveals much about both novels. The

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<sup>1</sup>Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 336.

characters of Quentin and Mr. Compson in Absalom, Absalom! are shadowy and somewhat difficult to understand, and certainly what we know about them from The Sound and the Fury helps in understanding the roles they play in the later work.

There are many similarities between the two novels in addition to the use of the same characters. Both novels use several distinct narrators telling the same story from different points of view. Both novels progress from the narrator most closely bound to the story emotionally to the one furthest away. Both novels involve a main character (Caddy and Sutpen) who does not actually appear in the novel though his influence is great. And both novels are concerned with the meaning of reality.

In Absalom, Absalom!, as in The Sound and the Fury, the characters are involved in trying to impose order and meaning on existence, only in the later work it is the life of another, rather than one's own life, on which the order must primarily be placed. The meaning of Sutpen's life holds symbolic, not literal, meaning for Quentin. Aswell feels that Faulkner's theme in Absalom, Absalom! is that order has no meaning, but that he "dramatizes on every page the futility of imposing any kind of order or pattern upon human life, while at the same time revealing with the utmost compassion, and making us feel with the greatest poignancy, that the yearning to make logical sense out of events is a compulsive, inescapable need, one of the defining characteristics of the



human soul."<sup>2</sup> Each of the four narrators seeks to find the pattern and thus the meaning of the Sutpen story. Yet each one uses his own imagination to fill in the unknown details in a successively freer manner, although, paradoxically, the later version of Shreve and Quentin is probably less personal and more nearly true than the first account. Absalom, Absalom! is a novel about the creative process. And through observing the minds of the narrators in the process of creation, we gain insight into their characters.

The Sutpen legend is synthesized by Faulkner out of the psychologies of the people who tell the story.<sup>3</sup> The reader too is actively involved in the creative process, for he is compelled, like the narrators, to put together the facts, to judge the prejudices of his authorities, and to compare and decide among discrepancies. Faulkner, when asked which version was correct, replied that the reader's story, after he had all the other versions, was something like the true Sutpen story.<sup>4</sup> The novel is surprisingly short of facts about Sutpen; Faulkner seems to indicate that reality lies not in facts but in the minds of the people who interpret them.

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<sup>2</sup>Duncan Aswell, "The Puzzling Design of Absalom, Absalom!," Kenyon Review, 30 (1968), 67.

<sup>3</sup>Ilse Dusoier Lind, "The Design and Meaning of Absalom, Absalom! in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960), p. 282.

<sup>4</sup>Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, ed., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 274.

Although Quentin is the principal interpreter of the Sutpen legend, and at least one critic sees him, rather than Sutpen, as the main character of the novel,<sup>5</sup> he gets his information from several sources. The novel opens with a conversation Quentin has with Miss Rosa Coldfield on a September afternoon in 1909, just before he leaves for Harvard. Miss Rosa was Sutpen's sister-in-law, though of about the same age as his daughter, and the only narrator who ever saw him alive. Later that evening Mr. Compson supplies what additional details he can and adds his own interpretation of the facts, to his son Quentin. Mr. Compson's source was his father, who was a friend of Sutpen, probably his only friend. And Mr. Compson shows Quentin a letter which has come into his hands, a letter which Charles Bon wrote Judith Sutpen just before he came home the last time and which Quentin later quotes. Later that night Quentin and Miss Rosa visit the old Sutpen home, where they find Henry Sutpen who has come home to die. Quentin talks to him and gets an undetermined amount of information from him. Quentin relates much of what he knows to his roommate Shreve, on a December night in their Harvard room. The two of them then continue to retell the story, frequently interrupting one another, and employ their imaginations where facts give out.

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<sup>5</sup>William Van O'Connor, The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1954), p. 99.

The version of the Sutpen story that Mr. Compson tells Quentin is based on information he got from his father, General Compson. His information is incomplete, and he adds certain conjectures to make Sutpen's actions comprehensible. Mr. Compson's major lacuna is that he is unaware that Charles Bon is Sutpen's son, or that he has some Negro blood; so he is ultimately unable to explain the murder of Bon by Henry. Mr. Compson believes that the moral objection Henry makes to Bon's marrying his sister is that Bon has an octoroon mistress in New Orleans. Not until Quentin's night visit to the Sutpen mansion does Mr. Compson learn Bon's true relationship to Sutpen.

Mr. Compson retains in Absalom, Absalom! his exaggerated chivalry toward Southern womanhood. He explains to Quentin that the boy has an obligation to listen to Miss Rosa's long-winded account: "Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts. So what else can we do, being gentlemen, but listen to them being ghosts?"<sup>6</sup> Mr. Compson still accepts and seems to agree to live by the Southern code, all the while realizing its utter meaninglessness. He also realizes the sham of the Southern insistence on the importance of one's ancestors. He describes Miss Rosa's aunt as one of those ladies, who, on first seeing Sutpen, "had agreed never

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<sup>6</sup>William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Random House, 1936), p. 12. All subsequent references to this novel are from this edition.

to forgive him for not having any past, and who had remained consistent" (p. 52).

Mr. Compson sees the Sutpen story as a classical tragedy.<sup>7</sup> His account, coming after the first part of Miss Rosa's narrative, discounts her demonizing of Sutpen, but uses its emotional power to make a tragic hero of Sutpen. Mr. Compson's frequent allusions to classical literature, which correspond to the Latin phrases he employs in The Sound and the Fury, add to the effect. He calls Miss Rosa "Cassandralike" (p. 60), and seizes upon the name of Sutpen's Negro daughter, Clytemnestra, as significant, suggesting, "I have always liked to believe that he intended to name Clytie, Cassandra, prompted by some pure dramatic economy not only to beget but to designate the presiding auger of his own disaster" (p. 62). Mr. Compson sees Thomas Sutpen as a hero, a person of great stature and pride, but destined by some inexplicable force to doom. He describes the people involved in the tragedy as

people too as we are, and victims too as we are, but victims of a different circumstance, simpler and therefore, integer for integer, larger, more heroic and the figures therefore more heroic too, not dwarfed and involved but distinct, uncomplex who had the gift of loving once or dying once instead of being diffused and scattered creatures drawn blindly limb from limb from a grab bag and assembled, author and victim too of a thousand homicides and a thousand copulations and divorce-ments. (p. 89)

Mr. Compson, even though he disapproves of the women's insisting that Sutpen have worthy forebears before he can

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<sup>7</sup>Lind, p. 279.

be worthy himself, falls victim to a similar kind of Southern ancestor worship. He insists that the Sutpens, because they belong to an earlier time, are superior in moral strength and simplicity. He sees the present South as defeated and modern man as hopelessly mired in the complexities of his life. He sees the earlier South as superior, and gives it a mythical quality. The longing for a simpler, nobler life is at the heart of this mythologizing of the Sutpen story and reveals him as, beneath his veneer of cynicism, a hopeless romantic. And it is this romantic escapism that his son senses and inherits, rather than the surface nihilism, in Absalom, Absalom! as well as in The Sound and the Fury, where Quentin finally commits suicide as an escape.

Mr. Compson is, like Quentin later, particularly interested in the relationship between Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon. He does not know until later, of course, after Quentin visits the old Sutpen mansion, that the two are half-brothers and that Bon is part Negro. But he instinctively seizes upon the relationship of the two as the crux of the whole tale, though he is finally at a loss to explain the paradox of the final shooting. He insists that Henry loved Bon (p. 90), and that when Henry was forced to choose between his friend and his father, "the decision instantaneous and irrevocable between father and friend, between (so Henry must have believed) that where honor and love lay and this where blood and profit ran" (p. 90). For Mr. Compson, who recognizes the foolishness of a strict and exceptionless morality, and

apparently advocates a personal morality based on a rather classical concept of honor, Henry's decision for "honor and love" and against "blood and profit" is an admirable one. Judith, according to Mr. Compson's account, is also morally admirable because she too defies her father but "who did obey Henry in this matter--not the male relative, the brother, but because of that relationship between them--that single personality with two bodies" (pp. 91-92). Judith also follows personal, not conventional, reasons for her moral behavior.

Because Mr. Compson does not know of the real reason that Thomas Sutpen objects to the marriage of Bon and Judith, he makes up one that seems plausible. Mr. Compson feels that the objection to Bon rests on the fact that he has an octoroon mistress and a child in New Orleans, and not only the fact of the mistress is distressing to Henry but also the fact that Bon has actually gone through a wedding ceremony with her. Mr. Compson believes that Sutpen visited New Orleans for the purpose of investigating the background of his prospective son-in-law, where he discovered the mistress and consequently relayed the information to Henry. In Mr. Compson's view, Henry is the victim of conventional morality, though he struggles temporarily against it. For four years he chooses his friend over his father, but at the end of that time kills Bon rather than let him marry his sister in a situation which Henry would think bigamous.

Mr. Compson's version of Henry is strikingly similar to the character of Quentin in The Sound and the Fury. Henry,

like Quentin, is terribly concerned with honor and a victim of the rigid moral code he has been taught. Mr. Compson calls Henry's reaction to Bon's marriage a "fetish-ridden moral blundering which did not deserve to be called thinking" (p. 93), thus indicating his lack of ability, like Quentin's, to act independently of the code. Certainly Mr. Compson has Quentin in mind, at least subconsciously, when he refers to Henry's "fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity" (p. 96), and describes Henry as "given to instinctive and violent action rather than to thinking" (p. 96). And his views of virginity and its importance are exactly the same as some of the speeches Quentin remembers in The Sound and the Fury:

In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband. (p. 96)

Mr. Compson apparently sees the relationship between Quentin and Henry, and perhaps he is consciously or subconsciously imposing Quentin's character, which he knows, on Henry's which is unknown. Henry's "puritan heritage--that heritage peculiarly Anglo-Saxon--of fierce proud mysticism and that ability to be ashamed of ignorance and inexperience" (p. 108) is for Mr. Compson exactly like Quentin's. But Quentin's father, in telling him his version of the story, never makes explicit or even hints at any didactic purpose. But the very fact that he takes the few known facts of the lives of the



Sutpens and makes them into a myth which parallels Quentin's situation in many important places indicates that he is thinking of Quentin and Caddy. Certainly he finds the Sutpen story important or interesting enough to spend considerable time relating it to Quentin, and his tendency to mythologize it indicates that he looks upon it as archetypal and significant to his own and his son's life. Mr. Compson's strong interest in the Sutpens and his emphasis upon Henry and his sister is probably what first causes Quentin to become so intensely interested in them. Quentin, indeed, takes up where his father leaves off and, with new facts at his disposal, continues to investigate those parts of the Sutpen story that are particularly similar to his own.

Because he so closely identifies Henry with Quentin, it would seem natural for Mr. Compson to identify with Thomas Sutpen. But he does not. The father Sutpen is far too dynamic, too passionately involved in life, for Mr. Compson, the effete pacifist, to find anything in common with him. Rather, he makes a mythic hero of Sutpen and identifies himself with Charles Bon. He remarks that Bon refuses to take part in Henry's moral dilemma, but "seems to have withdrawn into a mere spectator, passive, a little sardonic, and completely enigmatic" (p. 93). Bon, in Mr. Compson's view, "watches them from behind that barrier of sophistication" (p. 93), exactly as Mr. Compson himself watches Quentin's moral agony in The Sound and the Fury. Bon certainly does not understand Henry's moral objection to his marriage; having grown up in New Orleans he accepts the rather decadent



and sensual morality of that city in which the custom of part-Negro mistresses was common and even accepted and did not constitute a barrier to marriage with a white woman. Bon, in Mr. Compson's words, observes the problems of the Sutpen family with a certain "reserved and inflexible pessimism" (p. 94). Bon exhibits qualities "gentle sardonic whimsical and incurably pessimistic" (p. 129), a good description of Mr. Compson, or so he would like to think. Mr. Compson keeps Bon's letter to Judith as an example of his personality and reserves it to show to Quentin at the end of his tale as the best part. Mr. Compson's admiration for Bon is apparent.

Mr. Compson has Bon justify his mistress to Henry at one point with "that pessimistic and sardonic cerebral pity of the intelligent for any human injustice or folly or suffering" (p. 115). Bon explains that these octoroons would be slaves if they were not the mistresses of "those few men like myself without principles or honor either" (p. 115) who engage them. Mr. Compson of course means without the conventional and rigid ideas of morality which Quentin and Henry hold. He believes himself and Bon to be above conventional morality, to be truly enlightened and superior to the provincial puritans like Henry and Quentin. Mr. Compson exhibits a refusal to become involved in Quentin's moral problem in The Sound and the Fury, similar to Bon's refusal in the later novel, and displays the same pity for those who suffer. Bon, in spite of this refusal, loves Henry (p. 108), as Mr. Compson loves Quentin. Bon's

failure is that he does not become involved, that he sees himself and Henry as victims of fate. Mr. Compson, of course, does not see this attitude as a failure on Bon's part, just as he does not see himself as a failure to Quentin. Rather, he sees Quentin and Henry both as helpless victims of circumstance.

But in spite of Mr. Compson's interest in the story, the principal narrator is Quentin. He is, in the first part of the novel, passive, and thus a suitable repository for the story.<sup>8</sup> But his interest is aroused by his father's bringing in the themes of incest and honor and a brother's responsibility. Quentin, as he begins to see the possible parallels between himself and Henry, becomes passionately involved in the story and begins to add his own imaginative realization. His excitement is catching, and his roommate Shreve becomes likewise involved in the telling of the story and begins to take part in the narration. Together they reconstruct or imagine the story until their voices become as one, and toward the end they blend--the reader finds it hard to tell which boy is speaking. Shreve and Quentin create a version which might be called "interpretation by immersion, or by empathy,"<sup>9</sup> for just as Quentin identifies with Henry, so Shreve identifies, like Mr. Compson, with Bon.

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<sup>8</sup>Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 155.

<sup>9</sup>Hyatt H. Waggoner, William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World (Louisville: The University of Kentucky Press, 1959), pp. 180-181.

But there is a difference in the two boys' attitudes. Quentin is possessed by a compulsion to reconstruct the story, to find its meaning for himself, but Shreve insists on seeing it as a game.<sup>10</sup> Shreve says, "Let me play a while now" (p. 280), as he takes over the narration, although Faulkner comments that this attitude is not merely levity but rather the shameful protective coating with which Shreve covers the fact that he is moved by Quentin's narrative (p. 280). Quentin, on the other hand, is too closely connected, too committed to the issues, to actually enjoy the narration.<sup>11</sup> He rather suffers compulsively through it.

That Quentin is personally involved in the story is made abundantly clear. As he listens to Miss Rosa's account, his attention focuses on the confrontation between Henry and his sister:

The two of them, brother and sister, curiously alike as if the difference in sex had merely sharpened the common blood to a terrific, an almost unbearable, similarity, speak to one another in short brief staccato sentences like slaps, as if they had stood breast to breast striking one another in turn neither making any attempt to guard against the blows.

Now you cant marry him.

Why cant I marry him?

Because he's dead.

Dead?

Yes. I killed him.

He (Quentin) couldn't pass that. (p. 172)

Quentin cannot even listen to what Miss Rosa is saying to him after she relates this scene because he keeps repeating

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<sup>10</sup>Brooks, p. 312.

<sup>11</sup>Brooks, p. 312.

this conversation to himself. It is the central event of the Sutpen story to him, and he spends a good deal of time thereafter listening to, repeating, and recreating the events that led up to that conversation. For Henry has done what Quentin tries to do and would like to do, as explained in The Sound and the Fury, when he attacks and tries to kill Dalton Ames. Quentin is compelled to discover Henry's motivation and the source of his courage. But Quentin is forced finally to recognize that he is incapable of action like Sutpen's. Quentin sees the four years that Bon and Henry spend at the war, between the time Henry learns of Bon's origin and the time he kills him, as "probation . . . holding all three of them--himself and Judith and Bon--in that suspension while he wrestled with his conscience to make it come to terms with what he wanted it to do" (p. 270). Quentin finds it easy to project his own moral dilemma on Henry, and feels even greater kinship with him because Quentin feels he has gone through the same struggle.

Faulkner makes explicit the identification between Quentin and Henry and adds Shreve and Bon: "Now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two--Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry" (p. 334). Although Mr. Compson identifies with Bon in his narrative, Shreve is naturally identified with him in Quentin's. That both narratives have an element of truth is borne out by the fact that Quentin notices how much Shreve sounds like his father: "He sounds just like father he

thought" (p. 181), and again: "I didn't need to listen then but I had to hear it and now I am having to hear it all over again because he sounds just like father" (p. 211).

Shreve and Quentin, in their joint narrative, emphasize Bon's yearning to be recognized by his father. They both believe he would go away if Sutpen just gave a sign.<sup>12</sup> For them, Bon's story is that of a search for a father, a search for the "father and security and contentment and all" (p. 340) that Henry had and Bon envied. They describe Bon's disappointment when he meets his father face to face for the first time and "nothing happened--no shock, no hot communicated flesh that speech would have been too slow even to impede--nothing" (p. 320). Quentin's concern for the need for a father is accountable--he feels that his own father, while a very great influence on him, is a failure because of his lack of ability to act and perhaps envies a father like Henry's, as Bon does, though he knows Sutpen was of no help to Henry in his moral dilemma. Shreve's concern for a father is not explained because his background remains unknown. But we may surmise that Shreve, and in a more general sense, Quentin, are interested in the search for a father simply because they are young, are sons, and are at an age when dependency ends and friendship begins in a parent-child relationship.

Quentin's narration is filled with references to his father though they are not so frequent as those in his

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<sup>12</sup>Waggoner, p. 182.

monologue in The Sound and the Fury. He constantly reminds us that he got much of his information from his father or that his views differ from his father's. In remarking to himself that Shreve in taking over the narrative has taken over Mr. Compson's function, Quentin notes that "apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do" (p. 277), thus acknowledging specifically the influence his father has had on Quentin and, through Quentin, on Shreve. At another point in their joint story-telling, Shreve remarks that Quentin sounds like his father and Quentin thinks, "Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us" (p. 262). Quentin feels very strongly the influence of the Sutpen story, and he is also aware that each person's version of the story influences the other's understanding of it.

Quentin and Shreve disagree with Mr. Compson's version in one important aspect. They do not ascribe to Henry the horrified puritanical reaction upon learning of Bon's octoroon mistress that Mr. Compson does. In fact, Faulkner notes (p. 336) that Quentin did not even tell Shreve that part of Father's account. For both Quentin and Shreve believed "and were probably right in this too--that the octoroon and the child would have been to Henry only something else about Bon to be, not envied but aped if that were possible" (p. 336). Of course, Mr. Compson did not know of Bon's origin when he advanced this theory to account for

Henry's stopping the wedding of his sister by shooting Bon, but Faulkner implies that the boys would not have accepted this theory even had there been no other explanation. They have a deeper and more empathetic understanding of Henry than does Mr. Compson, and would find a moral dilemma based on this kind of conventional morality untenable for Henry. For them, Henry stretches his moral code as far as possible for Bon's sake, and would gladly have accepted the mistress. But he revolts at the idea that his beloved sister should marry a part-Negro. For a Southerner, miscegenation is the ultimate evil, and Henry could not bear to see Judith involved in it. Henry's problem was, in Quentin's and Shreve's account, one of choosing between "opposed goods or conflicting evils,"<sup>13</sup> and he found the choice excruciatingly difficult. As Brooks notes, had he loved either Judith or Bon less the choice would have been easy.<sup>14</sup> Shreve and Quentin sympathize with the difficulty of this choice, and the necessity of making a choice is especially meaningful to Quentin. Mr. Compson, being a confirmed fatalist, has never faced a difficult decision. He always waits for time, or fate, to make the choice for him; thus time is really his misfortune. So he does not understand Henry's psychology as well as Quentin does.

The Quentin in Absalom, Absalom!, then, is not quite the same as the Quentin in The Sound and the Fury. He is no

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<sup>13</sup>Brooks, p. 318.

<sup>14</sup>Brooks, p. 318.

longer concerned with conventional morality. By the time he has finished reviewing the Sutpen story and has thoroughly explored the character of Henry Sutpen, he is no longer the provincial puritan his father through his description of Henry implies Quentin is. Faulkner's concept of Quentin seems to have changed slightly between the two novels. Mr. Compson, on the other hand, does not seem to have changed at all in the second book. His influence on Quentin is still great, though we see this influence lessening as Quentin grows in emotional maturity in the process of studying the Sutpens. Absalom, Absalom! is not only a novel about the creative process, demonstrated in the imaginative reconstructions which the narrators take part in, it also is a novel about the creative mind. Quentin views the Sutpen story, both in his own and his father's versions, exactly as a critic views a piece of literature, and he learns from it. He accepts many aspects of his father's interpretation and rejects others. His relationship with his father has become more mature than it was in The Sound and the Fury, for in the earlier novel he accepts unquestioningly the surface meaning of whatever his father said. In Absalom, Absalom! Quentin is approaching the point at which he may be able to see the essential humanity and kindness of his father, and to understand and perhaps sympathize with his problems.



#### IV

#### THE SUTPENS IN ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

The characters of Thomas Sutpen and his sons, Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, are infinitely fascinating to Quentin and to his father. Although an objectively true view of the relationship between Sutpen and his sons is, as we have seen, impossible to attain and even contrary to Faulkner's purpose, a study of the Sutpens as they are presented through the accounts of the various narrators of Absalom, Absalom! does contribute to an understanding of Faulkner's general handling of the theme of interaction between father and son.

In the Sutpen family, as with the Compsons, the father acquires an original and unique morality which he fails to pass on to his sons, whose rather conventional moral codes are derived entirely from the surrounding culture. Sutpen, like Mr. Compson, is out of step with Southern society. He attempts to be a part of the culture he has adopted, that of the Southern aristocrat, and consciously apes the manners and morals of the upper-class planter. But he is not at heart a Southerner. His sons, though, adapt easily to the moral code of the society in which they have been raised. Henry is much more a Southerner than his father. Bon is also a typical product of his environment although the easy decadence of the New Orleans society in which he is raised

is somewhat different from the frontier Puritanism that Henry experiences. That the moral fiber of the son is independent of the influence of the father is emphasized by the fact that Bon never knew his father until long after his moral character was well formed. The meeting of these three moral beings, one Puritan South, one decadent South, and one independent, upon the delicate ground of racism and incest results in a clash which eventually destroys all three.

Thomas Sutpen, although he spends his life acquiring the outward signs of Southern culture, never really becomes a part of it. The critic Brylowski notes that Sutpen models his life upon the propaganda of Southern society, while his neighbors, who do not believe the words they mouth, view him as a fanatic.<sup>1</sup> Sutpen has "concealed himself behind respectability" (p. 16), and he is mistrusted from the first by his neighbors although they do not openly attack him: "He was not liked (which he evidently did not want, anyway) but feared, which seemed to amuse, if not actually please, him" (p. 72). Miss Rosa's narrative, in which she characterizes him as a demon, is typical of the response he awakened in the inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha county. The Compson view of Sutpen is perhaps typical of the upper class; they observe him with interest, perhaps even with sympathy, but with little real understanding. He is no more a part of their lives than he is a part of Wash Jones's, whose view of Sutpen

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Brylowski, Faulkner's Olympian Laugh: Myth in the Novels (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), p. 22.

represents that of the lower class, a mixture of idolatry and murderous hatred.

Sutpen's early life, at the time when his moral character was formed, was in an environment quite different from that of Jefferson. These early years have been compared to man's sojourn in the Garden of Eden and Sutpen to the amoral Adam living in a world in which morality is not necessary.<sup>2</sup> His family sprang from primitive mountain stock and a society in which family ties were strong, the land was communal property, no one was wealthy, and moral superiority was determined by "lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room" (p. 226). That Sutpen never quite outgrows this culture is demonstrated by the fact that he, even after becoming a wealthy and successful planter in Jefferson, still finds it necessary or at least interesting to prove his physical superiority over his slaves through hand-to-hand combat (p. 29).

Sutpen never really acquires a sense of the value of money or property. He sees that it is important, and he sets out to achieve wealth and status. When he was, as a boy, rejected at the door of the mansion by a Negro servant, even though he had legitimate business with the white inhabitants of the house, the shock was very great and Sutpen in his innocence "rejected his mountain heritage and accepted a

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph Gold, William Faulkner: A Study in Humanism From Metaphor to Discourse (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p. 32.

materialistic one wherein a man was measured by his possessions."<sup>3</sup> What he fails to perceive are the somewhat finer Southern values of humanity, love, and honor.

Sutpen always attempts to follow the rules of Southern society. His failure lies in his lack of understanding of the motives that support Southern gentility. He gains a plantation and a family, but he refuses to love. Having fought valiantly in the war he "brought home with him a citation for valor in Lee's own hand" (p. 68), but he lacks a sense of responsibility to the community. His obligation is to his design, a design born of a different moral order and which results in a cheap imitation of Southern culture.

Nevertheless, Sutpen's morality is often highly admirable. His consistency, his stubborn life-long insistence on following his design denotes a strength truly heroic although, as Sowder points out, Sutpen also achieves in his one decision to become a gentleman a kind of security, a freedom from having to make other decisions for the rest of his life.<sup>4</sup> His innocence leads him to believe that he had treated his first wife and son adequately when he gave them money upon deserting them. The desertion was necessary to the design which is Sutpen's highest moral order. Brooks insists that Sutpen is "not without morality or a certain

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<sup>3</sup>Sarah Latimer Marshall, "Fathers and Sons in Absalom, Absalom!," University of Mississippi Studies in English, 8 (1967), 20.

<sup>4</sup>William J. Sowder, "Colonel Thomas Sutpen as Existentialist Hero," American Literature, 33 (1961-62), 486.

code of honor" and feels that he has done everything possible to make life easy for his rejected family.<sup>5</sup> Sutpen sees the importance in Southern culture of the family, but he does not see the humanistic basis for this importance--only the economic. Still, he remains true to this economic morality by paying off his first wife and son.

The innocence which Sutpen never outgrows causes him to believe that outward economic result is the prime mover of the society he has adopted. Brooks speaks of his "abstract approach to the whole matter of living."<sup>6</sup> Once he sees the power of wealth and determines to have it for himself, Sutpen arranges his life according to his design. He naively expects the people around him to conform to his morality; he expects his first wife and child to accept their fate graciously and even believes he has behaved generously toward them. He expects Henry and Judith and later Bon to play their roles according to the necessities of his design. Sutpen consistently ignores the human needs in favor of the economic ones. He achieves Southernness through the acquiring of land, house, and slaves rather than through adherence to the more humanistic values of his Southern friends such as the Compsons.

Sutpen's sons, however, were both raised in this Southern culture and have a clearer understanding of its

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<sup>5</sup>Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 300.

<sup>6</sup>Brooks, p. 298.

functioning. They are more typical Southerners and try to live according to the precepts of their culture, rather than simply to create the effect in their outward lives. Hence the conflict between father and sons is one which springs from the very nature of that culture, the conflict between inward moral necessity and outward appearances which ultimately destroyed the South as well as the Sutpens.

Henry displays typical Southern prejudices and obsessions. He is willing to condone incest, like Quentin, although, also like Quentin, he is unwilling to commit it and seeks it vicariously, in the person of Bon (p. 96). His close affection for his sister and their isolation from surrounding society are typical of Southern planter families. Henry is even capable of acting violently, and violence is characteristic of all frontier societies, including the Southern.

But Henry's greatest moral problem is concerned with the Negro race. Ultimately Henry, like the South in general, decides against the Negro. He kills Bon rather than allow miscegenation. He prefers to deny the humanity of Bon and to deny the love between the two young men rather than allow even a fraction of Negro blood into a place of importance. Henry is acting on the precepts of Southern culture in murdering Bon, for the very basis of Southern life is the desperate need for white supremacy and the unreasoning instinct to subjugate the Negro.

Sutpen, of course, also follows typical Southern morals in disowning and refusing to recognize his son Bon because

of his part-Negro blood. But Sutpen's motives are always personal; Henry's motives are general, cultural. For Thomas Sutpen, the design must be adhered to, the boy at the door of the mansion avenged. Brooks carefully points out that Sutpen's refusal to recognize Bon is impersonal, merely a part of the design. He says "one is tempted to say" that this refusal "does not spring from any particular racial feeling" and that "the prevailing relation between the races in Jefferson is simply one more of the culture traits which Sutpen takes from the plantation community."<sup>7</sup> For Henry, on the other hand, there is no boy at the door, no personal reason to deny the Negro, simply the blind, unreasoning instincts of a culture inhaled with the air breathed from birth. In fact, Faulkner shows that Henry had every reason to acknowledge the Negro; all the ties of affection and blood and desire pulled him towards Bon.

Bon is typical of another side of Southern society, a product of sophisticated New Orleans. Raised and indulged by his mother, he is opulently dressed, well-educated, at least by Henry's standards, and possesses an octeroon mistress, as do most white men of means in New Orleans. He is not easily moved and views the adulation of Henry with amused tolerance. But he is, in spite of his obvious contrasts with the impulsive Henry, not incapable of emotion, and even comes, in the view of the Compsons, to love his half-brother.

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<sup>7</sup>Brooks, p. 298.

Bon's greatest aim in life, however, seems to be to gain the recognition of his father. He is not perhaps aware of his part-Negro blood. Bon's aim is essentially the same as Sutpen's--to achieve meaning and selfhood through the establishment of family ties. But Bon's heritage is one of passivity and intellectual cynicism. He has none of his brother's or father's aggressiveness or insistence on action. He waits, rather than acts, and thus forces the Sutpens into an unaccustomed inactivity. His morality too is more negative than positive. He views the Negro and his country relations alike with an assumption of superiority and cool indifference. That this indifference is merely assumed is demonstrated by the urgency of his need for a word or look of recognition from his father.

Bon's motives are based entirely on this need for acknowledgement by Sutpen. Even in the sophisticated society he comes from, the absence of a father must have had a profound effect upon the boy. He must have felt strongly the stigma of his situation, and his primary motivation is the very conventional moral one of establishing, at least in his own mind, his legitimacy. Thus in spite of his air of superiority his actions are based as firmly as Henry's on the moral code of the society in which he was raised.

The conflict between Thomas Sutpen, Henry Sutpen, and Charles Bon, then, is a result of the complex origins of Southern culture. Both Henry and Bon were raised as Southerners and understand and live by the Southern code. Sutpen, on the other hand, lives by his personal morality which,



while mimicking everything Southern, is really based on only one Southern trait to the exclusion of all others, economic rapacity. The failure to synthesize these various elements of its heritage is the tragedy of Absalom, Absalom! and the tragedy of the South as Faulkner presents it to us.

Thomas Sutpen's failure is inherent in his design. His desire for property causes him to marry Bon's mother, and his desire to establish a dynasty to keep that property results in his rejecting her and Bon. His refusal to put human considerations before economic ones destroys him later when Bon returns as an adult seeking the recognition which Sutpen cannot give him without losing the property. So Sutpen refuses a second time to put human feeling before economic necessity. The direct result of his action is that Henry is now forced to murder Bon to prevent his marrying his sister. Henry flees and Sutpen loses both sons. Ironically, he has already lost most of his property through the Civil War and his design is in shambles.

Henry's impulsive nature and his insistence on loving Bon until the very moment of miscegenation put him into conflict with his father. Henry will give up his inheritance to Bon, he will give up the economic world which is so important to his father, and he will deny his father and ride off with Bon for four years. Sutpen has fathered Henry, but he has failed to give his son his own moral standards--the design just is not important to Henry. Sutpen's failure to build a dynasty is actually built in Henry's childhood as, little by little, the son absorbs and learns his mother's

morality and not his father's. Sutpen's failure is again traceable to the flaw in his design--its inhumanity. Had Sutpen exhibited love and concern for his son, he perhaps would have had greater influence over him, and Henry's respect for the design would have been greater.

Sutpen's failure with his other son is similar to his failure with Henry. The father had no influence upon the son; Sutpen abdicated his responsibility toward Bon entirely. Had he helped in the boy's upbringing, had he exhibited a normal human interest in his son, Sutpen's morality might have had some meaning for Bon and the death of neither would have been necessary.

Sutpen's refusal to take responsibility for his sons is essentially a refusal to take a responsible attitude toward any of his fellow humans. Sutpen's design killed the very society it sought to imitate. Because he did not love his sons he did not pass on his values to them, and because they did not share his moral attitudes the conflict between them was fatal. Sutpen's refusal to teach his own sons insured that his hope of a dynasty was doomed to failure. He did not realize the necessity of love and human interaction to his design.

The conflict between Sutpen and his sons is twofold in origin. It results both from the internal conflict of Southern culture of which the characters are the result and the reflection and from the clash of sharply varying moral orders. Sutpen's morality has its basis in the mountain regions of Virginia. Henry's morality is that of the

plantation owner generally thought of as typically Southern, while Bon's belongs to the sophisticated and European-influenced New Orleans. But the important differences between the father and sons lie in the manner in which their moral characters were formed. Sutpen acts according to a simple but all-encompassing design formed in his childhood. He attempts to make everything and everyone in his life correspond to this design. His moral code is private, entirely his own. Bon and Henry, on the other hand, absorb their morality from the culture surrounding them. Theirs is a conventional morality. Both types of morality are rigid. Neither gives in to the other, and they inevitably clash. The conflict between Sutpen and his sons is fatal and is the result both of the conflicting elements of the society and the failure of moral codes to give way to personal and human considerations.

## CONCLUSION

Many critics consider The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner's greatest works. In them he has explored in great depth the problems of the fathers and sons of two aristocratic families and the relations between the generations. In each case, though, the influence of the father is somewhat less than might normally be expected. The Southern society Faulkner wrote about placed great emphasis upon the family and the position of the father only if that father supported the values of the society. Both Mr. Compson and Thomas Sutpen refute the values of Southern society; thus their influence on their sons is not that of the typical Southern father.

Mr. Compson has retreated from Southern society long before Quentin reaches maturity. That his personal influence on all his children was apparently great when they were small is revealed in flashbacks in both Quentin's and Benjy's sections of The Sound and the Fury. By the time of Quentin's suicide, however, he has abjured the values of the society around him and retreated into alcoholism and nihilism. When Quentin reaches the crisis brought about by Caddy's rebellion, he finds in his father only a negative example.

Nevertheless, the frequent references to father in Quentin's section show how important the relationship remains

to the son. Having been raised in the Southern tradition of the importance of the family, he naturally looks to his father for advice. He is baffled and confused when he finds not a comfortable reiteration of the Southern code of honor but an apparently logical insistence on the meaninglessness of honor and of life. His father's position is a contributing factor in Quentin's decision to commit suicide. Mr. Compson and his son share an intense interest in the events of the family, but their differing points of view toward Southern society result in quite different ways of acting upon these problems.

Thomas Sutpen, unlike Mr. Compson, apparently never has any personal influence upon his sons' development. Bon, of course, reaches adulthood without knowing his father. Their relationship takes place entirely after Bon's character is already formed. Sutpen's refusal to see Bon as a person and his insistence on treating him merely as the Negro who is to destroy the design of Sutpen's life negates any possibility of a personal relationship between them. Bon himself does not want his father's love but merely his acknowledgement of their kinship.

Sutpen's relationship with Henry is hardly closer than with Bon. Although Henry grows up in the shadow of his father, there is little personal interaction or sympathy between them. Thomas Sutpen has subordinated his character to his design, and his design does not include personal relationships. Sutpen is almost an automaton who calculates carefully the reactions of the people around him and attempts

to maneuver them to fit his plans. Henry is more pliable, being less strongly developed in character, than Bon, and he obeys his father's will in refusing to allow Bon to marry his sister. But the real influence on Henry, as on Quentin, is not the father but the code of Southern values which his father pretends to follow. The conflict which arises between the older and younger Sutpens like that between the older and younger Compsons is not so much a personal conflict between fathers and sons as a moral conflict between traditional and personal values. This conflict between the personal morality of the fathers and the conventional morality of the sons is only a part of the larger theme that Faulkner has explored in many of his major works: the individual's will to impose order on his own existence.

Quentin and Mr. Compson, and Bon, Henry, and Thomas Sutpen suffer like many other Faulkner characters under a compulsive need for order. Quentin and Henry seek a sense of order and meaning for their lives by accepting wholeheartedly the values of the Southern society in which they are raised. They are too young and inexperienced to understand that this moral system is fallible. Each sees in the Southern feeling for honor, with its confusing sexual morality, its reverence for the past and family tradition, its exaltation of the white woman, and its subjection of the Negro, a ready-made order upon which to build his life. Neither is capable of dealing realistically with the problems of his life; so he remains tied to this code and

psychologically blind to the possibility of any other order or meaning. When a member of his own family breaks or threatens to break the tenets of this code, neither Quentin nor Henry can retreat from his position of strict adherence to it or alter his beliefs to fit the human situation. Quentin and Henry instead become only more rigid in their allegiance to the code and seek to make everyone around them follow it also. Forcing other people into their own narrowly restricted but orderly moral world proves impossible, and Quentin and Henry must face what seems to them the breakdown of order in their lives. So Quentin is forced into suicide and Henry into murder.

Their fathers too suffer from the need for absolute order. Neither Mr. Compson nor Thomas Sutpen finds the meaning for life in typical Southern morality, however. Sutpen, to be sure, adheres to the Southern code on the surface. In reality, though, his order is in his "design" which he decided upon in childhood, to become a plantation owner and establish a family line. Everything in his life is carefully planned to forward this design; it is the ordering force of his life. Although the design requires that he act out the part of the Southern gentleman, it does not require that he believe it as his son does.

Mr. Compson, of the other hand, almost totally rejects the Southern code and speaks in a bitterly ironic tone of Quentin's ideas of honor. The order that Mr. Compson applies to his life is a philosophy of meaninglessness. He commits himself to nihilism and cynicism which give a kind of

negative order to his life. He has to look no further for meaning in his life, just as Sutpen has to look no further than the design and Quentin and Henry no further than the code.

The less prominent sons in these two novels also follow some system or idea which gives them order for their lives. Charles Bon's moral code is similar to Quentin's and Henry's although he comes from a slightly different part of the South with a slightly different moral order. Benjy and Jason do not actually come into conflict with their father because their lives are not ordered on values at all but on physical objects: Jason's life centers upon money and Benjy's upon a few pleasure-giving images such as fire and Caddy's slipper. They do not come significantly into conflict with a world which refuses to fall into their orderly system although The Sound and the Fury ends with Benjy's howl of protest as the order of his world is temporarily destroyed.

That howl of protest is equivalent to Bon's murder or Quentin's suicide. The sons who would live as they believe true Southerners must live--Quentin, Henry, and Bon--meet violence and destroy or are destroyed by their failure to impose order on their world. The failure of Southern morality is obvious. Both the fathers, who do not seek order primarily as Southerners, fail also and meet destruction. The failure for Faulkner lies not in any particular type of order. He does not cast blame on Southerners, or on Sutpen's design, or on Mr. Compson's nihilism. What the author does



criticize is the undeviating devotion to any system of values. The fathers and sons of The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom! meet destruction because they cannot compromise. They refuse to put human needs before the demands of their various systems; they are unable to act from motives of love and sympathy. The only characters in these novels who do survive are those who, like Judith and Dilsey, do not feel compelled to force order upon the world, who are strong enough to endure disorder and so are free to be human. Humanity, warmth, and desire or ability to compromise are qualities the male Sutpens and Compsons lack; so they do not succeed and their families are destroyed.

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