

ANALYSIS

Absalom, Absalom! (1936)

William Faulkner

(1897-1962)

“In *Absalom, Absalom!*, although apparently with great difficulty, as if he were wrestling with the Snopes world all the while, Mr. Faulkner finally achieves the presentation of a kind of ‘glamorous fatality’ for the Sartoris world—embodied in Thomas Sutpen and his house. The book is really a summary of the whole career of the tradition—its rise, its fatal defects, its opponents, its decline, and its destruction. The action is of heroic proportions. The figures are larger than life; but, as Mr. T. S. Eliot has suggested of Tourneur’s characters, they are all distorted to scale, so that the whole action has a self-subsistent reality. And the book ends with a ritualistic purgation of the doomed house, by fire, which is as nearly a genuine tragic scene as anything in modern fiction.

For the first time, Mr. Faulkner makes explicit here the contrast between traditional (Sartoris) man and modern (Snopes) man, dissociated into a sequence of animal functions, lacking in unity under essential morality.... [It was Quentin’s effort] to transform his own family’s doom into the proportions of the world of Sutpen and Sartoris—that led to this death. But it is significant that it should be Quentin through whose understanding the story of Sutpen is told, and that it should be Quentin who watches the final destruction of Sutpen’s house. For Sutpen’s tradition was defective, but it was not formalized as Quentin’s was; and his story approaches tragedy.”

George Marion O’Donnell
“Faulkner’s Mythology”
The Kenyon Review 1.3 (1939)

“The story of Thomas Sutpen and the intricate patterns of other lives involved with his are narrated through Quentin Compson, the grandson of Sutpen’s befriender, General Compson. Born to a poor-white family in the West Virginia mountains in 1807, Sutpen runs away at 14 and makes his way to Haiti. There he marries Eulalia Bon, a planter’s daughter, and they have a son, Charles. Discovering his wife’s partial black ancestry, Sutpen leaves her and the child, and two years later (1833) appears in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, with a band of wild Haitian blacks.

He obtains 100 acres of land questionably from the Chickasaw Indians, creates a plantation, and builds a large house on ‘Sutpen’s Hundred.’ As a further part of his grand design to achieve aristocracy, Sutpen marries Ellen Coldfield, of a respectable family, and they have children, Henry and Judith. Years later, at the University of Mississippi, Henry meets and admires Charles Bon, Sutpen’s Haitian son, who has grown to manhood in New Orleans. When Bon comes home with Henry for Christmas, he falls in love with Judith, but Sutpen forbids their marriage. To Henry he reveals that he is Bon’s father (but conceals the black background), and Henry reacts by renouncing his birthright and leaving with Bon, and upon the outbreak of the Civil War, the two go off to fight.

During the war Ellen dies but the men survive. Although Bon will not repudiate his octoroon mistress and their son, he still wants to wed Judith, being willing to leave only if Sutpen will acknowledge him as ‘Bon, my son.’ Learning of Bon’s Negro blood, Henry murders him to prevent the marriage, and then disappears himself. Intent on begetting an heir and founding a dynasty, Sutpen gets engaged to his sister-in-law Rosa Coldfield, who leaves him when he suggests that they try to have a son before marrying. Attempting ‘to replace that progeny the hopes of which he had himself destroyed,’ Sutpen has relations with the granddaughter of Wash Jones, a poor-white squatter on Sutpen’s Hundred. When he casts off Milly Jones and the child because it is a girl, Wash kills Sutpen with a scythe.

Bon’s son by his mistress, Charles Etienne De Saint-Valery Bon, is brought to the plantation by Clytemnestra (Clytie), another daughter of Sutpen by one of his slaves. Charles Etienne in turn marries a

full-blooded black woman and fathers an idiot son, Jim Bond. After Judith and Charles Etienne die of yellow fever, only Sutpen's black heirs, Clytie and Jim Bond, remain on the decaying plantation. In 1910, shortly before her death, Rosa, aided by Quentin, finds Henry, now aged and wasted, returned and hidden in the house, and when Rosa sends for an ambulance, Clytie, thinking it a police car come to arrest Henry for the old murder, sets fire to the house, violently ending the 'doom' of Sutpen's own destructive career on a 'land primed for fatality and already cursed with it'."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 4

"*Absalom, Absalom!* is not primarily about the South or about a doomed family as a symbol of the South. It is a novel about the meaning of history for Quentin Compson. The story of Sutpen simply represents that part of the past which Quentin must understand if he is to understand himself. In this respect Quentin's dilemma is very similar to that of Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses*. Whether the scene is Ireland or the South, the problem of extracting value from a cultural heritage remains about the same. Indeed, Quentin has his own Buck Mulligan in his roommate, Shreve McCannon.... As Faulkner sees it, the system was corrupt enough not to be able to control its Thomas Sutpens. And we may even view the Civil War as a consequence of such a further corruption of existing order as that which was carried on by Sutpen....

The father has slowly undermined for Quentin the myth of any spiritual transcendence of what seems to be the mechanism of historical fact. This is in great part the problem faced by Quentin in *Absalom, Absalom!*... It is a problem which makes Quentin, as an organizer of Sutpen's story, the dramatic center of this novel. Indeed, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin is nearly allowed to appropriate the position of the author.... At different times Quentin associates himself both with Bon, who feels compelled to threaten incest, and with Henry, Judith's brother, who must kill his friend to prevent it and the accompanying evil of miscegenation. Quentin, who could neither dignify Caddy's immorality by the damning sin of incest nor properly defend his sister's honor, discovers something of himself...by recreating the circumstances which led to Bon's murder.... [At the same time] Had Quentin assumed the luxury of treating the Sutpen story merely as an objectification of some personal obsession, the total effect of the novel would have partaken of the overindulgent and romantic self-dramatization of Rosa's soliloquy....

It is emphasized that at least three of the other characters, Wash Jones, Charles Bon, and Mr. Coldfield, were at one time confronted respectively with the very things which injured Sutpen: the same social antagonism, nearly the same act of repudiation, and an almost identical opportunity to exploit the evils of the economic system. Sutpen alone seems able to pursue his ambition, what he calls his 'design,' not only in defiance of an outraged community but in ignorance of its codes and customs and with a complete insensitivity to human character.... To acknowledge that Charles Bon is his son would be to infuse humanity into the 'ingredients' of his 'design.' He is simply incapable of doing it. He fails to realize that Bon is demanding only the same sort of recognition denied him as a boy at the plantation door. And he can forget human need so completely that he cannot understand how or why his plans could be so affected by what he calls 'a maelstrom of unpredictable and unreasoning human beings'.... Sutpen, as we have seen, comes totally to express the very inhumanity and injustice which he would have us believe compelled the 'design' in the first place....

The structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* is a reflection of both the nature and the method of Quentin's search, in a confusion of historical fact, for value. Consideration of that structure might begin simply by dividing the novel into two parts of four chapters each, leaving Rosa's monologue, which separates them by exclusively occupying all of Chapter V, for special consideration. The first four chapters, in which the whole of Sutpen's story is continually repeated with changing emphases, are really a dramatization of Quentin's activity at the sources of his information. In the last four chapters, during which he is at Harvard College, Quentin, with the help of his roommate, Shreve, piece together all of the facts and opinions about the story held by Rosa, his father, and his grandfather along with a good deal of information which is apparently a part of his heritage. All of the data, as it comes to him in the early chapters, is confused, contradictory, and phenomenal in character. It is like the letter which Judith had given to his grandmother and which is now a document in his attempt to order the story coherently....

As he listens [to Rosa], Quentin does not yet realize that, like her handwriting, Rosa's 'demonizing' of Sutpen is indicative of a character which is 'cold, implacable, and even ruthless.' Her description of Sutpen's first years in Jefferson is wild and incredible. Sutpen becomes '*an ogre, some beast out of tales to frighten children with.*' But the distortions resulting from her nightmarish sensibility are continually being revealed to the reader by the contradictory nature of Rosa's own testimony.... The detailing of incidents by Quentin's father, in Chapters II, III, and IV, if not as distorted as Rosa's, is no less riddled with faulty information. On the basis of what he knows, Mr. Compson believes, for example, that Sutpen forbade Judith's marriage merely because her fiancé, Charles Bon, kept an octoroon mistress in New Orleans....

In the process of retelling the story in Chapter VII, he corrects his father's error in Chapter II. We learn what only Sutpen knew at the time: the real identity of Charles Bon. Judith's betrothal to him was forbidden by Sutpen because it would have resulted not only in incest, but in miscegenation. This new information not only partially invalidates Mr. Compson's analysis, but also reflects adversely on the already questionable account of the story given by Rosa. In the first chapter she tells Quentin that she 'saw Judith's marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse.' It is this belief, based on ignorance of the facts, which partly explains the peculiar quality of her hatred of Sutpen. Rosa's bitterness and frustration at being the last child of cold and unloving parents finds total expression in the collapse of the romantic life she had lived vicariously in that of her niece, Judith....

Although she has never seen him, Rosa has fallen deeply in love with her vision of the man who she never learns is Sutpen's unrecognized son. She has heard him discussed by Ellen, whose plans for an engagement between him and Judith, also made in ignorance of Bon's identity. Come to objectify Rosa's own romantic longings. Her dream of Bon is a dream of the future, it is a 'fairy tale' which is foolishly isolated from the world of other human beings in which it must, if at all, exist. Rosa's dream was concocted in the hallways of her darkened house.... The collapse of Rosa's illusions is roughly equivalent to Sutpen's sudden discovery, also due to Bon's activity, that in pursuit of his 'design' he seems to have arrived 'at a result absolutely and forever incredible.' Sutpen still believes that it is merely a matter of miscalculation and that 'whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point'....

Rosa must reassess her whole experience in relation to her fatal excursion into the 'factual scheme' of things. And she tells the story of her life to Quentin after she has experienced the effects of having been awakened out of the dream state. The shock and revulsion resulting from the stair episode is imposed back upon situations from which the necessity of Rosa's emotions would not seem naturally to have arisen. Rosa can acknowledge the past only through the retrospective distortions of her own rage and frustration.... The poverty of Sutpen's imagination and the neurotic richness of Rosa's place the two figures at poles. Yet in their different ways, both express a wholly nonsocial, dangerously individualistic point of view. This polar equality between Sutpen and Rosa is similar in kind to the thematic relationship existing in *Light in August* between Hightower and Joe Christmas... Rosa and Sutpen were...made for each other. That is the ironic appropriateness of Sutpen's proposal. What Rosa confesses to Quentin, and to us, is the story of a woman who, confronting a world as furiously antagonistic as Sutpen's, feels that she can come to life only as a man.... Sutpen represents all that she would but cannot be....

The breaking of the engagement occurs only when he intimates that she is merely the means to provide him with another son to carry on the 'design.' In a rage, she returns to her 'womb-like corridor' to live on the charity of the town and to continue her 'demonizing' of Sutpen.... But the very attitudes implicated in her final revulsion and hatred of Sutpen further the ironic similarities already suggested as existing between Sutpen and Rosa Coldfield. Both of them try desperately to disown the past. Rosa has had her own design, one by which she was obsessed with a future even more impossible of achievement than Sutpen's. Sutpen's scapegoat is the 'monkey nigger'; Rosa's is Sutpen. She uses him, as Sutpen used his experience at the plantation door, to objectify an exclusively egocentric and romantic view of life which has been wrenched apart by forces and events for which she holds this remarkably childish man too exclusively responsible. She never sees in the very nature of her illusions—nor does he in his—the source of their destruction....

Quentin's version of the Judith-Bon affair causes a reorientation of the whole Sutpen story. Sutpen's attitude toward the marriage becomes a coherent element in his 'design' and Bon's insistence on returning

to marry his half-sister becomes a dramatically powerful gesture activated by his need for paternal recognition.... The emphasis here is primarily upon Quentin... Neither Rosa nor Sutpen can serve as the dramatic center of this novel. Quentin's acts of remembrance actually determine the form of the novel.... The account of the Bon story which finally emerges from the conversations of Quentin and Shreve may be viewed as an attempted rejection by Quentin of both his father's and Rosa's points of view. The effect, in terms of the novel, is a rejection of Naturalism. The activity of Bon and Henry, as it is seen by Quentin, simply does not sustain a conception of history either as impersonal mechanism or in which 'blind fate' slowly and solemnly triumphs....

Bon gives Sutpen numerous opportunities to correct his 'mistake.' Rather than revenge for his mother, all he is seeking is [acknowledgement].... But he at last falls victim, as Sutpen himself is a victim, of the ravages of this abstract 'design.' Incest with Judith or death at the hands of his brother become the only ways in which Bon can identify himself as Sutpen's son. Henry, after four years of painful indecision, kills his friend and brother at the gates of Sutpen's Hundred.... Henry acts not in obedience to his father, but to an inherent sense of a moral code which is stronger than his love for Bon. The act...is really a transcendence by Henry of the dehumanized quality of his father's 'design'.... What is important is that Quentin can see in the activity of Charles and Henry an active expression, however confused and frustrated, of human value responding to the inhumanity of Sutpen....

The actions of Wash Jones and of Valery Bon suggest as clearly as the final actions of Bon and Henry a distorted but eloquent sense of moral revulsion at the corruption and inhumanity of Sutpen's 'design.' When there seems no hope of reinstituting that 'design,' Sutpen perhaps consciously provokes Wash into killing him. In Wash's hearing, he crudely repudiates Milly, Wash's granddaughter, when she fails to bear him a son.... Like Milly and Wash, Valery Bon discovers that he, too, is a part of the rejected residue of his grandfather's career.... Having no family of his own, his real identity hidden from the town, Valery Bon seeks literally to make a name for himself by violent and extraordinary action. Though he could pass for a white man, he marries a woman who is an extremely dark Negress, and insists on being recognized as a Negro himself. Considering the social consequences, this is really a conscious form of self-degradation similar in its motivation to that of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. Valery Bon's violence, like Joe's unkindness to Mrs. McEachern, is directed against the feminizing pity of those about him....

The howling of Jim Bon is totally devoid of the kind of value which was tragically dramatized by Henry's murder of his friend. Quentin actually trembles in his bed as he remembers it.... The Negro idiot seems powerfully to reintroduce the apparently inhuman and mechanistic nature of Sutpen's history and of Quentin's heritage.... Inherent in the tragically suggestive ambiguity of the conclusion is the justification for the structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* The form of the novel itself insists that the act of placing Sutpen in the understandable context of human society and history is a continually necessary act, a never-ending responsibility and an act of humanistic faith."

Richard Poirier

"'Strange Gods' in Jefferson, Mississippi: Analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*"

Sewanee Review LIII

(Summer 1945) 343-61

"'Tell about the South,' says Quentin Compson's roommate at Harvard, a Canadian named Shreve McCannon who is curious about the unknown region beyond the Ohio.... And Quentin, whose background is a little like that of Faulkner himself and who sometimes seems to speak for him—Quentin answers, 'You can't understand it. You would have to be born there.' Nevertheless, he tells a long and violent story that he regards as the essence of the Deep South, which is not so much a mere region as it is, in Quentin's mind, an incomplete and frustrated nation trying to relive its legendary past.

The story he tells—I am trying to summarize the plot of *Absalom, Absalom!*—is that of a mountain boy named Thomas Sutpen whose family drifted into the Virginia lowlands, where his father found odd jobs on a plantation. One day the father sent him with a message to the big house, but he was turned away at the door by a black man in livery. Puzzled and humiliated, the mountain boy was seized upon by the lifelong ambition to which he would afterward refer as 'the design.' He too would own a plantation with slaves and

a liveried butler; he would build a mansion as big as any of those in the Tidewater; and he would have a son to inherit his wealth.

A dozen years later, Sutpen appeared in the frontier town of Jefferson, where he managed to obtain a hundred square miles of land from the Chickasaws. With the help of twenty wild Negroes from the jungle and a French architect, he set about building the largest house in northern Mississippi, using timbers from the forest and bricks that his Negroes molded and baked on the spot; it was as if his mansion, Sutpen's Hundred, had been literally torn from the soil. Only one man in Jefferson—he was Quentin's grandfather, General Compson—ever learned how and where Sutpen had acquired his slaves. He had shipped to Haiti from Virginia, worked as overseer on a sugar plantation and married the rich planter's daughter, who had borne him a son. Then, finding that his wife had Negro blood, he had simply put her away, with her child and her fortune, while keeping the twenty slaves as a sort of indemnity.

In Jefferson, Sutpen married again. This time his wife belonged to a pious family of the neighborhood, and she bore him two children, Henry and Judith. He became the biggest cotton planter in Yoknapatawpha County, and it seemed that his 'design' had already been fulfilled. At this moment, however, Henry came home from the University of Mississippi with an older and worldlier new friend, Charles Bon, who was in reality Sutpen's son by his first marriage. Charles became engaged to Judith. Sutpen learned his identity and, without making a sign of recognition, ordered him from the house. Henry, who refused to believe that Charles was his half-brother, renounced his birthright and followed him to New Orleans. In 1861, all the male Sutpens went off to war, and all of them survived four years of fighting. Then, in the spring of 1865, Charles suddenly decided to marry Judith, even though he was certain by now that she was his half-sister. Henry rode beside him all the way back to Sutpen's Hundred, but tried to stop him at the gate, killed him when he insisted on going ahead with his plan, told Judith what he had done, and disappeared.

But Quentin's story of the Deep South does not end with the war. Colonel Sutpen came home, he says, to find his wife dead, his son a fugitive, his slaves dispersed (they had run away even before they were freed by the Union army), and most of his land about to be seized for debt. Still determined to carry out 'the design,' he did not even pause for breath before undertaking to restore his house and plantation to what they had been. The effort failed and Sutpen was reduced to keeping a crossroads store. Now in his sixties, he tried again to beget a son; but his wife's younger sister, Miss Rosa Coldfield, was outraged by his proposal ('Let's try it,' he had said, 'and if it's a boy we'll get married.');

and later poor Milly Jones, with whom he had an affair, gave birth to a baby girl. At that Sutpen abandoned hope and provoked Milly's grandfather into killing him. Judith survived her father for a time, as did the half-caste son of Charles Bon by a New Orleans octoroon. After the death of these two by yellow fever, the great house was haunted rather than inhabited by an ancient mulatto woman, Sutpen's daughter by one of his slaves. The fugitive Henry Sutpen came home to die; the townspeople heard of his illness and sent an ambulance after him; but old Clytie thought they were arresting him for murder and set fire to Sutpen's Hundred. The only survival of the conflagration was Jim Bond, a half-witted creature who was Charles Bon's grandson....

The reader cannot help wondering why this somber and, at moments, plainly incredible story has so seized upon Quentin's mind that he trembled with excitement when telling it and felt it revealed the essence of the Deep South. It seems to belong in the realm of Gothic romances, with Sutpen's Hundred taking the place of the haunted castle on the Rhine, with Colonel Sutpen as Faust and Charles Bon as Manfred. Then slowly it dawns on you that most of the characters and incidents have a double meaning; that besides their place in the story, they also serve as symbols or metaphors with a general application. Sutpen's great design, the land he stole from the Indians, the French architect who built his house with the help of wild Negroes from the jungle, the woman of mixed blood who ruined him, the poor white whom he wronged and who killed him in anger, the final destruction of the mansion like the downfall of a social order: all these might belong to a tragic fable of Southern history.

With a little cleverness, the whole novel might be explained as a connected and logical allegory, but this, I think, would be going far beyond the author's intention. First of all, he was writing a story, and one that affected him deeply, but he was also brooding over a social situation. More or less unconsciously, the incidents in the story came to represent the forces and elements in the social situation, since the mind naturally works in terms of symbols and parallels. In Faulkner's case, this form of parallelism is not

confined to *Absalom, Absalom!* It can be found in the whole fictional framework that he has been elaborating in novel after novel, until his work has become a myth or legend of the South.”

Malcolm Cowley
“Introduction to *The Portable Faulkner*”
(Viking 1946)

“Malraux, in his famous preface to *Sanctuary*, had already spoken of Faulkner’s art as ‘fascination,’ and Sartre, writing on *Sartoris*, as a ‘spell.’ Nowhere are those words more applicable than in *Absalom*. Even though at first the story is not particularly mysterious, the reader soon finds himself ‘possessed’ by it, as are the two narrators, Quentin Compson and his Canadian friend, Shreve. The Canadian is fascinated by his initiation into what he thinks is the mystery of the ‘deep South,’ Quentin by the horror of incest—both the incest he knows exists between Judith and Charles Bon and the incest he imagines existed between himself and his sister Caddy—while we common readers are hypnotized by the motionless, frozen time which is gradually revealed.”

Claude-Edmonde Magny
“Faulkner and Theological Inversion”
L’Age du Roman américain, trans. Jacqueline Merriam
(Paris: Editions du Seuil 1948) 196-243

“The complications of the Yoknapatawpha saga can only be suggested here. The deepest roots go back to *Absalom, Absalom!*, which begins with the building of Sutpen’s Hundred by naked slaves back in the 1830’s. Thomas Sutpen establishes himself in the community by marrying into the respectable Coldfield family, and his story is viewed in retrospect, as his sister-in-law, old Miss Rosa, tells it to Quentin Compson, upon the eve of his departure for Harvard in 1909. To proceed very summarily, Sutpen has been married before, and has had a son known as Charles Bon, by a West Indian woman whom he discarded when he learned that she had Negro blood. Charles later falls in love with his half-sister, Judith Sutpen, and is murdered by her brother Henry. (At the end of the book, Henry burns to death in the conflagration which consumes Sutpen’s Hundred in the best Gothic tradition. Sutpen too is murdered, by a poor white whose daughter he had taken unto himself in a vain attempt to beget a son.

Not all the story is told by Miss Rosa; some of it Quentin pieces out from other sources. Much of it he tells to his Canadian roommate at Harvard in a vain attempt to help him to understand the South. But Quentin himself is involved in a family tragedy as harrowing as that of the Sutpens—and this is the theme of *The Sound and the Fury*.”

Edward Wagenknecht
Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century
(Holt 1952) 419-20

“*Absalom, Absalom!*, in my opinion the greatest of Faulkner’s novels, is probably the least well understood of all his books.... *Absalom, Absalom!* is the most memorable of Faulkner’s novels—and memorable in a very special way. Though even the intelligent reader may feel at times some frustration with the powerful but darkly involved story, with its patches of murkiness and its almost willful complications of plot, he will find himself haunted by individual scenes and episodes, rendered with almost compulsive force.... *Absalom, Absalom!* is in many respects the most brilliantly written of all Faulkner’s novels, whether one considers its writing line by line and paragraph by paragraph, or its structure, in which we are moved up from one suspended note to a higher suspended note and on up further still to an almost intolerable climax. The intensity of the book is a function of the structure. The deferred and suspended resolutions are necessary if the great scenes are to have their full vigor and significance. Admittedly, the novel is a difficult one, but the difficulty is not forced and factitious. It is the price that has to be paid by the reader for the novel’s power and significance. There are actually few instances in modern fiction of a more perfect adaptation of form to matter and of an intricacy that justifies itself at every point through the significance and intensity which it makes possible....

Absalom, Absalom! is...from one point of view a wonderful detective story—by far the best of Faulkner's several flirtations with this particular genre. It may also be considered to yield a nice instance of how the novelist works, for Shreve and Quentin both show a good deal of the insights of the novelist and his imaginative capacity for constructing plausible motivations around a few given facts.... Most important of all, however, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a persuasive commentary upon the thesis that much of 'history' is really a kind of imaginative construction. The past always remains at some level a mystery, but if we are to hope to understand it in any wise, we must enter into it and project ourselves imaginatively into the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures.... To note that the account of the Sutpens which Shreve and Quentin concoct is largely an imaginative construct is not to maintain that it is necessarily untrue. Their version of events is plausible, and the author himself—for whatever that may be worth—suggests that some of the scenes which they palpably invented were probably true... But it is worth remarking that we do not 'know,' apart from the Quentin-Shreve semifictional process, many events which a casual reader assumes actually happened....

Faulkner has been very careful to define Sutpen's innocence for us. 'Sutpen's trouble,' as Quentin's grandfather observed, 'was innocence'.... This is an 'innocence' with which most of us today ought to be acquainted. It is par excellence the innocence of modern man, though it has not to be sure, been confined to modern times. One can find more than a trace of it in Sophocles's Oedipus, and it has its analogies with the rather brittle rationalism of Macbeth... But innocence of this sort can properly be claimed as a special characteristic of modern man, and one can claim further that it flourishes particularly in a secularized society....

Sutpen's unwillingness to acknowledge Charles Bon as his son does not spring from any particular facial feeling. Indeed, Sutpen's whole attitude toward the Negro has to be reinspected if we are to understand his relation to the Southern community into which he comes.... Henry and Judith were well aware that Clytie was indeed their half-sister, and that Clytie was allowed to grow up in the house with them. This fact in itself suggests a lack of the usual Southern feeling about Negroes.... Clytie is accepted naturally as part of the 'we.' She can be so accepted because acceptance on this level does not imperil Sutpen's 'design.' But acceptance of Charles Bon, in Sutpen's opinion, would. For Sutpen the matter is really is as simple as that. He does not hate his first wife or feel repugnance for her child. He does not hate just as he does not love. His passion is totally committed to the design....

As for slavery, Sutpen does not confine himself to black chattel slavery. He ruthlessly bends anyone that he can to his will. The white French architect whom he brings into Yoknapatawpha County to build his house is as much a slave as any of his black servants. Sutpen hunts him down with dogs when he tries to escape. The trait that most decisively sets Sutpen apart from his neighbors in this matter of race is his fighting with his slaves....to prove to himself and incidentally to his slaves that he is the better man.... Sutpen is not without morality or a certain code of honor. He is, according to his own lights, a just man.... Moreover, Sutpen is careful to say nothing in disparagement of his first wife.... It is Sutpen's innocence to think that justice is enough—that there is no claim that cannot be satisfied by sufficient money payment.... Sutpen thinks of himself as strictly just and he submits all of his faculties almost selflessly to the achievement of his design.... Slavery was an evil. But other slaveholders avoided Sutpen's kind of defeat and were exempt from his special kind of moral blindness....

Ellen Coldfield is not the daughter of a planter. She does not possess great social prestige or beauty and she does not inherit wealth. But as the daughter of a steward in the Methodist church, she possesses in high degree the thing that Sutpen most obviously lacks—respectability.... For Sutpen, respectability is an abstraction like morality: you measure out so many cups of concentrated respectability to sweeten so many measures of disrespectability—'like the ingredients of pie or cake.' The choice of a father-in-law is, in fact, just as symbolically right: the two men resemble each other for all the appearance of antithetical differences. Mr. Coldfield is as definitely set off from the community as is Sutpen. With the coming of the Civil War, this rift widens to an absolute break. Mr. Coldfield denounces secession, closes his store, and finally nails himself up in the attic of his house, where he spends the last three years of his life. No more than Sutpen is he a coward; like Sutpen, too, his scheme of human conduct is abstract and mechanical.... The truth of the matter is that Mr. Coldfield's morality is simply Sutpen's turned inside out....

Sutpen resembles the modern American...a 'planner' who works by blueprint and on a schedule. He is rationalistic and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious.... Sutpen is at some points more nearly allied to Flem [Snopes] than he is to the Compsons and the Sartoris. Like Flem, he is a new man with no concern for the past and has a boundless energy with which to carry out his aggressive plans. Yet to couple Sutpen with Flem calls for an immediate qualification. Granting that both subsist outside the community and in one way or another prey upon the community, Sutpen is by contrast a heroic and tragic figure. He achieves a kind of grandeur....

Sutpen is further defined by his son, Charles Bon. Bon is a mirror image, a reversed shadow of his father. Like his father, he suddenly appears out of nowhere as a man of mystery.... Like his father, Bon has an octoroon 'wife,' whom he is prepared to repudiate along with his child by her. Like his father, he stands beyond good and evil. But Bon is Byronic, rather than the go-getter, spent, rather than full of pushing vitality, sophisticated, rather than confidently naïve.... Bon possesses too much knowledge; Sutpen on the other hand is 'innocent.' The one has gone beyond the distinction between good and evil; the other has scarcely arrived at that distinction. The father and the son define the extremes of the human world: one aberration corresponds to—and eventually destroys—the other. The reader is inclined to view Bon with sympathy as a person gravely wronged, and he probably agrees with Quentin's interpretation of Bon's character: that Bon finally put aside all ideas of revenge and asked for nothing more than a single hint of recognition of his sonship. Faulkner has certainly treated Bon with full dramatic sympathy—as he has Sutpen, for that matter. But our sympathy ought not to obscure for us Bon's resemblances to his father, or the complexity of his character....

Charles Bon displays toward his octoroon mistress and their son something of the cool aloofness that his father displays toward him. If he is the instrument by which Sutpen's design is wrecked, his own irresponsibility (or at the least, his lack of concern for his own child) wrecks his child's life. We shall have to look to Judith to find responsible action and a real counter to Sutpen's ruthlessness. These other children of Sutpen—Judith and Henry—reflect further light upon the character of Sutpen—upon his virtues and upon his prime defect. They represent a mixture of the qualities of Sutpen and Coldfield. Judith, it is made plain, has more of the confidence and boldness of her father; Henry, more of the conventionality and the scruples of his material grandfather. It is the boy Henry who vomits at the sight of his father, stripped to the waist in the ring with the black slave. Judith watches calmly. And it is Judith who urges the coachman to race the coach on the way to church....

It is Judith who invites Charles Bon's octoroon mistress to visit Bon's grave. It is Judith who, on his mother's death, sends to New Orleans for Bon's son and tries to rear him. Some years later she also tries to free him (as Quentin conjectures) by promising to take care of his Negro wife and child if he will go to the North to pass as white, and Quentin imagines her saying to him: 'Call me Aunt Judith, Charles.' But Quentin's conjectures aside, we know that Judith did take him into the house when he was stricken with yellow fever, and that she died nursing him. The acknowledgment of blood kinship is made; Sutpen's design is repudiated; the boy, even though he has the 'taint' of Negro blood, is not turned away from the door. Both Henry's action, the violent turning away from the door with a bullet, and Judith's, the holding open the door not merely to Bon, her fiancé, but literally to his part-Negro son, are human actions, as Sutpen's actions are not. Both involve renunciation, and both are motivated by love. The suffering of Henry and Judith is not meaningless, and their very capacity for suffering marks them as having transcended their father's radical and disabling defect....

Miss Rosa feels that the Coldfields are all cursed; and certainly the impact of Sutpen upon her personally is damning: she remains rigid with horror and hate for forty-three years. But it is Miss Rosa only who is damned. Judith is not damned; nor am I sure that Henry is. Judith and Henry are not caught in an uncomprehending stasis. There is development: they grow and learn at however terrible a price.... Sutpen...never learns anything; he remains innocent to the end.... Henry's later course is, again, only implied. We know that in the end—his last four years—he reverted to the course of action of his grandfather Coldfield, and shut himself up in the house. But there is a difference. This is no act of abstract defiance and hate. Henry has assumed responsibility, has acted, has been willing to abide the consequences of that action, and now, forty years later, has come home to die....

The story of Judith, though muted and played down in terms of the whole novel, is one of the most moving that Faulkner has ever written.... Even Judith evidently did not know why her marriage was forbidden nor did she know why her brother killed Charles Bon. After the murder and Henry's flight, Judith tells Mrs. Compson, the General's wife, that the war will soon be over now because 'they [the Confederate soldiers] have begun to shoot one another.' The remark indicates her bafflement as well as her despair.... Because Henry knew what presumably Judith did not know, the secret of Bon's birth, his struggle—granted the circumstances of his breeding, education, and environment—was more difficult than Judith's. He had not merely to endure but to act, and yet any action that he could take would be cruelly painful. He was compelled to an agonizing decision....

As the last four sections of the book make plain, we are dealing with an intricate imaginative reconstruction of events leading up to the murder of Charles Bon—a plausible account of what may have happened, not what necessarily did happen.... One of the most important devices used in the novel is the placing of Shreve in it as a kind of sounding board and mouthpiece. By doing so, Faulkner has in effect acknowledged the attitude of the modern 'liberal,' twentieth-century reader, who is basically rational, skeptical, without any special concern for history, and pretty well emancipated from the ties of family, race, or section.... In their reconstruction of the story, Shreve and Quentin assume that Bon was aware that he was Henry's part-Negro half-brother (though a few pages earlier Quentin and Shreve assume that Bon did not know he had Negro blood). If in fact Bon did have Negro blood, how did Shreve and Quentin come by that knowledge? As we have seen, neither Judith nor Miss Rosa had any inkling of it. Nor did Mr. Compson. Early in the novel he refers to Bon's 'sixteenth part negro son.' Since Bon's mistress was an octoroon, his son could be one-sixteenth Negro only on the assumption that Charles Bon was of pure white blood—and this is evidently what Mr. Compson does assume. Mr. Compson, furthermore, knows nothing about Bon's kinship to Henry.

The conjectures made by Shreve and Quentin—even if taken merely as conjectures—render the story of Sutpen plausible. They make much more convincing sense of the story than Mr. Compson's notions were able to make. And that very fact suggests their probable truth. But are they more than plausible theories? Is there any real evidence to support the view that Bon was Sutpen's son by a part-Negro wife? There is, and the way in which this evidence is discovered constitutes another, and the most decisive, justification for regarding *Absalom, Absalom!* as a magnificent detective story.... Shreve, pressing the point, makes Quentin admit that he himself 'wouldn't have known what anybody was talking about' if he 'hadn't been out there and seen Clytie.' The secret of Bon's birth, then, was revealed to Quentin on that particular visit. Shreve's way of phrasing it implies that it was from Clytie that Quentin had got his information, but, as we shall see, it is unlikely that Clytie was Quentin's informant.... The hidden something turns out to be Henry Sutpen, now come home to die. Presumably, it was from Henry Sutpen that Quentin learned the crucial facts. Or did he?...

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

Cleanth Brooks

"History and the Sense of the Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom!*"

William Faulkner

(Yale 1954) 295-322

"In point of technique it constitutes the last radical innovation in fictional method since Joyce. A 'difficult' work, its difficulties do not inhere in verbal subtleties or in excessive refinement of perception, but in the strain imposed upon attention and sensibility in comprehending its monumental design. Broadly stated, the intention of *Absalom, Absalom!* is to create, though the utilization of all the resources of fiction, a grand tragic vision of historic dimension.... The curtain lifts on a play within a play: on the inner stage, the Sutpen drama; on the outer, the larger social tragedy involving the narrators. The second creates the first, and the first serves to convey the second. They are brought to their overwhelming finale together, but not without the reminder that, although catastrophe has been portrayed, life goes on...

As in the tragedies of the ancients and in the great myths of the Old Testament, the action represents issues of timeless moral significance. That Faulkner here links the decline of a social order to an infraction of fundamental morality cannot be doubted. Sutpen falls through innate deficiency of moral insight, but the error which he commits is also socially derived and thus illustrates the flaw which dooms with equal finality the aspirations of a whole culture. Events of modern history, here viewed as classic tragedy, are elevated through conscious artistry to the status of a new myth. Every reader of the novel is struck by its curiously heightened pitch, its brooding intensity, its poetic language, and the endless recapitulations which have the effect almost of incantation.... An exploration of unprecedented depth and scope into the meaning of history, the novel possesses throughout techniques proportionate to its ends....

The characters themselves are projected on a scale larger than life.... Sutpen 'abrupts' onto the scene as 'demon,' devil, with 'faint sulphur-reek still in hair, clothes and beard,' 'ogre-shape,' 'fiend,' 'blackguard.' His stature is heroic: the townspeople feel that, 'given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything.' His face is 'like the mask in Greek tragedy'.... He is an 'ancient varicose and despairing Faustus,' an enfeebled Abraham relegating the punishment of his sins to his children's children. His death is by the scythe, 'symbolic laurel of a Caesar's triumph.' And not least, in his anguished recognition of the unavailability of his rightful heir for the fulfillment of his design, he is, by ironical allusion to the title of the book, King David of Jerusalem, to whom it was promised that God would build him a house and establish his kingdom forever....

Behind Judith's mask we never penetrate. Credited with her father's demonic will, she enacts her role for motives that we are not given to know. Like Antigone, she dignifies the rejected brother with the appropriate rites of burial; as with Greek tragic heroines, generally, her individual psychology is not explored. She is the righteous Judith of the Old Testament, 'the same as a widow without ever having been a bride,' dedicated under self-assumed and uncommunicated compulsion to single-handed restoration of the moral order. Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon exist only to perform the parts assigned to them—Bon to pursue the acknowledgment which can never be his; Henry to commit, under circumstances which convey its poignancy to the fullest, the inevitable fratricide. They are the Biblical Absalom and Ammon in mortal conflict over a sister; they are Polyneices and Eteocles, sons of the cursed family of Oedipus, separated by their claims to power and doomed to mutually inflicted extinction....

A synopsis of the Sutpen legend would read like one of the summaries of Greek myths conveniently placed as prologue to modern translations of Greek plays. The continuing (though loose) analogues which exist between Sutpen and Oedipus, Sutpen's son and Eteocles and Polyneices, Judith and Antigone, suggest that the Oedipus trilogy might have served as a general guide in the drafting of the plot. At the same time, Sutpen's fall and the obliteration of his house bring to mind the great myth of man's original fall from innocence and the visitation of Divine justice upon third and fourth generations. Old Testament violence evoking God's wrath is recaptured here in a legend of father turning against son, son against father, and brother against brother.... The Greek sense of fate, specifically, is invoked. Slavery goes against the will of the gods; or, as it is stated in more exact terms, slavery goes against nature....

The Sutpen tragedy is the novel's center of dramatic interest, but the narrators are the center of the novel. In the execution of this double focus Faulkner exercises the full play of his genius.... The Sutpen tragedy, with its magnitude, power, and intensity, is...synthesized by Faulkner from the psychic bias of each narrator.... As the legend grows through the narrators' successive contributions, his capacity to estimate the various degrees of distortion increases. However, such is the ordering of the narrative that the magnification of events occurs always in advance of an understanding of the distortions which cause it. The reader is consequently affected sensibly before he can react intellectually. He knows that the narrators' conjectures are often in point of literal fact impossible, but he is forced to give them provisional credence; in so doing, he is taken in despite his reservations....

Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, and Quentin are the creators of the Sutpen myth, each spinning his version of the legend out of his own psyche... Their three differing interpretations might be compared to a display of the talents of three Greek dramatists composing tragedies about the same mythical figure, each poet having access to his predecessor's interpretation and adding new insights and flourishes of his own. The last

composer would be in the position to contribute the most; suspense would consist in the expectation that he solve the questions which earlier versions had raised....

The placement of the narrations in a sequence of cumulative revelations is supplemented by more familiar suspense-building devices. Accomplished action precedes cause throughout. In CHAPTERS I through VI, Sutpen appears as heroic, demonic, purposive and inscrutable; CHAPTER VII first presents him as the baffled, limited and compulsive mortal that he is. Henry's murder is cited as fact beginning with CHAPTER I; the circumstances and motive are not provided until CHAPTER VIII. Miss Rosa's ravings are suspect as hysterical from her earliest remarks in CHAPTER I; not until CHAPTER V do we learn how to discount her assertions in the light of her own psychology. Sutpen is buried (CHAPTER VI) before we are admitted to a view of his murder (CHAPTER VII); the murder itself is recounted in all its violence without our knowing what really provoked it (the sex of Milly's baby). Effect-cause sequence is worked into all the action and characterization....

Miss Rosa, whose shrill, belated, and misguided cry for vengeance opens the tale at its highest pitch, is a frustrated spinster. She is both physically and psychically misshapen. Venting upon Sutpen's image the accumulated tension of a lifetime of hallucinated isolation, she pictures Sutpen as the incarnation of demonic energy, positing horrendous crimes, 'too dark to talk about,' as the cause of the disasters which have overtaken Sutpen and his kin.... Her portions of the narrative, hysterical and disordered, generate the tension and fatality which span the entire legend. It is her madness which endows Sutpen with supernatural vitality and her perverted moralism which invokes the certainty of his destruction.... Miss Rosa's impossible romanticism is betrayed by her image of the ideal lover (the Bon-Judith courtship), her obsession with sin in her ascription of evil to Sutpen.... Her prejudices against Negroes are intensified by her repressions and by her need to sustain a false sense of social superiority. In youth, she refused to touch the objects with which Clytie had come in contact; at one point in the story, the shock of physical contact with Sutpen's Negro daughter sickens her with revulsion. Time does not lessen her snobbery or her prejudices; it merely fixes them into reflexes....

Mr. Compson brings to his narration a seeming repose and expansiveness which is a welcome counterbalance to Miss Rosa's blind subjectivity.... Mr. Compson at first arouses the confidence of the reader as an unbiased narrator. His ironic eye easily pierces the romanticisms, enthusiasms, and self-deceptions of others. A skeptic in religion, a rationalist in his general approach to life, a shrewd analyst of the social scene, his elaboration gives the legend an apparent foundation in fact. But his observations have dubious validity; they are the projections of a profound spiritual resignation. His world-weariness, his love of paradox, his fascination with the exotic, all suggest that he has absorbed [end-of-the-century] decadence into his private philosophy.... His skepticism is bottomless; he is a fatalist because he is at heart a defeatist.... Mr. Compson's effeteness is established in the very play of his rhetoric, in his perverse delight in what is mildly shocking, and in his sardonic asides.... He sustains the aura of catastrophe which Miss Rosa's forebodings initiated....

Aroused by the question of incest which the Bon-Henry-Judith relationship poses, Quentin shapes the story in the terms of his own vicarious incest wishes and creates the doomed Henry as an image of himself.... Quentin's psychology is depicted through his creation of Henry to no less degree than Henry's through Quentin....he is doomed through some case antecedent to his own existence, the victim of some larger fatality marked for the deep South itself.... The love of a brother for a brother, represented as so ideal in quality that it could surmount even the test of the incest conflict, is altered in an instant to blindly obliterative hate. The slight fraction of Negro blood, whose denial was Sutpen's crime, is sole cause. Now at last we know what turned father against son, son against father, and brother against brother. The language and allusions which elevate this compassionately rendered Cain-Abel conflict are appropriately Biblical....

All of the major narrators are born and bred in the South.... They live in a world of ghosts—the shades of the past. Miss Rosa is in pursuit of a ghost. Mr. Compson has surrendered himself to them; he has nothing to give his son except tales of the past, redolent of grandeur and defeat, but without meaning. During the period over which the legendizing takes place, we see Quentin sink progressively into self-willed oblivion. The past engulfs him; he cannot stay its flood. Miss Rosa drags him on her mission; his

father refuses to stop talking. Quentin makes feeble efforts at resistance: he doesn't want to accompany Miss Rosa; he would rather not hear any more about Sutpen.... Mr. Compson and Quentin are both rendered incapable of action.... Mr. Compson's manner of coping with life is through intellectual analysis undertaken from the refuge of personal retreat; Quentin, as the unfortunate heir of his spiritual bankruptcy and further declined status, is equipped only with excessive sensibility and illusion....

Young Sutpen's own loss of 'innocence' takes place before that white door of the great house of the plantation owner, where—under the stare of the 'nigger monkey'—he first felt, like Adam in Paradise, the shameful inadequacy of his natural garb ('his patched overalls and no shoes'). That single, contemptuous glance of the slave at the door altered his whole spiritual condition. The refusal of the Negro to hear his message or give him admittance provided the negative impetus upon which his entire design was constructed.... After our imaginative participation in Sutpen's ordeal, we can never be wholly alienated from him in sympathy. We cannot hate him, any more than Quentin can 'hate' the South. The family stock from which Sutpen derived was the class of settlers released to America from penal servitude in Old Bailey, and from this bit of genealogy we may assume for young Sutpen a meager heritage of humanistic values.... The gradual corruption of the mountain-folk is traced step by step.... The Biblical allusions which pervade the descent heighten the contrast between mountain 'innocence' and the spiritual depravity of a slave society....

Within their understandable limitations, however, Sutpen's qualities are admirable. His private integrity, manifested in innumerable small ways—his refusal to malign his first wife, his unwillingness to accept favors he cannot return, his establishment of man-to-man superiority over his slaves in sportsmanlike physical combat (as opposed to anonymous raids in the darkness, typical of others of his class), his searching for faults in his own acts rather than blaming others or Fate for his disappointments, his purposive adherence in conduct to the illuminations of his reason—these virtues confirm the largeness of his stature.... In his independence and strength, he is truly heroic; in the tragic flaw of his nature he resembles the great tragic heroes of literature. Unlike Macbeth or Lear, however, he never gains insight into his fault. Like Oedipus, rather, he is driven to new evils by forces which antedate his birth and which are beyond the sphere of his conscious governing. He is the modern tragic hero, insofar as art can represent him, a man felt to be circumscribed by psychological and social conditions, however large his abilities and aspirations....

The part played by Southern Protestantism in lending support to caste ambitions is depicted in the behavior of Mr. Coldfield. Denying slavery in principle, abetting it in practice, and in general substituting morbid righteousness for warm humanity, Mr. Coldfield's religiosity—and its contribution to Negro-white tensions—is a representation, in condensed form, of all that was set forth on this theme in *Light in August*. He lends money for Sutpen's dubious financial speculations (symbolizing the involvement of Southern planters with Northern finance), while detaching himself from the consequent moral responsibility. His impossible stand on the issues involved in the War leads to his complete withdrawal....

When Sutpen, in conformity to the 'design,' dishonors his legal tie to his first fractionally Negro wife, convincing himself that the claims of morality have been appeased by a financial settlement, his first crime against humanity is committed. According to law he has done, as he repeatedly argues, more than was demanded of him. But there are obligations of heart and feeling of which Sutpen is unaware.... That innocence, a 'minimal' response to the human spirit and its needs, Sutpen never outgrows. He marries Ellen not for love, but because he is ready to acquire the furniture for his house, 'not the least of which furniture was the wedding license'.... Ellen, the vacuous 'butterfly' who chaperones for Judith and Bon a courtship of patterned walks in a formal garden, is the female who presides over the rituals of refined existence.... Upon the maintained difference between slave-girl and gentlewoman, slave laborer and gentleman, plantation society rested.... As the biggest single plantation owner in the county, Sutpen is the very incarnation of the Old South....

Sutpen had two sons: one white, the other Negro. He denied the Negro; fratricide resulted. The Civil War, too, was a fratricidal conflict caused by denial of the Negro. In the passage which designates the Mississippi River as the 'geological umbilicus' of the continent, uniting Quentin and Shreve in a 'sort of geographical substantiation,' the brotherhood of North and South is established explicitly. Sutpen's sin, his

failure of humanity, is the equivalent in personal terms of the sin of plantation culture, its failure to accept the brotherhood of all mankind.... The war is lost, and not merely because of the superior strategy and numbers of the enemy, but through the transposition into military terms of... 'an absolute caste system'....

When Bon appears as the suitor to Judith, he comes as the instrument of vengeance for the outraged heart of his mother.... The well-bred mother of Bon never comes to terms with her dismissal. 'Paranoiac' in her enraged irreconcilability, she lives as the true Clytemnestra of the tale, appeasing her lust for vengeance at last. The genteel Charles does not leave the scene without making a final show of his outrage... Sutpen immediately knows him for his own son, and worse, knows that he is part Negro. Acknowledge him he feels he cannot; yet without acknowledgement there is no basis for objection to his marriage to Judith. 'Fogbound' in this dilemma, Sutpen forbids the marriage without any reason, hoping that time itself will veer the curve of events within the orbit of his ambition....

Desperate, Sutpen plays his trump card (the information that Judith's suitor is part Negro), but again he miscalculates. Henry's prejudices are more deeply ingrained than his own, which have a purely practical basis in his ambition. What Sutpen had wished was merely to have Bon stopped; Henry murders him.... 'So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, that you can't bear' [Bon says to Henry]... Defiance and counter-retaliation are the cause of his removing Judith's picture from his wallet and replacing it with that of his octoroon wife. (Shreve's foolish interpretation of this act gives ironic heightening to its real poignance.) Charles' gesture says, in effect, that if he is to be none of theirs, they will be none of his. In flaunting Henry's will, Charles invites his own death; yet before he is killed he succeeds in giving at least token return for the psychic blow he has received....

Now both sons are lost, and Sutpen's incapacity for feeling has caused the death of Charles, the exemption of Henry from meaningful existence, the unbridled widowhood of Judith, and all the ills which are yet to befall the remaining Bon descendants. His inability to locate his error dooms him to a repetition of his sins. At best, he can think only in terms of some practical mistake....

When Wash is compelled to absorb the finality of Sutpen's dishonorable intentions toward Milly, the bottom drops out of his world. His smiting down of Sutpen at this point is an appropriate vengeance against an overstepping—almost beyond credibility—of the bounds of generally understood humanity.... The point is clear: where caste rules prevail, affection and intimate relationships between 'whites' and those of 'tainted' blood cannot be recognized or sanctioned. The effect of such denial to those involved is, of course, vicious. Arbitrary rejection from those most binding of all ties, familial and marital love, breeds psychic outrage, and psychic outrage breeds personal revolt.... Wash, too, has an innocence to lose—the belief that because Sutpen is brave and a big plantation owner, he is capable of being human in considerations touching his design.... In his childlike adulation he believes that whatever the aged Sutpen driven to madness by the frustrations of his ambition may do, he will 'make it right' with the fifteen-year-old Milly. The incredulity of his disillusionment equals that of the boy not accepted as a simple human boy by the 'monkey' at the white door....

Judith, Clytie, and Miss Rosa similarly perpetuate the race assumptions derived from plantation culture. Clytie and Judith keep young Charles Etienne Bon scrupulously isolated from Negro companions, in an excess of good intention which has dire results. Clytie is depicted as trying literally to scrub the faint ivory tinge from his young skin. Henry, for all his delicacy of conscience, succumbs ironically at the last to the simple murderous reflexes of his class: his brother may marry his sister, but a 'nigger' must be shot dead. Miss Rosa's prejudices are rabid....

Charles Etienne Bon, whose spiritual rebellion is signalized in his establishment at Sutpen's Hundred of an anthropoid wife and in his rampages of uninhibited inebriation, reenacts his father's symbolic gestures with greater vehemence, in response to the more sustained psychic and social pressure which he has had to endure. Raised as white but self-identified as Negro, he treads that special path to Gethsemane which is reserved for the Joe Christmases of this world.... The desolation of the mansion is the key to Quentin's own, and in the story of a design that failed we may read the meaning of the decline of the South.... All human history in its recurrence of error and anguish is represented in the myth of Quentin, Sutpen, and the

South. In this fall of a man, a house, a class, and a culture, we know again, with terrifying nearness, the inexorability of 'fate'."

Ilse Dusoird Lind
"The Design and Meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!*"
PMLA (December 1955) 887-912

"*Absalom, Absalom!* is one of Faulkner's most intricate and difficult novels. Its plot centers around the career of the Mississippi planter Thomas Sutpen, who dies in 1869; but the story is seen through the eyes of young Quentin Compson in 1910. The mysterious and demonic Sutpen comes to Jefferson when it is still a frontier community. He buys a hundred-square-mile section of land ('Sutpen's Hundred'), imports a French architect to build a mansion, and brings in a wagon-load of slaves. After he has finished furnishing the house in expensive taste, he consolidates his position in the community by marrying Ellen Coldfield, daughter of a leading citizen of Jefferson.

Although he is considered strange and unfriendly, he grows immensely rich; he invites his neighbors to lavish dinners and entertains them with wrestling matches between his slaves. His wife bears him a son, Henry, and a daughter, Judith. Both of these children have strange qualities; Judith takes an unnatural pleasure in the ferocious combats of her father's slaves. Henry goes off to the University and there meets Charles Bon; by coincidence Charles is Henry's half-brother. Thomas Sutpen has been married before to a West Indian woman, but has abandoned her after discovery of her Negro blood. Now this ghost of his first marriage returns to haunt him; Charles meets his half-sister Judith and falls in love with her. At this point the source of Sutpen's wealth is revealed; it came from the dowry of the first wife he has abandoned.

The war intervenes. Then, as Charles is about to marry Judith, he is mysteriously killed by Henry Sutpen. Henry flees and drops out of sight for many years. Meanwhile Thomas Sutpen returns from the war to find his wife dead, and develops an obsessive desire to perpetuate his line. Since Charles is dead, Henry a fugitive, and Judith vowed to spinsterhood, he plans a second marriage with Rosa Coldfield, one of the narrators of the novel. Rosa flees from him in indignation, and in 1867 Sutpen, still seeking an heir, enters into a liaison with Milly Jones, granddaughter of the loafer and sometimes tenant farmer Wash Jones. In 1869 Milly bears a child, and Wash kills Sutpen in a rage. Henry returns to Jefferson and is killed in the burning of the mansion. Gradually the Sutpen clan dies out; the last survivor of the line is an idiot illegitimate son of Charles Bon. Miss Rosa, the last person to know the inside history of the family, dies in the winter of 1910.

The structure and style of this novel are complex; the story is related from diverse points of view, always in retrospect, and the language of presentation is purposely chaotic. The major part of the narrative is related by Quentin Compson to his indifferent Harvard roommate Shreve McCannon. Quentin himself acquires the story only obliquely; he hears part of it from his father, part from Rosa Coldfield, and part of it from family documents and letters. The rise, triumph, and decline of the Sutpen clan is symbolic; it represents the history of the Southern landholding class from 1830 to 1910. Thomas Sutpen, at first creative, vigorous, and ruthless, eventually becomes old, degenerate, and obsessive. His clan attenuates into idiocy as the Snopes of the South begin their rise to supremacy. The character of Quentin, who also appears in *The Sound and the Fury*, is skillfully drawn through his relations with the Northerner Shreve McCannon."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 216-18

"Like 'The Waste Land,' *Absalom* has many voices but no official, sanctioned Voice. The voices in it speak from many points of view, none of them removed from the criticism of irony.... The complications of the telling can be clarified somewhat if we think of the basic story—Sutpen, from his early youth through the death of his remaining son and half-Negro daughter—as having not one but several narrative frames. The telling of the story by Quentin to Shreve—and partly later by Shreve to Quentin—makes the frame which encloses all the others. But the telling and retelling is based on versions of the same story, or of parts of it, given to Quentin by Miss Rosa and father; and father's version is based in large part on a version given him by his father, who got it in part from Sutpen himself. Since in Quentin's version each of

these people speaks in his own voice, often at great length...with unintended revelation of himself in the process, what we have in effect is a series of frames, one within the other, like the picture of a picture containing a picture, and so on.

In the first chapter...we begin where memory intersects the past at a point very close to the present, with Quentin becoming actively involved in the story whose general outline he has known for as long as he can remember. Almost at once we move back into the more distant past with Miss Rosa, without however being allowed to forget the present...in which Quentin sits in the stifling room and listens. Then this frame, this telling, is replaced by a frame supplied by father's account of Sutpen and his speculations on the meaning of the letter he gives Quentin. Again we move back and forth between past and present... Then the absoluteness of this frame too is destroyed and we see father's telling of the story as only another version, and not without distortions. Shreve and Quentin talking in their college dormitory room now supply the frame to replace Miss Rosa in her 'office' and father on the gallery.

Miss Rosa's inadequacy as interpreter—her bias—has been apparent all along, and now it becomes clear that some of father's interpretations and speculations too are unacceptable: '...neither Shreve nor Quentin believed that the visit affected Henry as Mr. Compson seemed to think....' But on another matter, 'maybe this was one place where your old man was right.' As the frames are shifted and the implicit distortions discovered, we see the motive for the continual retelling. Each new version is a part of the search in which Quentin and Shreve involve the reader, the search for a truth beyond and behind distortion. So the past has to be continually reinterpreted; and each reinterpretation becomes a part of the accumulating past; a part even of the past which it attempts to interpret.... The motive for the retellings, the reinterpretations, each of which adds new facts as well as a new perspective and makes necessary a reinterpretation of the facts already known, is constant, and it supplies the organizing principle of the novel....

As father had been less intimately involved in the Sutpen story than Miss Rosa, so Shreve the Canadian is less involved than father. The movement is one of progressive disengagement, a moving outward from the center.... Shreve's presence in the book is one of the ways in which the tone is controlled. Shreve puts Sutpen's whole story in another kind of perspective when he says, toward the end, 'So he just wanted a grandson.... That was all he was after....' Shreve adds distance, controlling irony, to a story that otherwise might be obsessive or too shrill.... His point of view is not the final one because there is no final one explicitly stated anywhere in the book. There are only other points of view and the implications of the form of the whole....

CHAPTER ONE is Miss Rosa's. Miss Rosa lives in the past, in the cherishing of her hatred and her frustration. Quentin is restive as he listens, not only because of the heat, and partly discounts what she tells him. Her view of the past is simple, moralistic, and, to Quentin, quite incredible. For her Sutpen was an evil man, satanic, with no redeeming qualities. THE NEXT THREE CHAPTERS ARE Quentin's father's. His point of view is that of the interested but emotionally uninvolved rational observer. Unlike Miss Rosa, father is impressed by the mystery of human action and frequently confesses himself baffled in his search for understanding. If he is biased in any way it is slightly in Sutpen's favor, partly because the town condemned Sutpen and father is an iconoclast who has little respect for conventional opinion, partly because much of his information he got from his father, who was Sutpen's one friend in the community, the only one willing to defend him against outraged public opinion.

CHAPTER FIVE is Miss Rosa's again. We are now prepared for a verbatim report of a part of what she said to Quentin that afternoon. Miss Rosa, it is clearer now, not only hates Sutpen but judges him from a point of view not wholly distinct from his own. Sutpen's actions destroyed not only his 'design'—his plan for his life, his purpose—but hers. She shares, it begins to appear, both his racial and his class prejudices, and she hates him chiefly because he destroyed for her that social eminence, respectability, and security which it was the aim of his design to secure for himself and his posterity. Yet though we recognize and allow for her obsessive hatred, we learn much from her account that we should not otherwise know, and we cannot entirely discount her judgment.

CHAPTER SIX is Shreve's retelling of what Quentin has told him of what Quentin's father has told Quentin.... The snow on Shreve's overcoat sleeve suggests the distance from which he views this tale

which began for us in the 'long still hot weary' afternoon when Quentin sat with Miss Rosa.... CHAPTER SEVEN gives us Sutpen's story... Sutpen saw himself alternately in the role of innocence betrayed and the role of a man who had made some mistake in adding a row of figures. Grandfather does not question his self-evaluation, simply passes it on.... The poor child who had been turned away from the door of the rich man's house conceived a design for his life calculated to put him in a position where he could never again be humiliated by anyone.... Quentin interprets the 'design' as essentially 'getting richer and richer' and the innocence as a kind of moral obtuseness.... Most of the material of this chapter comes ultimately from grandfather, who was not only Sutpen's 'advocate' but the only one in Jefferson who knew about the past which had shaped him to be what he was.... [Grandfather is] an effective foil to the 'demonizing' of Miss Rosa, through whom we first met Sutpen.

CHAPTER EIGHT is Bon's chapter, his story (and Henry's, but chiefly his) as interpreted sympathetically by Shreve and Quentin. Shreve is no longer amused, ironic. He has been drawn into the tale now: this is a part he can feel, thinks he can understand. And for the first time he and Quentin are in complete agreement in their interpretive reconstructions. It no longer matters who is speaking... They are biased...being young like Bon and easily aroused to sympathy... And they are relatively uninformed, for another thing; there are some very crucial facts that they cannot know for sure, such as when Bon told Henry, if in fact he did tell him, that he was not only his half-brother but was part Negro. Yet the reader is led by the circumstantial solidity of this chapter to feel more certain that this sympathetic account of Bon is correct than he is of any other interpretation he has encountered so far in the book.

CHAPTER NINE presents what might be called a general perspective on the whole tale. We are beyond the uniquely biased views of those who were closest to Sutpen.... All those able to speak from direct knowledge of Sutpen are now gone; all that remains is the mutual creative remembering of Quentin and Shreve...as the appearance of objectivity evaporates, the 'facts' come back into focus and we move out again from subjective to objective. We learn for the first time in this chapter what Quentin experienced that night when he went with Miss Rosa to Sutpen's decaying mansion.... This meeting was a confrontation with a flesh-and-blood ghost [Henry Sutpen]. Here is proof that the past is 'real' (though not yet, for Quentin at the time, explicable). This is the shock that motivates the search for understanding. In giving us the incident only in the barest outline, Faulkner is following the Jamesian formula of making the reader imagine....

We end, in this last chapter, sharing Quentin's and Shreve's certainty about just two matters of the first importance: that Sutpen brought his destruction upon himself, and that Bon asked only for recognition.... If Shreve and Quentin are right in their sympathetic estimate of Bon, then the immediate cause of the tragic events that resulted in the failure of Sutpen's design was his refusal to recognize his part-Negro son. Bon, Shreve and Quentin both believe, would have given up Judith and gone away if he had had any sign at all from his father, even the most private and minimal acknowledgment of their relationship.... The title of the book, with its Biblical allusion, supports the hypothesis of Shreve and Quentin. Sutpen would not say 'My son' to Bon as David said it to Absalom even after Absalom's rebellion. And different as he was from his father, Henry acted in the end on the same racist principle, killing Bon finally to prevent not incest but miscegenation. One meaning of *Absalom*, then, is that when the Old South was faced with a choice it could not avoid, it chose to destroy itself rather than admit brotherhood across racial lines....

Sutpen was a cold and ruthless man motivated by a driving ambition to be his own god. His intelligence and courage won him a measure of success, but his pride destroyed him.... Sutpen was the new man, the post-Machiavellian man consciously living by power-knowledge alone, refusing to acknowledge the validity of principles that he cannot or will not live by and granting reality to nothing that cannot be known with abstract rational clarity. He lives by a calculating expediency.... [He] could calculate no advantage to be gained by recognizing Bon as his son, and he was not one to be moved by the incalculable. There is point as well as humor in Shreve's characterization of him as Faustus. He is also related to Ahab and Ethan Brand. The total form of the novel implies the ultimate reason for the failure of Sutpen's design. Considered as an integral symbol the form of *Absalom* says that reality is unknowable in Sutpen's way, by weighing, measuring, and calculating. It says that without an 'unscientific' act of imagination and even of faith—like Shreve's and Quentin's faith in Bon—we cannot know the things which are most worth knowing. Naturally Sutpen failed in his design, and naturally he could not imagine where his error had

been. His error had been ultimately, of course, in the moral sense that he had always treated people as things. Even Bon falls into the same error when he tries to use Judith as a lever to move Sutpen [in order] to get recognition....

Miss Rosa's interpretation epitomizes the traditional views with which Quentin has grown up. This 'demonizing,' this interpretation in terms of inflexible moral judgment, does not, to his mind, explain: the past remains incredible and unreal. Nor is he satisfied by his father's view that there is no meaning at all in history, that the only proper response is to call it a mystery that we are 'not meant to understand.' Father is as close to nihilism here as he was in *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin is unable to choose between Miss Rosa's belief that Southern history was God's punishment of the South, and of herself in particular—precisely for what she is unable to imagine—and father's denial of any intelligibility....

Sutpen's hubris, his narrow rationalism, his lack of love, all these are descriptions that imply the relevance of moral judgment. But Quentin and Shreve do not categorize Sutpen as simply a 'bad' man: they know that to do so is to substitute judgment for explanation. With father they feel the mystery of human life, but they are not satisfied cynically to give up the effort to understand. The view in terms of which they operate is that of classical-Christian tragedy, at once Greek and Biblical: history contains both God's judgment and man's decision, both necessity and freedom, and it has sufficient intelligibility for our human purposes. But its meaning is neither given nor entirely withheld. It must be achieved, created by imagination and faith. Historical meaning is a construct. Such a view of history contrasts sharply with Marxist and 'scientific' theories of history, but it has much in common with the best historiography of the thirties and of our own time....

No doubt *Absalom* gets its chief effect as a novel from our sense that we are participating in its search for the truth. *Absalom* draws us in, makes us share its creative discovery, as few novels do. The lack of an authoritative voice puts a greater burden on us as readers than we may want to hear. Faulkner ran this risk when he wrote it. He has had to wait long for a just appreciation of its greatness. Few readers were ready for it in the thirties. But if we can and will bear our proper burden as readers we shall find the rewards correspondingly great."

Hyatt Waggoner
"Past as Present: *Absalom, Absalom!*"
William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World
(U Kentucky 1959) 148, 153-69

"Thomas Sutpen, the son of a migrant, alcoholic hillman, himself descended from the first Sutpen who had probably come to America direct from the Old Bailey [English prison], had been reared, barely literate, in a cabin in a mountain cove where 'the land belonged to nobody' and 'the only colored people were Indians'.... Sutpen comes to us, for all his dreary end, with some of the qualities and many of the trappings of a tragic hero. Even Miss Rosa admitted his extraordinary power of will and his bravery ('I have never gainsaid that'), though she denied him (wrongly) pity and honor. He had impressive qualities of leadership...

He enlisted into his design Mr. Coldfield, Rosa's father, the Methodist steward of 'immaculate morality,' first by getting him to sign his very dubious bond [connects to Jim Bond] and then by persuading him (again, no one knew how) to let him marry Ellen, Rosa's older sister, by whom he intended to become respectable and found his line. ('He had marked down Miss Coldfield's father with the same cold and ruthless deliberation with which he had probably marked down the French architect' who had been essential to the building of the house itself.... In the War he became a colonel, and returned with a citation for bravery signed by Lee himself. He set about restoring his house and plantation with the same 'fierce constant will' with which he originally built it—and from which nothing could deflect him, not even the deputation of Klansmen whom he refused to join when they put to him the 'friend or enemy' question....

It was more even than his naively innocent view of morality whose ingredients were 'like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out.' It was an innocence which overlooked the moral relationship of means and ends and with which he could view the collapse of his design, not as retribution, not as 'fated,' not even as bad luck,

but simply the result of a 'mistake'.... To be sure, he saw nothing wrong in his design or his methods, and had scarcely a twinge of conscience about abandoning his first wife and child. By concealing the fact of her Negro blood, she had cancelled, so he thought, whatever responsibility he might have had for her; and even then he made generous provisions for her welfare.... His fall, like Agamemnon's, was moral, not tragic....

The tragedy is Quentin's. The action he is involved in extends through four months. It begins when Miss Rosa summons him, one September afternoon a few days before he is to leave for Harvard, to listen to her story and thus get him to escort her, that same night, to Sutpen's Hundred to find out if her suspicion is true that Henry (now in his sixty-first year) is hiding there—still a murderer in the eyes of the law. After supper that night, while waiting for the time to go with Miss Rosa, his father fills out the story, recounting what *his* father, the General, had told him, and showing Quentin the letter of proposal that Bon had written Judith from the front.... Three months later, Miss Rosa brings ambulance and attendants to the mansion to rescue Henry, only to have Clytie mistake them for the police and touch off the blaze which, by prearrangement with Henry, had been prepared for three months. In mid-January Quentin hears from his father of Miss Rosa's death and that night tells the story to Shreve....

Even Miss Rosa, cherishing her hate for forty-three years, insisting 'out of some bitter and implacable reserve of undefeat' that her story be told, had heroic qualities. Shreve suggests that in the end she even conquered her hate and went with ambulance and doctors to save Henry—or at least, knowing what might happen, was willing to risk losing 'for his sake' this object of hate which like a drug had kept her going all these years. As the various narrators recount their versions of the story, or, like Quentin and Shreve, re-create its scenes in their own imaginings and become vicarious participants in it, the ugly surface facts are distanced and transcended."

Richard B. Sewall
The Vision of Tragedy
(Yale 1959) 135-47

"*Absalom, Absalom!* continues Faulkner's attempt to make technique and structure focus the meaning of the novel. It is most closely linked to *The Sound and the Fury* whose structure it elaborates and enriches. Like Caddy Compson, Thomas Sutpen is never presented directly, and like her, he becomes a tremendously vital as well as an enigmatic figure by being the object of intense concern for a number of characters. The difference, and it is a large one, is that Sutpen, unlike Caddy, provides a dynamic rather than a static center. The perspectives are no longer self-contained and self-illuminating; as a result, we have a kaleidoscope instead of a juxtaposition of views.

Each successive account of Sutpen is constantly being merged with its predecessors. At every moment, there falls into place yet another pattern which disavows some parts of the earlier interpretations but never discards them. Rosa's story of Sutpen makes its own impression and despite later qualifications and objections, it contributes to and influences Mr. Compson's narrative. Both of these are, in turn, caught up in Quentin's and Shreve's version. Rosa's 'demonizing' is still evident in the final reconstruction, though altered considerably by Shreve's mocking tone. This means that our final picture of Sutpen results from a fusion of at least three accounts, each of which belongs to a different generation and reflects a different personal bias.... The element of ambiguity is sustained to the very end of the book....

Rosa feels that the only explanation needed for Sutpen's refusal to sanction Judith's marriage to Bon is his perverse, demonic nature. Mr. Compson offers as an alternative Sutpen's disapproval of Bon's New Orleans mistress. Quentin adds the 'fact' of Eulalia Bon's Negro blood, and at this point, everything appears to fall into a logical and convincing pattern. But even this final revelation is open to question. There is no doubt that Quentin himself is convinced of the truth of his interpretation, but so is Miss Rosa of the truth of her 'demonizing'.... The number of alternative explanations and unresolved ambiguities in the three accounts of Sutpen suggest the immense difficulty attendant upon the effort to arrive at truth. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that truth must eventually be fixed by words, which by their very nature falsify the things they are meant to represent. This distortion inherent in language is the reason for the torturous style of *Absalom, Absalom!*....

Rosa...uses the past to justify her moral judgments, which have been formulated in advance of the situations she feels called upon to judge.... She is...the perfect defender of the idols of the South, for she is never tempted either to question or to deny them.... Sutpen takes the main role in Miss Rosa's Gothic thriller and in Mr. Compson's classical drama which is forever verging on satire. But in the story told by Quentin and Shreve, he recedes into the background as love becomes the dominant interest and chivalric romance the dominant form. Moreover, through the three successive accounts, history moves from the factual to the mythic, leaving Quentin and Shreve free to interpret, imagine, and invent so long as they remain true to what they believe is the spirit of the past.... By default, Mr. Compson contributes to the perpetuation of a system whose vices and follies he sees all too clearly.... His intellectualism may be a little more refined, a little more subtle than Sutpen's halting logic, but it serves just as efficiently to isolate him from humanity....

That isolation which leaves Miss Rosa forever watching other people's lives unfold while hers remains unchanged gives unlimited scope to her fantasies compounded of religion and romance. Without being put to the test of reality, the world becomes a matter of masks.... Only complete withdrawal from the world can preserve such fantasies as these from the impact of reality. Rosa, however, rushes forth in the conviction that her fantasies actually correspond to the people she encounters only to find, inevitably, her illusions of herself and others shattered.... The complete separation of her vision of Sutpen from the man himself is indicated by the ease with which she replaces the '*ogre of my childhood*' with '*a shape which rode away beneath a flag.*' The demon is slain by the hero who returns to claim a virgin bride. But this pleasant charade dissolves when Sutpen muffs his lines and destroys her image not only of him but of herself. His crude proposition forces Rosa to choose between her fantasy and an experience that is brutally shorn of all romantic illusion. The outrage to her sensibility as well as her moral principles simply intensifies her obsessions and completes her retreat into a world where nothing and no one can challenge her vision of Sutpen as the essence of all evil....

In contrast to Mr. Compson's and Miss Rosa's, the recreation of the past by Quentin and Shreve is the product of their youth and romantic imagination. These enable them to overcome geographical and cultural differences so that it is almost impossible to tell where the Southerner leaves off and the Canadian begins the reconstruction of the Sutpen legend. Both are able to anticipate the thoughts and words of the other... The vividness with which they see and endow the past has its source in romantic rather than historical imagination. Thus, the eighty odd years which separate them from the events they seek to recreate allow them a kind of poetic license in arranging the scenes and characters. Charles carries a wounded Henry from the battlefield, knowing that Henry will prevent him from marrying Judith. Later he substitutes the octoroon's portrait for Judith's as a means of saving Judith tears and Henry her condemnation. Both these romantic gestures are contradicted by the earlier evidence of Miss Rosa and General Compson; nevertheless, they are true to the spirit of Shreve's account in a way that the prosaic 'facts' could not be....

Consistently Quentin and Shreve interpret the past and frame their narrative in terms of literature, for it is in it that they find those eternal values of youth which can be confined to no one place or time. Yet only Shreve recognizes that the story they have jointly created is only poetically true and that its function is the symbolic one of embodying love, courage, and loyalty in a single form without exhausting them. Quentin, on the other hand, is unable to maintain aesthetic distance or to distinguish the symbolic from the literal. For he, like Henry Sutpen, is obsessed with the idea of incest and with his own responsibility for his sister. And since Henry's gesture in killing Bon is identified with 'honor vindicated' and virginity protected, Quentin feels that only by repeating the gesture (which he attempts in *The Sound and the Fury*) can he defend Compson honor.... He has the choice of viewing the past symbolically or literally and of affirming or denying its 'design.' With his passionate reiteration that he does not hate the South, Quentin reveals his decision to perpetuate the design he has found in the past....

Sutpen himself is a mirror image of the South, for his career in Jefferson merely repeats in a foreshortened form the rise of many families whose longer tenure of the land has given them respectability. Through his single-minded preoccupation with the 'design,' he effects consciously and in the span of a few years what other Southern families accomplished over a period of generations.... Sutpen becomes the staunchest defender of the idols of the South at a time when they most needed defending. At no point in any of the Yoknapatawpha novels or stories is Sutpen accused of failing the South during the four long

years of agonizing combat. Not once does he place his property or the safety of himself or his family above that duty which he has assumed along with the Sartorises and Compsons....

Like the South as a whole, Sutpen refuses to admit defeat or the changes that it inevitably brought about. He attempts to rebuild his plantation and to set his family in order as if the war had never occurred, an attempt that is very much like Colonel Sartoris' defiant rebuilding of his mansion on a grander scale than before. For better or worse, Sutpen does reflect both the virtues and the vices of the South, but he does it without any of the social graces, the courtly gestures of the Sartorises.... However lacking in elegance, his mountain home had stressed certain fundamental human values—the man rather than his possessions.... But as he and his family journey into the valley, all the familiar and comprehensible beliefs and manners give way to a strange, nightmare world which has no place for them. As they pass from hamlet to hamlet, the Negroes become the focus of their bewilderment. That bewilderment is channeled into resentment by the poor whites who find relief in hating the Negro as a symbol of and foundation for [the] economic and social system...

Sutpen feels the full force of this pattern of exclusion and its application to himself when the 'monkey-nigger' orders him to the back door of the plantation house. In that brief moment the central symbol of *Absalom, Absalom!* is established—the boy seeking admittance and being turned away in the name of the social code.... His instinctive reaction is to believe that the behavior of the plantation owner as expressed through the Negro is wrong and inhuman. Yet his final decision betrays that instinctive reaction and he exchanges individual integrity for a handful of social concepts and conventions. His acceptance of circumstance or 'luck' as the controlling factor in man's life is replaced by his worship of a man-made pattern; his primitive mountain ethics give way to what he believes to be the code of the South.... The choice confronting the Sutpens is a recurrent one and therefore there is always the hope that someone, some time will open the doors of the plantation, thus reversing Sutpen's decision....

Sutpen's 'innocence' is manifest: it consists not only of his unquestioning belief in the value of all the idols of the South but in his belief that the structure, the design, is itself the secret of its strength and its perpetuation, that he need only follow its ritual... Sutpen's rejection of his wife and son constitutes a rejection of himself as husband and father.... In the complex tensions existing between Sutpen and his children, particularly Charles Bon, the boy symbol and the rejection are repeated under different circumstances. The most striking instance, of course, is Charles's arrival at Sutpen's Hundred and his unspoken demand for recognition. The boy is not longer barefoot and tattered, but he too is seeking acceptance on his own merit. It is denied him, as it was to his father, for the sake of the design. Time has once more produced a situation in which Sutpen must choose between his adherence to the concept of pure blood and his own and his son's humanity. His refusal to acknowledge Charles goes far toward destroying the very design it was intended to protect....

The crudeness of his proposal [to Miss Rosa] shocks 'the little dream woman' completely out of her fairy tale world in which a Sutpen in love becomes softened and mellowed by her presence. With a single phrase Sutpen destroys her illusion both of him and of herself. It is an insult she cannot forgive, if only because it denies her the opportunity of either saving or annihilating the demon of her childhood in some fittingly dramatic fashion.... In rejecting Milly, Sutpen also destroys the admiration, which is almost hero-worship, of Wash Jones. In a sense, the aging Jones is closely akin to the young Sutpen, for he too stands bewildered before a world that posits and flaunts inequality.... His violent attack on Sutpen is but the most extreme protest against the design in that series which begins with Sutpen's own hurt bewilderment.... At the core of Sutpen's design and of the social structure of the South is the concept of the 'Negro' as an inferior being or social pariah.... By his shot at the gate of Sutpen's Hundred, Henry commits himself and his sister to an affirmation of Sutpen's design. The lives of Charles Bon, of Judith, and of Henry are sacrificed to an abstract principle and a social tradition that proves stronger than the moral or religious....

Although Judith is not a party to Henry's decision, she, nevertheless, condones it by her own subsequent action. Charles Etienne, the white-skinned Negro, the nephew to both her and Clytie, is brought to Sutpen's Hundred by her direction. Whether the two women ever realize that he is their nephew is one of the unresolved ambiguities of *Absalom, Absalom!* but that they know him to be the son of an octoroon is beyond dispute. With his appearance the boy symbol recurs in the third generation. Etienne's youth, his

dependence, his complete vulnerability arouse a certain maternal love and affection in both Judith and Clytie, but in neither of them is it allowed to express itself freely and naturally. His claims on their love are balanced by his Negro blood, a situation that is dramatically rendered by the sleeping arrangements made for him midway between Judith's bed and Clytie's pallet.... In her relation with Etienne, Judith repeats almost exactly the action of her father in connection with Eulalia Bon. She too need only have closed her eyes to have 'fooled the rest of the world'.... Judith's subsequent behavior, nursing the stricken Etienne and scrimping to pay for his tombstone, is her way of expressing penitence, a penitence that is perhaps also implied in Henry's painful return to and concealment in Sutpen's Hundred....

Lacking reason, this last descendant of Sutpen [Jim Bond] is incapable of realizing that he is colored or that there are social conventions which define his position with respect to other men....the only one who is not forced to decide between the claims of humanity and society, the only one who is not destroyed by the very necessity of choosing is the idiot... [Quentin's] despairing cry at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals [his] decision and his solution to the problem of his dual self. He commits himself to the past, denying the Quentin preparing to enter Harvard and to participate in life for the sake of the Quentin 'who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that.' He insists on the reality of his concepts and on the validity of the past the character of which he himself has helped to establish. And when he cannot recreate in his own life the principles and gestures which he admires in Henry, he commits suicide....

Absalom, Absalom! is an extension not only of the structure but also of the theme of *The Sound and the Fury*. The relation of the narrators to the center once more points out the essential ambiguity of fact and the multiplicity of 'subjective' truths to which it can give rise.... As in *The Sound and the Fury*, inherited traditional concepts of the Old South are contrasted with the eternal virtues and truth which cannot be confined to a single historical period. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the choice between them is not only rendered dramatically in each of the Sutpens but is extended to the present in the figure of Quentin. Consequently, the decision is formulated in terms of the whole South rather than a single family. Sutpen's design is and can be no other than a microcosm of the South; his values are its values. To make Sutpen the scapegoat as Rosa does or to isolate him from Jefferson in a kind of moral quarantine as Quentin tends to do distorts the meaning of what is perhaps Faulkner's finest novel."

Olga W. Vickery

The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation
(Louisiana State 1959,1964) 84-101

"The parade of objections was of course led by Clifton Fadiman's *New Yorker* review (October 31, 1936): 'every person in *Absalom, Absalom!* comes to no good end, and they all take a hell of a time coming even that far.' Fadiman discoursed on what he called the 'Non-Stop or Life Sentence' of the novel, citing statistics, and discussed the method of 'Anti-Narrative, a set of complex devices used to keep the story from being told...as if a child were to go to work on it with a pair of shears....' Perhaps significant of the reviewer's tastes, Fadiman concluded with a qualified approval of James T. Farrell's *A World I Never Made*: at least 'what [Farrell] knows is important, what he says is clear....'

There was widespread agreement with Fadiman concerning the 'Anti-Narrative' of *Absalom, Absalom!*, and not a little exasperation over what seemed a perversity of method carried too far. Such figures as these were employed to describe the obscurity: a man dealing cards and secretly hiding the joker; reading the novel at times little easier than trying to knit with barbed wire; an extravagant puzzle; a mixture of fog and dreams. Bernard DeVoto complained (*Saturday Review of Literature*, October 31, 1936) that 'When a narrative sentence has to have as many as three parentheses identifying the reference of pronouns, it signifies mere bad writing and can be justified by no psychological or esthetic principle whatever.' Life is short and *Absalom, Absalom!* is very long!

Faulkner's friends among the critics acknowledged the 'density' of style and the complication of method, but while admitting the former explained and sometimes defended the latter with suggestions of Conrad and James. The method of 'multiple narrators' provoked references not only to these but also to Ford Madox Ford. William Troy suffered from the same need to defend what he was not certain of understanding (*Nation*, October 31, 1936): Faulkner is best understood as a lyric poet, said Troy; and his

fiction provides no 'norm' to which the reader can have access. 'His imagination posits isolated people, actions, gestures, even speeches, broods upon them until they take the full shape of his vision, and then attempts to relate them in some sort of pattern.'

In short, *Absalom, Absalom!* proved a crucial test for Faulkner's admirers as it seemed definitive proof of the long-standing objections of his detractors. Not even Troy (who disapproved of the scheme of 'multiple narration') saw clearly the relevance to Quentin Compson of the Sutpen story or came clearly to recognize its speculative nature. The complexities of style were almost universally called an extreme case of Faulkner's suffering from a lack of advantage, as Mary Colum put it, 'of threshing out his technical ideas around a café table'."

Frederick J. Hoffman, Introduction (1960)
William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism
eds. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery
(Harcourt/Harbinger 1963) 20-21

"*Absalom, Absalom!* is a further—albeit somewhat different—experiment with the technique Faulkner used in *The Sound and the Fury*. In place of the sustained interior monologue Faulkner projects his story by means of three narrators; their personalities and concerns are revealed as each tells the story of Thomas Sutpen, the central character. Miss Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law, first tells the story to Quentin Compson shortly before his departure for Harvard; her story is supplemented by that of Quentin's father; and Quentin, in turn relates the stories of the first two narrators, in addition to his own interpretation, to his Harvard roommate, Shreve McCannon.

The story centers on Thomas Sutpen and his attempts to fulfill his 'grand design' to become accepted as a Southern aristocrat and the founder of a wealthy family. The son of a West Virginia poor white, he raises himself to social eminence in Jefferson, Mississippi, and, at the climax of his career, is elected Colonel of Jefferson's regiment in the Civil War. Returning to his estate, Sutpen's Hundred, after the war, he finds his daughter confirmed in spinsterhood, his son disappeared, and his plantation half ruined. He attempts to have another son to continue his name, but the poor white girl with whom he has an affair bears a daughter, and Sutpen is murdered by her grandfather. As the Sutpen saga comes to an end in 1910, all that is left of his dream is an idiot Negro, Jim Bond, Sutpen's only living descendant, howling in the ashes of the burned house. Having accepted the social code of the Old South as a part of his grand design, Sutpen had repudiated his first part-Negro wife and their son; the consequences of this act pursue him through life and triumph over his dream after his death."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 2

"In this story of the failure of Thomas Sutpen's 'design,' Faulkner pushes the convention of the Conradian narrator to its extreme limit. The 'story' consists in Quentin Compson's telling Thomas Sutpen's life and motives, from the time when as a boy Sutpen was refused admittance to a plantation house to the moment of his death, cut down by Wash Jones's scythe. Why Quentin should often regard Sutpen as superior, even heroic, is difficult to understand, or why the language of the novel should be so baroque and the manner of telling the story so involved. Quentin's long 'conversation' with his Canadian roommate at Harvard, Shreve McCannon, nonetheless permits Faulkner extraordinary freedom in manipulating time, in building up mystification and suspense, and in evaluating Sutpen's 'mistake.' The mistake had been multiple: destruction of the wilderness, slavery, above all Sutpen's refusing to acknowledge his son of Negro blood."

William M. Gibson & George Arms, eds.
Twelve American Writers
(Macmillan 1962) 728

"From its place at the center of the Yoknapatawpha chronicle, *Absalom, Absalom!* gains an unsuspected stature; what might in isolation seem a stylized frenzy becomes a tone essentially right, even if all but unbearable. How else, one must concede, could Faulkner manage this lacerating return to the past? How else invest his one great story—the story of the fall of the homeland—with that foaming intensity which

might warrant still another recapitulation?... To see the purpose and shape of the novel one must understand why Faulkner draped it in Gothic remnants...its three main elements [are]...the character of Sutpen, the formal arrangement of its parts, and its uses of language....

No other Faulkner character rules a book so completely as does Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* To be sure, there are several striking figures in the novel: old Mr. Coldfield starving himself in protest against the War; Wash Jones cackling the news of Charles Bon's death and years later cutting off Sutpen's head; Valery Bon marrying a lamp-black Negro woman so as to flaunt his own ambiguous status before anyone, whatever his color. But these figures are not meant to be more than full-scale. Present even when not seen and dominating whether seen or present, Sutpen fills the novel with his smoldering resolution.... [He] would force the world to his ends, butting his will against society.... This single-mindedness is less fanaticism than a grandiose solipsism. He is ready to exalt his purposes above the wisdom and convenience of society not because he despises it but because it does not exist for him; and he has the terrifying gift for hurrying to his fate without an interval of self-doubt.

Given his energy, his commitment to a mythic role, his impersonality in behalf of personal vindication—given all this, what could the mirror of his mind reflect but a rigid duplicate of his behavior? Faulkner's neglect of his inner consciousness is, therefore, no failure at all; for this hero need not be analyzed, he need only be stared at from a distance as he lives out his destiny.

Few things in Faulkner astonish more than Sutpen's power to make himself continuously felt, shading each scene, altering the lives of all who touch or cross him. The most frightening evidence of this power is Miss Rosa Coldfield's narrative; as she rises to a hysteria of eloquence in castigating Sutpen, she unwittingly declares herself still subject to him. Were Sutpen to call from the grave, she would run to him, an appalled accessory to his diabolism. Everything in the novel, from Charles Bon's doglike yearning for acceptance by his father to Wash Jones's ultimate rearing-up to manhood, is a function of Sutpen's will.... Throughout the book Sutpen is finely controlled, his doom an inevitable culmination of his first clash with the world. In a curious sense Sutpen is innocent: he cannot fully reckon the consequences of what he does, the hunger that impels his 'design' remains obscure to him. He harms no one out of malice or sadism, and he is not without sense, particularly in the hysterical years after the War. These very qualities serve only to intensify his destructiveness, for Faulkner realizes that a premeditated and impersonal act of evil can be more dangerous than a quick impulse to hurt.

Sutpen's life is a gesture of hubris; what prevents him from rising to the greatness of the tragic hero is a failure in self-recognition. For such a climax the stage seems ready: few heroes fall as low as Sutpen, selling candy sticks in a backwoods store, drinking with Wash Jones, trying to perpetuate his line through Wash Jones's daughter. But Sutpen is never struck by a weight of knowledge; he neither searches the source of his fall nor assumes responsibility for its consequences. Because he is incapable of that rending of the self and tearing out of pride which forms the tragic element, Sutpen dies as he lived, a satanic hero subject only to his own willfulness and the check of fate....a man who is large and grand in his evil, and from this complexity in his character follows the technique of the novel. Suspensions of incident, apparent mystification, calculated affronts to continuity—all are used in behalf of Faulkner's executive purpose....

Of all Faulkner's novels *Absalom, Absalom!* most nearly approaches structural perfection. By presenting the effect of an action on spectator or narrator long before the action itself, the novel creates sudden eddies of confusion but also arouses large and exciting expectations; the emotional response of the characters, instead of stemming from the action, prepares for it.... The scrambling of narrative cause and emotional response, like the circling back and forth in time, is warranted by the material itself. Faulkner is probing the under-tissues of the past... Were he merely trying to render the past in pictorial breadth and immediacy, *Absalom, Absalom!* would surely contain many more dramatic scenes than it does; but since Faulkner and his central narrator Quentin Compson refuse to surrender to the past even as they cannot tear themselves away from it, the story is told rather than shown. And since the past is to be seen as a 'dead time,' an almost incredible passage of nightmare, it must be presented in a ghostly flatness... The novel creates an illusion of timelessness within a strongly felt present....

For the details of this scheme there can be only praise: for the flares of inventiveness (Charles Bon's love letter, written with stove polish captured from Northern stores); for the moments of scenic vividness (Sutpen taking his bride through the Yoknapatawpha mob while his Negro slaves follow with burning pine knots); for the shrewd placing of cues in the first chapter (by the first fifteen pages the novel has been presented in miniature); for the balanced relation between chapters, each carrying its fraction of the story and together forming a comprehensive pattern; and for the skill with which Faulkner deploys shocks of climax (Judith watching the Negro wrestlers in the stable, Wash Jones announcing Bon's death, Miss Rosa Coldfield revealing her suspicion that Henry Sutpen has returned to the abandoned Sutpen's Hundred)....

'Miss Rosa rambles and ejaculates with spinsterish emotion, Mr. Compson is elaborately and sometimes parenthetically ironic, Quentin is most sensitively imaginative and melancholy, Shreve most detached and humorous.' These differences are indeed present."

Irving Howe
William Faulkner: A Critical Study
(Random House/Vintage 1962) 221-25

CHARACTERS

Thomas Sutpen
Ellen Coldfield Sutpen, *his second wife*
Henry Sutpen, *their son*
Judith Sutpen, *their daughter*
Rosa Coldfield, *Ellen's younger sister*
Goodhue Coldfield, *their father*
General Jason Compson II, *Sutpen's only friend*
Wash Jones, *Sutpen's poor-white handyman*
Milly Jones, *Wash's granddaughter*
Clytie [Clytemnestra], *Sutpen's daughter by a Negro slave*
Charles Bon, *Sutpen's son by his first wife*
Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon, *Charles's son by an octoroon*
Jim Bond, *the idiot son of Etienne Bon and a Negro woman*

NARRATORS

Rosa Coldfield, *who tells her story to Quentin*
Jason Compson III, *who tells the story he heard from his father, General Compson, to Quentin, his son*
Quentin Compson, *who tells what he heard from Miss Rosa and his father, as well as what he...recalls*
Shreve McCannon, *Quentin's Harvard roommate*

PLOT

"The son of a poor-white Virginia mountaineer, Thomas Sutpen was nearly out of boyhood when his family moved east to the Tidewater and for the first time he saw white men of great wealth and property who owned Negro slaves. Having grown up thinking that one man was essentially the same as another, that possessions or a bit of money were a sign of luck rather than superiority, young Sutpen could not imagine that the wealthy planters would consider him or his family inferior. However, when delivering a message to a plantation house, he was told by a liveried Negro to go around to the back, and his naïve view of life was destroyed. He concluded that 'they'—men who judged other men's worth by what they owned rather than what they were—could only be fought with their own weapons: money, slaves, and possessions. In order to assert his right to be recognized as a human being by other men, he determined to become a member of the class that had snubbed him, and adopted the aristocratic Southern social code....

Sutpen ran away to the West Indies to make his fortune and married the daughter of a Haitian sugar planter. Soon after the birth of their son, however, Sutpen discovered that his wife had Negro blood. Knowing that [his] 'grand design' to become a wealthy Southern planter and found a dynasty could never be fulfilled if his wife and offspring had a taint of black blood, he divorced her and left Haiti, forced to start

over again in his attempt to achieve his dream. In 1833 Sutpen, with no apparent past and almost no possessions, arrived in Jefferson, Mississippi. He acquired a hundred square miles of fertile bottom land near the Tallahatchie River from Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief, paid with his last gold coin to have his deed to the property recorded in the town patent office, and disappeared. Returning a month later with a wagonload of wild French-speaking Negroes and a French architect, he began to build his house. After two years the house was completed and Sutpen lived alone for another three years in the unfurnished and windowless mansion, borrowing seed from General Compson to plant his first crops. Five years after his arrival he furnished the house and married Ellen Coldfield, the daughter of Goodhue Coldfield, the most piously respectable man in town. Ellen bore him two children, Henry and Judith.

In 1859 Henry Sutpen entered the University of Mississippi, forty miles away in Oxford. There he met and became a close friend of Charles Bon, some ten years Henry's senior, not knowing that Bon was the unacknowledged son of Sutpen's first marriage. The two young men spent Christmas at Sutpen's Hundred, and Ellen at once projected a betrothal between Charles and Judith. When, on the following Christmas, Charles again accompanied Henry to the plantation, Sutpen told Henry that the marriage between Charles and Judith could not take place. Henry, unwilling to believe the reasons for his father's decision, renounced his birthright and left for New Orleans with Charles. At the outbreak of the Civil War the following spring, the young men returned to Mississippi and joined a regiment formed at the university. Sutpen himself went to the war as a second in command in Colonel Sartoris' 23rd Mississippi Infantry, of which he was elected colonel the following year. Charles and Henry stayed together all during the war, and came back to Sutpen's Hundred when the war was nearing its close. Then, in order to prevent him from going through with the forbidden marriage to Judith, Henry shot Charles at the plantation gate and disappeared.

When Sutpen returned from the war a few months later, he found his design to found a dynasty in ruins: his wife had been dead for three years, his son was a fugitive, and his daughter was confirmed in spinsterhood. In order to beget a male heir to replace Henry, Sutpen became engaged to his sister-in-law, Rosa Coldfield, who, in spite of her hatred for him, would have married him had he not insulted her by suggesting that 'they try it first and see if it was a boy and lived, they would be married.' Sutpen then seduced the fifteen-year-old granddaughter of Wash Jones, his poor-white handyman, but the girl gave birth to a daughter. Because of Sutpen's total lack of concern for the girl and her child, Jones killed him; later that day Jones killed the girl and her infant and brought about his own death by threatening the posse that had come to arrest him for Sutpen's murder.

After Sutpen's death Judith went on living in the plantation house with Clytie, her mulatto half-sister. In 1871 she sent Clytie to New Orleans to bring back the orphaned Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon, Charles's son by his octoroon mistress. Judith and Clytie raised the boy, who was white in appearance, to think of himself as a Negro. As a result, he rejected his white blood entirely and married an apelike and very black Negro woman, who bore him an idiot son named Jim Bond. In 1884 Etienne caught yellow fever; Judith came down with the disease while nursing him, and both died.

In 1909 Miss Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law and one-time betrothed, discovered that someone besides Clytie and Jim Bond was living in the dilapidated plantation house. Accompanied by Quentin Compson, she drove out to Sutpen's Hundred, where she found Henry Sutpen in hiding, ill and cared for by Clytie. Three months later Miss Rosa brought an ambulance to take Henry to the hospital but Clytie, thinking Henry was being taken for the killing of Charles over fifty years before, set fire to the house over her own and Henry's heads. The idiot Negro Jim Bond, howling in the ashes of the ruined house, was left as Sutpen's only descendant.

THE NARRATORS

Miss Rosa Coldfield, the first narrator, is both closest to Sutpen and least able to view him objectively. Summoning Quentin Compson to hear her story (Chapter 1), she evokes a vision of Sutpen as a demon mounted on horseback and fresh from hell, followed by his 'wild niggers' and his captive French architect. She pictures Sutpen as a villain without pity or honor, a man whom she had learned to regard as an ogre before she first met him. Yet, though in many ways Sutpen had been the center of her bleak life, Miss Rosa knows little about him except hearsay, and had seen him scarcely a hundred times before she went to live at Sutpen's Hundred after Charles's death. Thus her information is limited to what she had heard of him as a

child and her own brief personal experience with him; her account is further distorted by her thwarted personality. Embittered and lonely from childhood, Miss Rosa regards Sutpen as the cause of her family's misfortunes, a demon that must be destroyed, even though the destruction of her own family is involved in his. Having nothing around which to build her life but her hatred of Sutpen, Miss Rosa could forgive him anything but dying, for it had left her with nothing in his place.

Mr. Compson, the second narrator, gives a more objective picture of Sutpen's life because it has not involved him emotionally, and because he is by temperament a detached, somewhat cynical man. His version of Sutpen's life, which he had heard from his father, General Compson, casts a completely different light on Sutpen; no longer a demon or a brigand, he is seen on his arrival in Jefferson as only recently recovered from a long illness, gaunt, owning nothing save a pair of pistols and the horse he rode, unwilling to mix with the men in the Holston House bar because he did not have the money to pay for his share and would not accept what he could not return in kind.

Quentin Compson sees Sutpen as a representative of the South, particularly of the failings of Southern life and morality which he can recognize but from which he cannot separate himself. He sees in the Henry-Charles-Judith relationship a parallel to his relationship with his own sister, Caddy, and her lovers (see *The Sound and the Fury*). Quentin and his roommate Shreve so thoroughly project themselves into their characterizations of Sutpen's sons that at one point they seem to become Charles and Henry. Shreve McCannon, Quentin's Harvard roommate, is the least involved of all the narrators, and thus is able to see Sutpen the most clearly. Having been told Miss Rosa's, Compson's, and Quentin's versions of the story, he summarizes and reconstructs with ironic detachment what he imagines to have been Charles's background. With Quentin, he creates a dramatization of the events just prior to Henry's murder of Charles.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

CHAPTERS 1-5: a Sunday afternoon in Jefferson, Mississippi, September, 1909: (1) Miss Rosa Coldfield, having summoned Quentin Compson to listen to her story, tells him about Sutpen from the time he arrived in Jefferson in 1833 until about 1850. In the beginning of the chapter an omniscient narrator describes the setting—Miss Rosa's 'office,' her verbal evocation of Sutpen, the demon, and Quentin's thoughts as he listens. The bulk of the chapter, however, is given over to Miss Rosa's narration.

(2) It is the evening of the same day, and Quentin sits on the porch with his father, waiting until it is time for him to take Miss Rosa on her mysterious errand out to Sutpen's Hundred. The chapter begins in the present but quickly blends into 'that Sunday morning in 1833' when Sutpen arrived. Although the first part of the chapter is narrated by the author it is clearly Mr. Compson's version of the tale that is being rehearsed. Compson himself takes over the telling of it at the point at which Sutpen leaves town for the second time.

(3) The chapter begins with Quentin's question: Why, if Sutpen jilted Miss Rosa, should she want to tell anybody about it? Mr. Compson then begins his account of Miss Rosa, from her birth in 1845 to the death of Charles in 1865.

(4) Quentin is still waiting for it to be dark enough for him to start for Miss Rosa's. Mr. Compson has just gone inside to get the letter written by Charles to Judith, and given by Judith to Quentin's grandmother. Mr. Compson then tells the story of Henry and Charles, beginning in 1860 and ending with Charles's murder.

(5) Narrated in its entirety by Miss Rosa (save for the last page), this chapter begins at the point at which the two preceding chapters ended—the death of Charles—and ends with Sutpen's death. At the end of the chapter Miss Rosa tells Quentin why she wants him to accompany her out to Sutpen's Hundred.

CHAPTERS 6-9: a cold night in Cambridge, Massachusetts, January, 1910: (6) Shreve McCannon, Quentin's roommate, has just come in; Quentin has been reading a letter from his father saying that Miss Rosa is dead. Shreve had asked him to tell him about the South, and Quentin remembers the beginning of his trip out to Sutpen's Hundred with Miss Rosa; Shreve interrupts and summarizes what he has by now

been told of Miss Rosa and Sutpen. Quentin thinks of the death of Sutpen, and Shreve again interrupts, asking about the visit made by Quentin and his father to the grave yard at Sutpen's Hundred, where Mr. Compson had told Quentin of Bon's son, Charles Etienne, and how he was raised by Judith and Clytie, married a black woman, and begot an idiot son. The chapter ends as Quentin tells Shreve that someone besides Clytie and the idiot was living at Sutpen's Hundred the night he and Miss Rosa went out.

(7) Quentin tells Shreve what he learned of Sutpen's life as a result of his visit to the plantation to find out who was hiding there.

(8) Shreve gives his interpretation of Charles's early life and of his relationship to Henry and Judith; Quentin and Shreve together create a kind of mental dramatization of the events leading up to Henry's murder of Charles.

(9) The room is freezing, and the boys get into bed. Quentin relives the night he and Miss Rosa found Henry hiding at Sutpen's Hundred. Shreve, having been told about the South, now wonders why Quentin hates it so much; but Quentin frantically denies that he hates it at all.

STRUCTURE

Absalom, Absalom! is composed of pieces—fragments of Sutpen's story—almost like the pieces of a pattern or a puzzle to be fitted together. Gradually, the fragments are pulled into place, the overlapping pieces of the narrative woven together, and the resultant picture of Sutpen and his family is one that is somehow greater than the sum of its individual parts. We are not so much told about Sutpen as forced to live through the narrators' knowledge, either real or imaginary, of Sutpen's life, to undergo the narrators' experiences in relation to the Sutpen saga....

Both structurally and contextually, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a novel dealing with the nature of truth, and with the inability of any single person to perceive more than a fragment of it. In the first place, the nature of the perceiver determines to a large degree the nature of the thing perceived.... To Miss Rosa, Charles was the unseen and idealized knight to whom she could transfer her thwarted girlhood's need to love.... Against Miss Rosa's vision is played the counterpoint of Mr. Compson's story, in which Sutpen emerges as a man of more ordinary stature and with no more than an ordinary capacity for evil.... His view of Henry as a raw provincial youth seduced by the cosmopolitan glamor and world-weary sophistication of Bon is the attitude of an aging ironist toward the too-serious preoccupations of youth.... To Compson [Bon] was a young fatalist, a decadent too old in the ways of the world to be reasonably expected to turn up at a new college in the wilds of Mississippi and yet inexplicably there, the sybaritic seducer of both Henry and Judith.

Quentin and Shreve give Charles his final shape and articulation, seeing him and Henry as themselves, seeing their own individual concerns reflected in Charles's and Henry's... Shreve combines pieces of Miss Rosa's demonizing and Mr. Compson's objectivity and mild satire with his own flippancy and his emotional and temporal distance from the story to create a third version, as if he were playing the two counterpointed voices in a different key. He provides a variation to the tale with his story of the vengeful mother and the greedy lawyer bringing up Charles to be the instrument of Sutpen's destruction....

Attempting to recreate the reality of Sutpen, none of the narrators are satisfied with their attempts to describe him or account for his actions; as a result, they constantly qualify, repeat, and rephrase their statements, constantly search for a different word, a different way of putting it, that will somehow convey the fullness, the total reality, of their perception.

SUTPEN

In broadest terms, Sutpen is a representative of the Old South: exaggerated, perhaps, because his rise and fall had to be compassed in a period of thirty years, not over several generations, more ruthless and less cultured than men of his generation who were members of already established families (Sartoris, Compson), because he did not think he could afford pity and he knew he did not have time for culture. His

faults were the faults of the Old South as a whole, magnified—like Sutpen himself, somewhat larger than life—but not therefore distorted. His downfall, the ‘mistake’ he could not locate or begin to understand, was the result of his most fundamental failing: his inability to recognize, though the same choice was offered him again and again, the superiority of human values over social ones.... His morality, based only on logic and rationality, denied the validity, perhaps even the existence, of emotional obligation, and led him to view human relationships as accounts in a ledger, capable of being cleared as one clears a legal debt....

Given more awareness, Sutpen might have been a truly tragic figure in the Greek fashion, for he had the stature; his physical accomplishments were those of a man of heroic courage and determination. His besetting ambition and pride resemble the hubris that prefigures tragedy... However, unlike Oedipus, he died morally blind, aware that he had failed but totally unaware of the reasons for his failure.... According to his own lights, Sutpen acted justly and justifiably. This failure to understand the nature of his mistake is doubly ironic: what had begun as a design to assert his right to be recognized as a human being became a rigid pattern which forced Sutpen to choose to repudiate the human claims of his wife and son; the very recognition he so desperately wanted himself he failed to give to those who stood in relation to him as he had to the Tidewater aristocrats. Charles is repeatedly shown in the position of Sutpen’s ‘boy-symbol,’ the forlorn child whom Sutpen had vowed would never be turned away from the door again; and Wash Jones (Sutpen is referred to as the apotheosis of Jones) is presented as what Sutpen might himself have been, had he not been fired with ambition to be recognized as the equal of the plantation owner....

QUENTIN

At the time that Quentin is telling the story to Shreve, he is suffering from his inability either to accept his sister’s promiscuity or to avenge the family’s smudged honor by killing her seducer. Thus Quentin is fascinated by the vision of Henry facing his sister after he had killed Charles.... In addition, Quentin identifies himself with both Henry and Charles: with Henry, of course, who loves his sister and is driven to kill her would-be husband, and with Charles, who plays the role of the sister’s lover and is therefore the man—the part of himself—whom he must kill to prevent dishonor...he is seeing himself both as failing to kill Ames, the seducer, and as successfully killing himself, the would-be lover who wanted to erase petty dishonor by overshadowing it with the sin of incest....

Quentin shows himself to be, spiritually at least, a son of Sutpen when he and Shreve emphasize that it is the threat of miscegenation, not incest, which drives Henry to kill Charles; and Shreve’s irony awakens in Quentin’s mind echoes of his father, so that Shreve becomes a kind of latter-day Compson, Northern style.... Quentin can no more be free of the Southern past than he can be free of his own past acts. Its history and traditions are perpetuated in him, and, as he loves the South as a part of himself, he also hates it for the guilt, both sectional and personal, that it has forced him to assume. The guilt that Sutpen, and the ante-bellum South as a whole, incurred without ever recognizing it has been passed on to be expiated only, if at all, by later generations.”

Dorothy Tuck
Crowell’s Handbook of Faulkner
(Crowell 1964) 56-66

“*Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner’s analysis of the effects of slavery on the conscience and consciousness of the South, but through his structure and narrative techniques, his theme of rejection takes on universal significance. The profundity of that theme and the superb craftsmanship with which it is handled make this work Faulkner’s greatest novel....

Like King David in the Biblical story from which Faulkner derived the title of his novel, Thomas Sutpen rises through his own power to high station among men, breaks the moral law and brings suffering upon his children. In both the house of David and the house of Sutpen, retribution takes the form of violent crimes by the children—revolt, incest, fratricide.... The murder is actually the dramatic center of the novel. All the details uncovered about Sutpen and his children lead toward the solution of the mystery: why Henry killed Bon. Not until the final pages does Faulkner reveal the vital fact that Bon has Negro blood. It is the one fact needed to clarify the mystery of the murder and the significance of Sutpen’s history to the

narrators.... When the final clue is revealed, we realize that Henry could sanction an incestuous marriage but not a miscegenetic one....

The theme of *Absalom, Absalom!* is rejection and its moral consequences....spanning four generations, [it] is an incisive history of the South; it is also a perceptive study of American individualism, and the need of each living being to be recognized as an individual.... By using multiple narrators, Faulkner is able to incorporate two stories: Sutpen's life, and the effects of his life on the narrators. (The design of the central story follows...the pattern of Greek drama).... The four speakers...are in one way or another victims of his history, and in their various versions of Sutpen's life, they reveal the meaning to them of his tragedy.... All of the storytellers, despite differences in background and character, employ an identical rhetorical, impressionistic language. Also, the narrative is developed without chronology; there is frequent repetition, and crucial data is consistently withheld.... The characteristics of human thought determine its form....

The author reserves for himself a minor role.... He sets the scenes for each chapter—at Miss Rosa's or on the porch of the Compson house or in the Harvard dormitory room—but the rest of the novel is, for the most part, a continual flow of talk. About ninety-percent of the narrative is, in fact, set off by quotations marks. And in all that talk it is difficult to distinguish the individual voices of the narrators.... Differences in the language and tone of the narrators does not appreciably detract from the singular sound patterns of the novel, which is created by loose, long sentences, with qualifying phrases added to qualifying phrases, clauses attached to clauses. This kind of cumulative sentence structure creates the effect of thought-flow, the mind ranging free, working over a fact, speculating about it, rejecting one possibility, considering another, rushing ahead more quickly than words can be uttered. It is the technique of the interior monologue or stream of consciousness vocalized.... It is precisely by means of the powerful current created by the flood of words that the reader is involved with Sutpen's story and its general significance. After being subjected to these rhythms for several chapters, the reader's own thoughts begin to form in similar patterns....

Rosa speaks...of her struggle with Clytie when she is prevented from rushing up the stairs to Judith after the murder of Charles Bon. She describes her recognition of Clytie as a fellow human being, as an individual entity, a recognition of a Negro's individuality by a white that is usually prevented by the shibboleth of color.... Mr. Compson's narration clears the air of the hell-fire smoke.... His image of Sutpen as a Greek hero defying man and gods betrays his own involvement in the legend of the South's grandeur.... The towering figure of Sutpen as demon becomes the towering figure of Sutpen as tragic hero.... He is the rugged individualist of nineteenth-century America. He possesses those qualities associated with the development of the nation—the fierce ambition, the self-assurance, the iron will...the ability and willingness to endure hardship and hard work. In an American setting, Sutpen is the closest possible approximation of the kind of character essential to classical drama. His tragedy, played out against an historical backdrop, is caused by a fatal flaw in his character, a human flaw that gives universal significance to his downfall....

The parallel between Sutpen's experience at fifteen and Rosa Coldfield's at twenty is striking. Their immediate reactions are identical. They both retreat physically, Rosa to her house in Jefferson, Sutpen to a cave in the woods. Both are shocked and outraged by this refusal of another human being to acknowledge in them...their individuality.... Before he is turned away from the plantation door, Sutpen's ideas about human existence are based chiefly upon feelings. Afterward, they are based upon 'reason.' His feelings betray him, lead him to a disastrous collision with reality. He becomes an opportunistic rationalist, formulating a design in accord with the social reality he discovers.... Ultimately, Sutpen's tragedy is caused by a lack of feeling, a failure to recognize the feelings of others....

As Rosa is to do, and as Sutpen himself has already done, Eulalia will react with fury. In Shreve's reconstruction of her role in Sutpen's history, she uses her son, Charles Bon, to gain her revenge. Sutpen cheats Rosa of whatever satisfaction her fury requires by getting himself killed, but Eulalia Bon enjoys revenge.... If Sutpen had simply told his children that Bon was Negro, they would hardly have accepted him as suitor and friend.... He detonates the explosion that destroys his design when he tells Henry at the end of the War that Charles is Negro, but his act merely confirms the inevitable. His dream was doomed at the moment he repudiated Eulalia Bon, just as the catastrophe of the Civil War was initiated by secession

but had its beginnings on the day the first slave was landed on American shores.... Like the Southerners he represents, he cannot understand that his downfall is caused by the violation of a design for human existence far more basic than the design of plantation aristocracy....

In this novel, as in many of Faulkner's works, crucial scenes are, ironically, enacted on those days that are dedicated by men to the memory of Christ and his doctrines. On Christmas eve, Sutpen forbids the marriage of Judith and Bon. During the Christmas season, Rosa Coldfield finally decides, after three months, to bring the sheriff out to the Sutpen place to arrest Henry. Charles Bon, Charles the Good, is thirty-three when he is murdered. Charles seeks only recognition of his common humanity. The murder of Charles, like the murder of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, is a re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ, who is the symbol of love and suffering among men. The universal tragedy of rejection is that its effects extend through time. The violated becomes the violator, the crucified the crucifier. The boy Sutpen, expecting immediate acceptance at the door, is rejected and becomes the man Sutpen, blind to every other human being, compounding in his own acts the wrong from which he suffered....

Wash grasps the significance of Sutpen's and the South's tragedy. The lack of compassion in Sutpen mirrors the lack of compassion in the South. It brings Sutpen to a violent end as it brought the Old South to a violent end.... The chronology of events in the personal drama of Charles and Henry is identical with the chronology of the War. They meet in 1859, fight the Yankees together for four years, and when the South is defeated and the war to end slavery is done, Henry discovers that Bon has Negro blood and kills him. The murder takes place less than a month after Lee surrendered at Appomattox. The moral crime that brought on the war is thus repeated. Henry's crime is basically the same as Sutpen's, but Henry is not blindly innocent; he is involved with Charles as a human being. He cannot ignore the moral responsibility of his act. In Faulkner's version of the Greek *Oresteia*, Henry is pursued by the furies for forty years....

Judith comes into sharper focus than Henry, but she, too, cannot escape the legend.... The sustained image of Judith is the image of woman suffering. Her individuality exists in the characteristics she inherits from her father—strength, courage, independence. Only intimations concerning the motives for her actions are provided, however. The effect is that she looms larger than life. She is Electra, a figure in a legend whose acts illuminate the legend rather than her own individuality.... The impression Judith gives is of a woman atoning for a crime; and yet we never know if Henry told her why he killed Bon, or if she ever realizes that Bon was her father's son.

Whatever the motives, the results of Judith's actions are a series of ironies that add dramatically to the central theme of rejection.... The greatest irony, perhaps, is that the man Judith loves has Negro blood, and though she devotes and sacrifices her life to his son, she is at the same time capable of denying Charles Etienne's equality because he is a Negro. Judith's suffering, her loss of Charles and of her brother at the same moment, stems directly from her father's crime.... Love and guilt are inextricably blended and deprive her of the freedom to live in the present. In the complicated mixture of feelings that characterize her relations with Charles Etienne, she represents the post-War South.... She cannot...escape her heritage of racial prejudice, and by her attitude dooms Charles Etienne as surely as if she rejected him outright....

Charles seeks nothing more than a sign of recognition from his father. He may be the agent of his mother's vengeance, but he himself is not, at first, vindictive.... Charles waits patiently for four years. And it is only when he is certain that his desire is hopeless that he acts. From that moment on, he follows the pattern of the rejected, determined to assert his individuality by an act of vengeance. Knowing what he does about his relationship with Judith and Henry, Charles commits a ruthless act when he writes his letter proposing marriage. It is an act calculated to bring upon his father the greatest possible suffering. If Bon, as Shreve and Quentin decide, does love Judith, he would, it is obvious, have sacrificed that love if his father had acknowledged him. And also, if he does love her, it is a strange love that would bring him to marry his own sister without telling her that she will be committing incest.

To avoid the unpleasant truth about Charles, Shreve and Quentin weave a romance of love and heroism; but Charles has been rejected, and his actions are an expression of an overpowering need for revenge.... All his acts are those of a man determined to bring pain and anguish, at no matter what cost, upon the Sutpen family. Carrying the picture of his octoroon wife and child is a defiant declaration of his identity

rather than an attempt, as Shreve romantically conjectures, to spare Judith the pain of mourning him. Charles acts out of the fury that grips all victims of rejection.”

Edmond L. Volpe
A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1964) 184, 189-91, 194-96, 199, 201-12

“The structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) appears especially relevant. It is one of the most involved and difficult novels of the author and yet also one of the most rewarding ones. It relates the rise and fall of the planter Thomas Sutpen and his family before, during and after the Civil War as a result of an immoderate will to obtain social prestige, as well as through a total disregard of the basic value of human dignity. Thomas Sutpen deserts his first wife after he discovers that she is really colored; his second wife bears him a son and a daughter, the latter becoming attached to a friend of her brother Henry who, upon realizing that his friend is actually his (colored) half-brother kills him and disappears. A few years later Sutpen, in a last desperate effort to carry through his design, makes the grand-daughter of a poor white squatter his mistress, but treats her with such contempt on her giving birth to a girl instead of a boy, that her grandfather kills Sutpen, his granddaughter and her baby. Forty years later Sutpen's place has become the home of an illegitimate colored daughter and a colored great-grandson of Sutpen's and the hiding place of Sutpen's son, Henry. An attempt by Henry to help is misunderstood by the Negro woman, who sets fire to the house and perishes in it with Henry. The great-grandson vanishes in the anonymous mass of the colored population.

The structure of the novel is evidently meant to leave the reader guessing about the real and ultimate causes and issues of the tragic events right to the end. In this way we are continually confronted by the problem of knowledge and identity. We further become aware of the curious tension between the traditional values of the South and the fatal consequences they may have if they are adhered to in a predominantly operative way. The theme of alienation appears as a paradoxical but inevitable consequence of the passionate desire to ‘belong.’ The past with all its guilt and errors pervades the present so inescapably that it has its effects on every phase and aspect of our lives. These concepts are made particularly manifest through the total abolition of chronology in the narrative method and through the very complexity of the—even for Faulkner—unusually long and complicated sentences, which seem to urge on the reader the simultaneousness of almost everything remembered, felt, guessed, reconstructed and thought of by the characters and narrators concerned.”

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 90-91

“*The Sound and the Fury* dealt with the fall of a family, *Absalom* deals with the fall of a society. The Quentin Compson of *Absalom* is not quite the same as the earlier Quentin: his concern is social rather than personal and his role is identified for the most part with a central quest in the novel—the quest to discover the truth about the rise and fall of his South. In its search for the truth about a whole society, the novel circles and shuttles back and forth in time, its sentences twist and strain, and its narrators attempt to recreate a past on the basis of some fact and much conjecture. Sometimes the narrators mislead unintentionally, sometimes they contradict one another, and often they are carried away by their own bias, preoccupation, or imagination. Yes, it is hard to come by truth, but still one might question whether a novel whose pitch is too shrill, whose approach is emotional and poetic, whose perspective seems unclear and shifting—one might question whether such a work presents the best way of getting a historical truth. The method of narration apparently mirrors not only the difficulty in getting at truth but the struggle to face truth. For all its straining, its complexities and obscurities, *Absalom*, I would conclude, is Faulkner's most historical novel....

For Mrs. [Duso] Lind and most other critics, Sutpen is the South. Yet some influential critics have qualified or contradicted this interpretation. Both Malcolm Cowley and Robert Penn Warren have stated in effect that ‘the Deep South was settled partly by aristocrats like the Sartoris clan and partly by new men like Colonel Sutpen.’ Whereas they see Sutpen as only partly representative of the Deep South, Cleanth Brooks would question whether Sutpen is a Southerner at all. For Brooks, Sutpen is in many ways a

Yankee: he 'is a "planner" who works by blueprint and on a schedule. He is rationalistic and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious.' 'Indeed, Sutpen is at some points more nearly allied to Flem [Snopes] than he is to the Compsons and the Sartoris. Like Flem, he is a new man with no concern for the past and has a boundless energy with which to carry out his aggressive plans'....

Contrary to the Sartoris-Snopes thesis, the ante-bellum South, though once ruled by the planter class, did not consist only of planter aristocracy and poor whites; the great majority of its people have always been hardworking small farmers, like the Tulls and the Bundrens and Houstons and Quicks and Armstids of Yoknapatawpha. Moreover, to attribute the decline of the South to the Snopeses is to compound legend with fantasy, for not only does such a view assume the existence of an aristocratic South based on a benevolent system of slavery and characterized by humanistic values but it finds a ready scapegoat for its ills in a tribe of Southern 'Yankees,' the Snopeses. It is more logical and just to assign the major responsibility for the fortunes of the South to its rulers—the Thomas Sutpens. And it is essential, if we are to understand *Absalom*, to know (1) the fact and legend of Southern history and (2) how Sutpen's life and career mirror the history and heritage of the South, moral as well as social and political....

Under the spur of the Civil War defeat, the Southerner's need to believe in the aristocracy of his ancestors and in the superiority of his tradition hastened the spread of the Southern legend. The legend affected the whole South, not just the Deep South. The force of its need and conviction submerged the fact that almost no members of the Cavalier aristocracy ever left England for America, that the Southern aristocracy derived from the low and middle classes, and that the aristocracy of the Deep South was made in one generation. Scratch the veneer of the aristocrat of the Deep South and you would find a frontiersman. It was these new planters who took over the leadership of the Old South...the new men brought to their position the frontier's aggressiveness, the strength and ruthlessness of self-made men, and a fierce faith in the righteousness of their cause and their interests....

With the possible exception of Sartoris, all the founders of the ruling clans in Yoknapatawpha were new men. Sutpen, McCaslin, and Compson got their land by hook or by crook. Compson acquired his by swapping a mare to the Indians, Sutpen got his with a little Spanish gold, and McCaslin 'bought the land, took the land, got the land no matter now.' Faulkner has not told us how Sartoris got his land, but Sartoris possessed the 'violent and ruthless dictatorialness and will to dominate' which generally characterize the founders of the Yoknapatawpha ruling clans. The getting of the land, the hacking of a plantation out of the wilderness, and the establishment of a family dynasty would naturally promote violence, ruthlessness, and strength of character, and not 'vital morality and humanism.'

Nevertheless, Faulkner has made a distinction between Sartoris and Sutpen. They are different, not in the sense that Sartoris was an established Yoknapatawpha planter when Sutpen arrived at Jefferson in 1833—Sartoris did not arrive until a few years after Sutpen—but in the sense that Sartoris' origin was 'aristocratic' whereas Sutpen's was plebian. Colonel Sartoris, as we see him in *Sartoris* and later in *The Unvanquished*, is a much more traditionally romantic figure than Sutpen. Sartoris, it is generally acknowledged, has been modeled in part on the character and life of the author's great-grandfather, Colonel William C. Falkner. Yet Faulkner's origin more closely approximates that of Sutpen than of Sartoris: Sartoris came to Mississippi 'with slaves and gear and money' from a Carolina plantation, but Falkner came out of Tennessee as a poor boy. The inference is plain. Sartoris represents in part a projection of the legend, but Sutpen represents the reality....

The decision that Sutpen made as a boy becomes the fateful decision of his life: he gave up the values of the frontier for those of a property-caste system. It was a decision full of bitter ironies, for in time it would lead to a war in which the backwoodsmen fought by the side of the planter to preserve a system alien to his character and heritage. The planter and backwoodsman were separated by long-standing differences, but in the fierce mounting tension between North and South and in the War and its bitter aftermath, Southerners suppressed their differences. Still the union between planter and backwoodsman, despite its surface solidarity, remained fundamentally uneasy. Faulkner's own sympathies seemed to be on the side of the backwoodsman. Although Faulkner depicted the frontier way of life as crude and often brutal, he presented it as basically more honest and natural and innocent, simply because it was not founded on and sustained by property, by slavery. Ultimately, Sutpen's decision is a moral one: he committed the sin that would visit

the iniquity of the father upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generations. He did not know what he was doing, he would never know.

In 1829 Sutpen got his son. He named him Charles Bon—a name ironically reminiscent of Bonnie Price Charles, who was heir to a throne he never inherited and prince to a nation that repudiated him. In 1831 Sutpen repudiated his 'Negro' wife and son. The repudiation of the Negro was compelled by the planter's 'design.' Yet the repudiation planted the seed of the system's destruction. Charles Bon represents both the doomed victim and the fated undoer of the 'design.' He incarnates in a sense the tragic history of the American Negro. Running through his veins was the blood of the slavers and planters—the Spanish, French, English, and American—and the blood of the American Negro. But it was the Negro blood that would work like a strange power of fate in the lives of the planters, the slaves, and all their descendants....

Thomas Sutpen, who transplanted his slaves from Haiti to the Mississippi wilderness and transformed the wilderness to a plantation, was part of a large historical movement. He was part of the movement of slavery from the islands to the mainland and from the Eastern seaboard to the Southwest. Paradoxically, slavery was to find its most aggressive defenders in the Southern democrats of the United States.... It was a time when the South chose not a Thomas Jefferson but a Jefferson Davis as its leader. It was a time of Thomas Suptens, not Quentin Compsons.... The marriage of Thomas Sutpen to Ellen Coldfield signifies the union of frontiersman and puritan, a union which would give birth to the very character of the South. Frontier violence would be yoked to fundamentalist religion, frontier individualism would be married to the puritan's conscience. Superimposed upon the marriage was the plantation system, with another set of values and with its Peculiar Institution....

Charles Bon. Charles Good. In station and manners and breeding he was the elegant New Orleans scion, fortunate member of the planter class and an elite Latin culture.... He wanted no inheritance; he wanted but a word, a sign, a look, a touch from Sutpen which would say you are my son. He got no acknowledgement, he got nothing. Even the love he got from his brother Henry turned into ashes when Henry learned that Bon was *'the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister.'* For all his sophistication, Bon remained only the orphan (he never really had a mother since, warped by paranoiac hatred of Sutpen, she had lost the power to love) who never found the father he sought: that was his fate. So it was that he lived as if something had gone out of him, as if he did not really want to live. The story of Charles Bon is a richly ironic fable of the Old South. Bon embodies both the most favored of whites, a New Orleans scion, and the lowliest of blacks, the white man's bastard....

A schism, a kind of unconscious hypocrisy, embedded itself deeply into the soul of the South. For the white man the Negress was the female animalized and his white woman was the female spiritualized.... Reality was two families by a planter, white and black. Reality was a brother who was not a brother, a sister who was not a sister, a wife who was not a wife. Southerners knew of this reality, accepted it, lived with it, even though it violated what they thought they believed in: honor, pride, the family, and the decencies of life. This reality underlies the story of the House of Sutpen. All the relationships in the Sutpen family are invested with a peculiar irony, doom, and tragedy, as if a curse had been placed on them like the curse on the House of Oedipus. Incest, fratricide, and the fall of a family are all aspects of both curses. Moreover, like several characters in *Oedipus Rex*, the Suptens, for the most part, did not know the full truth about themselves and could not realize their identity and humanity....

There is a grandeur to the man who hammers out his 'design' in the face of God's and nature's opposition. Yet there is a fatal defect too: his Adamic innocence, like that of other American barons on the make, had hardened into moral blindness, and the egoism and energy generated by his rejection and dream of vindication had become ultimately a force for destruction of himself, his family, and his society. In attempting to build a dynasty, he had lost a family; in making himself into the image of the Southern planter, he had lost part of his humanity; in displacing conscience by pride, he had lost the power to see into himself...his life ended not in tragic affirmation but in gross deterioration and unheroic death....

In silent, stoic joylessness [Judith Sutpen] survived the privations of the War and Reconstruction. Her mulatto sister, Clytie, continued long beyond Judith's death as the guardian of her master's house. Clytie represents the Negro family servant so involved with her white folks that she could make no life of her

own. Finally there was Miss Rosa. Conceived in her parents' old age, as Gail Hightower had been, she passed from a warped childhood to a spinster's dream world and became a writer of odes to Confederate heroes. But the emotional thrust of her life derived from her hatred of Sutpen, a hatred which stemmed mainly from his matter-of-fact proposal 'that they try it first and if it was a boy and lived, they would be married.' Faulkner's characterization of Miss Rosa has been generally rendered in broad paradox and sly irony. She is both the chaste Southern woman and warped old maid; the romantic defender of the South and paranoiac hater of its supreme representative, Thomas Sutpen; vicarious bride in her dreams to Charles Bon and hater of the Negro. So shielded had she been from the realities of the Old South, Rosa Coldfield never knew she had loved the 'nigger' son of Thomas Sutpen....

As the nineteenth century yielded to the twentieth, there survived the rotting house, its slave guardian, the death-in-life heir (Henry), and the last Sutpen descendant—the idiot, Jim Bond. It had taken two generations for Bon to become Bond, good to become slave. Not much was left of the planter's baronial dream. Like the planter's mansion, the dream kept rotting. In December 1909 the house of Sutpen went up in smoke. Only the idiot remained. The others were dead. Dead was the planter with his double family, black and white; dead were the Coldfields, with the shopkeeper's barren puritanism and the spinster's barren gentility; and dead was the poor white family of Wash Jones.... Even Wash Jones's life ended in protest. From an anguished and outraged heart Faulkner has cried out in *Absalom, Absalom!* against an evil implanted in his South. Faulkner has presented Sutpen as the source of the evil, but he has presented him too as the only heroic figure in the story. Sutpen is both the pride and the shame of the South. For a Quentin Compson the ambivalence of his feelings about his heritage is further complicated by the reality of the present. His heritage is peculiarly compounded of accomplishment and defeat, innocence, and guilt, pride and defensiveness."

Melvin Backman

"Sutpen and the South: A Study of *Absalom, Absalom!*"

PMLA, LXXX (1965) 596-604

"The year 1935...brought Faulkner to yet another crisis when his youngest brother, Dean, to whom he had sold his plane, crashed to his death during a barnstorming excursion. Faulkner for a time was inconsolable, but he finally found comfort in resuming work on the novel that he called *Absalom, Absalom!* and later declared to be his best. Many have since agreed, but reviewers in 1936 were bewildered by a strategy that involved the reminiscences and speculations of several narrators and a series of constructions and reconstructions and found the book unnecessarily confusing. In their struggle to clarify the story line they failed to grasp the significance of what Faulkner had done with it.

Absalom, Absalom! was the story of a young Harvard undergraduate, Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury*, who was intrigued by the mystery surrounding a long-dead planter in Yoknapatawpha County, Thomas Sutpen, in whose legendary career he dimly perceived a possible clue to his own identity as a southerner. Initially, all Quentin had to go on was the bare outline of the legend: how Sutpen arrived in Jefferson some years before the Civil War with a retinue of wild blacks, acquired land (no one quite knew how) that came to be known as Sutpen's Hundred, built a mansion, married a local girl, sired a daughter and a son, and dreamed of a dynasty.

Yet following the war, which spared his land and mansion, Sutpen's hopes had collapsed when the wife died and the son murdered his sister's fiancé and promptly vanished. Thereafter he let the land go untended, the mansion fell into disrepair, and himself grow fat, but he stubbornly kept alive his dream of dynasty and vainly sought a female partner to enable him to begin again. To that end he seduced the granddaughter of one Wash Jones, a poor white living in Sutpen's abandoned fishing camp, but rejected her when the child she bore was a daughter. Jones, enraged, dispatched both granddaughter and child and then killed Sutpen with a scythe. To supplement this story Quentin adds details, many of them suspect, provided by Sutpen's sister-in-law, Miss Rosa Coldfield, his own father's testimony, and his father's recollection of what his father had told him. He also has information gathered when he accompanied Miss Rosa on a mysterious trip out to the still standing mansion, and the report of what happened shortly thereafter when Miss Rosa sent out an ambulance to bring back the wasted figure of Sutpen's long vanished son and heir.

Faulkner presents his story partly as Quentin's report and partly as a continuing exchange between Quentin and his Canadian roommate, Shreve McCannon, who has asked to know something about the South. Together they reconstruct Sutpen's tragedy, which involves murder, a series of racial interminglings, and the threat of incest; and the result—part fact, part inference, and part guesswork—embodies contributions by both but is an account that neither can reject. For Shreve acceptance is easy. Fascinated, he takes it to be symbolic of a violent social evolution that in the end may be beneficial, but sensing that Quentin is disturbed, he asks a final question: 'Why do you hate the South?' The novel concludes with Quentin's confused and agonized reply: 'I don't hate it,' he said. *I don't hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; *I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*'

Perceptive critics have agreed that the significance of the novel is implicit in Quentin's breathless response. In a single work Faulkner had presented more of the essential truth about the self-proclaimed aristocracy of the deep South than anyone before him: its genesis in an amoral wilderness and its human roots in a tide of adventurers... Men like Sutpen in their failure exposed the reality that Faulkner's luckier adventurers—the Sartorises, Compsons, McCaslins, and their descendants—had been at pains to deny.... Reviewers, however, in the North and the South alike, saw it as mainly another sensational offering by a southern author given to sensationalism and to presenting what should have been a straightforward tale in a barrage of unnecessarily obtuse stylistics."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 84-85

Michael Hollister (2015)