CHAPTER IV

"Absalom, Absalom!": The Problems of Perspective

His themes, however, are not always so clearly distinguishable from those of the nominalists...to them truth is abundantly obvious to anyone who opens his eyes. Faulkner, however, is almost painfully aware of how inaccurate is vision, how subjective is experience, how distorted is perspective, how naïve is the myth of the innocent eye. Consequently, he does not allow even his most astute narrators to grasp all of the truth around them. (Broughton, Panthea Reid. Abstraction and the Actual. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1974. 34)

The Sutpen tragedy as communicated in the novel has no “objective” existence. It is the collective product of the workings of the minds of the three major characters, abetted by the collaboration of a fourth. The Sutpen tragedy is the novel’s centre of dramatic interest, but the narrators are also the centre of the novel. In the execution of this double focus Faulkner exercises the full play of his genius.

It is interesting to note that out of the five major characters narrating the story of Sutpen, two namely Miss Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson personally
met Sutpen. But despite their first hand knowledge of the legendary man, their narratives are not to be accepted as the most reliable. For example, we see Miss Rosa Coldfield, who was much closer than Mr. Compson, gives the most biased and distorted picture of the man. Quentin and Shreve who are far removed from the events of the story, try their best and give focus on certain aspects hitherto untouched by both Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson. However, in the process of their narration or the reconstruction of the story, they are overwhelmed by their vicarious experience of the fate of Chares Bon and Judith, because it is the story of love and incest, and also of youthful romance. So ultimately they end up identifying themselves completely with the characters of the past event. Despite being Oxford scholar, their total identifying themselves with the characters of an absorbing life story of people in the past indicates the point that human assessment is fraud with personal imagination; one can not become absolutely dispassionate on any particular matter. Our perception, our judgments are largely influenced by our own personality. So it is impossible to re-create a history. The problem of identification was acutely felt by Bartolt Bretcht, who tried epic theatre in order to alienate the audience from identifying themselves with one or two characters of the play. Faulkner’s objective is however different from Bartolt Bretcht’s. Faulkner’s primary concern emanates from his profound knowledge that the reality is unknowable; any claim to have perfect knowledge of a given matter is sure to be overthrown. Referring to “the elusiveness of truth” as a major theme of Faulkner’s novels, Panthea Reid Broughton mentions Faulkner’s awareness of “how inaccurate is vision, how subjective is experience, how distorted is perspective” (34).
Through their acts of narration, the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* reveal themselves more than they reveal the Sutpen tragedy in proper perspective. Miss Rosa, a frustrated spinster, begins the tale at its highest pitch. She is both physically and psychologically mal-adjusted. Venting upon Sutpen’s image the accumulated tension of her hallucinated isolation, she pictures Sutpen as the incarnation of demonic energy, letting loose grievous crimes, “too dark to talk about,” as the cause of the disasters which have overtaken Sutpen and his kin. A belief in his foredoomed obliteration is to her a psychological necessity, a means by which she can visit upon Sutpen vicariously her private outrage and relieve her unnaturally developed sense of guilt. As a daughter of a Christian steward, she endows her notion of an avenging fate with the coloration of a wrathful righteous God, ponder “what our father or his father could have done before he married our mother that Ellen and I would have to expiate...what crime committed that would leave our family cursed to be instruments not only for that man’s destruction, but for our own”(21). Her portions of the narrative, hysterical and disordered, generate the tension and fatality which span the entire legend. It is her distorted vision which endows Sutpen with supernatural vitality and her perverted moralism which invokes the certainty of his destruction.

Mr. Compson brings to his narration a seeming repose and expansiveness which is an apt counterbalance to Miss Rosa’s blind subjectivity. Enlightened, informed, comprehensive in his judgements, Mr. Compson at first arouses the confidence of the reader as an unbiased narrator. He seems to discern the romanticisms, enthusiasm, and self-deceptions of others. A sceptic 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; as we go on it becomes clear that 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 developed the typical malaise of the turn of the 19th century in his private philosophy. The nature of his imagination is unhealthily voluptuous. Only his love for the refinements of eroticism could do justice to the institution of octoroon mistress in New Orleans. He is a fatalist as well as defeatist. His narration sustain the aura of catastrophe which Miss Rosa’s foreboding initiated.

Quentin’s efforts at legendizing the story are marked by a febrile intensity which charges the entire last section with renewed emotion. The passionate narration of the Bon-Henry conflict derives wholly from Quentin’s morbid involvement. 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.

Shreve, whose youthful curiosity and romanticism makes him a suitable collaborator in the Bon-Henry legend, projects the fraternal affection which exists between his roommate and himself. Not otherwise involved, he serves chiefly as an instigator, prodding his curiously obsessed Southern roommate into the reluctant fulfilment of his narrative function.

The narrators themselves, lost in their private obsessions and viewing the Sutpen story only partially through their individual distortions of vision, do not have any idea about the distortedness of their vision of the Sutpen story, although the reader has a fuller view of the stage. He sees, as it were, two tragedies on a
single theme simultaneously enacted. The curtains lifts on 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. This technique is very original to the credit of Faulkner and for this reason Ilse Dusoir Lind says the novel "constitutes the last radical innovation in fictional method since Joyce" (272).

Each time a character attempts to get into the heart of the mystery of the story of Sutpen, new difficulties arise. Mr. Compson’s acquiescence in the insolubility of the puzzle is unacceptable to Quentin, whom we have met as the Harvard-attending scholar in The Sound and the Fury. In that novel a whole chapter records the day upon which he commits suicide by drowning himself in the Charles River rather than return to the South to face the growing disintegration of his own family. In Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin’s involvement with the Sutpens is placed in the previous summer (1909), when he hears their history from his father and from Rosa Coldfield and accompanies her to the derelict Sutpen mansion. In January (1910), on receipt of a letter from his father describing the burning of the old Sutpen mansion and the Harvard roommate Shreve converses deep into the night in a final exhausting effort to wring the truth about the Sutpens from the many confusing and conflicting reports.

Barbara Hardy defines narrative as a "primary act of mind", as a placing of the self in time and space; for Faulkner that involves a displacing as well. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language acquisition in the child invests narrative performance with "quasi-magical" function of signs. According to him, language competence derives from our rudimentary mimetic effort not to represent things but to
imitate the behaviour of others. Narrative acts, therefore, are rooted not in simple ontological assertions but in social transformations, appropriations, and revisions, designed to produce results for the self similar to those produced by and for others. Rosa makes Sutpen's story her own, not simply as revenge (a form of character assassination) but far more significantly to assert her presence into the Sutpen/Compson narrative tradition of male exclusivity.

The language of storytelling in Faulkner is manipulative and not descriptive. Words may fail to represent authentic personal experience adequately, but Faulkner is concerned with the more rudimentary aspects of narration as social performance and as autobiography which are guided by convention and subjective narration. Sutpen's proposals, the insult, have extraordinary consequences measured not merely in terms of social impropriety but in more personal terms; they are an outrage and they forms a prejudice in Rosa's mind which in turn leads to the very subjective nature of her narrative of Sutpen story.

The way Sutpen makes the proposal is not only abrupt but also eccentric. Sutpen proposed thus: "You may think I made your sister Ellen no very good husband. You probably do think so. But even if you will not discount the fact that I am older now, I believe I can promise that I shall do no worse at least for you" (164). What Sutpen said is within the bound of his own nature—the man in whom everything including marriage should fall within his design and hence without human emotion. Sutpen's words, quoted directly, are unremarkable, as easily self-depreciating as sinister. But what Rosa conveys in response to this proposal is her experience of his persuasive authority, a real power over her person. Rosa's narration of her experience in response to this proposal is thus:
That was my courtship. That minute's exchanged look in a kitchen garden, that hand upon my head in his daughter's bedroom; a ukase, a decree, a serene and florid boast like a sentence (ay, and delivered in the same attitude) not to be spoken and heard but to be read carved in the bland stone which pediments a forgotten and nameless effigy. I do not excuse it. I claim no brief, no pity, who did not answer 'I will' not because I was not asked, because there was no place, no niche, no interval for reply. (164)

Absalom, Absalom! is the part of a major tradition in modern fiction, including such novels as Moby-Dick, Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim, The Great Gatsby, Doctor Faustus, and All the King's Men, in which the spheres of the imagined and the real are first divided, and then fused. Teller and actor become mirrors of each other, both exploiting and serving their opposites; and the exploitation of the relationship between meaning and acting, illusion and reality, is lifted to the dramatic surface of the text. Telling, on the other hand, is a means of exploitation as the narrator forces the actor to become the incarnation of his own fantasies and desires. At the same time the actor is the narrator's model, whose action the latter imitates, even as he provides that action with verbal forms, establishing motive and meaning. In fact the teller must become in some way the subject of his imaginative reconstruction in order to give validity to his telling.

The narrator celebrates his own life by transforming his hero into a dramatic version of it. At the same time he celebrates the life of his hero by relegating his own to the repetition of what he takes to be truth of that life. The truth, the interpretation, is both the means and the end of the repetition. The deeds of the
actor are the ground from which the narrator builds his fable; yet the act of cre­
ation, involving form and interpretation, must contain the motives of the teller as well. The result is a novel about the making of a fiction centred on an impressive actor, yet imbued with the attitudes of an equally impressive creator. Fictions and fact are interdependent and undistinguishable: both are present but one is not certain as to which is which.

At the centre of Absalom, Absalom! there is a known fact that in 1865 a man named Henry Sutpen, the son of Thomas Sutpen and Ellen Coldfield, killed a man named Charles Bon. The fact is inhuman not only because it has to do with violent death but because it is without meaning; it covers everything with chaos. This fact is what makes imagination necessary; and imagination is limitless, with the single exception that it can not unmake the fact from its existence even though several attempts are made to create and recreate the fact in the absence of hard evidences. In 1909-1910, we see Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon, retelling the story of the Sutpen family and their lives take root and grow into unique shapes through the different ways they approach to this fact. Each invents the structure to satisfy the conditions of fact and the conditions of the self as well. Each of the narrators has to learn the processes by which they can master imaginatively the enigma of murder in 1965. The test of that mastery is the degree to which imagination and fact can coincide in a supreme fiction, although it may be removed from the reality of fact. The perspective assumed by each character necessarily does not approach towards authenticity. However, its success depends on how much one can blend the fact and imagination to make up the fragmented pieces into a whole.
Listening to the last sentence of Miss Rosa's long and urgent narration of her life, Quentin realizes that there was something which he could not pass. He sees the story he has just heard does not fully explain to him the imagined picture of Judith and Henry striking one another with their hammering words: "Dead? / Yes. I killed him". In order to achieve the full explanation of the story, each narrator passes some enigma of the self. Meaning rests on what the self dares to imagine. It reminds one of the familiar Freudian truth that the imagination, like dream, is always a function of our deepest personality traits; and that it rises in order to resolve symbolically tensions otherwise irreconcilable or unendurable. However the meaning we crave for has to sacrifice the immediacy of an experience such as Benjy's or a literalism such as Sutpen's. At the cost of the literal or immediate experiences, there might be an achievement of "a new reconciliation—unstable, precarious—a reality redefined" (Kartiganer 91). The imagined truth comes to vivid life in Absalom, Absalom! as each narrator tells the Sutpen story in accordance with his own private needs. Kenneth Burke proposes an approach to literature "in terms of a situation and a strategy of confronting or encompassing that situation" (54). The language and structure of the work are the poet's means of identifying and coping with a significant personal dilemma. Form, in other words, is symbolic: "The motivation out of which the poet writes is synonymous with the structural way in which he puts events and values together when he writes" (Burke 21).

We must examine what the narrators tell us for its motivation if we are to arrive at its full meaning, for one is the symbolic language of the other. Our questions must not be merely what each narrator believes or how they have come to
believe it, but why they find it necessary to believe in the way they do. The ques-
tion is not how, for example, Quentin and Shreve discover that Charles Bon is
Henry's half-brother, but why it is necessary for them to make Bon his half-brother,
for that "discovery" is as much a strategy as Miss Rosa's need to see Sutpen as
a demon. According to Burke strategy always contains attitude.

Each version of the Sutpen history, equipped with motive and meaning, is
an exercise in symbolic extrication from some condition of anxiety. The success
of that extrication, both in terms of the relief it provides the teller and the assent it
gains from the listener, depends on the degree of candour it demonstrates. A
convincing extrication, in other words, depends on the power the poet can give
those elements his structure that are most threatening to the resolution he is try-
ing to achieve. Of course, this is part of the strategy.

It is rather difficult to draw a line as to where the self-serving strategy ends
and where the "truth" begins. Art never ceases to temper guilt, to absolve the
poet's own life—it never seems to go beyond that. Imagination must begin in
personal need, and the fiction it produces is very unlikely to contain a truth for us
all. It is a matter worthy of speculation as to at what point fiction intersects with
reality even as it preserves a discontinuity we have come to insist on.

The main point of Miss Rosa Coldfield's narrative is her re-creation of
Thomas Sutpen as a diabolic and therefore incomprehensible being, "from abys-
mal and chaotic dark to eternal and abysmal dark completing his descending"
(171). His motiveless behaviour accounts for the decline not only of his and Miss
Rosa's families but of the entire South. Miss Rosa's interpretation of Sutpen's
character as demonic is perfectly consistent with her understanding of the story
as a whole. Like Sutpen's refusal to allow his daughter Judith to marry Charles Bon, this story is for Miss Rosa "without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse" (18). The basic irrationality of all the events is further proof of her conviction that the devil has been at work. Miss Rosa's narrative, however, like all the versions of the story we get, is rooted in her own personality, and we must read her interpretation as a text of that personality, its symbolic outline, even as it is a text grounded in certain facts about Sutpen.

Miss Rosa's tale is affected by remoteness, a gap between herself and a sensual world whose primary image is Thomas Sutpen. She divides existence in half, between class and custom, "the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering" and physical reality, "the touch of flesh with flesh" (139). It is this second realm that remains closed to her. Quentin Compson says that Miss Rosa talks about Sutpen in order to let people know "why God let us lose the War" (11). More crucial is her need to exonerate herself from the guilt of not having completed her passage into a real world. The Sutpen she invents is the cause of her aborted life; at the same time that life is a major impulse to the invention.

Miss Rosa's basic fear of life is easily traceable; she is born into the old age of a man widowed by her birth, a man who disapproved not only of the war but of life: "That night he mounted to the attic with his hammer and his handful of nails and nailed the door behind him and threw the hammer out the window" (82). The Coldfield inheritance is, according to Mr. Compson, a "'cluttering of morality and rules of right and wrong'" (120), and is a major source for Rosa's life-long inability to move from preconceived orders to an encounter with the reality.

In several ways Miss Rosa is comparable to Quentin of The Sound and
the Fury, who is also terrified of blackness, sex, and the mundane realities of men. The gap between some "symmetrical" order and living flesh, the "might-have-been" and an "unbearable reality," is what provokes the earlier Quentin to suicide and, for all her attempts to engage, that reality drives Miss Rosa continually back to the "single rock" of her illusions. Despite her fear, however, she tries again and again to "wake," to know on her fear, pulses those Sutpen truths that have always fascinated and frightened her. This eagerness persists to the very end, to 1909, as once again she journeys out to Sutpen's Hundred, this time with Quentin rather than Wash Jones as her escort, again to confront the "inscrutable coffee-coloured face" (138) of Clytie on the stairs, and not the dead Bon but the dying Henry.

Sutpen shatters the fantasy with the suggestion that he and Miss Rosa have a child, testing for gender, before considering marriage: "as if he were consulting with Jones or with some other man about a bitch dog or a cow or mare" (168). This is what Rosa cannot accept, the insult that undermines the "decorous ordering," all that might be left of "the old lost enchantment of the heart" (150)...

Sutpen's proposal becomes the last and insurmountable barrier between Miss Rosa and truth, since to accept it would require her to give up the Calvinistic illusion that a devil has walked the earth in the figure of Sutpen, and that it is for the sake of his exorcism "that Heaven saw fit to let us lose" (20). Having rejected Sutpen's lewd proposal, however, she remains on the other side of ignorance; she has not known him in life, and her version of the story can go no deeper than the strategy that explains why she could not know him: because he was not human. Her tales is finally of shadow: the satanic shape, the beautiful (unseen) mur-
dered young man, a South in chaos and purgative flames—these are the form and substance of her stopped life. Having come to the edge of reality, both in her life and in her tale, Miss Rosa can now retreat, with justification, to her Coldfield world of illusion. She confines Sutpen once more to the shape of the black ogre still polluting the land: “Because he was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow” (171).

Her attempt to decipher the meaning of murder in 1865 is no more than the symbolic repetition in defence of her own history. If Sutpen is the devil, then Rosa is justified in her fear of life. Having imagined his inhuman lust, this “light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment” (171), she can, like her father, nail herself up in an attic of her own design: for who would traffic with the ogre once he has revealed himself, unequivocally, as such? And if Sutpen is the devil, then Rosa is justified as well in her puzzlement over the murder of Charles Bon, for this too must be the mad work of demonic forces. She cannot conceive the tale in terms of human motive, the record of beings so immersed in life that dream requires irrevocable action. For her, “the brain recalls just what the muscles grope for; no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream” (143).

Mr. Compson’s narrative of the Sutpen history appears to stand in relationship to Miss Rosa’s as a cool, rationalistic version to a near-hysterical one. Yet it is not to be inferred as a genuinely objective or disinterested: just as much as Rosa, Compson creates his tale out of his own psychic and emotional needs. If he presents the characters, particularly Sutpen, as if they were the objective creations of a mind distant in time from the originals, then this too is only a func-
tion of the personality of Compson. He sees this way because he must, not only because it is the habit of his mind but because he too must protect himself against what he suspects for him some special implications of this story. The sense of detachment that we get from Mr. Compson's version is owing largely to his desire to rid the tale of its complexity; to see its remoteness as the result of the sheer simplicity of its actors he says:

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

Mr. Compson, till Quentin gives him additional information, cannot understand why Henry murdered Bon or why Sutpen apparently refused to allow the marriage of Bon and Henry's sister, Judith; and this inability to understand points to Mr. Compson's perspective that is rooted in his temperament and other allied background. Mr. Compson says: "It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they don't explain and we are not supposed to know" (100). Anyway the moral issue faced by the Sutpens is not an issue at all for Compson. The actions that took place in 1865 are hardly the result of principled commitments that we can understand—the moral stances taken in the name of some concept of good and evil, justice and injustice. There is no serious moral com-
plexity in the episode of Sutpen tragedy. Their concerns are "simpler than our own, their choices "uncomplex."

By doing his reasoning along this line, Mr. Compson makes his own retreat. By insisting that the inaccessibility of the tale is its very point, that its actions occur at such distance from us as to be incomprehensible, Mr. Compson begins the justification not only of his ignorance but of the static quality of his life. Miss Rosa justifies her failure to engage herself with the human by her portrait of Sutpen as a demon and her world as torn with God's necessary vengeance. She reads meanings in the irrationality of events with the help of her Calvinistic frame of reference. Mr. Compson, dispensing with religious imagery, sees only "a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs" (101). The Sutpen story for him is a sequence of gigantic actions, utterly without moral meaning. Sharply dividing human complexity and human action in terms of history, Mr. Compson defends not his ignorance but his cynicism saying that those people could act simply because their world was much simpler and freer of moral nicety than his own time.

Mr. Compson's narrative reveals at times the similarities of Greek tragedy and epic, the heroes of which are frequently made to act in allegiances and context—the capricious machinations of the gods—which free them from what we consider moral issues of right and wrong. The Sutpens of Mr. Compson's imagination can act with comparable boldness because they donot have to endure the terrible conflicts of inner argument, of the fine distinctions between what is right and what is to be done. Moreover, they are propelled by a controlling Fate, determining the movement even before the actors have completed a scene, a Fate of which some of them are even vaguely aware: "[Henry] must have known,
as he knew that what his father had told him was true, that he was doomed and
destined to kill. He must have known that just as he knew that his hope was vain,
what hope and what for he could not have said” (91). From his narrative, in which
he manages to bring Henry and Bon again to their rendezvous at the Sutpen
gates, what Compson wants to suggest is that he is not to be blamed for his own
inactive and indecisive life.

Far more than Quentin, the Compson of Absalom, Absalom! reminds us
of his characterization in The Sound and the Fury. That same tired cynicism with
which he lectures to his troubled young son in the earlier novel is still present in
this one. Quentin says in The Sound and the Fury: “Mother would cry and say that
Father believed his people were better than hers...she couldn’t see that Father
was teaching us that all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust
swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away…”
(175). Quentin’s need in the earlier novel is to do something that is significant, to
save Caddy and himself from that “trash heap” where his father has confined
them, to convert mundane promiscuity into heaven-defying incest. Faced with
this need, in The Sound and the Fury, Mr. Compson can only reiterate his pessi-
mism, the sardonic view of all human effort which has caused Quentin’s need in
the first place:

You want to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror
and then exorcise it with truth...you cannot bear to think that
someday it will no longer hurt like this...no man ever does that
[commit suicide] under the first fury of despair or remorse or
bereavement he does it only when he has realised that even the
despair or remorse or bereavement is not particularly important to
the dark diceman……you will not do that until you come to believe
that even she was not quite worth despair perhaps…then you will
remember that for you to go to Harvard has been your mothers
dream since you were born and no Compson has ever disappointed
a lady…. (177-78)

The first part of Mr. Compson’s narration is concerned with Sutpen. Its
pace is leisurely, the teller himself calm and controlled, producing what is cer­
tainly one of the less dramatic portions of the novel. The reason is simple enough.
Sutpen is easy for Mr. Compson: he is the blind titan of an earlier time, a near­
barbarian whose capacity for action and indifference to the assumptions of com­
munity Mr. Compson finds amusing and easy to absorb. He admires Thomas
Sutpen because he does not understand him, and feels no need. With sardonic
humour he presents the stranger who rapidly interests, intimidates, and at last
dominate the entire community. Immune to the town’s growing outrage, Sutpen
acquires land, house, furniture, and bride with dynamic speed, while public opin­
ion remains much of the time “ ‘in an acute state of indigestion’ ” (46). Dismayed
not so much over what Sutpen does, but at the candour of the way he does it, the
members of the community are presented by Mr. Compson as gnats hovering
impotently about a giant. Sutpen is the larger-than-human who makes clear the
insignificance of the human.

Respectability may be one of Sutpen’s self-determined requirements, part
of the necessary equipage, like furniture and a wife, but Mr. Compson’s admira­
tion is owing to his sense that these are merely the accessories of Sutpen: they
neither reflect nor subjugate the man himself: "'anyone could look at him and say, given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything'" (46). And for Mr. Compson it is for this potentiality for pure action unencumbered by customary social forms that throws all complexities, the innumerable duties and conventions of society into a cocked hat: "He was not liked (which he evidently did not want, anyway) but feared, which seemed to amuse, if not actually please, him" (72).

Given his conception of the size and simplicity of Sutpen, there is no need for Mr. Compson to probe for motive and rationale. Obviously for Mr. Compson there can be no place to study the motive of a figure that has little in common with an ordinary man. Like the characters in Greek tragedy, Sutpen is two dimensional, the mask of a man, known to us by his chosen role and his action. And his splendour is exactly his freedom from all the human anguishes of inner conflict. There is no other way Mr. Compson can dare to comprehend the dynamic and active man, and in the case of Sutpen he scarcely need try. The historical evidence, handed down largely from townspeople who knew almost nothing of him, and from Miss Rosa, who cannot imagine him as human, easily permits the kind of interpretation Mr. Compson makes here.

Mr. Compson can take pleasure in Sutpen because he is hardly conscious, an innocent savage with his children, dragging the Old South to its inevitable, yet unforeseen destruction. His ability to act is only the function of his blindness—he doesn't know, is in fact outrageously ignorant that Fate is the real ruler here: "he was unaware that his flowering was a forced blooming too and that while he was still playing the scene to the audience, behind him Fate, destiny, retribution, irony—the stage manager, call him what you will—was already striking the set and drag-
Bon is the second of the two ideal figures Mr. Compson presents in his narrative. Sutpen is the dynamic actor unburdened with knowledge, whose crudeness of mind and vision girds him with lethal power. Bon is his opposite, the epitome of a decadent aesthete, premature as far as the South is concerned, but hardly for Mr. Compson. For him, Bon is "'an elegant and indolent esoteric hot-house bloom'" (97). "'lounging before them in the outlandish and almost feminine garments of his sybaritic privacy'" (96). His great insight, like Mr. Compson's, is the knowledge of human folly.

And yet this is the man, having the same cynicism of the narrator, who finds it necessary at last to die rather than give up his mistress or marriage to Judith Sutpen. The irony, of course is not merely that Bon would do such a thing, but that Mr. Compson, knowing from hindsight the way of Bon will die, would imagine him the way he does. It is Mr. Compson's own ordering of things that makes what Bon's personality is, and that devises the threat of bigamy as the cause of murder. The story he tells of Bon and Henry in New Orleans, their discussion of Bon's mistress and the marriage ceremony, their hope that the war will decide the conflict by doing away with at least one of them—this is all conjecture on Mr. Compson's part. In other words, Mr. Compson attributes to at least one of these characters a personality and values similar to his own, knowing full well that this figure is one who apparently does act, who chooses to die for a cause that Mr. Compson is at pains to describe as not being a very good one.

Mr. Compson's own task as narrator becomes clear: to account for Bon's last action in such a way so as to keep intact his own fundamental attitude to-
wards life, his insistence that action and commitment are impossible to the think-
ing, aware man. That this task will be especially difficult with Charles Bon that Mr.
Compson himself has created is exactly the point. If Mr. Compson is to enjoy the
comforts of symbolic detachment from anxiety, if he is to force the fact of murder
into a fiction consistent with his own attitudes, then he must strike the apparent
opposition at its strongest link. The symbolic resolution will be effective only if it
appears to be well tested.

Mr. Compson's strategy is to see Bon's inflexible pessimism as growing
to an incurable fatalism, an awareness of doom that nothing surpasses, and to
see the lovers themselves (the brother Henry as well as Judith and Bon) as being
guided and determined by psychological forces having little to do with love and
choice. Mr. Compson does not give significance of action in the story of Sutpen's
children by portraying it as hardly being action at all: rather it is the inevitable
outcome of random meetings, conventional psychological forces, and the unfor-
tunate clash of two diametrically opposed habits of vision, one belonging to Bon,
the other to Sutpen. Mr. Compson's belief is that Bon's death is not so much as
the conclusion of a considered action, a climax of motives and commitments that
thrust themselves against real obstacles, but as the result of Bon's passivity: his
recognition of the poverty of motive and the imminence of destiny.

The love between Bon and Judith which might be seen as necessitating
the murder is explained away by Mr. Compson. Since they saw each other only a
few times in their lives—"three times in two years, for a total period of seventeen
days" (99)—it is preposterous to imagine that Judith and Charles Bon fell in love:
"You cannot even imagine him and Judith together" (97). On the contrary it is
Henry who is the lover here, incestuously attracted to Judith, homosexually attracted to Bon, revolving this psychological maze by uniting the two objects of his neurotic loves: “it must have been Henry who seduced Judith, not Bon” (99).

This is not a love story, not a tale of death heroically endured or administered as the price of love, but rather a case book of more or less typical psychological responses. It is Mr. Compson who tightens the threads here, gradually depriving his characters of their freedom, with Charles Bon as the only one sophisticated enough to recognise and admit the truths that Mr. Compson demonstrates. Even the attachment of Henry to Judith is nothing more than what any modestly read man might easily imagine between brother and sister, the product of glands and conventional complexes: “between Henry and Judith there had been a relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of brother and sister even” (79). So even this love was not chosen, it is “such as might exist between two people who, regardless of sex or age or heritage of race or tongue, had been marooned at birth on a desert island” (99).

As for the friendship of Henry and Charles that leads to the engagement of Bon and Judith, Mr. Compson applies his typical reasoning to make inference; he says the meeting of them has the effect of an attraction of the opposites: Henry a man with provincial background and Bon a tantalizing product of New Orleans society. Overwhelmed with the sophistication, the dress, the bearing of Charles Bon, Henry chooses him as the agent of his own desire for Judith: “The brother...taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband” (96).

The two young men, according to Mr. Compson, are as trapped in the
structure of sex and social upbringing, the blood's attractions and the environment's demands, as Sutpen is in the schemes of the unseen fatality that rules him. Mr. Compson, always quick to utilize his knowledge from Greek, Biblical, or Freudian sources, sees Bon and Henry as the representatives of neatly opposed concepts: the Catholic and the Puritan; an extravagant and worn-out New Orleans and a Spartan Sutpen's Hundred; a pessimistic and passive view of life that lives with despair because it has never bothered with hope, and the active and aspiring view that desires realities, it well knows, are impossible. Although Mr. Compson is more engaged here than he has been with Sutpen, he still controls the movement of the events in his own perspective. Olga Vickery says what Compson describes here is "a battle of ideas or concepts and not a conflict of people" (89).

With the arrival of Henry and Bon in New Orleans, however, Mr. Compson's narrative picks up, as he becomes genuinely fascinated with the character of Bon and his attempts to argue Henry out of his puritan attitudes regarding a man's obligations to his future wife. Charles Bon at this point absorbs Mr. Compson's full attention and imaginative powers, appearing to the latter as a man marvellously shrewd, initiating Henry in the splendid sexual and social intricacies of New Orleans. Mr. Compson's interest here is not in the soundness of Bon's arguments— for he will eventually present these as specious later—but in Bon's grace of manoeuvre, his ingenious undermining of Henry's provincialism: "I can imagine how he did it—the calculation, the surgeon's alertness and cold detachment" (111).

Mr. Compson describes in detail the octoroon women. They are "a row of faces like a bazaar of flowers, the supreme apotheosis of chattelry" (112); the place where those women live is the place of love, "a place created for and by volup-
uousness" (112), and the woman who lives in it is "raised and trained to fulfil a woman's sole end and purpose: to love, to be beautiful, to divert" (117). Mr. Compson gives Bon the art of sophistry to defend his mistress, marriage, and child, and Compson sees the signs of Bon's worldliness in every word and argument made by him. Bon glibly attacks the Anglo-Saxon repression and hypocrisy, justifying his own "normal human instinct" (116). He then shifts, in the midst of his argument from lust to the argument for compassion: the bought woman as the sign of her new owner's sympathy—"But we do save that one, who but for us would have been sold to any brute who had the price, not sold to him for the night like a white prostitute, but body and soul for life... a sparrow which God himself neglected to mark" (116). And the woman is not a whore, rather "the only true chaste women, not to say virgins, in America" (117). This is all the part of the charm of Mr. Compson's Bon, cynical and world-weary like his creator. In Mr. Compson's imagination Bon becomes a man of sophistication who can argue brilliantly either for morality or voluptuousness; through his artful argument the whore he has bought becomes the sparrow he has saved; and the great gift of the woman is her knowledge of the "the strange and ancient curious pleasures of the flesh which is all: there is nothing else" (116).

In these passages Bon becomes a type of wish fulfilment for Mr. Compson, the possessor of a powerful sophistication derived from his nihilism. A comparable situation exists between Miss Rosa and her imagined Sutpen, whose brutality is implicit in her frustrated desire. In both cases Sutpen and Bon are the products of the creators with the stamp of their own personality. Bon is Mr. Compson's man of the world, the consummate nihilist who will argue, love, kill, in
the name of ending whose only purpose is to fulfil the time between birth and
death. Henry Sutpen, caught in all his diverse loves and obligations to father,
friend, and sister, can only wait for Bon to act; and Bon simply submits himself to
the necessity of whatever it is that is going to happen.

Fate is the basis of Mr. Compson's understanding of the Sutpen story, and
Charles Bon becomes the key to his narrative because Bon is the complete fatalist.
Bon's death at the end is seen by Mr. Compson as perfectly consistent with his
worldliness: in fact it is also considered as an act. Even suicide is an action; what
Bon does is more suitable: he allows himself to be murdered as the last necessary
episode in this "horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs" (101).

Bon has said to Henry, "I donot renounce" (132), which may echo later in
the reader's mind that when he learns how Sutpen puts aside his first wife, or how
Judith informs Charles Etienne that he might put aside his own wife, but here in
Mr. Compson's version it has scarcely the meaning of moral earnestness or fidel-
ity. The story of octoroon mistress, or the nigger who should scarcely trouble Henry
Sutpen depends on Bon's rhetorical purposes at the time. To imagine that Bon
would die for her is as unthinkable as that he would die for Judith Sutpen. Then
why does he refuse to renounce her? But the unanswerability of that question is,
of courses, the whole point and substance of Mr. Compson's narrative. The fail-
ure of all these bloody happenings to mean, their failure to form a coherent, ration-
nal version of human affairs—that is what Mr. Compson insists upon at the last.

Henry Sutpen does not murder Charles Bon to protect his sister's honour
or his own, does not drag the wounded Bon to safety for the sake of a moral code.
And Charles Bon, who does not woo Judith, who loves her only "after his fashion"
(94), who becomes engaged "without volition or desire...took his dismissal in the same passive and sardonic spirit" (100), does not suddenly discover either love or honour. The photo of the mistress and the child which, according to Mr. Compson, Judith finds in his pocket, is probably not even a gesture of bitterness, any more than it is the gesture of love which Quentin and Shreve stress in their later version. However uncertainty never disperses from their story.

If there is truth in the narration of Quentin and Shreve, it does not depend on a closeness to historical fact, but on the vitality of the telling and the passionate involvement of the narrators with their subject and with each other. Unlike the other narrators, Quentin and Shreve present what is largely a cooperative version of the Sutpen story. For Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson the listener of a tale is a silent receptacle not only absorbing story but also being affected by the pressure exerted by the teller. But for Quentin and Shreve listening and telling are identical actions:

It was Shreve speaking, though...it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal; the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere. (303)

This engagement of the boys with each other is another attempt still untried to get at the truth of the Sutpen legend. It is a novel technical device thought to be worthy of trial by Faulkner to get at the truth through human narrative.

Like Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson, the boys begin their narration with imag-
ining the Sutpen history in the shadow of their own personality, colouring the tale with their youth, their distance from the past, their situation as freshmen at Harvard. The time is now January 1910. Shreve approaches the story with a heavy wit: “You mean she was no kin to you, no kin to you at all, that there was actually one Southern Bayard or Guinevere who was no kin to you? Then what did she die for” (174). He quickly retells the story he has just heard in a few pages of parodic exaggeration: “this old dame” (176) and “this Faustus, this demon, this Beelzebub...who appeared suddenly one Sunday with two pistols and twenty subsidiary demons” (178), who fiercely erected his kingdom and, just as fiercely, destroyed it. Shreve sees Sutpen as a “mad impotent old man” (180) who deliberately frustrates his own ambitions. And Quentin responds with his own device for keeping himself detached both from these matters and his Canadian roommate: “He sounds just like father...Just exactly like father” (181).

Following the story of Charles Etienne (mostly from Mr. Compson in chapter 6) and Sutpen’s own version of his life (mostly from Grandfather in chapter 7), the two boys move into their own invention. They decide that Charles Bon must have been the older half-brother of Henry and Judith, determined either to marry his half-sister to win recognition from his father, Thomas Sutpen, who, for some unknown reason, withholds it. The basis for their assumption that the threat of incest, not bigamy or the blind vengeance aroused by a demon, is the true cause of Henry’s murder of Bon and they explain it unequivocally. Explaining to Shreve how Mr. Compson comes to know the incest motive, when in his own narrative he attributes all to bigamy and the “bloody mischancing of human affairs” Quentin says that he himself was the one who gave Compson the new information, “The
Regardless of this evidence, however, the important fact here is that Quentin and Shreve can expand and elaborate on the incest theme because it rightly suits the condition of their own youth: sons still seeking their maturity, potential lovers still dreaming of passions they cannot admit are usually confined to books. Whatever facts may exist here, the romantic tale of siblings and lovers which Quentin and Shreve evolve goes well beyond such facts. Their story is similar to the stories of Rosa and Compson in that this is the tale they can most afford to tell, a magnificent yet self-indulgent exploration of love and courage, of defiance and honour. The enigma of murder in 1865, which Rosa explains in terms of demonic powers and which Compson attributes to fatality, becomes with Quentin and Shreve a tale of star-crossed lover and the quest for identity. It is the tale we would expect from two boys "who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins, the heart and blood of youth" (294).

There story has all the elements of Byronic romance. First there is Charles Bon: the gallant, troubled young man isolated by his mother for some unknown reason; the lover torn with incestuous desires he is still prepared to restrain for the sake of honour; the son who demands from his mysterious father the nod for recognition that will send him on his way, a fugitive from his desire yet the owner at last of his identity. And there is Henry Sutpen, the young brother, the follower who is desperately trying to catch up with his model. He is born into one world and follows his hero into another, attending him, even as he must guard his sister from him.

Shreve says, "And now we’re going to talk about love" (316). This is the
impact of the first and longest phase of Quentin and Shreve's narration: a story of love and youthful heroism, intensified because it is also the story of potential incest. By interpreting the facts this way, they free Charles Bon of the callousness and fatalism with which Compson has described him. But in doing so, the boys encounter the necessary crisis of their narration, the possibility that this is a story not so much of love as of exploration. For if Bon is the half-brother of Judith and eventually realizes this fact, as the boys allow he does, then his actions toward Sutpen take on the quality of exploration. It could be argued that he is willing to use Judith as a human instrument in order to gain his recognition from the father.

Insofar as the boys are using this historical material for imaginative self-service, it is necessary for them to deal with this possibility of exploitation on Bon's part. If he has to be their Byronic hero, representing in the middle of their nineteenth-century values and possibilities attractive to the youths of 1910, then he can hardly be the callous rogue who uses the love of his sister to attack his father. Their problem here is again the requirement of symbolic resolution: if they are to enjoy the solace of symbolic form, then they must overcome some self-erected barrier, in this case the possible dishonour of Charles Bon. Shreve takes most of the initiative here. Charles Bon wanted recognition from Sutpen, Shreve admits, but he also loved Judith.

Quentin resists Shreve's argument for much of their narrative, as if eager for a purer love than this. Yet Shreve gradually makes clear his point, emphasising both the fervour of Bon's quest for recognition—"there would be that flash, that instant of indisputable recognition between them and he would know for sure and forever" (219)—and the growing intensity of his attraction to Judith: "It would be
no question of choosing, having to choose between the champagne or whiskey and the sherbet, but all of a sudden... you find that you don't want anything but that sherbet and that you haven't been wanting anything else but that" (323). Shreve even uses the incest as evidence of the love of Bon for Judith—the impossibility of his being able to restrain it—and thus further excuses him from any possible charge of calculation. Finally, the love and the quest for recognition are involved with each other, for the measure of Bon's earnestness for the one is taken by his willingness to sacrifice the other: "Yes. Yes. I will renounce her; I will renounce love and all; that will be cheap, cheap, even though he say to me 'never look upon my face again; take my love and my acknowledgement in secret, and go' I will do that" (327).

The motive behind this retelling is the symbolic indication that adolescent notions of love and honour still operate in the world. By conceiving the story as they do, Quentin and Shreve conjure up a fiction in which these notions are not names but living factors. It is the father, not the young men caught up in this irresolvable dilemma, who is made to bear the deepest moral censure of the story. For it is he, according to the two boys, who withholds recognition from his eldest son, thus ensuring the final disaster.

But the motives of Quentin and Shreve are more personal and specific than this need to give fictional life to certain abstract values. For Quentin there is the additional problem of his complex relationship to the South. Proud of his heritage yet ashamed of its transgressions, Quentin participates in this retelling of the Sutpen story in the hope of ridding himself of his ambivalence. For despite the urgent cry with which he concludes the novel, it is clear that in certain ways
Quentin does hate the South, finding in the Sutpen history a legacy of violence and hatred, of courage exacted in an unworthy cause, of grace and courtesy undermined by inhumanity.

Quentin’s strategy here, aided by Shreve, is to shift the emphasis of the story to the sons, Henry and Bon, seeing them (as he must try to see himself) as the unwitting and faultless victims of the brutality of the father. By explaining the murder of Bon as a tragedy of incestuous love, Quentin can resolve his own and Henry’s guilt in the necessary defence of honour and purity. Sutpen’s refusal to recognize Bon, and thus prevent incest, gives Bon no choice: he must (for love and honour) insist on going through with the marriage. Henry Sutpen, Quentin’s special alter ego, must then murder his friend and brother out of devotion to a code that transcends brotherhood. The actions of both sons are justified by Quentin and Shreve, and the concluding episode of violence is also justified by finally admirable allegiance to purity. Bon’s love for Judith may be sincere enough, and Sutpen’s rejection of him cruel and irrational, but Quentin’s Henry Sutpen still has the larger responsibility of protecting his sister, even at the cost of his brother’s life, against the violation of a universal, rather than a merely Southern, sanction against incest.

Shreve identifies himself closely with Charles Bon. According to Shreve, he is ruthlessly cut off from the family that is his, and is helpless to wrest from his father the sign that will return it to him. The implication of incest is able to provide Shreve, as it does Quentin, comfort for his inner grief, because it so romanticizes Bon’s alien situation, transforming him into a virtual Byronic figure. Shreve’s Charles Bon is the man stripped of his past, yet in actuality the eldest son, the
adored, the skilful, the brilliant hero of his own alienation, who rides to his death because he can neither have nor give up the woman he loves.

For Quentin and Shreve, as for Miss Rosa and Compson, this re-creation of the past becomes a source of symbolic consolation, a strategy with which to relieve the pressures of private anguish. Despite the intensity of all these tales and the investment being made, and despite the willingness to deal with some imagined crisis on which to test their aesthetic strength, the fact remains that they are all examples of imaginative manipulation for their creator's ends.

The coming together of the boys is the mirror of their imaginative engagement with the past, an engagement so profound as to give their meanings the status of facts in our minds. By this crossing into each other's lives, Quentin and Shreve emotionally propel themselves into communion with the lives of Bon and Henry as well: "the cold room where there was now not two of them but four, the two who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins, the heart and blood of youth" (294). Out of their imaginative capacity for the one emerges the other; the one is the flesh of the other. The past is finally known in the dynamics of love, which becomes for Faulkner the power of the imagination to break down temporarily the fact of separation, of distance between knower and known.

The section is interesting in the sense that now Quentin and Shreve, in the process of re-creating the Sutpen story, identifies themselves totally with the two characters of history Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen. As they have totally identified themselves with the characters of the Sutpen story, there is a breakdown of the objectivity of the narrative for which they attempted earlier. Since they assume the
character of Charles and Henry Sutpen, in the act of their narration, they are now expected to express their feelings and pathos instead of exercising their best mind to re-create the story that took place some forty years ago. At the height of the disintegration of their narrative Shreve makes confession that there is in the South "something my people haven't got", which is answered by Quentin, "You can't understand it. You would have to be born there" (361)—a statement that dismisses the meaning of everything they have done together.

In an interview with Faulkner a university student asked him whether his technique was like looking at the blackbird in different ways, Faulkner, instead of reacting against it, made an earnest rejoinder saying "it was ..... the thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But ..... when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth" (Gwynn. 274). Faulkner tries to trace the roots of human tragedies in man's inability to grasp reality which is in a constant state of flux. He systematically explores man's feeling of insecurity in the absence of fixed patterns or ideals which are otherwise abstractions derived from human experience. Since there is no guarantee of capturing the truth from personal experience, it is folly to be passionately assertive in our views of life or in anything. Faulkner's ambivalence in dealing with his South as well as in racial matters has close link to his philosophical orientation. Sutpen's dynastic dream may be a grotesque caricature of a man of the plantation economy of the deep South, but the narrators of his story are not. Their illusions and romanticizing of events are the fundamental issues which have far-reaching implications to human suffering and tragedies. Faulkner is well aware of the limitations in human
perceptions and to make his reader aware of this reality in itself is an important achievement, because it helps a person to see a problem in better perspective.

The supremacy of the fiction lies in that everything conjectured by the narrators, however distorted, reveals thematic relevance. Since their projections are determined by their own psychological and social past, and since the Sutpen story throws additional light upon the past, the meaning of what they tell reflects at least doubly and must be read throughout for its multiple import. More important than this is the capability of human imagination in making up of various versions of verisimilitude of a given thing. They tell what might have occurred; their usefulness lies in their conjectural plausibility. The theoretical probabilities raised by the narrators in their error are the core of Faulkner's thematic concern. How can truth be known except by conjecture? The unknowability of truth is confirmed by Quentin's remarks that his version of an event will certainly not be so plain as he has heard from others. Truth is not as smooth and plain as the verbal formula tries to re-create it. However, if the reader has this knowledge as his background, he has a better chance to approximate the truth. By his ingenuity Faulkner creates a new actuality or supreme fiction. As such his work becomes, in Ernst Cassirer's words, "not an imitation but a discovery of reality" (143).

Works Cited


Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, 1936. All the quotations of the novel in this chapter are from this edition.


