CHAPTER – IV

Absalom, Absalom!: The Unfinished Dialogue

“There is neither a first nor last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) - they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and reinvigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival” (Bakhtin 1986 170).

This chapter examines the narrative features of Absalom, Absalom! as a polyphonic novel emphasizing on the limitations of knowledge and the problematic nature of language as a means of communication and apprehension of reality. As we have seen in Light in August polyphony is the main source of tension and ambivalence in the narrative. Having the highest ambivalence and tension among Faulkner’s novels, Absalom, Absalom! would be considered a perfect polyphonic novel. The four character narrators, Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon recount the same story by telling a variety of episodes that continuously overlap. Their versions are extremely different and intensely revised as they are retold, which induces a feeling of confusion in the readers, who have to dialogically participate in constructing of the whole story.

Not only do the narrators, who come from three different generations, engage in an unfinished dialogue, but also the present time narrators, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve, respond to the earlier and absent narrators such as General Compson, Miss. Rosa and especially Thomas Sutpen. The narrative voices intersect and interrupt
each other in the most complicated manner so that the reader finds him/herself in the
difficult situation of having to reconcile conflicting and contradictory versions of the
same story. The narrators’ constant time changing, the intermingling of narrative
voices, and the fragmentation of the story produce a tension that demands from the
reader the titanic effort of holding all the information provided without a chance to
calmly organize it. The reader, thus, once again finds him/herself thrown into the
narrative as passive reading seems impossible.

The novel appears at this early point to conform to the definition of a
dialogical novel given by Bakhtin. A dialogical novel, he writes, “is constructed not
as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects
into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none
of which entirely becomes an object for the other; this interaction provides no support
for the viewer who would objectify an entire event according to some ordinary
monological category (thematically, lyrically or cognitively)—and this consequently
makes the reader a participant” (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 18). Individual
characters speak for themselves and readers judge for themselves which voices they
will give authority to, without the influence of an author who valorizes one
character’s “truth” over another’s.

As Donald Kartiganer observes, “[e]ach narrator . . . must tell that version of
the Sutpen story which he or she needs to tell—the version that will both explain the
facts and satisfy some personal desire: symbolically purge an anxiety or justify a life
that is not without its frustrations and bitterness” (1983 155). A distinction between
them would help us understand the construction of this polyphonic and highly
complex narrative artifice.

The book opens with a story that Miss Rosa Coldfield tells to Quentin
Compson. Quentin, we discover, has already heard the story, or at least part of it, from
his father, Mr. Compson. Later on, with the help of Shreve, his roommate at Harvard,
Quentin himself will attempt to retell or (re)construct the Sutpen story as they pick up
from where Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson have left it.

Absalom, Absalom! unfolds in front of our eyes since the crucial events are
told and retold from several perspectives. Todorov calls this process “repetition” and
is constituted of the various accounts of the same events from which the reader must
construct the event (72). Bakhtin rightly calls these repetitions the various points of
view of the narrators. The narrators of Absalom, Absalom!, however, are not narrators

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in the common sense of the word. They are not satisfied with just relating what they know about the story, but also endeavor to supply the missing facts. Thus they do not just narrate what they know about the Sutpen story, but also contribute to its making. In fact, were it not for their speculation and interpretations, the Sutpen saga would have sounded absurd, or at least incomprehensible.

On another level, Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, and especially Quentin and Shreve play the role(s) the reader has to play as s/he tries to understand the story. What makes these narrators interesting is that each of them has a different point of view on the Sutpen story. In fact, each point of view reflects its author’s personality and what s/he stands for. Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson and Quentin are involved in the story at a personal level. To them understanding the story is vital to their very existence. Thus Miss Rosa’s version, which appears rather distorted, is derived from her personal experience colored by her difficult childhood and puritan upbringing. Miss Rosa tells Quentin that she has always been afraid of Sutpen as a child and believed that he was an “ogre” or “demon.” In fact, we find out from her narrative that fear of him has never left her even as a grown woman. We thus conclude that, Miss Rosa’s vision of Sutpen and of “reality” is colored by her fascination with Sutpen and her fear of him.

With respect to Mr. Compson, we face a different problem. Mr. Compson, whom we meet in this book, is essentially the same character we have met in *The Sound and the Fury*. He is still skeptical intellectual. Therefore, we must expect that his construction of the Sutpen tragedy would betray the way he views himself and the world. Mr. Compson is the narrator who casts a fatalistic and pessimistic aura on the story. He frequently refers to the role fate played in Sutpen’s life and his consequent downfall and finds in it a parallel to the demise of the South.

Quentin, perhaps, plays the most important role in *Absalom, Absalom!* Several critics believe that the novel is Quentin’s and not Sutpen’s. No doubt, Sutpen’s tragedy hits Quentin deep and the parallels between it and *The Sound and the Fury* are numerous. No wonder, the Sutpen’s tragedy engages Quentin’s imagination and emotions, especially the Henry-Bon-Judith triangle with its echoes of Quentin’s relationship with his sister Caddy. The resemblance between Henry’s situation and Quentin’s is without a doubt responsible for Quentin’s passionate response to the story.
On the other hand, while Quentin plays the role of the listener, or what Todorov calls the patients, in the first part of the novel, he also assumes the more active part of the “agent” in the second half where he and Shreve (re)construct most of the events. Shreve plays the role most similar to that of the reader. As an outsider, to whom the Sutpen story does not have much personal significance, he can be an objective observer, critic and interpreter. The reader perhaps finds him/herself in the same situation that Shreve finds himself. As Shreve, s/he is presented with the story of Sutpen as it is told by three more or less involved narrators who are motivated by emotional and psychological needs to tell and interpret the story of Sutpen. These narrators are strongly attached to the story as they invest in it their most intimate emotions. Shreve, however, has less at stake, and consequently, like the furniture dealer in *Light in August*, can relax and reflect on the story with a bemused, detached and even at times light-hearted manner.

It is appropriate here to mention that different personal pasts have shaped a range of perspectives on each character in Sutpen’s story, just as different ideological points of view have determined the representation of the events in the novel. According to Bakhtin’s analysis of the relationship between language and ideology, one’s language receives deep-rooted influence from someone else’s discourse, which makes the language heterogeneous as well as “socio-ideological”:

> As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. . . . Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 293-94)

In one level *Absalom, Absalom!* is concerned with the paradox of language: the need we have for language to apprehend and express reality and its limits in doing so. As Miss Rosa declares, language can tell everything and nothing:

> I will tell you what he did and let you be the judge. (Or try to tell you, because there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them. It can be told; I could take that many sentences, repeat the
bold blank naked and outrageous words just as he spoke them, and bequeath you only that same aghast and outraged unbelief I knew when I comprehended what they meant; or take three thousand sentences and leave you only that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for almost fifty years.) (138, Italic original)

As an example that illuminates the sagacity of Rosa’s observation, Louis D. Rubin notes

“I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” What that last paragraph tells us, too, is the inadequacy of language, of words, to articulate the complexity of Quentin Compson’s emotional experience. As if the single abstract verb proposed by Shreve McCannon could possibly comprehend the intensity and complication of Quentin’s response to the process of discovery and recognition that he has just completed! (Yet it is through language that we are enabled to understand this; for we are reading a novel). (1995 340)

As Rosa Coldfield notes, the narrators’ language is so charged with their perceptions and their tormented personalities that to distinguish between events and subjective impressions and emotions is nearly impossible. Of course, this is because they cannot, indeed, be separated. But what will the listener’s perspective of Sutpen and the story be if not multilayered, flexible even imagined? We shall take a closer look at the narrators’ subjective perspectives in the following section. Furthermore, the construction of reality is not only affected by the minds and experience of the characters but also by the predetermination of their views resulting from their personal absorption or rejection of the cultural codes appropriate to the context, which the characters, the narrators, Faulkner, and us as readers project onto the reality we live, the reality we tell, and the reality we read.

If the coexistence of narrative voices is particularly relevant to Light in August’s concern with narrative reliability, it is much more so in Absalom, Absalom!, where Faulkner relies on the investment of different voices in the telling of the enigmatic Sutpen’s story. This allows the writer to reflect on the nuances of the fragile credibility of discourse as a means of conveying knowledge, which he does by elaborating degrees of reliability in the narrators’ accounts, allowing subjective, ideological, and purely discursive factors to pervade and shape the voices’ relation to the story. Working on the same level of the diegesis, the four character-narrators
produce a composite image in which, although under the direction of the frame (external) narrator, the voices inform, overlap, contradict each other, comment, and absorb the others, blurring the lines that might apparently distinguish the accounts while telling the various maladjustments between character narration and story, in a repetitive mode of the story of Thomas Sutpen that, although it seems to be the same story, in fact appears to be a different one for each narrator. To accomplish my aim of considering Faulkner’s complex textual formulation of the problem of reliability in *Absalom, Absalom!* I will attend here to the peculiarities and functions of each narrative voice in the novel.

Rosa Coldfield is the first storyteller to present Sutpen’s story. Her narrative covers a great part of chapter 1, told directly for the most part yet sometimes filtered through Quentin’s thoughts presented in italics; and the whole of chapter five in what has been labeled by Ruppersburg “translated narrative,” which complicates even more the analysis of her voice.111

In chapter one, we learn that Miss Rosa sent for Quntin to tell him the story of her brother-in-law Thomas Sutpen. The external narrator opens the chapter by describing the scene in which we see Quentin and Miss Rosa in her father’s office. Miss Rosa apparently needs to tell the story. Quentin remarks, “It’s because she wants it told” in the future.119

In chapter V, Miss Rosa describes the day Charles Bon was killed and the subsequent War years when Judith, Clytie, herself and Wash Jones took care of Sutpen’s Hundred, and finally explains how Sutpen came back and caused her an “unbearable outrage” (140) by proposing a conditioned marriage.

Miss Rosa is presented to us first by the external narrator as a 66-year-old angry and frustrated woman whom he depicts as follows:

Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she has worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or not husband none knew, sitting so bolt upright in the straight hard chair that was so tall for her that her legs hung straight and rigid as if she had iron shinbones and ankles, clear of the floor with that air of impotent and static rage like children’s feet, and talking in that grim haggard amazed voice until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self- and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as
thought by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the binding and dreaming and victorious dust (3-4).

The external-narrator early on warns us about Miss Rosa’s reliability as a narrator. Not only is she an involved narrator, but she is also an angry old maid. Later on, as we learn more about Miss Rosa’s childhood from her and Mr. Compson, we become more doubtful of her reliability. Her version of the story sounds like a Gothic tale with all the necessary ingredients beginning with Sutpen the “ogre” and his mansion and ending with his victims that include his own children, Miss Rosa and her sister Ellen. We must take into consideration, as Bakhtin points out, that the language that Rosa uses is essential for an understanding of her point of view. That is the way Miss Rosa sees Sutpen and the world reflects who she is and what she believes in. Concerning the social orientation of the language Bakhtin states

"[l]anguage is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life...." (1981 293)

Thus, by paying attention to her language, the reader can come to understand her and her role in the novel. For instance, Rosa’s vocabulary and imagery are rooted in her Calvinistic background. It is this background that makes her see Sutpen as a devil who came and destroyed her world, her father, her sister and her sister’s children, and finally herself. She also holds him, and men like him, responsible for the defeat and destruction of the South. Rosa’s monetary metaphors also reflect her background. She is the daughter of Calvinist merchant who measured and weighed his personal actions as did his business transactions.

On the other hand, Miss Rosa’s choice of words shows her awareness of and attention to her audience. Perhaps it is no coincidence that she picked the young and romantic Quentin to tell the story to, since a more mature person would not have neither taken her nor her narrative as seriously. Miss Rosa always leaves a “loophole” in her statements about herself as Bakhtin would say. That it to say, her discourse about herself is marked with doubt. It seems like she expects her listener, Quentin, to tell her that she should not blame herself because she was the victim of
Sutpen’s ruthlessness. It is for this reason that Miss Rosa keeps repeating the sentence “I hold no brief for myself.” Concerning this Bakhtin aptly expounds:

Each person’s inner world and thought has its stabilized social audience that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values and so on are fashioned … specific class and specific era are limits that the ideal of the addressee cannot go beyond. In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As a word it is precisely the product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addressee and addressee. Each and every word expresses the “one” in relation to the “other”. I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view of the community to which I belong (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 86).

Miss Rosa’s profoundly sensorial discourse is concerned with touch, sight, and emotions provoked by felt experiences such as the weight of Charles Bon’s coffin, the touch of Clytie’s flesh, or the door barring her entrance to Judith’s bedroom. Since her tale narrates her personal experience, her language is highly subjective and connotative, affected by both a female and rather traditional admiration, as well as personal outrage. She is at the center of the story of the harm done by Sutpen to her family, and so everything is told depending on how this has affected her isolated and wasted life; “as participant she is the one least capable of selecting and organizing what has happened to her, the one most subject to the feelings and memories rather than the thoughts which might grow out of the story of Sutpen” (Reed 161).

Rosa furnishes us with many of the major details of the story. On the other hand, her construction of the events is colored by her fear and fascination with Sutpen. Nevertheless, her narrative owes its fantastic element to Rosa’s wild imagination that is fed by her ignorance of the man himself. She, herself, declares that she has seen him only a few times in her whole life. Thus, like the reader, Miss Rosa has to construct Sutpen and his story. While she succeeds at times she fails at others. As Todorov says, Rosa, the narrator, passes through the three stages of ignorance, illusion and truth before s/he reaches her final construction of Sutpen’s story (1980 80). That statement is also true with respect to the other narrators. They are all searching for knowledge which will enable them to understand Sutpen and eventually themselves.
Rosa also does not know much of the details of the story. For instance, she does not know why Henry had to kill Bon, his sister’s finance. She also fails to understand Judith when she thinks that Judith did not mourn Bon. Thus her ignorance is also responsible for her misinterpretation of the events and the other characters. The following passage, for example, reveals how little Rosa knows:

I saw Judith’s marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse; I saw Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn to and ask to protect her remaining child; I saw Henry repudiate his home and birthright and then return and practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister’s sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown; I saw that man return—the evil’s source and head which had outlasted all its victims—who has created two children not only to destroy one another and his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him (12).

This passage actually summarizes Miss Rosa’s story, which she is trying to understand through telling it. However, Rosa also has another reason for telling the story. The key is the phrase “yet I agree to marry him” (emphasis added). Rosa sounds apprehensive about her willingness to marry Sutpen. We know that she was insulted by something that Sutpen said to her at the time. Perhaps she still feels insulted. Moreover, Rosa knows that the community knows about her failed engagement to Sutpen and thus she intends to set the record straight once and for all.

Despite being intensely personal, Rosa Coldfield’s narrative powerfully engages the historical and social views of the community of Jefferson. Aware of this, she tells Quentin that “at home could have had the company of neighbors who were at least of my own kind who had known me all my life and even longer in the sense that they thought not only as I thought but as my forbears thought” (127). The town has shaped her personal voice, which reflects the collective view: her repeated storytelling prevents forgetting while simultaneously reinforcing prejudices, and thereby conforming to social and racial beliefs. The town has a voice in the storytelling through Rosa’s narrative emanating from her intimate space. When she narrates her return home from Sutpen’s Hundred, she constantly refers to what “they will have told you” (139) in a complaint about their misunderstanding. She is able to provide reasons for what they say, and even affirms that she forgave Sutpen for his affront, although “[t]hey will tell you different, but I did” (142). Nonetheless, Rosa assumes the town’s version in order to explain her pitiable circumstances, her multiple
frustrations, her intimate reasons (139-142). As with Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, the town’s account becomes a source of authority because she is unable to see herself differently. This explains why her views on historical, social, gender, and racial discourse conform so much to the New South’s creed and how, through her utterance, the communal oratorical voice finds a projection in the intimacy of the individual, while Rosa’s fragile personal voice endows the collective discourse with authority.

Whereas the first part of Rosa’s narrative takes place before the Civil War, the second part takes place during and after it. Parker views this section as an “unspeakable monologue” and not as a dialogue between Rosa and Quentin. He says “It is difficult to imagine a character, even a Faulkner character, even Rosa Coldfield, literally speaking the words of *Absalom*’s chapter V, at least not in any ordinary fictional sense” (67). Parker seems to ignore Miss Rosa’s need for a response from her listener, even a silent response that would signify agreement or sympathy. Sutpen is at war, Ellen is dead, and one day Wash Jones, Sutpen’s servant, comes to Miss Rosa’s house and shouts that Henry has killed Charles Bon, his sister’s fiancé. (We have already been introduced to Bon in chapters II, III and IV by Mr. Compson). Bon, even more than Sutpen, does not seem to exist outside Miss Rosa’s and Mr. Compson’s imaginations. We never see him or hear him talk except when Miss Rosa or Mr. Compson speculate on what he must have done or said on certain occasions. Meanwhile, the Charles Bon that Miss Rosa construct resembles a romance hero. In fact, Miss Rosa herself questions the reality of his existence. Even when she goes to his funeral, she tells Quentin that she does not see his corpse. For while she helps carry his coffin, she suspects that his body was not in it. However, Bon appeals to Rosa’s imagination as she seems to have fallen in love with him, despite her repeatedly denying it, she says:

> I had never seen him (I never saw him. I never even saw him dead. I heard a name, I saw a photograph, I helped to make a grave: and that was all) though he had been in my house once, that first New Year’s Day when Henry brought him from nephew duty to speak to me on their way back to school and I was not home. Until then I had not even heard his name, did not know that he existed. Yet on the day when I went out there to stay that summer, it was as though that casual pause at my door had left some seed some minute virulence in this cellar
earth of mine quick not for love perhaps (I did not love him; how could I? I had never even heard his voice, had only Ellen’s word for it that there was such a person (117).

At another point, Miss Rosa adds, “so who will dispute me when I say, why I did not invent, create it.” Still Miss Rose takes it upon herself to tell Quentin, Bon’s story. By the mere act of telling it, Rosa betrays her child-like infatuation with the worldly Bon whom she has never met.

Finally, although Rosa aims at remembering rather than at explaining, her tale nevertheless plants the seed of the enigma, without intending to decipher it. Her narration sets a tone of remembrance for the whole, starting in the first chapter and taking it up once again in the fifth, including the emotive implications of it, the frame of the Southern myth, and finally referring to the mysteries of Sutpen’s story, thus setting in motion the recurring pattern of the search for a solution.

Our second major narrator is Mr. Compson unlike Miss Rosa, he takes an objective, intellectual, distant and uninterested stance towards the story, or so it appears. Mr. Compson is one generation removed from the story and is not directly involved with it. Kinney thinks that “Mr. Compson provides the neatest story because he is more detached than any of the others. Mr. Compson’s narrative is probably the most extensive one, covering chapters II, III and IV in their entirety, as well as a great part of chapter VI as filtered by Quentin. His voice performs the transition from a witnessed or told story to an imagined one, made of a combination of information and conjecture. In his desire to understand and find reasons for the gaps, his voice develops into a highly persuasive narrative voice. In general terms Mr. Compson explains Sutpen’s arrival and the construction of Sutpen’s Hundred, continues with Ellen’s marriage and early motherhood in chapter II, which in turn closes with the confrontation of Sutpen with his “negroes”—a structure parallel to chapter I. In chapter III, Mr. Compson focuses on Miss Rosa and the degrading relationship between the Coldfields and the Sutpens, on Mr. Colfield’s life and death and Rosa’s miserable life after her father’s death. Chapter IV starts with Charles Bon’s letter to Judith, not read until the end of the chapter, focuses on the Sutpen children’s triangular relationship (Henry-Bon-Judith) and narrates Bon and Henry’s visit to New Orleans, the visits to Sutpen’s Hundred, and the war years. Finally, in chapter VI, Mr. Compson tells Quentin the story of the Sutpen family graveyard. He tells Judith’s life
after the war, the visit of the octoroon and Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon, and the latter’s return to Jefferson.

There is a clear progression in Mr. Compson’s narrative from a fairly reliable voice to a voice of persuasion, clearly discernible through chapters II, III and IV. If we were to characterize his narrative in general, we could describe it as revealingly educated, deeply committed to a psychological perspective of the characters, intensely concerned with aesthetics, and not satisfied with merely what is known but willing to conjecture about the possible reasons behind the actions, fond of providing the tale with what seems to be unknown detail.

Drawing on his classical educations, he accepts at face value Sutpen’s own stated purpose as his father, Grandfather Compson, repeated it to him” (203.) Nevertheless, Mr. Compon does not succeed in remaining objective. To Mr. Compson, Sutpen’s tragedy symbolizes the tragedy of the South. Mr. Compson also shares Miss Rosa’s view of the demonic nature of Sutpen, although he does not use the same fanatical language. To Mr. Compson, there is something inhuman in Sutpen character.

Mr. Compson relies on several factors that bestow authority on his voice: he is part of the community and gives voice to its collective knowledge, yet he provides the reader with a more distant and critical point of view of its beliefs, such as when he comments on the fact that they ignore that the language spoken by Sutpen’s slaves is not an “uncivilized” one but créole. This is reinforced by his very elaborate and sophisticated language, adorned with comparisons that proudly exhibit the marks of an educated man, as when he draws similes with Lothario (85), Don Juan (89), Wilde (160), Beardsley (160), Cassandra (50), the French Revolution (93), or a Roman holiday (47).

On the other hand, Mr. Compson finds in Sutpen’s story an opportunity to justify his dark and nihilistic view of the world and humanity. For Mr. Compson, Sutpen’s story affirms his belief that human beings are incapable of standing up to Fate. Moreover, like Quentin, he finds his counterpart in the tragedy, Bon, in whom he invests his fatalistic ideas. Mr. Compson says to Quentin:

“You see? You would almost believe that Sutpen’s trip to New Orleans was just sheer chance, just a little more of the illogical machinations of a fatality which had chosen that family in preference to any other in the county or the land exactly as a small boy chooses
an ant-hill to pour boiling water into in preference to other, not even himself knowing why” (81, emphasis added).

Mr. Compson adheres to this fatalistic point of view. Thus we get two different interpretations of the Sutpen story that reflect their narrators’ psychological makeup and personal experiences. Mr. Compson, who is struggling with a personal and historical failure, sees in the Sutpen’s tragedy some evidence of the helplessness of human beings in the face of Fate. (I agree in this respect with Kartiganer and Kinney who maintain that Mr. Compson uses the Sutpen story to justify his own failure). Thus, while Miss Rosa holds Sutpen responsible for his and her family’s tragedy, Mr. Compson absolves him of any moral responsibility. The result is two different stories about two different men with the same name Sutpen. The Sutpen that Mr. Compson creates represents the practical side of Mr. Compson, if he had one. In other words, we learn as much if not more, about Mr. Compson himself as about Sutpen from the way Mr. Compson reconstructs Sutpen’s story. The above cited passage echoes Mr. Compson’s discourse in The Sound and the Fury when he says, “Man the sum total of what have you. A problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil: a stalemate of dust and desire” (85)

The character that reveals the most about Mr. Compson’s personality, however, is that of Charles Bon. Mr. Compson furnishes Bon with many of his most dearly held fatalistic views on life. Like Miss Rosa, he suspects the existence of Bon and definitely needs Bon to from his narrative. Mr. Compson thus reflects:

*I can imagine her* [Ellen] engineering that courtship, supplying Judith and Bon with opportunities for trysts and pledges with a coy and unflagging ubiquity which they must have tried in vain to evade and escape, Judith with annoyed yet still serene concern, Bon with that sardonic and surprised distance which seems to have been the ordinary manifestation of the impenetrable and shadowy character. Yes, shadowy: a myth, a phantom: something which they engendered and created whole themselves: some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all (82, emphasis added).

It is important to notice that both Mr. Compson and Miss Rosa suspect the reality of Bon. Both seem to doubt Bon’s very existence. Should the reader doubt it, too? I believe so. Our narrators who are puzzled by the fall of Sutpen need to create
Bon to explain it. For Miss Rosa, Bon is one of the tools that God uses to bring about Sutpen’s fall. He is also the mysterious stranger, whom Rosa falls in love with. To her, he is the martyr of love, since Henry kills him for no reason. Mr. Compson, on the other hand, needs Bon for a different reason. Being an outsider, around whom a lot of mystery revolves, Bon presents Mr. Compson with an opportunity to create someone in his own image to excuse his own failure and explain the defeat of the South. Moreover, Mr. Compson needs Bon because he finds in him an agent to express and confirm his fatalistic beliefs. For what could be more instrumental to Mr. Compson’s ideology of defeat than a person who is determined to bring upon himself the sentence of Fate. Evidence of Mr. Compson’s need for Bon to confirm his philosophy can be found at several points in Mr. Compson’s narrative. For example, in the following episode, Mr. Compson has Bon address Henry about his octoroon mistress of whom Henry disapproved:

No, not whores. Sometimes I believe they are the only chaste women, not to say virgins, in America, and they remain true and faithful to that man not merely until he dies or frees them, but until they die. And where will you find a whore or lady either whom you can count on to do that? (93)

This passage echoes Mr. Compson’s views on virginity in *The Sound and the Fury*, when he says that virginity was invented by men and not women. It brings to our attention, how much a narrator’s point of view can influence his narrative. The reader thus is forced to question Mr. Compson’s vision and wonder to what degree it is distorted.

Mr. Compson believes that Henry killed Bon out of fear of miscegenation and not incest as Quentin and Shreve think. He speculates that Henry killed Bon because the latter refused to renounce the octoroon and dissolve the marriage. On the other hand, Mr. Compson believes that Henry Himself was in love with Bon. According to him, Judith was seduced by Henry and not by Bon. It is Henry who makes her fall in love with Bon whom she has only met twice. He completely resorts to his imagination as the main source of conjecture, in its focus on Henry, Bon and Judith’s relationship throughout the chapter IV. As Mr. Compson himself speculates: “So I can imagine him, the way he did it” (91), “I can imagine how he did it—the calculation, the surgeon’s alertness” (92), which contributes to his initial construction of Bon as a character. This faculty is crucial in this function, since Bon “can never be reported,
exposed, told (exposed) as substance or subject, and is not even dissimulating or self-concealing... in the occult of not knowing.” (Flores 1984 161) The power and importance of the imagination in delineating the characters is very strong, as we observe when Mr. Compson speculates about the depth of Judith’s love for Bon: “I can imagine her if necessary even murdering the other woman. But she certainly would have made no investigation and then held a moral debate between what she wanted and what she thought was right” (100).

This imagination feeds the psychological characterization of Bon, Henry and Judith. A few examples shall suffice to illustrate this. Mr. Compson speculates on Bon’s feelings on the campus: “this man handsome elegant and even catlike and too old to be where he was, too old not in years but in experience, with some tangible effluvium of knowledge, surfeit: of actions done and satiations plumbed and pleasures exhausted and even forgotten” (79), and how he felt about the Sutpen white siblings: “as if he had known all the while that the occasion would arise when he would have to wait and that all he would need to do would be to wait; that he had seduced Henry and Judith both too thoroughly to have any fear that he might not marry Judith when he wished to” (78).

Mr. Compson also freely judges characters and their actions, in what Dorrit Cohn classifies as signals of a “discordant narrator,” or a narrator whose judgments the reader has cause to suspect of being inaccurate, as we have seen. His judgment is particularly harsh when he refers to women. For example, he explains how Ellen gathered Bon:

She spoke of Bon as if he were three inanimate objects in one or perhaps one inanimate object for which she and her family would find three concordant uses: a garment which Judith might wear as she would a riding habit or a ball gown, a piece of furniture which would complement and complete the furnishing of her house and position, and a mentor and example to correct Henry’s provincial manners and speech and clothing. (61)

He also judges acts that he cannot even know whether Rosa committed:

Nobody knows how she managed to get the material from her father’s store. He didn’t give it to her. He would have felt it incumbent on him to supply his granddaughter with clothes if she were indecently clad or if she were ragged or cold, but not to marry in. So I believe she stole it.
She must have. She must have taken it almost from under her father’s nose” (63)

Notwithstanding the signals that populate his discourse to indicate his misleading evaluations, Mr. Compson is not only aware that “it just does not explain” but also that human beings are prone to misjudge when we have to fill in the gaps of someone else’s story. In a revealing passage he says:

Have you noticed how so often when we try to reconstruct the causes which lead up to the actions of men and women, how with a sort of astonishment we find ourselves now and then reduced to the belief, the only possible belief, that they stemmed from some of the old virtues?” (100)

Actually Mr. Compson reminds us that he is making up the story as he usually begins his narrative sections with words like “I can imagine,” “perhaps,” “it must have been.” Despite the fact that Sutpen historically existed, Sutpen’s story becomes a myth similar to that of South before the war. Along with narrative conjecture, imagination and the privilege of access to thoughts and words he could not have witnessed, as well as judging, Mr. Compson’s tendency to turn into direct assumption what had begun as pure speculation highly contributes to his persuasiveness. On the whole the reader must always be alert to the narrators’ biases and self-interest. At the same time, the reader sees in the narrators a parallel of her/himself, because, like us, they are attempting to understand Sutpen and his story. We should remember here that the narrators, like the reader, are going through stages of ignorance and illusion nourished by the imagination as they attempt to find their way to the “truth”. Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve will find out that the “truth” is really a personal truth that the story renders to each of them. The reader will gradually come to the same realization. S/he will find that each version of the story is true; however, it is not comprehensible without the person who sees and experiences it.

Quentin Compson is the third main narrator of the Sutpen story which he (re)constructs with Shreve who helps bring some balance into the narrative by virtue of his physical and emotional distance from the story. Although Quentin Compson only fully narrates chapter VII, his role is pivotal in the novel, as Hugh Ruppersburg has demonstrated:

Because his thoughts and reactions are repeatedly emphasized and each of the narratives is channeled through his mind, because he
ultimately receives all the information about Thomas Sutpen, Quentin is the focal character in the novel—a sustained interval narrative from his perspective” (88)

Quentin acts as a listener and re-teller of the whole story of the Sutpens, including both the known and the speculative fragments, thus aiding the process of reproduction and perpetuation of the stories that belong to the Southern community. His discourse is marked by impressively consistent reported speech that leaves little room for his own opinion and impressions. The effect of the reported speech is often intense, as in the following instances: “and told Grandfather . . . just told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside . . . telling Grandfather in that same tone while they sat on the log waiting for the niggers to come back with the other guests and the whiskey: ‘So I went to the West Indies. . . . a Scottish woman who, so he told Grandfather, never did quite learn to speak English. . . . Sent to school, ‘where,’ he told Grandfather, ‘I learned little’ (199) or “because at that time, Grandfather said, . . . or at least, Grandfather said, he did not appear to intend to resume. . . that was how Grandfather remembered it” (202). And Mr. Compson’s reported speech: “and Father said how for that moment Wash’s heart would be quiet . . . the actual world was the one where his own apotheosis (Father said) galloped on the black thoroughbred, thinking maybe, Father said. . . . but Father said how . . . Father said maybe he realized all of a sudden . . .” (233); and “He chose the name himself, Grandfather believed, just as he named them all—the Charles Goods and the Clytemnestras and Henry and Judith and all of them—that entire fecundity of dragon’s teeth as Father called it. And Father said—” (220) vi

Alongside with his rigorous reporting, Quentin points out the information gaps in the story. Remarks such as “[a]nd he [Sutpen] never told whether the voyage was hard or not” (202), or when he says that Sutpen himself “didn’t know, or remember, whether he had ever heard, been told, the reason or not. All he remembered was that” (185), “he not telling how he got there, what had happened during the six years between that day when he, a boy of fourteen who knew no tongue but English and not much of that, had decided to go to the West Indies” (204), are common. Likewise, it is also easy to recognize his concern for accuracy: “(you couldn’t call it period because as he remembered it or as he told Grandfather he did, it didn’t have either a definite beginning or a definite ending” (186) or when he corrects Shreve’s lack of precision
in referring to Miss Rosa as “Aunt Rosa” (146), or confusing Gettysburg with Manassas (297).

It is appropriate here to mention that Shreve acts as a filter to Quentin’s highly emotional narrative. He brings Quentin back to the here and now when the latter’s imagination, spurred with the emotional trauma of his personal family experience, runs wild with him.

We should always remember that Quentin had heard the Sutpen story from Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson before he attempts to narrate his own version of it. Mr. Compson himself has heard the story from his own father. Only Miss Rosa had known Sutpen personally, even though she gives the most fantastical version of his story. The whole narrative thus is carried in the oral tradition of folk tale which Bakhtin calls Skaz, a form that makes the novel one of the closest forms to everyday language. This oral tradition undermines the role that events normally play in the novel. What really count here are the narrator and his point of view. Bakhtin believes that this is one of the most important features of the polyphonic novel since it demonstrates how one’s point of view on the world include the self and therefore is personal and can never be objective.

Quentin tells the Sutpen story a few months before he commits suicide. The story is vital to him in that it resembles his own story and is significant to the history of the South. Like the Compsons, the Sutpens are a family which belongs to the aristocratic class of the South. Like them they also have fallen into decadence and ruin. But most importantly, Quentin finds in the Sutpen tragedy his counterpart. It is Henry Sutpen, who, like Quentin, is a puritan idealist young man who loves his sister. What strikes Quentin deeply is the fact that Henry kills to protect his sister, whereas Quentin himself fails to do so concerning his sister Caddy. Thus, Henry becomes Quentin’s double or surrogate through whom he avenges himself on those who ruined his sister. For the above mentioned reasons, Henry fascinates Quentin. As a results, his narrative centers around Henry and his relationship with Bon and Judith. Some knowledge of The Sound and the Fury, here becomes crucial to our understanding of Quentin’s role in Absalom, Absalom! Sutpen’s story haunts Quentin from the moment he hears it from Miss Rosa. He is desperately seeking answers for his own dilemma and the Sutpen saga promises to provide him with some of these answers. Ironically, the more Quentin is involved with the Sutpen story more confused he becomes.

Quentin plays the role of the listener in the first part of the book. He does not
start the active role of narrating until chapter VI where he receives the letter from his father that informs him of Miss Rosa’s death. It is very important to note that while Quentin does not begin narrating until chapter six, he remains a very active listener. Quentin is not satisfied to simply listen. He asks Miss Rosa a lot of important questions. Even as Miss Rosa tells him the story, Quentin begins to respond by imagining the Sutpen's family picture. He also wonders about the meaning of the story and concludes before he leaves Miss Rosa's house that "there was also something which he too could not pass" (13). That something, we are told by the external narrator, is Henry's murder of Bon. After his meeting with Miss Rosa, Quentin seeks his father's help to solve this mystery. In this detective role, Quentin parallels the reader who wants to get all the information he can in order to understand the story.

Mr. Compson's letter, which informs Quentin of Miss Rosa's death, triggers Quentin's suppressed emotions and compels him to tell the story to Shreve who must have heard parts of it earlier. Now the two young men sit down and reconstruct the story. On one level, this version of the story is a continuation of the narrative of Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson. On another level, it stands on its own as another point of view on the story. This narrative sounds less Gothic than Miss Rosa's and lacks Mr. Compson's cynicism. Nevertheless, it remains a dark narrative with some humorous moments provided by Shreve.

Quentin provides us with Sutpen's background. He tells us that Sutpen was born in western Virginia and that his family moved to Tennessee when he was about fourteen. We also learn that Sutpen ran away from home and sailed to Haiti where he worked for a plantation owner. When the slaves rebelled against the plantation owner, Sutpen rescued him and his daughter. In return, the plantation owner gave Sutpen his plantation and his daughter's hand. Sutpen's wife gave birth to a son before he discovered that she was part black. At this point, he decides to abandon them and leaves them his fortune as compensation. We should remember at this point that Quentin is retelling the story Sutpen told to his Grandfather, who, in turn, told to his son, Mr. Compson, who then told to Quentin. Although the story does not come to us directly, we can still hear Sutpen's voice at several points in it. In this section too, we hear for the first time of Sutpen's "design." We also learn more about Charles Bon, Judith and Henry Sutpen, Bon's son Charles Etienne Bon, and Jim Bond, the idiot son of Charles Etienne. The theme of this section is racism and the South, a theme that haunts Quentin as we have seen in *The Sound and the Fury*. 

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Shreve McCannon narrates chapter six which serves as a summary of the Sutpen tragedy. It begins when Quentin receives a letter from Mr. Compson informing him of the death of Miss Rosa. Shreve has so enthusiastically followed Quentin’s narrative of the Sutpen’s story that he is not only ready but also willing to participate in the telling. Shreve has a curiosity about and a stereotyped idea of the South that clearly determines his way of narrating. Just like in his insistent demand for Quentin to define the South (145, 296), Shreve’s sarcastic and detached mode of storytelling is visible in the comments denoting his mere pleasure in narrating as when he urges “you wait. Let me play a while now” (231) or when he establishes a parallelism with dramatic performances: “That was all he was after. Jesus, the South is fine, isn’t it. It’s better than the theatre, isn’t it. It’s better than Ben Hour, isn’t it?” (180). This gives him a freedom in narrating that does not aim at pursuing the truth of the story, in contrast to the extreme care taken by Quentin to provide the sources of his information in order to reassemble it correctly.

Quentin, who is lost in thought, gives Shreve a chance to contribute his share to the narrative. As Shreve reconstructs Sutpen’s story, Quentin comments that Shreve sounds just like his father. We, as readers, however, can hear the flippancy in Shreve's tone. In contrast, Quentin, who is too sorrow stricken by all the emotions that the letter has stirred in him, is not able to discern it. If Shreve does sound anything like Mr. Compson it is because he is parodying Mr. Compson's style and is not speaking for Faulkner as Ross thinks. Shreve's narrative thus becomes double-voiced as Bakhtin tells us, because by having Shreve mock Mr. Compson, Miss Rosa and Quentin he understates the tragedy and puts it in perspective. Quentin is too involved in Sutpen's story to the extent that he can see no humor in the story, whereas the uninvolved Shreve can certainly see it. To Quentin, the tragedy is still present because he lives in the past which he is not able to forget. This is why he cries out in despair, "Yes. I have heard it too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long thinking Yes, almost exactly like Father"(168).

In the following chapter Quentin and Shreve move on to the episode of the building of Sutpen's Hundred. They speculate about the causes of Sutpen's downfall. Quentin here retells Sutpen's story as heard it from his father (who in his turn heard it from his own father). Quentin begins the narrative with the statement "his trouble was innocence, which is what Mr. Compson said earlier about Sutpen. In this chapter we also learn from Quentin about Sutpen's childhood in western Virginia as a son of a poor farmer with many kids that he could not keep. Most importantly, however, we learn
about Sutpen's traumatic experience when he was told by the black slave of the Virginian plantation owner to use the back door. We are told that this traumatic experience is the major factor behind Sutpen's "design." The humiliation that the young Sutpen feels makes him vow to become a rich plantation owner to protect the little boy inside him. Ironically, Sutpen will reenact the tragedy when he turns his own son away from his door.

The narrative is filtered through several narrative voices extending over three generations: General Compson, Miss Rosa, Thomas Sutpen, Mr. Compson, and finally Quentin and Shreve. In this section we hear Sutpen's voice for the first time. It starts when Quentin says,

Grandfather said, because of that innocence which he had never lost because after it finally told him what to do that night he forgot about it and didn't know that he still had it and told Grandfather, told him, mind; not excusing, asking for no pity; not explaining, asking for no exculpation: just told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside like the eleventh and twelfth century kings did: "I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside" (194).

We are told that Sutpen had told his story to Quentin's grandfather while they were chasing the French architect. Quentin tells Shreve (and the reader) "That was how Grandfather remembered it" (emphasis added). We have to stop and think here. First, Quentin's grandfather told Mr. Compson the story many years ago after the actual event took place. That means that General Compson must have forgotten some details or added others because human memory cannot be trusted. In a similar fashion to Miss Rosa (although we can assume that he is more reliable because of his lack of personal interest) he must have reconstructed the conversation that took place between him and Sutpen at the time.

Quentin says, "He [Sutpen] was telling a story. He was not bragging about something he had done; he was just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced, which would still has been the same story if the man had no name at all, if it had been told about any man over whisky at night" (199). What is unusual about this narrative is Sutpen's impersonal narration of the events. As General Compson and Quentin have observed, his detached, objective and impersonal attitude
towards his own life story sounds rather inhuman and makes Sutpen look heroic and monstrous at the simultaneously. As readers, we are faced with the dilemma of whether there is humanity in Sutpen. It is the same problem with which Mr. Compson and Quentin are faced. But we wonder if they are not responsible for making Sutpen seem inhuman because of their need to see him as heroic and superhuman. Contrary to what Walter Slatoff believes, it is Shreve who saves the story from becoming completely incomprehensible by bringing the characters and the events back to the human level. In this respect, *Absalom, Absalom!* questions the myth of the South. Faulkner represents the views of Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson and Quentin who see it larger than it was, and the views of General Compson and Sutpen himself who lived it and saw it for what it was. Then we have sympathetic outsiders like Shreve (and implicitly the reader) who can see it as a human tragedy irrespective of time and place: a story of the human heart in conflict with itself.

While General Compson stresses the grandiosity of Sutpen's endeavor and his personal courage, Mr. Compson stresses the role Fate has played in the Sutpens' lives. Quentin, however, is the most vulnerable among the narrators as he considers himself the inheritor of the Sutpen tragedy, a tragedy that symbolizes to him the history of the South with its heritage of guilt and shame brought about by slavery and defeat.

On the narrative level, we should keep in mind that Quentin, the narrator, is very attentive to his audience, Shreve, as he uses suspense to keep him interested in the story. He stops at climactic moments in the narrative and delays revealing the causes of major events. For example, when he tells Shreve about Sutpen's adventure in Haiti, he stops at the point where Sutpen becomes engaged to the plantation owner's daughter and ends this section by simply saying "Then he stopped." Shreve and the reader naturally respond by saying "All right. Go on." (205) Thus while Quentin plays the role of the author, Shreve acts like the reader who is anxious to get all the information s/he needs to understand the story. Like Shreve, we are frustrated and anxious to know more every time the narrative is interrupted.

Quentin generally adopts his father's point of view, although he differs with him sometimes like in the speculating on Bon's relationship with Henry and Judith. Thus most of Quentin's speculations begin with the phrase "Father said" as in the below cited passage where Quentin speculates with Shreve on Sutpen's trip to New Orleans:

"So he invited Bon into the house, and for the two weeks of the vacation (only it didn't take that long; *Father said* that probably Mrs.
Sutpen had Judith and Bon already engaged from the moment she saw Bon's name in Henry's first letter) he watched Bon and Henry and Judith, or watched Bon and Judith rather because he would have already known about Henry and Bon from Henry's letters about him from the school; watched them for two weeks and did nothing... Father said, because Mrs. Sutpen was already covering the town and county both with news of the engagement that Father said didn't exist yet, and still he [Sutpen] did nothing... Then Sutpen went to New Orleans. Whether he chose that time to go in order to get Bon and his mother together and thrash the business out for good and all or not, nobody knows, just as nobody knows whether he ever saw the mother or not while he was there, if she received him or refused to receive him; or if she did and he tried once more to come to terms with her, buy her off maybe with money now, since Father said that a man who could believe that a scorned and outraged and angry woman could be bought off with formal logic would believe that a scorned and outraged and angry woman could be bought off with formal logic would believe that she could placated with money and it didn't work too(215-16, emphasis added).

Notice how Quentin relates his father's narrative, which is mostly speculative, without questioning its acceptability. In general, Quentin, who seems to have a great deal of respect for his father's intellect, agrees with him, or rather adopts his point of view in relation to Sutpen and his role in the tragedy.

The external narrator is more visible in this part of the narrative. However, he is satisfied to leave the narrative to his character narrators. He only interferes to describe the room in which Quentin and Shreve are sitting or to explain their intentions when he feels they may be misunderstood. The following passage is typical in this respect:

[A]lmost gone out of the radiators: the cold iron fluting stern signal and admonition for sleeping, the little death, the renewal. It had been some time now since the chimes had rung eleven. "All right," Shreve said. He was hugging himself into the bathrobe now as he had formerly hugged himself inside his pink naked almost hairless skin. "He chose. He chose lechery. So do I. But go on." His remark was not intended for flippancy nor even derogation. It was born (if from any source of that incorrigible unsentimental sentimentality of the young which takes the
form of hard and often crass levity— to which, by the way, Quentin paid no attention whatever, resuming as if he had never been interrupted, his face still lowered, still brooding apparently on the open letter upon the open book between his hands (220-21, emphasis added).

The external narrator here takes the role of a stage director. He tells us, for instance, that the time is eleven in the evening. On the other hand, he explains to us Shreve's and Quentin's thoughts making sure we do not misunderstand Shreve's remarks. Rarely does this narrator comment on the events. He only interferes when he thinks it is necessary to clarify Quentin's or Shreve's attitudes, or to describe the outside atmosphere. Another important aspect of this narrator's role is that he tries to see things from the character narrators' perspective. Bakhtin refers to this as the author's talking to his major characters in their own words. For instance the phrase "the little death, the renewal," echoes Quentin's thoughts, and does not belong to the external narrator. This narrator, as usual in Faulkner, is not a fully omniscient narrator. His role is limited to providing facts in a similar fashion to the Dostoevskian narrator.

The Wash Jones' Story

Wash Jones is at the center of chapter seven. In this section, Quentin maintains his father's point of view with respect to Jones' relationship with Sutpen and his motives for killing him. According to Mr. Compson, and possibly to Quentin, Jones has worshiped Sutpen as a hero and a god. This opinion is emphasized in words that Mr. Compson makes Jones say to himself, "You know I never. You know I never expected or asked or wanted anything from area living man but what I expected from you. And I never asked that. I didn't think hit would need: I just said to myself I dont need to question or doubt the man that General Lee himself said in a hand-wrote ticket that he was brave? Brave" (233).

Once again, we are back to the theme of questioning the legend of the South. Were men like Sutpen heroes or were they only fragments of the imagination of people like Jones and Mr. Compson? Is Faulkner, like Dostoevsky, testing his ideas by hearing them from another person's point of view? I believe he is.

On the other hand, this section reflects Quentin's state of mind and Mr. Compson's ideology as well as that of the community at large. By making Jones have those adulatory feelings and unrealistic expectations from Sutpen, Faulkner presents the reader with a double-voiced narrative. On one level, we have the point of view
presented by Mr. Compson through Quentin. Beneath this point of view, the reader can sense another point of view that questions the point of view of the narrators. Faulkner's point of view is evident, or as Bakhtin would say refracted throughout the novel in the discourse of the narrators as we have seen and in the subject matter of the novel as well the action which sometimes invalidates the narrators' points of view as in the above quoted episode in which Sutpen frustrates Jones' expectations. Shreve, in his turn, plays the role of the reader as he continues to puzzle over the narrative and ask Quentin to explain to him the parts that sound ambiguous.

The Henry-Charles-Judith Triangle:

Shreve seems to be most interested in the Henry-Charles-Judith triangle. In fact, Shreve is responsible for a good part of this narrative. He is very interested in Bon's struggle to gain his father's recognition. For this reason, Shreve creates a number of possible scenarios to work from. First, he assumes that Bon's Mother has told him about his father's desertion. When this scenario does not work, Shreve introduces a lawyer. He makes this lawyer manipulate the mother and her son, especially the latter, whom he sends to the University of Mississippi in an attempt to blackmail Sutpen without letting Bon know about his intention.

At this point, Quentin is satisfied to listen and correct Shreve whenever he gets off the right track. The external narrator points out that Quentin and Shreve are "recreating" the story. He does not want us to forget that we are reading fiction and not a real story. Thus he says:

Four of them there, in that room in New Orleans in 1860, just as in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblike room in Massachusetts in 1910. And Bon may have, probably did, take Henry to call on the octoroon mistress and the child, as Mr. Compson said, though neither Shreve nor Quentin believed that the visit affected Henry as Mr. Compson seemed to think. In fact, Quentin did not even tell Shreve what his father had said about the visit. Perhaps Quentin himself had not been listening when Mr. Compson related (recreated?) it that evening at home (268).

The external narrator urges us to doubt everything that has been told so far. We are told that what we know so far is not a proven fact, but rather a figment of the narrators' imagination who themselves disagree on how to view the events with which they are dealing. Consequently, the reader is warned against relying on Mr. Compson,
or even on Quentin and Shreve, for a clear and accurate explanation, since they are all "recreating" the story. So what are we to do? Should we dismiss the story as an illusion or should we investigate the motives of the various narrators? I believe Faulkner would like us to take the second path and contribute to the recreation of the Sutpen story. Another important hint from the external narrator on the character narrators' role in recreating the story is found in the middle of the love scene between Judith and Bon. Shreve had added the flowers to the scene even though the episode is supposed to have taken place in the winter and not in the spring (235-37).

The external narrator, on the other hand, emphasizes the affinity Shreve and Quentin feel towards the protagonists of the episode, Henry and Bon. He directly tells us that Shreve identifies with Bon and Quentin with Henry. We are reminded that Shreve and Quentin are simultaneously playing the roles of narrators and readers of the story.

"And now" Shreve said, "We're going to talk about love." But he didn't need to say that either, any more than he had needed to specify which he meant by he, since neither of them had been thinking about anything else; all that had gone before just so much that had to be overpassed and none else present to overpass it but them, as someone always has to rake the leaves up before you can have the bonfire. That was why it didn't matter to either of them which one did the talking, since it was not the talking alone which did it, performed and accomplished the overpassing, but some happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the other--faulting both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and sifting and discarding of the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault or false"(253, italic original).

Is this not what the relationship between the author and the reader is all about? Does not the active reader engage in an act of "speaking and hearing" with the text, which Bakhtin calls a dialogue with the text where s/he sorts out what is relevant and important and discards what is not in order to get to the meaning of the story? Of course, that is what the act of reading fiction is all about. It is an indirect act of
communication between the author and the reader. It is an act of love, where the reader forgives the author his "paradox and inconsistency" in order to progress to love. This love is the text itself, the child of the author which s/he offers to her/his appreciative reader.

The Henry-Bon-Judith triangle parallels that of the Quentin-Dalton Ames-Caddy as a number of critics have pointed out.xii Quentin identifies with Henry because he sees himself in him. Like Quentin, Henry loved his sister and cared for her honor. Unlike him, however, Henry defends Judith's honor by killing her potential seducer, Bon. It is worth noting that it is Shreve who brings in the incest theme and not Quentin. We can speculate that Shreve knows about Quentin's feelings towards Caddy. On the other hand, Quentin, like Henry, is faced with the problems of racism and miscegenation. While they may not personally apply to Quentin, they are more problematic because Quentin is the inheritor of the guilt from which Henry was spared. It is this guilt which drives Quentin to commit suicide a few months after his meeting with Henry in the attic of the Sutpen mansion. This same feeling of guilt forces Quentin to defensively repeat to Shreve. "I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!" (303)

As readers and interpreters of the Sutpen tragedy, Quentin and Shreve bring to the story an energy that Mr. Compson and Miss Rosa do not. Their youth is responsible for their exploration of the themes of love, honor, friendship, pride, and courage. At their hands, such themes are treated without the sentimentality that would have surrounded the older narrators' narratives if they were to have dealt with them. In fact, Miss Rosa's narrative is at its weakest when she deals with the theme of love. Quentin and Shreve's versions of the Sutpen story humanizes the acting characters like Henry, Charles Bon, Judith, Charles Etienne De Saint Valery Bon and, even, Eulalia Sutpen and the French architect. It also undermines the darkness that envelops the older narrators' versions. Actually, the truth of Absalom, Absalom! is the truth of its various narrators and its readers.

The source of truth remains murky. When he was speaking at the University of Virginia, Faulkner himself claimed to have a level of knowledge similar to the narrator's. Asked if Charles knew that Sutpen was his father, he replied with the same kind of qualifiers the novel has: "I think he knew. I don’t know whether he--his mother probably told him. I think he knew" (Gwynn 79). Even the author, the creator of the fictive world who should have been able to answer all questions definitively
chose instead to qualify his answer, with a familiar “probably”. He did this because the nature of oral traditional knowledge, as well as all other types of history, is that there are some things we can not know. Faulkner explained that *Absalom, Absalom!* is about the nature of truth:

I think that no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. So these are true as far as Miss Rosa and as Quentin saw it. Quentin’s father saw what he believed was truth, that was all he saw. But the old man was himself a little too big for the people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson to see all at once. It would have taken perhaps a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful person to see him as he was. It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth. (*Faulkner in the University* 273-74)

Whether the reader can attain the Truth and what this Truth actually consists of is itself part of an unfinished dialogue. But what is certain is that the novel places in the foreground from the first to the last page the problems of the limits of knowledge and the limits of language as an instrument to attaining a historical truth. As Albert Guerard observes “not all conjectures, in Absalom, Absalom! have the same degree of truth, nor does Faulkner want us to think they do” (333). All of the tellers speak some of the truth, or some truth, and no voice should be privileged over any other because all of them arrive at the truths of their own consciousnesses, and the author invites us to find the truth of ours as readers. At the conclusion of a dialogical novel like *Absalom, Absalom!* “nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and always will be in the future” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 166).
I Rosa’s tale grows out of the demonization of Sutpen from the beginning: Sutpen, “the evil’s source and head which had outlasted all its victims” (14), “(man-horse-demon)” (6), this man Rosa looked “as an ogre, some beast out of a tale to frighten children with” (131), a “villain true enough” (138), “a demon, a villain” (140), “mad, yet not so mad. Because there is a practicality to viciousness: the thief, the liar, the murderer even, has faster rules than virtue ever has; why not madness too? If he was mad, it was only his compelling dream which was insane and not his methods” (137).

II There has been much criticism noting this theme in the novel. As an example, Arthur F. Kinney observes that “The act of narration is a reiterated point in Absalom, Absalom!: personal story, like regional definition, is a story, human consciousness operates the same way for both. Because empirical experience is, sooner or later, cradled in the mind’s constructs, history, fiction, biography, and autobiography all take the shape of narrative. Yet so claiming Absalom, Absalom! redeems and reemphasizes the power and poetry of such human shapes for truth. Even while it admits the inadequacy of language and the fundamental mysteries in events, Absalom, Absalom! confirms the potency of words.” (196)

Ruppersburg believes that “in contrast to simple character narratives, translated narratives do not always reflect the narrator’s speaking voice, implying instead an external narrator’s presence. Such narrative evokes the speaking character’s personality, environment, sensibility, weakness and strength. . . . In fact, chapter 5 presents a fusion of what Miss Rosa says with what Quentin thinks and feels as he listens to her” (86).

A little later Quentin adds his own motive to that of Rosa when he says, “It’s because she wants it told he thought….. So that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He slay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth” (6). The External narrator tells us that Quentin dismisses this conclusion immediately. However, it remains Crucial to our understanding of Quentin’s attitude towards the Sutpen story as it emphasizes Quentin’s personal involvement in the Supten story.

Bakhtin calls the ‘loophole’ [lazeika], an ability to evade final judgement, that is ‘the retention for oneself the possibility of altering the final, total meaning [smysl] of one’s word’ (1994b 136; 1984 233). The loophole accompanies the word like a shadow. It leaves the word open for the potential other meaning. It presents itself in conflation with the Bakhtinian concept of ‘unfinalisability’, suggesting that ‘nothing conclusive has yet taken place, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the word is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future’ (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 166)

See also for Grandfather’s reported speech: 188, 200, 208; and for Father’s: 236-7, 238, 239.

We only get to read half of Mr. Compson’s letter in chapter VI, where Quentin and Shreve begin their own narrative, and we do not read the rest of it until they are about to finish their narrative. The second part of the letter does not add to the information communicated in the first part. However, it is important, because, it influences Quentin’s response to the Sutpen story, and perhaps his response to his own problems which he will solve in suicide. In fact, Mr. Compson’s letter portrays death as an easy solution to one’s troubles when he says, “If death be anything at all beyond a brief and peculiar emotional state to the bereaved it must be a brief and likewise peculiar state of the subject as well” (141). The rest of the letter is as gloomy.

His narration is quite prolonged, covering the beginning of chapter VI, almost all of chapter VIII and a large part of chapter IX. For the most part he is summarizing the accounts that Quentin had told him he had heard from Rosa Coldfield and Mr. Compson at the beginning of chapter VI, he ends that chapter by alluding to the figure of Jim Bond, and he continues his story by telling Henry and Sutpen’s conversation in the library, in chapter VIII.

Slatoff thinks that Shreve “summarizes the story with brutal and flippant absurdity.” (Quest for Failure 200).
Here, again, *The Sound and the Fury*, could provide us with some insights into *Absalom, Absalom!* as the readers of the first novel would certainly remember Quentin’s obsession with the idea of death, which could have been on his mind for some time.

Refers to the definition of heteroglossia which according to Bakhtin is “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (*Dialogic Imagination* 324). It is “double-voiced” discourse— the direct intention of the speaking character, and the refracted intention of the author (Ibid. 324).