

The Thin Line Between Love and the Consequences of Hate:  
The Tragedy of Thomas Sutpen and the South

Senior Paper

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Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is the story of Thomas Sutpen, whose rise and fall mark the book's action. The reader must come to terms with the tragedy of Sutpen which is written in a convoluted sequence of time and events told by four narrators, the most significant of which is Quentin Compson. In a letter to his publisher, Faulkner justified choosing Quentin as a focalizer for the text: ". . . I use his bitterness which he has projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people to get more out of the story." (qtd in Williamson, 244). As Quentin and his Canadian roommate, Shreve, sit in their room at Harvard smoking pipes, Quentin relays the story of Sutpen's abandonment of his family and subsequent trip to the West Indies. Sutpen takes a job as an overseer on a plantation, and during his employment there is a rebellion. This uprising lasts several days, and on the eighth day the plantation runs out of water and something has to be done. Quentin tells Shreve: "so he [Sutpen] put the musket down and went out and subdued them. That was how he told it: he went out and subdued them" (Faulkner 204). He quelled this rebellion and came back to marry the Planter's daughter. This decision marks not only his rise to power, it marks also the tragic choice that ends up defining his life.

Though despicable in many ways, Thomas Sutpen is ultimately revealed as a tragic figure in the Aristotelian sense. He is a serious and dignified character who suffers a reversal of fortune; readers may be repulsed, yet pity him. Although Sutpen's actions are tragic, his downfall is emblematic of a greater demise, that of the antebellum South, plagued as the House of Thebes. By conflating Sutpen and the South, Faulkner creates a portrait of Dixie's waning glory and the consequences of her blindness.

Tragedy's dark secrets fascinate us. Every aspect of our world is imbued with tragedy; music, poetry, art and literature. Aristotle explains this, comparing tragedy to

history; history tells us what has already happened. Tragedy, however, is useful in a more practical way, offering two things: it can tell us what *can* happen, without our actually having to experience it, and it offers catharsis. We can deal with emotions such as pity and fear without actually becoming victims ourselves. Aristotle says: “it is clear that the office of the Poet consists in displaying, not what actually has happened, but what in a given situation might well happen”(qtd in Cooper 31). History is tied more to the particular, with cause and effect; *X* happens because *Y* did this, or said that, or made a decision that caused *X* to happen. While we can understand this, we do not necessarily attach ourselves to it. We can be sympathetic, if called for, but aloof.

Tragedy is more formulaic, wired fundamentally into the universe, into the way of things. We can all relate to it, accepting it's just the way the world is. Tragedy ties us into its own kind of cause and effect, whether we like it or not. Aristotle says: “By an exhibition of what is universal or typical is meant the representation of what a certain type of person is likely or is bound to say or do in a given situation”(qtd in Cooper 31-32). Louise Cowan, critic and professor at the University of Dallas, diverging from Aristotle, argues instead, tragedy “evokes something rather than reminds us of something.” Its purpose, she continues in the Forward to *The Tragic Abyss*, is to “bend all its efforts toward producing a result” (Arberry 03). In the Aristotelian tragedy, the end result is that having identified it, our own lives are rewarded by catharsis; we do not feel sympathy for others. This is Aristotle's end result.

Aristotle's formula for the tragic hero begins with plot. For him, rising action comes by way of complications within the plot and a climax is reached when the protagonist makes a critical choice to do something. This choice often based on hubris, or

a tragic flaw that Aristotle refers to as *hamartia*, sparks the falling action or decline and ultimately resolves itself in tragedy. For Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, the storyline for tragedies was given, recognizable to the audience because of the characters and their associated mythologies. Conversely, Faulkner's tale begins in *medias res* so the reader gets to know Sutpen's character and story, piecemeal from several narrators, through flashbacks. Narrators who have never met Sutpen flesh him out in the book. The one exception is Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law, and although she was once inclined to marry him, she now hates him for what he did to her and her family. Noticeably, however, Faulkner attributes to each narrator a degree of unreliability.

Rosa calls on Quentin Compson, a young man whose grandfather had been acquainted with Sutpen. Quentin is on his way to Harvard, and she thinks that there is a chance that once at the university he might decide to write her story. Rosa is convinced that Sutpen is responsible for the demise of her entire family; her sheer hatred, the readers realize, is the basis of her unreliability. Because she so despised him, Rosa Coldfield describes him in such a way as to remind the reader of the devil himself. She describes him thus at the very beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!*:

“Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed. . .”(04)

She describes as “violent” and “without gentleness” everything from his movements to the conception of his children (Faulkner 05). These images are echoed later in the novel by Mr. Compson, Quentin's father as he describes his first encounter with Sutpen:

“A man with a big frame but gaunt now almost to emaciation, with a short reddish beard which resembled a disguise and above which his pale eyes had a quality at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed in a face whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven’s fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay.” (24)

Further encouraging the reader to fear and misunderstand Sutpen is Rosa’s retelling the story of how the plantation came to be. She speaks scornfully in her narrative to Quentin. Sutpen and his slaves:

“ . . . overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen’s Hundred, the Be Sutpen’s Hundred like the oldentime Be Light”(04).

This is the reader’s one-dimensional first impression of Sutpen. However, true to Aristotle’s tragic form, the story is complicated after the main exposition. Aristotle tells us “there must be a synthesis of conflict and actions and this synthesis must be imitative of events that arouse pity and fear, for therein lies the distinctive function” (Cooper 39). As earlier stated, tragedy allows us to experience pity and fear vicariously, without becoming victims ourselves.

Faulkner’s use of multiple narrators instigates these emotions by making the reader feel surrounded by conflict and, thus, more involved in the story. As Compson and his

father take up the narrative, a different picture of Sutpen emerges. Although this story is given to us fourth hand, the distancing again creates unreliability, it is nevertheless revealing. The story follows the path from Sutpen himself, to the General. The General then relays these facts to Quentin's father, who passes the story on to Quentin. Quentin tells the story to his college roommate, Shreve, who relays the story to the reader. Shreve's retelling, however unreliable, clarifies and elucidates Sutpen's character and background.

Sutpen was raised in the mountains of the poor south, in West Virginia. His family migrates to Mississippi, and during the move, Sutpen has an experience that leaves an impact and decides his destiny. Sutpen's father takes a job as an overseer on a plantation. Sutpen, then a young boy, is sent on an errand to the plantation house where he is turned away from the front door and sent around to the back door by a young black houseman. Dramatically, the humiliation of being treated as a lesser person by a black man becomes a driving force in Sutpen's life.

Growing up, Sutpen remembers families living in log cabins, men lounging around fires and women working around them to prepare meals. His only experience with people of color was with Indians, the enemy, who were dealt with at gunpoint. So Sutpen is surprised to learn that differences exist not only between white men and black men, but also between white men and white men. These differences are "not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room"(183). He learns this through his observations of the plantation owner from the woods. The owner lives on a beautiful and flourishing plantation, surrounded by slaves who cater to his every whim, and Sutpen sees him:

“in a barrel stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes off and a nigger who wore every day better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to, who did nothing else but fan him and bring him drinks;. . .that man who not only had shoes in the summertime too, but didn’t even have to wear them.” (184)

Sutpen finds himself wanting to be that man, and understands that there is a measure of competition involved in the business of becoming a wealthy plantation owner. He thinks to himself: “to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with”(192).

Thus begins his life-long quest for a dynasty of his own, structured in the southern manner of wealth and power despite the effects this ambition might have on others. Sutpen leaves his family quietly at dawn and heads to Haiti, never to see any of them again. In describing Sutpen, Faulkner says:

“[What Sutpen] was trying to say in his blundering way, is Why should a man be better than me because he’s richer than me, that if I had had the chance I might be just as good as he thinks he is, so I’ll make myself as good as he thinks he is by getting the same outward trappings which he has, which was a big house and servants in it. He didn’t say, I’m going to be braver or more compassionate or more honest than he – he just said, I’m going to be as rich as he was, as big as he was on the outside.” (qtd in Gywnn 35)

Sutpen’s design is based on want and personal gain. When he looks at the plantation owner, he demonstrates no situational awareness. He only sees a black man fanning the

man of the house, bringing him drinks, waiting on his every need. He does not see another human being, differentiated only by the color of his skin, treated as a lesser person than the plantation owner. Because Sutpen built his plan in the same fashion as the southern plantation aristocracy, by treating other humans as lesser beings, he is doomed to never attain the power and respect he so desires. Instead, he falls like the Aristotelian tragic hero. His pride and his ruthlessness are indeed fatal flaws.

In Haiti, Sutpen acquires a plantation, a wife, and has a son. Very shortly after the birth of his son, however, Sutpen discovers that his wife, and now his son, may have negro blood. "They deliberately withheld from me the one fact which I have reason to know they were aware would have caused me to decline the entire matter, otherwise they would not have withheld it from me – a fact which I did not learn until after my son was born"(212). This turning point of the story is when a major change takes place. Aristotelian theory dictates this climactic change happens because the protagonist displays some error of judgment, or shortcoming. A human frailty within the hero, i.e. a lack of insight or some other tragic flaw, is *hamartia*, a change altering the protagonist, is fate. For Sutpen, in his intolerance, the mixed race issue renders his life in Haiti unacceptable. After making provisions, he abandons Haiti and his family. The falling action begins, like a series of dominos that have been set into motion, and the story starts to unravel as Sutpen's goal of wealth, power and male heirs inevitably fails. Sutpen willingly sacrifices his family, his position as a plantation owner in Haiti, based wholly on the fact that his wife was of mixed race, and therefore unsuitable as the wife of a powerful southern plantation owner. He focused on his grand design, never acknowledging the people around him as anything more than a means to an end.



Mr. Compson, Quentin's father, takes up the narrative at this point. He reveals how Sutpen settles in Jefferson, Mississippi, wresting Sutpen's Hundred, his hundred square miles from the timbered wilderness of Southern Mississippi. Author A. Nicholas Fagnoli, Faulkner scholar, puts it this way:

“He rides into Jefferson, Mississippi, on a Sunday morning in June 1833, inveigles a hundred square miles of bottomland out of a Chickasaw chief, forces a captive French architect to design a mansion the size of a courthouse for him, and marries into a respectable Jefferson family.” (229)

Sutpen wants the “stainless wife and the unimpeachable father-in-law, on the license, the patent. He has no interest in an anonymous wife and children. So he sets about trying to cultivate the favor of the father of Ellen Coldfield, his idea of the perfect plantation wife.

Sutpen tries to establish himself within the community, but with poor results. He makes his entrance into Jefferson, Mississippi, on a peaceful Sunday morning. He crosses the square amid people on their way to church, men looking on from the Holston House gallery. Collectively, the town-folk look up and there before them is this stranger, no face they'd ever seen, no name they had ever heard. He appeared, a man on a “hard-ridden roan horse, man and beast looking as though they had been created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer sabbath sunshine.. .”(24). So his name went back and forth among the people of Jefferson “in a steady strophe and antistrophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen.*”(24). He wouldn't even drink with them, saying he didn't drink. It would be a long time later before the men of the town realized it was because he didn't have the money to spend on drinks, nor could he afford the courtesy of returning the favor of drinks bought for him. This intrusive stranger made others in the community uncomfortable.

Rosa tells Quentin: “He wasn’t a gentleman. He wasn’t even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before. . . seeking some place to hide himself” (09). She makes the point that Sutpen is not from a respectable family from Virginia or the Carolinas coming in with a surplus of slaves. She says “Anyone could look at those negroes of his and tell that they may have come (and probably did) from a much older country than Virginia or Carolina but it wasn’t a quiet one.”(11). Rosa’s prejudice illustrates the southern aristocracy’s bias. Who did this man possibly think he was? He was not from an established family from Virginia or the Carolinas. He had no valid accreditation, which was ironic, because the whole southern plantation aristocracy was itself very superficial, based on self-made frontiersmen and their heirs who carved out a nouveau riche life from the wilderness.

Sutpen is successful in his bid for Ellen Coldfield’s hand in marriage. One hundred invitations go out for their wedding, yet only ten people, including Ellen’s father and aunt attend the nuptials. The town is distrustful and their dislike of this mysterious man spoils the event and many stand outside pelting the couple with dirt and vegetable refuse as they leave the church. Here the reader gets a first glimmer of the human side of the heretofore demonized Sutpen:

“the bride shrinking into the shelter of his arm as he drew her behind him and he standing there, not moving even after another object. . .struck the hat from his head, and a third struck him full in the chest. . .He retreated to the carriage, shielding the two women with his body ordering the negroes to follow with another word.”(44).

Ellen Coldfield cries on the day of her wedding. With Mr. Compson's story, readers not only get a second opinion, but also a more humanized picture of Sutpen as he tries to protect the women from the pelting masses at the end of this disastrous wedding. He presents more like a human being but Compson too, is unreliable for he never knew Sutpen and uses only information gathered from others. The reader, here, begins to feel an empathy toward this man, who is, after all, a human being. One with goals and desires, as we all have.

Sutpen and Ellen adjust to married life and eventually have a son and daughter. Years later, with the war imminent, Sutpen's life suddenly becomes very complicated. Things take a dark turn as Aristotle's formula for tragedy continues with the falling action. Sutpen's son, Henry, goes off to school and meets a friend, Charles whom he brings home with him. Charles and Judith, Henry's sister, become engaged to be married. Unknown to everyone but Sutpen himself, Charles is the son that Sutpen left behind on the plantation in Haiti. The inevitable conflict is delayed, however, when the three men go off to war. During Sutpen's time away from home fighting the war, his wife dies, Henry murders Charles and disappears. Shortly thereafter, Judith becomes stricken with yellow fever and expires. In line with the tragic formula, once again, Sutpen's grand design has fallen apart. Aristotle says:

“But when the tragic incident occurs within the circle of those who are bound by natural ties – when murder or the like is done or intended by brother upon brother, son upon father, mother upon son, or son upon mother, – pity is aroused; and such are the situations that tragic poet must look for in the traditional stories”(qtd in Cooper 44).

As Aristotle suggests, one son murders the other son, destroying Sutpen's aspiration for a dynasty. Sutpen, humiliated at an impressionable age, implements his grand design and proceeds to follow through with it having no regard for those who may be adversely affected by his actions, but his grand plan is not to be.

Ultimately, it becomes apparent that Sutpen's problems lay in his innocence, just as Quentin's father was told by the general. ". . . he [Sutpen] discovered what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself. . . never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on. . ." (178). This lack of foresight and connection with others says much about the character of Thomas Sutpen. He was not a demon; he was a driven man, driven by forces deep inside him, developed during formative years. Aristotle says:

"To be perfectly tragic, the Plot must not, as some hold, have a double issue, fortunate for the good, unfortunate for the bad, but a single one. And the change of fortune must be. . . a fall from happiness to misery; and this fall must come about, not through depravity, but through a serious defect in judgment, or shortcoming in conduct" (qtd in Cooper 41).

What the reader is beginning to discover is that Sutpen is not a depraved man, not necessarily the person Rosa depicts. He takes care of his acknowledged family, he provides for them and supports his community; he sends his son to the university, he goes to war to support the southern cause. Faulkner says about Thomas Sutpen: "he wanted to establish the fact that man is immortal, that man, if he is man, cannot be inferior to another man through artificial standards or circumstances" (Gwynn 35). Sutpen's tragedy comes down

to a serious defect in his judgment, just as Aristotle points out. Though respectable by southern standards he is blind to his own faults.

Quentin and his roommate Shreve are speculating on the information they have been given to piece together, in their conjecture is again the unreliability of the lack of first-hand knowledge. They construct another side to Sutpen, not the demon, not the brave and ambitious warrior, but a man in a weakened state, someone who has lost everything he worked for not once, but twice, and with no time left to implement a well thought out plan. Sutpen, in talking to Quentin's grandfather speaks these words: "You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it"(212). Sutpen probably thought that things he did, decisions he made, were done in good faith and he fully expected to have good results from them. He may have begun to doubt his actions but does not live long enough to right his wrongs. The formulaic tragic flaw manifests itself.

In a desperate attempt to try again to build his dynasty, Sutpen ultimately turns to Milly, the granddaughter of Wash Jones, his overseer. Milly is not of high birth, but she is white. Instead of a much needed male heir, Milly gives him a daughter. In his haste and desperation, and because of his arrogance and single minded focus, Sutpen makes grave mistakes that lead to his final demise. He insults Milly as she lies with their daughter in her arms, "Well Milly; too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable"(229). Wash, who had visions of living in the plantation house is incensed and kills Sutpen with a rusty scythe. Thus, Aristotle's *denouement*, or catastrophe--the end of a tragic story.

Allegorically, Faulkner connects Thomas Sutpen to the story of the rise and fall of the antebellum south. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen's character will expose the moral crisis that conflicts that small country, the racism, the violence, the obsession for wealth, respect and power at any cost.

Quentin wonders why Rosa wants to tell her story specifically to him:

“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 stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth.”  
(06).

In telling her story, Rosa insinuates that the war was lost because Sutpen, and men like him were lacking in compassion and pity. Rosa's story haunts Quentin. He experiences the south through stories of people out of the past and these experiences annihilate his vision of the chivalry of the south, or the Lost Cause. A vision that included a romanticized vision of the old south defined by gentle women, reflective men and racial harmony between the slaves and the slave owners.

Literary critic Margaret D. Bauer speaks about this Lost Cause:

“As Quentin Compson hears the history of Thomas Sutpen and his family, as he pieces together the different accounts and hypothesizes the rest, and finally, as he too, stands at the deathbed of a 'relic' from the past, he is struck by the futility and potential destructive force of analogous 'shattered human hopes, absurd effort, and insignificant achievement,' and begins to

despair over the nature of mankind – past and present (and implicitly, future).”

Compson listens to the tragedy of Thomas Sutpen’s life, and thinks about the bigger tragedy of the South. Like Sutpen’s grand design, the southern plantation aristocracy, relying on slavery, aspiring to wealth and status, was built on a complex and rotten foundation, a diseased system that could not hold.

In equating Sutpen and the South, one must look at the similarities between the rise and fall of the South and the rise and fall of the house of Sutpen. One must also consider the Faulknerian tendency toward complication or complexity: no one character is necessarily just a character, which lends support to equating Sutpen and the South. Suzanne Disheroon-Green, editor of *Voices of the American South* talks about the historical timeline. By the 1700’s “social and political power became tied to land ownership in a way that would influence the social order of the South far into the twentieth century.”(05). An agrarian economy develops and because the work is so labor intensive, indentured servitude becomes a large part of the culture. Literary critic Melvin Backman adds: “The plantation aristocracy served as a symbol and goal, as the crown of a Southerner’s achievement; it provided the more successful and ambitious with a manner and tradition which they put on, so to speak, like a new cloak.” (598). White males could aspire to the southern plantation gentleman, which serves to highlight the irony of Rosa Coldfield’s objections that Sutpen came into town a stranger, with no pedigree. No pedigree was needed. The measure of a man was not about personal integrity, but about possessions, a model all too familiar to Americans reeling from the current economic debacle brought by Wall Street. This too is an example of tragedy based upon the same foundations as the southern plantation

aristocracy, with one difference. This is less about skin color and more about class stratification, the upper and the lower classes, which is also a delineation lacking dignity. Cowan speaks about tragedy and recognizing that harm has been done. The tragic protagonist as well as viewers of the tragedy must be able to see the ruination and understand that they were responsible for the loss. “Confronted with their imperfection, which they discern as an external depth into which they have fallen, and finding themselves to blame for everything, they are stunned into immobility as from a sudden blow”(16). They are frozen in place, unable to immediately comprehend what they have done.

Similarly, no pedigree was needed for the new men of the South. They carried certain qualities of the frontier settlers, particularly “the aggressiveness, the strength and ruthlessness of self-made men, and a fierce faith in the righteousness of their cause and their interests.” (Backman 598). The Southern gentleman didn’t think about how his hacking a plantation out of the wilderness and building a dynasty based on slave labor would work to destroy morality and instead would produce and endorse violence, greed, a terrible ruthlessness, and inhumanity to other humans whom they regarded as property. Cowan posits that “human beings have a secret but unexamined awareness of an imperfection in the frame of things and of their own implication in it – along with the intuition that they will ultimately be held accountable for it”(Cowan 16). This just brings us back to the cyclical nature of tragedy and our inability to learn from experience because we can never see past our goals for personal gain.

Melvin Backman talks about how “The Renaissance and the Commercial Revolution had unleashed new energies and freedoms; one of them was ‘the freedom to



destroy freedom.” (600). And it was the United States, a new country based on freedom and equality that would become the greatest violator of these institutions.

Backman wrote: “*Absalom, Absalom!* deals with the fall of a society.” (596). He considers Quentin’s role in the book: “his role is identified for the most part with a central quest in the novel – the quest to discover the truth about the rise and fall of his South.”(596). He goes on to talk about the trickiness of the narration in this story and how it mirrors the struggle to not only get to the truth, but to face the truth as well.

Shreve’s presence in this novel is two-fold. He is a narrator, from Canada which implies he not only was never acquainted with Sutpen, but has no real acquaintance with the south, other than through his friend and roommate, Quentin. In addition, it is Shreve who drags Sutpen’s story out of Quentin, slowly and methodically. Millgate argues that Shreve extracts more and more detail from Quentin. Shreve working in such a way that it forces Quentin to look at the quagmire that the south has become for him, detail for exquisite detail, all the way to the end of the story when Shreve asks: “Why do you hate the South?” (303). Quentin’s reply is telling: “*I don’t hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it!*” (Faulkner 303). But it seems he does.

Donald Kartiganer, literary critic and leading Faulkner scholar, says that in order to understand this complicated novel, one must recognize the fact that “for Faulkner, Thomas Sutpen is, in his basic intentions and in the fundamental characteristics of his methods, an image of the pre-Civil War Southern plantation owner.”(Kartiganer). In other words, Sutpen is typically representative of the southern plantation gentleman. And in this case, Kartiganer goes on to say:

If Sutpen horrifies the community, it is largely because he is a pure, naked version of its own deepest principles, the incarnation of those values and attitudes that enable a slave system to survive. The dismay which Jefferson feels regarding him does not alter the fact that it is the community itself that has created that code of conduct which he follows obsessively; Sutpen's face is the community's own, compounded to larger-than-life proportions."

Thomas Sutpen is the mirror image of the antebellum south. He was less a stranger to the inhabitants of Jefferson, Mississippi, and other small towns all over the south than anyone wanted to understand. Because of this inability to see the truth for what it was, both the character and the region will have tragic ends.

Literary critic Ralph Behrens, on *Absalom, Absalom!* and its thematic center, points out "the failure may be equated with the failure of dynasties of ancient times illustrated in the prophetic books of the Old Testament." (24). In Behrens opinion, "Faulkner expected his readers to find significance in the parallels between his story and the account of the House of David." (24). This didactic aspect of Faulkner's writing is subtle in his work, but evident. Behrens offers four sound reasons for the failure of Sutpen's grand design. The first, was Sutpen's innocence. He came up from very poor beginnings, there was no property, no people of color. He comes to the south and he's out of his element. The second reason is that of hubris, Sutpen's pride and arrogance which parallels those of the protagonists in the Greek tragedies. But the third reason is the critical of the four that Behren offers. It is representative in a microcosmic way, of those principles upon which the Old South built its social system." (26). Once more, a decayed, destined-to-fail system is built on the backs of racial inequality and the unfortunate capacity of man's inhumanity to

man. The fourth reason is through biblical analogy. Behrens states: Within the first two paragraphs of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner establishes a biblical tone through the choice of words.”(28). From there, he carries the theme throughout the book.

There are many perceptions of the south that stand strong even today. H.L. Mencken once stated in 1917 in an article called *The Sahara of the Bozart* that the south was a “stupendous region of worn-out farms, shoddy cities and paralyzed cerebrums. . . it is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert.” (Mencken). But what is more interesting is what Mencken states in the same article about the pre-civil war south:

“But in the South there were men of delicate fancy, urbane instinct and aristocratic manner-in brief, superior men-in brief, gentry. To politics, their chief diversion, they brought active and original minds. It was there that nearly all the political theories we still cherish and suffer under came to birth. It was there that the crude dogmatism of New England was refined and humanized. It was there, above, all, that some attention was given to the art of living that life got beyond and above the state of a mere infliction and became an exhilarating experience. A certain notable spaciousness was in the ancient Southern scheme of things. The *Ur*-Confederate had leisure. He liked to toy with ideas. He was hospitable and tolerant. He had the vague thing that we call culture.”

The implications here are clear and troubling. The South was a gentle place of culture and intelligence, respectable men, until that is, the war annihilated the south. What was left afterward was simply a vast wasteland of nothing. What isn't said in Mencken's passage is that the reason men had leisure and time for reflection was because slaves were brought in

and used without mercy to maintain the fields, the house, the very lifestyles these supposedly respectable and cultured men lived. Faulkner, who had clear convictions about respectability states: “respectability is an artificial standard which comes from up here. That is, respectability is not your concept or my concept. It’s what we think is Jones’s concept of respectability.” (qtd in Gwynn 35). In other words, Faulkner acknowledges that while power and money are tangible objects that can be obtained, respectability has qualities that are more liminal, peripheral; respectability is not bought as a commodity and though bestowed may have a very short shelf life.

Faulkner, in his University of Virginia lectures connects Sutpen and the South: “This is a story of a man who wanted a son and got too many, got so many that they destroyed him. It’s incidentally the story of Quentin Compson’s hatred of the bad qualities in the country he loves.” (qtd in Gwynn 71). However incidental the connection is, Faulkner has merged the character of Sutpen and the antebellum south in this novel, and neither are respected, through Quentin’s character.

In discussing the achievement of Faulkner, Michael Millgate, professor of English at the University of Toronto, talks about the elusiveness of Sutpen’s character: “Sutpen, long dead, is reflected in such varied and usually violent shapes in so many different minds that he assumes an air of portentousness and mystery which. . . makes him at the same time essentially unknowable. Sutpen, in fact, remains elusive both as a symbol and as character.” (Millgate 153). It is because of this elusiveness that Rosa Coldfield likens him to the universal southern gentleman, the one who lost the war. But this elusiveness also invites the readers to see that Sutpen as the antebellum south, was varied, violent and unknowable.

In 2008, almost a century after Mencken's article proclaiming the south *The Sahara of the Bozart*, and half a century after Faulkner proclaims his faith in mankind during his Nobel Prize speech, Christopher Dickey writes an article, *Southern Discomfort*, that was published in *Newsweek* magazine. He states: "For as long as I've been alive the old Confederacy has been a land without closure, where history keeps coming at you day after day, year after year, decade after decade, as if the past were the present, too, and the future forever." (Dickey, 23). There still remains a lack of closure.

Faulkner received the Nobel Prize in 1949 "for his powerful and artistically unique contribution to the modern American novel"(FaulknerOTW). He grew up in Oxford, Mississippi, son of an old southern family. From his family history and own experience, Faulkner created a host of characters that typified the growth, decay and ultimate demise of the southern plantation gentleman aristocrat, none better than Thomas Sutpen. Although he spent millions of words telling us tragic stories of the perils of building dynasties from baseless and seedy foundations, he stood before the world and announced his abiding faith in the human spirit. His work was never really meant to be didactic, but as human beings we have an obligation to ourselves and each other to justify his undying faith in our compassion and endurance. Sutpen and the South were doomed; Faulkner, through *Absalom, Absalom!*, immortalizes both man and region. Though there is no closure in Faulkner's modernist masterpiece, there is opportunity for understanding tragedy and reacting with compassion, and perhaps catharsis.

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