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**Faulkner's Idealizers and Fixators:
Their Susceptibility to Destruction by the Past**

**Michele Fetterolf
Honors Thesis
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I

William Faulkner has often been referred to as a regional novelist, an author drawn to the disturbed period of the ante- and post-bellum South. The impact of Southern history is obvious in Faulkner's works, yet it remains questionable whether Faulkner's themes and characters can be read as representative of the true course of Southern history. To assume that Faulkner set out to portray the way the South actually was during the time in which his works take place is perhaps foolhardy. Being fictional, his works can only be expected to adhere to the conventions of fiction, that is, that they concern fictional characters who exist in a fictional time and place. Although the influence of history is evident in Faulkner's works, an assumption that the works represent actual historical events and attitudes cannot follow merely from this fact.

Nevertheless, such literary critics as James Gray Watson and Richard Gray have proposed that the works of Faulkner do indeed portray the actual world of the ante- and post-bellum South. Claiming Faulkner was in fact an "historical novelist," both Gray and Watson assert that Faulkner presents an actual sense of the attitudes, mores, and customs of Southern man prevalent during the time in which the works are set. Watson characterizes the Sartoris and Snopes families of Faulkner's works as representative of ante-bellum Southern aristocracy and post-bellum modern materialism (16). Gray adds that the characters Quentin and Shreve (Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury), both plagued with insecurities regarding their place in the new world, are synonymous with the modern man of the post-bellum period.

Perhaps what has led such critics to this assumption is their reading of historical interpretations of the period in question. One such historiographical view is that of W.J. Cash, author of The Mind of the South. In this work, Cash shows the antebellum Southern world as "a world singularly polished and mellow and poised, wholly dominated by ideals of honor and chivalry and noblesse" (ix), claiming that:

in every rank they [the inhabitants of the South] exhibited a striking tendency to build up legends about themselves and to translate these legends into explosive action to perform with a high, histrionic flourish, and to strive for celebrity as the dashing blade (50).

Says Cash of the post-bellum South:

With the antebellum world removed to the realm of retrospect, the shackles of reality . . . fell away from it [the post-bellum South] altogether. Perpetually suspended in the great haze of memory, it hung, as it were, poised, somewhere between earth and sky, colossal, shining, and incomparably lovely . . . wherein everybody who had ever laid claim to the title of planter would be metamorphosed with swift precision, beyond any lingering shade of doubt, into the breathing image of Marse Chan and Squire Effingham . . . (124).

Undeniably this is the way Faulkner presents the ante-and post-bellum South in his major works. The sense of noblesse and grandeur are embodied wholeheartedly in Faulkner's portrayal of the Sartoris and Compson families (members of the Old South's aristocracy); so too is the tendency to "build up legends" about family history, as this study will later demonstrate. Another similarity between the South of Faulkner and that of Cash can be found in Faulkner's portrayal of the post-bellum world as one fraught with disaster because of its inability to exist independently of the pre-Civil War past. Such is the fate of characters like Gail Hightower of Light in August, Quentin Compson in Absalom, Absalom!, and the elder generation of Sartorises in Sartoris. Thus it seems that, if Cash's depiction of ante- and post-bellum Southern life is accurate, Gray and Watson have a valid point in characterizing Faulkner as an "historical novelist."

But was the world of the ante-and post-bellum South actually as Cash portrays it? Many have rejected Cash's portrait of the

South because of growing skepticism about the verity of his historiographical interpretation. Claiming no qualities "typical" of the South existed at that time (as Cash would have it), critics see Cash's portrayal of Southern history as overgeneralized and based on what have become through time the commonly conceived, though illusory, notions about the South. For instance, Hyatt H. Waggoner claims that no characteristics unique to Southern history, such as those proposed by Cash, actually existed. He cites the fear of miscegenation and the practice of primogeniture, two qualities Cash associates uniquely to Southern life, as not necessarily "Southern" but prevalent throughout the entire nation at that time. Given these claims, the validity of Cash's work is problematic, and Watson's and Gray's conception of Faulkner as primarily an historical novelist collapses under this weight.

Given this doubt, the theory behind Faulkner's recreation of Southern history with which this paper will occupy itself is Faulkner's use of characters' imaginations as shapers of the past. Critics now lean toward the notion that the Southern past in Faulkner's novels is based, not on actual history itself, but on the workings of his characters' minds. Faulkner's evocation of the Southern past in his novels does not adhere to established historical fact. Rather, the characters' individual interpretations produce the past. Michael Millgate contends that Faulkner's attempt was not to portray this period factually but to show it as a time which feeds the imagination of his

characters and invites subjective interpretation. This subjective interpretation in turn reveals more about the characters themselves than about actual Southern history (26-27). Faulkner, he contends, is concerned "with history as a matter of interpretation, as the way particular people think about the past, rather than with history as the recreation of what actually happened in the past" (31). Waggoner claims that in Faulkner's works "the area of agreed-upon or public truth has shrunk" and that the past becomes imagined from a "jumble of facts, rumors, old wives' tales, hypotheses, and dubious interpretations" (80). Therefore, although the historical context is realistic, the Southern past portrayed in Faulkner is most validly interpreted as one created through the characters' subjective interpretations.

II

The values and way of life of the antebellum South is undeniably a prevalent theme in the works of William Faulkner. Many of Faulkner's characters meet their downfall because they cannot reconcile their subjective interpretations of this period with their present lives. This paper proposes two character models into which those who are unable to resolve past and present fall: idealizers and fixators. Idealizers are those characters who believe that the ante-bellum code of existence is

an ideal by which modern man must live his life. The fixators are those who feel that their lives in the present are determined by an irrefutable bond with the ante-bellum past. In the former case, the characters long for the antebellum South and its ways to reemerge as the standard of Southern life. They are dreamers, caught in an ideal state from which they refuse to emerge. In the latter case, the characters' sense of an indisputable link between past and present drives them to reconcile the complexities and unknowability of the past with their present lives. They feel this is necessary for self-understanding. These idealizers and fixators suffer irreparable damage because of their tendency to engulf themselves in the past. Faulkner presents their fascination with this period as a negative force which may lead to stasis, withdrawal, or obsession.

The antebellum past overcomes these two character types because of their common tendency to attribute mythic qualities to this period. In using the term "myth" I have followed the definition set forth by T.S. Eliot: "the manipulation of a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity" (reprinted from The Dial, November 1923, in Adams, 58). Antiquity in this case is the ante-bellum Southern era; in keeping with Eliot's definition, the characters constantly compare what they see around them in the present to what they believe was true of the past. The characters become myth-makers in Eliot's sense of the term in that, as they make comparisons, they attribute mythic qualities to the antebellum Southern past.

The past takes on a sense of enormousness; its unknowability is resolved through a process entailing illusion, idealism, and speculation. When the boundary between actuality and imagination becomes blurred, the characters create myths to explain the unknown past. This indulgence in the myth surrounding antebellum Southern history leads the idealizers and fixators to develop their respective ideas concerning Southern history.

Once the characters' reliance upon myth is established, several problems emerge. Characters who become engulfed in a mythical view of the antebellum South become so obsessed with trying to understand it that they are disassociated from both themselves and society. Those who idealize this period forget that they must live in the present; they adapt a static life into which neither change nor progress is permitted. And those who simply cannot bear the onslaught of modernity, seeing it as a threat to the antebellum values by which they live, choose to flee from humanity in the futile attempt to live a life which can no longer be. In allowing the antebellum South to be elevated to mythic proportions, idealizers and fixators become engulfed in illusory ideals, ideals which in the aforementioned cases lead to the total disassociation of these characters from the flow of human experience.

III

Examining Sartoris, Absalom, Absalom! and "The Bear," I will show first how and why the values and way of life of the antebellum South are elevated to mythic heights and then how the adherence by certain characters to this mythicism leads to their deterioration on both the personal and societal scale. These three works exemplify best the two character models I have proposed. In Sartoris and "The Bear" we are presented with the idealizers; these are the characters whose tendency it is to allow the mythic characteristics they attribute to the Old South to lead them to refute the present in all forms. They hold their ideal illusions of the Southern past as a standard up to which they feel the modern world must live. Finding no way by which this can be achieved, given the changes taking place because of new, modern values, the characters totally refute the present, allowing themselves to retreat into the world of the past. Absalom, Absalom! portrays the fixators, those who believe that the present is undeniably linked to the past whose complexities must be resolved in order for the self to emerge. These characters become so obsessed with understanding the past that their lives are destroyed; their need for reconciliation of past with present overcomes their ability to live effectively.

IV

The opening lines of Sartoris establishes that the past is indeed constantly compared to and associated with the present in this novel. John Sartoris' evocation in the opening paragraph presents a figure far more powerful and real than even those actually sitting in the office. He looms over the action, inundating the characters with his presence:

As usual, old man Falls had brought John Sartoris into the room with him, . . . fetching, like an odor, like the clean dusty smell of his faded overall, the spirit of the dead man into that room where the dead man's son sat and where the two of them, pauper and banker, would sit for a half an hour in the company of him who had passed beyond death and then returned.

Freed as he was of time and flesh, he was a far more palpable presence than either of the two old men who sat shouting periodically into one another's deafness . . . He was far more palpable than the two old men cemented by a common deafness to a dead period . . . John Sartoris seemed to loom still in the room, above and about his son, with his bearded, hawklike face, so that as old Bayard sat with his crossed feet propped against the corner of the cold hearth, . . . it seemed to him that he could hear his father's breathing even, as though that other were so much more palpable than mere transiently articulated clay as to even penetrate into the uttermost citadel of silence in which his son lived (19).

The basis of the myth in the novel revolves around John Sartoris and his brother Bayard. We see John Sartoris as the epitome of antebellum Southern aristocracy; both he and his way of life imbue a sense of gallantry, chivalry, and pageantry:

. . . in John Sartoris' day it [the parlor] had been constantly in use. He was always giving dinners, and balls too on occasion, . . . surrounding himself with a pageantry of color and scent and music against which he moved with his bluff and jovial arrogance (62-63).

Moreover, Faulkner presents John Sartoris as an omnipotent figure devoted to upholding and defending the southern antebellum code of behavior. When carpetbaggers come to Jefferson inciting the Negroes to utilize their power to vote, John Sartoris takes the law into his own hands, disposing of the unwanted carriers of subterfuge with a flair that practically abolishes all immorality associated with this double murder:

'Madam' he [John] says, 'I was fo'ced to muss up yo' guest-room right considerable. Pray accept my apologies,. . . fer havin' been put to the necessity of exterminatin' vermin on yo' premises' (194).

This sense of both pageantry and steadfast devotion to the Southern code is what entices the characters in the present of the novel to attribute mythic characteristics to John Sartoris. The idealizers see John Sartoris as a man of an aristocratic and loyal nature; they then associate him with an ideal state of being, a sublime way of life in which the characters in the present can have no part. The time of John Sartoris embodies the characteristics of aristocratic splendor and bravery which the idealizers seek.

Such is also true of John's brother Bayard. A soldier in the Civil War, Bayard's character becomes synonymous, through the

tales of Miss Jenny and Old Man Falls, with heroic bravery. Bayard's untimely death was brought about, not in the throes of battle, but at the hand of a cook from whose regiment Bayard was trying to steal anchovies. Rather than see this "harebrained prank" for what it really was, Miss Jenny, successor of the Sartoris line, raises this episode to heights of epic splendor, "and as she grew older the tale itself grew richer and richer, taking on a mellow splendor like wine" which ultimately became

a gallant and finely tragical focal point to which the history of the race had been raised from out the old miasmatic swamps of spiritual sloth by two angels valiantly fallen and strayed, altering the course of human events and purging the souls of men (25).

Adventurousness and rebelliousness are also associated with Bayard, as is demonstrated in his disruption of a Methodist tabernacle revival during the course of a fox hunt, "in a spirit of fun, purely" (25). Such a combination of heroicism and audaciousness surrounds the Bayard Sartoris name, attributing to him a glamorous quality to which the idealizers are drawn. In her deification of Bayard Sartoris, Miss Jenny attributes to him a "notoriety which his skill as a soldier could never have won him" (26), thus suggesting that most of the glamour the idealizers associate with these dead men is illusory. In the unfolding of the respective myths, the reader can see through the glamorous facade; Miss Jenny, Old Bayard, Old Man Falls, and Simon the Negro slave, however, fail to notice the ordinary

and even foolhardy way in which these men lived their lives. They apotheosize the name of Sartoris, in their own minds at least, as representative of the ideal Southern way of life.

The reason the myth of Sartoris holds so much appeal to the idealizers is because of the encroachment of modernity on their agrarian society. More forceful, less glamorous persons such as the Snopes family are slowly pushing aside the remaining few of aristocratic background. A new world with new values is imposed on the old, and the idealizers seek to protect what has proven good in the past. The idealizers stereotype the likes of the Snopes as "parasites" because the Snopes place no value upon pageantry and appearances. They are coarse, materialistic, and middle class, qualities in direct conflict with the Old Southern code upheld by the idealizers. The modern world is an antithesis to their established code of life, so the idealizers retreat to the safe haven of their illusory state; there they feel they will be protected from the immorality of the materialism and crudeness of the Snopes.

Once the idealizers establish the myth surrounding the Sartoris family, those indulging in it feel that they too possess the idealistic qualities attributed to their predecessors; they become anachronistic representations of the antebellum Southern era. They exhibit a sense of vainglorious pride which they believe to be transmitted through family ties. Miss Jenny is described as:

that indomitable spirit that, born with a woman's body into a heritage of rash and heedless men and seemingly for the sole purpose of cherishing those men to their early and violent ends, and this over a period of history which had seen brothers and husband slain in the same useless mischancing of human affairs (286).

Miss Jenny is a character of great strength who adheres strictly to her established code of aristocratic ethics. She lives with the fatality and doom she feels encompasses the Sartoris family because it is her birthright; she feels tied to the Sartorises by their family legacy, a legacy which demands that she uphold the aristocratic values of her ancestors. This birthright requires that she must shun the modern world and its appurtenances to lead a life of pride and appearances.

Such is also true of old Bayard; he makes pride in his family heritage the model for his behavior, admonishing the new ways of his culture and choosing to live his days in fond remembrance of times past. Although old Bayard, having been born "too late for one war and too soon for the next" (298), cannot be an integral figure in the Sartoris myth, he becomes what Watson terms "a creature of the self-created and self-perpetuated Sartoris legend" (24). Bayard and Miss Jenny create the Sartoris legend, choosing to be its heralds in the modern world by preserving its splendor and gallantry in appearances and outdated mores. Even Simon the Negro slave indulges in the idealism surrounding the Sartorises, placing himself at a position of superiority over his race. "'Block off de commonality, ef you wants, but don't intervoke no equipage waitin' on Cunnel er Miss

Jenny,'" he commands, establishing himself as a protector of their fine legacy and leaving "his spirit mollified . . . and laved with the beatitude of having gained his own way" (37). For him as well as for the other idealizers in Sartoris, being associated with the Sartoris myth serves as a way by which to raise themselves above the "commonality" of their contemporaries.

Although the indulgence in illusions surrounding the Sartoris myth seems to raise the idealizers above their fellow man, Faulkner suggests that their adherence to these outdated mores is ultimately destructive. By clinging to a set of values which probably never even existed and which at any rate have long since passed from society, these characters exhibit characteristics of a static life; idealizers hinder not only their own growth but also that of those around them. The Old South becomes the idealizers' model; they scorn cars and industry, thus refusing to reap the benefits of the modern world. In admonishing the new generation, they encourage rebellion; such is the fate of young Bayard, who is driven to futile acts of violence in an attempt to prove his merit in the idealizers' eyes. In trying to live up to the expectations of heroicism demanded of him by the idealizers, young Bayard destroys himself. He simply cannot live up to their idealistic expectations and is unable to define his place in the Sartoris line. He is neither a hero of Sartoris legend nor an idealizer perpetuating it; he is thus displaced amidst his own family because of his inability to act according to his own desires. Because of the static as well

as the destructive effects brought about by the perpetuation of the Sartoris myth, we see what Watson terms the "death in life" of the Sartoris family. As a result of the over-glorification of their family's past, the inescapable influence of legend traps the idealizers (18,25).

V

The opening lines of "The Bear," as with those in Sartoris, immediately allude to the influence the past has over the present of the work. The myth here, however, surrounds not a family of Southern aristocracy but the wilderness of the South itself and the men who perpetuate the hunting ritual each year:

For six years now he [Isaac] had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document: - - of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey; bigger than Major de Spain and the scrap he pretended to, knowing better; older than old Thomas Sutpen of whom Major de Spain had had it and who knew better; older even than old Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief, of whom old Sutpen had had it and who knew better in his turn. It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and relieved against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules which voided regrets and brooked no quarter . . . (191-92).

This description evokes an almost sacred tone in relation to the wilderness, which is bigger than all men, incapable of being possessed, and timeless in its existence. It is a place to which the hunters return each year for "the best game of all" (192), the hunt of Old Ben. Through their yearly ritual the hunters acquire what Isaac sees as "special" characteristics; the hunters too become part of the myth associated with the wilderness. Isaac thus becomes an idealizer because of his view of the hunt and of the hunters themselves. He idealizes the hunt and attributes characteristics of grandeur to all associated with it. The whiskey the hunters drink is unique to hunters ("that brown liquor which not women, not boys and children, but only hunters drank, drinking not of the blood they spilled but some condensation of the wild immortal spirit," 192). The "coarse rapid food" they consume is "cooked by men who were hunters first and cooks afterward" (196). And the sleep they enjoy is "in harsh sheetless blankets as hunters slept" (196). The communal feeling enjoyed by the hunters is something of which Isaac yearns to be a part; he longs "to earn for himself from the wilderness the name and state of hunter provided he in his turn were humble and enduring enough" (192). These characteristics of humility and perseverance are also a part of the hunter-myth; each year the men engage in the pursuit of Old Ben with absolutely no intention of slaying him. Rather, they see the hunt as a "yearly rendezvous with the bear which they did not even intend to kill;"

they experience the hunt as "the yearly pageant-rite of the old bear's furious immortality" (194).

The myth surrounding the hunters is especially embodied in Sam Fathers, the half-Negro, half-Indian who serves as the initiator of Isaac's manhood, "the old man, the wild man not even one generation from the woods, childless, kinless, peopleless" (246). Isaac joins Sam with the hunters and the wilderness as another force to which mythic qualities are attributed. Sam is an integral part of both the hunt and the wilderness. Without him, Isaac may never have achieved hunting expertise or intense love for the wilderness: "Sam led him into the wilderness and showed him and he ceased to be a child" (330). Isaac looks to him as "his spirit's father" (326), the man who shaped his attitudes and initiated him into the bond shared by hunters. Because Isaac idealizes Sam, Sam becomes the figure around whom Isaac shapes his existence. In his ultimate retreat from man and society at the close of the episode, Isaac follows the example set by Fathers, who lived far from societal interaction.

The mythicism which permeates the story is further established in comparing the past state of the Southern land to its present state of collapse. As with the idealizers in Sartoris, the idealizers in "The Bear" dread the effect of the modern world upon the wilderness. Destruction and modernization encroach upon the land, filling the hunters with a sense of a gradual decay pervading their idealistic life. The hunters come to term the land as

that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another (193). . .

The idealizers thus see the wilderness with a sense of nostalgia. They long to perpetuate the old myths as a stay against the callousness and materialism of modern society. But even they feel a sense of doom in their ways, knowing that modernism must prevail. Thinks Isaac:

It seemed to him that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning, had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too (226).

The idealizers in "The Bear," the hunters, establish a myth surrounding the hunt and the wilderness out of their necessity to perpetuate a ritualistic lifestyle. Because they cannot accept the implications of the encroaching modern world, the hunters enshroud themselves in this myth, attempting to deny that the modern world exists at all.

Faulkner presents such a denial of and withdrawal from modern society as ultimately destructive. Isaac's repudiation of his family inheritance is largely related to the myth he attributes to the land. Isaac strongly believes that the land can belong to no one; therefore, to claim that he owns any piece of it or is entitled to any portion because of family inheritance

is absurd to him. Isaac says of the creation of the earth:

He [God] made the earth first and peopled it with dumb creatures, and then He created man to be His overseer on earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name, not to hold for himself and his descendants inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood (257).

Because Isaac truly believes that no one man can own any one piece of land, he repudiates his inheritance and withdraws from society. He establishes himself in a shabby shack from which he makes frequent visits to his true home, the open wilderness. His repudiation forces him to withdraw from family and society, leaving him a "myth-man deciding to become as a little child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Moses 21).

Isaac's refusal to accept the sins of his forefathers is also associated with his withdrawal from society. His grandfather's illegitimate black offsprings fill him with a sense of inescapable disgust. Thus because he cannot accept the sins established in his family's past, he retreats into idealism. The intrusion of his forefathers' sins upon his idealistic picture of the South works to encourage Isaac's withdrawal. Even after Isaac takes a wife, he still will not claim his inheritance; this causes his wife to refuse to provide him an heir by which he can perpetuate his name. Isaac severs his legacy because he adheres to the ideals of the myth associated with the land. The ill effects incurred by Isaac's idealistic vision are twofold:

he not only withdraws from both family and society, but he also refuses to carry on his family name. Like Sam Fathers, Isaac chooses to live his life in "loneliness and solitude," terms used earlier in the novel to describe Fathers (177). As in Sartoris, Faulkner makes a clear statement in "The Bear" about persons who indulge in idealism and myth. Man cannot disengage himself from the bond of humanity; such action results in a life of tragic failure (Fowler 50). Like the Sartoris idealizers, Isaac too flees humanity, adopting a static life for the sake of an idealism that is no longer possible.

VI

Thomas Sutpen, much like the heroic Sartorises and hunter Sam Fathers of Sartoris and "The Bear," is the principal character around whom the myth of Absalom, Absalom! revolves. Sutpen is a ghost-like shadow in the novel who looms over the action. His presence is evoked in every scene:

. . . the long-dead object of her [Miss Rosa's] impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy victorious dust . . . Out of the quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous . . . faint sulphur-reed still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him band of wild niggers . . . Immobile, bearded and hand palm-lifted the horseman sat (7-8).

Sensing Sutpen's violent, demonic qualities, the reader realizes that Sutpen's final act of retaliation upon mankind is to haunt their existence even long after his death. The facts about Sutpen's life are never actually known; instead, other characters must piece together, from the sketchy and often questionable evidence, his life's nature. The legend of Thomas Sutpen that Quentin finally establishes is as follows:

It seems that this demon -- his name was Sutpen -- (Colonel Sutpen) -- Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation -- (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) -- tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which -- (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) -- without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only -- (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) -- and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says -- (9).

The Sutpen legend Quentin and his roommate Shreve concoct derives from their intuitions and embellishments. They do not know the real facts, so they base their story upon what others (Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson) have told them. As their unravelling of the tale proceeds, the characters about whom they are speaking achieve larger-than-life proportions. Quentin and Shreve never make real contact with the past; instead, Quentin and Shreve apply a "decorous ordering" to the episodes about which they have speculated (Gray 109). Thomas Sutpen becomes an enigma to them, a figure to which they are mysteriously drawn because of his shadow and unknowability. Their uncovering of his "design"

establishes the myth of Sutpen. He becomes a larger-than-life character whose purposes and goals reach epic proportions.

As Quentin and Shreve gradually uncover the legend of Sutpen, they become so engrossed in the tale that they become indistinguishable from the characters about whom they are speaking:

So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two -- Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry . . . 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 (334,336).

The myth surrounding Sutpen becomes so powerful that it overtakes the present, enveloping Quentin and Shreve and drawing them back to a time almost 50 years prior to the time during which the novel is actually set. The force of the legend is established; it is so awesome as to completely deride time, engulfing two characters 50 years later.

Once the myth is established, Quentin associates it with unlocking "old universal truths" (Millgate 27). Such makes Quentin a fixator, a character obsessed with creating an impregnable bond between past and present events. The "universal truths" that Quentin believes he uncovers become an obsession for him. In his quest to uncover the driving force behind Sutpen's behavior, Quentin allows himself to become overcome and controlled by the past. The past with which he is dealing is only that of Thomas Sutpen, yet he comes to relate this singular

existence with the past of the entire South. Thomas Sutpen's life becomes, for Quentin, Southern life during that period. As his talking proceeds, it discloses to Quentin with the force of fate the burden of Yoknapatawpha's history:

the introverted illusion of itself as a representation of the old, familial, corporate, sacramental community . . . The origins of Yoknapatawpha lie in the ruthless drive of the modern historical ego which had founded a modern slave society in a wilderness (Simpson 240).

Although Quentin is forcefully drawn toward the myth of Thomas Sutpen, he looks upon it with abhorrence. After all, Sutpen acts immorally in several ways. He forsakes his first wife and child when he discovers her Negro blood; he rather callously suggests and Rosa mate and try for a male heir before they become married; finally, he shuns his mistress (Wash Jones' granddaughter) and her female offspring because of his obsessive desire for a male heir to perpetuate his "design." For the sake of his "design" Sutpen commits many grievous moral errors. For Quentin, the actions of Sutpen represent the actions of the entire South. He sees the whole period as one steeped in immorality and lust for power.

Quentin's view of the South establishes him as a fixator. He is irresistibly drawn to the South, finding it impossible to escape its "doom and pressure," yet he cannot decide whether he despises it (Gray 197-198). When asked by Shreve, "Why do you hate the South?" Quentin replies:

I dont hate it, Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; I dont hate it, he said. I dont hate it he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark; I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!

Quentin is unable to resolve his feelings about the South. On one hand he loves it: it is his birthplace, the land he knows and loves, a land from which he finds it hard to be separated during his stay at Harvard. But as is obvious through Quentin's incremental protestations, he knows that the South is tied to people like Sutpen; the bond is hideous yet undeniable. As he says at one point:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happens is never once but like ripples maybe on water the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord, to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water . . . reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter; that pebble's watery echo moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm . . . (261-62).

Quentin seems to be saying here that Southern history is a "continuum out of which the individual person emerges and to which he eventually belongs" (Gray 98). This means that he too, as well as the entire South, is as much a part of Sutpen's evil as is Sutpen. He cannot reconcile himself to this fact. He becomes confused as to exactly whom he is in relation to the universe. Is he Quentin Compson or merely an embodiment of the entire course of Southern history? Does his course of action actually make a difference in the long run, or is he merely

perpetuating what all Southerners must as a consequence of their birthright? This confusion over his place in the present world, given his tie to the past, leaves Quentin utterly ineffectual; he is trapped between two worlds, neither of which he feels he can be a part. As he says to Shreve, "I am older at twenty than a lot of people who have died" (377). The superimposition of the Sutpen myth upon Quentin's life has left him a ghost in his own time, doomed to ineffectuality by a myth established through heresy and bias. Quentin's life is tragic because he is fixated on a vision of the past that has usurped all of his emotional and intellectual faculties. It allows him to see life only in terms of the past; the past overcomes and dominates his consciousness, creating an inability to live an independent life (Rollyson 374). He becomes oblivious to present surroundings and loses all self-identity.

VII

As is exemplified in Sartoris, "The Bear," and Absalom, Absalom!, indulgence in myth and illusion as by the idealizers and fixators is an overwhelmingly destructive force. Once this force is established, it draws both toward irremediable doom. Creating the myth, whether as an idealization of the past or as a point to which the past is undeniably linked, ultimately leads the characters to stasis, isolation, or ineffectuality.

Although at times the reader sees that indulgence in myth offers the characters a momentary stay against the onslaught of a modern world they detest, ultimately Faulkner dramatizes that this world must be accepted and reconciled with in order for man to move forward and to progress. To Faulkner, the past should be neither forgotten nor ignored:

There is no such thing really as was because the past is. It is a part of every man, every woman, and every moment . . . And so . . . a character in a story at any moment of action is not just himself as he is then, he is all that made him, as the long sentence is an attempt to get his past and possibly his future into the instant in which he does something (quoted in Rubin 243).

Mankind's association with his past is inevitable and even beneficial, asserts Faulkner. The past helps him shape his actions in the present by helping him understand himself. The present is derived from the past, but in the present we must live. Life for Faulkner is motion; it must move on with time. According to Faulkner, "Man's fate . . . is that he must and will change; man's hope is that, by his own efforts, he can change for the better" (quoted in Adams 134). Nostalgic feelings toward the Old South are inevitable, but Faulkner asserts that the modern Southern man must put away these unnecessary sentimental attachments and become a "citizen of the world" (Adams 135). Where the idealizers and fixators have gone wrong, then, is in their refusal to accept the changing world for what it is: a continuum in which all mankind is involved and which must be accepted for effectual change to take place. What Faulkner seeks

is a call to action, progress. We must get on with our lives in the present in order to survive. Indeed, when this is accomplished, we may not only survive but, in Faulkner's hopeful words, prevail.

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