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Bad Blood: The Southern Family in the Work of William Faulkner

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BAD BLOOD: THE SOUTHERN FAMILY
IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

A Thesis Presented

by

NEIL T. PHILLIPS

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University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Department of English

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DEDICATION

INTERVIEWER: Some people say they can't understand your writing, even after they read it two or three times. What approach would you suggest to them?

FAULKNER: Read it four times.

-William Faulkner with Jean Stein
The Paris Review, Spring, 1956.

ABSTRACT

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IN THE WORK OF WILLIAM FAULKNER

SEPTEMBER 2011

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This thesis concerns the work of William Faulkner, specifically *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. Using the Southern family as a lens through which to view Faulkner's overarching commentary on the values of the Old South, I explore how the Compsons, Sutpens, and McCaslins remain unable to escape the prejudicial and repressive culture that is Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County.

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INTRODUCTION

Like I say, blood always tells.

-Jason Compson, *The Sound and the Fury*¹

I watched the miragy antics of men and women- my father, my sister, Thomas Sutpen, Judith, Henry, Charles Bon- called honor, principle, marriage, love, bereavement, death.

-Rosa Coldfield, *Absalom, Absalom!*²

Those who had fought for four years and lost to preserve a condition not because they were opposed to that franchisement . . . not because they were opposed to freedom . . . but for the old reasons for which man . . . has always fought and died in wars: to preserve a status quo.

-Isaac McCaslin, *Go Down, Moses*³

Attempting to locate a paradigmatic strain throughout any author's works can be a difficult, even arduous, task. Yet the novels of William Faulkner exhibit an unparalleled thematic continuity that traces the disintegration of various families often struggling to fuse social convention with instinctual morality. Three of Faulkner's most important dynasties, the Compsons, Sutpens, and McCaslins, successfully expose the spurious principles of the Deep South, and the cataclysmic consequences they produce, without ever taking us outside the domestic realm. Hardly ever are we situated in the prototypical scenario of the cotton field or slave quarters, yet just as rarely do the Southern mores structuring the edifice of slavery and its attendant racism, even postbellum, resemble anything but an omnipresent force. Faulkner chooses, rather, to place the reader in circumstances more connected to his own experience in their nuclear families, making his writing all the

more horrifying for its relevance. As opposed to, for instance, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Faulkner's novels hold the power of identification, if not with the South itself, with the piteous failings of the Southern family.

Irving Howe reminds us that "Clan rather than class forms the basic social unit in Faulkner's world. Pride in family and reverence for ancestors are far more powerful motives than involvement with class . . . It is through the breakup of clans that Faulkner charts the decay of the traditional South."⁴ Howe may be right in identifying the "clan" as the most potent symbol dominating the world of Yoknapatawpha, but those individual cohorts add unique significance to the social milieu presented in Faulkner's corpus. The Compsons cannot transcend their gross nihilism and obsession with Caddy's wantonness, the Sutpens systematically implode following Thomas Sutpen's act of miscegenation and abandonment of his wife and child, and the McCaslins never fully escape the shadow of their predecessor Old Carothers and his contamination of the family bloodline. All of these disjointed, dysfunctional clans, though, are analogous in their inability to sustain a viable existence relying on the irrational expectations of the traditional South.

Patricia Roberts Miller's analysis of dictatorial rulerships provides the most apt encapsulation of what it means to be a part of an essentialized community; that is, in a totalitarian state there is always the conflict between "the goal of inclusion and the need for rules."⁵ Precisely this conflict is what each of the Faulkner's families displays. In the Old South, the demand for solidification (especially in terms of race) surpasses all other concerns, but it is precisely those attempts to mend the torn

social fabric when cultural imperatives are disobeyed that it begins to fall apart and reveal the actuality that it is built upon shifting sand.

As a possible way to insulate against looming cultural forces while establishing a visible presentation of unity, the family takes on a key significance for creating and maintaining identity through blood. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* have continuous arguments over whose bloodline actually fostered the poor qualities they find in their children, and often debate who can claim the purest lineage. “My people are every bit as well born as yours,” Mrs. Compson exclaims, “Just because Maury’s health is bad.”⁶ Juxtaposed to these many fruitless conflicts that constitute the Compson family are the disenfranchised Gibsons who actually provide the only familial stability (and sanity) necessary to sustain the rapidly disintegrating clan. Yet what primarily stimulates these questions of blood and simultaneously the Compson collapse is Caddy, as nearly every one of the four narrative sections reflects a different reaction to her behaviors that even contribute to an instance of suicide and castration. The Compsons (most saliently the men) are powerless to overcome their obsession with Caddy’s promiscuity and although we hear little of her voice, she remains the most important figure propelling the novel’s action. Most importantly, though, she functions as a gateway into the disturbed psyches of her family members, whose mental anguish is well suited to a series of individual psychological studies that remains a useful form of analysis for each novel.

Furthering the importance of blood, John T. Irwin describes Thomas Sutpen of *Absalom, Absalom!* in paternalistic terms: “We see why Sutpen’s revenge requires

that he found a dynasty, for the proof that he has succeeded in becoming the father will finally be achieved only when he bequeaths his authority and power to his son as an inheritance . . . thereby establishing the son's dependence on his father and thus the father's mastery. . . . His is the paradoxical fate of one who tries to seize authority and power by one rule and then hold them by another, the fate of a man who wants to be God."⁷ Sutpen's selfhood can only be realized through the fathering of a dynasty, of which his first family constituting mulatto Eulalia and Charles Bon do not meet the proper racial standards. So Sutpen abandons them until Bon's reappearance and the Civil War destroys his family and dreams of enduring as the quintessential Southerner. As Irwin acknowledges, the evident God-complex Sutpen manifests contrasts starkly with his inability to find equilibrium between his wholesale belief in not only the rectitude, but the permanence of the Southern value system, and the later events that challenge entirely those beliefs by pointing to their intrinsically inequitable and nonviable nature. Ironically Sutpen's past transfers fluidly to his children when they too begin to replicate his actions consciously, thus indicating the true power of blood in Faulkner's works as the sins of the fathers are always in some form conveyed upon successors. Charles Bon exoticizes his own secondary black family and Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon even goes a step further to flaunt his black bride in the faces of what he deems his white tormentors. As Etienne argues late in the novel regarding his marriage and child: "*That paper is between you and one who is inescapably negro; it can be put aside, no one will anymore dare bring it up than any other prank of a young man in his wild youth. And*

*as for the child, all right. Didn't my own father beget one? And he none the worse for it?"*⁸

Compared to Sutpen, we know little about Carothers McCaslin, the original progenitor of the McCaslins in *Go Down, Moses*. What we do know, though, is that his incestuous relationship with his daughter splinters the familial infrastructure irrevocably from that point on. A feeling of culpability extends to each succeeding McCaslin generation and in a move away from Sutpen and his plantation, Faulkner shifts scenarios from the McCaslin land, to the wilderness, to far back in time to the prehistoric dawn of man. What this chronological flexibility allows for is a thematic push towards questioning whites' claim to racial supremacy by perpetually indicating blacks as the master race and hence forbears of all mankind. The novel's white characters such as the Edmonds always fall into subconscious interludes during which they question their heritage far beyond Carothers' origination, and pose a remarkable test of the South's racial hegemony. Perhaps what *Go Down, Moses* most efficiently proves is the arbitrariness of Southern categorization, and concomitantly how those prejudicial designations are passed down from parent to child endlessly with no reason other than to maintain the existing establishment. The narrator in "The Fire and the Hearth" tracks how such values become inculcated by describing the childhood of young Carothers Edmonds who for years spends so much time with the black Beauchamps that "the two houses had become interchangeable," when suddenly "one day the old curse of his fathers, the old haughty ancestral pride based not on any value but on an accident of geography,

stemmed not from the courage and honor but from wrong and shame, descended to him.⁹

In sum, Faulkner places great weight on Southern precepts of lineage, and the perpetuation of wrongs passed down from generation to generation. Patterns of familial behavior and the effects forbears have on the present, and future, are extremely important in these novels, where each character seems to exist, or whose subconscious becomes fully elucidated, only within the framework of his family and the values in place therein. On a macro level, family values and individual actions act as a guide towards the overarching mores of the Old South. The members of each family, the Compsons, Sutpens and McCaslins, each contribute a different voice to Faulkner's world and collectively portray the South as a dystopian society in direct contrast to its supposed Edenic culture. The hope is that through this three-chapter thesis, not only will the reader attain a clearer sense of how Faulkner presents issues of blood and selfhood, but also a greater understanding of how the extremely complex Southern ideology functioned and impacted every action, every thought, of those in Yoknapatawpha County and beyond.

Notes

- ¹ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (Norton, 1994), 193.
- ² William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Random House, 1993), 169.
- ³ William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (Vintage International, 1990), 267.
- ⁴ Arthur Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family* (NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1990), 1.
- ⁵ Patricia Roberts-Miller, "Democracy, Demagoguery, and Critical Rhetoric" (*Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.3 2005), 460.
- ⁶ *The Sound and the Fury*, 28.
- ⁷ John T. Irwin, "Fathers and Sons" (*Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 130.
- ⁸ *Absalom, Absalom!*, 216.
- ⁹ *Go Down, Moses*, 107.

CHAPTER 1
THE SOUND AND THE FURY

The Southern family is perhaps one of the most complex images throughout Faulkner's work, but nowhere is the dynamic more fraught than in the Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury*. Collectively, the Compsons constitute less of a unified whole than a chaotic microcosm of disjointed, dysfunctional relationships. They often exploit or place blame on one another to rationalize their own failures, and among the family's men, women are viewed mainly as subversive or subordinate. With that in mind, Faulkner's novel proves ripe for an analysis of how each character reacts against Caddy's perceived radical behavior. Yet Caddy's prominence as a formative figure in her family's lives cannot be analyzed without also recognizing her presence as a potent sexual force. Her unbridled sexuality forces the Compsons to acknowledge, examine, and respond to sex, propelling the novel's tension as each family member struggles with his or her own identity through her actions specifically. The novel's men in particular have difficulty grappling with Caddy's promiscuity, and the attendant complications that arise in terms of their attitudes towards women generally. What then becomes most interesting are not Caddy's own actions, but the upheaval she inadvertently creates in her wake.

Benjy, Quentin, Jason, Mr. and Mrs. Compson, each obsesses over Caddy to destructive ends. Such a preoccupation, I argue, leads not only to the downfall of the

entire Compson family, but to the individual stasis of nearly every character (besides the Gibsons) who remain trapped in a state of childlike neurosis. Caddy comes to represent a gateway into other characters' sexual subconscious and the anxieties perpetuated by their respective, complicated conceptualizations of identity in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender. Thus, more broadly, she very much acts to define a basis for others' individual conception of reality. What I then also wish to analyze in this chapter are not only the psychological effects Caddy has on her family, but the more general ways in which each family member conceives of his or her subjective realities, often linked in some way to the idea of sex as a corrupting or even destructive force.

Jason Sr. principally sets forth the main misogynistic tenets for his male children. However he also characterizes the world as entirely subjective and thus relates a cryptic and distorted consciousness evidently passed on to Quentin, Jason, and even Benjy. Quentin, for one, believes he and his father are the guardians of the female sex: "Father and I protect women from one another from themselves our women. *Women are like that they dont acquire knowledge of people we are for that they are just born with a practical fertility of suspicion that makes a crop every so often and usually right they have an affinity for evil for supplying whatever the evil lacks in itself for drawing it about them instinctively as you do bed-clothing in slumber fertilizing the mind for it until the evil has served its purpose whether it ever existed or no*" (62).¹ Jason Sr.'s reality evidently hinges on the belief of hierarchized and intrinsic gender roles. Men are the inherent protectors and givers of knowledge to all women who, from birth, acquire an "affinity for evil." Such notions are

emblematic of the drunken, self-destructive Compson patriarch, who continually remains on the periphery of family affairs, and does little more throughout the novel than emit nihilistic observations. His presence actually does more to deconstruct the family unit through constant moralizing than it does to instill any valuable, or viable, exemplary message.

Moreover, these governing concepts that the Compson men ascribe to either implicitly or explicitly are, given proof by Jason Sr.'s later statements, merely inventions of his own arbitrary and meaningless reality. Any shared sense of reality as an immutable category is impossible in this context as is any linear comprehension of time itself, or as Jason Sr. states: "the constant speculation regarding the position of mechanical hands on an arbitrary dial . . . a symptom of mind function," a sentiment later echoed by Quentin in his own chapter (54). Ironically, although something as universal as time is deconstructed and placed within an "arbitrary" category of experience, his misogynistic cant remains a fixed principle of nature. The deficient parenting the Compson children receive with its conflicting, and nearly always detrimental, mores marks the roots of their corrupted consciousnesses, forecasting their later conflict as adolescents in a constant endeavor to realize a sense of selfhood.

The above dynamic takes various forms throughout, most distinctly during Mr. Compson's pseudo-philosophical father-son talks with Quentin, which inevitably revolve around the topic of sex. Interestingly, it is only during these moments that the voice of Jason Sr. is made clear- his role as father and husband equates to acting as the judge of sexual virtue and condemnation. When Quentin confesses his

fraudulent incestuous affair to his father, which we get in broken, memory form, Mr. Compson again vacillates from resigned fatalism to the dogmatized: "And Father said it's because you are a virgin: don't you see? Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you dont know. You cant know and he said Yes. On the instant when we come to realize that tragedy is second-hand" (74). Although men are not immune from the complications of virginity and its repercussions, women are implicated as responsible for all "tragedy" only experienced by men "second hand." In one of his broader generalizations, Nature itself demands impurity- a notable inverse of Christian precepts. Women are the pinnacle of corruption, and are thus compatible with the natural order, albeit conversely Caddy's and Miss Quentin's promiscuity is what damns them from the social one. Mr. Compson's inclination to span a decisive rhetorical canopy over female behavior contradicts his own argument when he claims virginity as nothing more than "words." Yet his predilection for nullifying the significance of some concepts while upholding others results in an increasingly precarious balancing act for the Compsons.

However equivocal Mr. Compson may be, engagement in, or the very concept of, sex always seems to represent negative states of existence and adverse outcomes. In his secular reality, women have little recourse for action surrounded by a constantly fluctuating male worldview always trending towards female subjugation. Jason Sr.'s discourse often sheds light on women as the site of degradation and paradoxical virtue: "'Of course.' Father said. 'Bad health is the

primary reason for all life. Created by disease, within putrefaction, into decay . . .”

(28). The decay of the Compson clan begins with the Bascomb contamination of the aristocratic Compson bloodline dating back to the glories of the Civil War. However, with the war’s outcome, Southern genealogical ideals have already been interrupted by the destruction of the South as a self-contained, isolated locus of those values:

“Do you think so because one of our forefathers was a governor and three were generals and Mother’s weren’t . . . *Done in Mother’s mind though. Finished. Finished. Then we were all poisoned* you are confusing sin and morality women dont do that your mother is thinking of morality whether it be sin or not has not occurred to her” (65). Like her husband, Caroline clings to a notion of secular, natural morality rather than religious credo. The bastardization of the once balanced moral state (at least on the Compson side) is on one level carried out through Caroline’s marriage to Jason Sr., but is subsequently perpetuated by her children, particularly Caddy. For the Compson parents, sex is viewed as a vehicle to decay, reflecting the continuation of an inescapable, base morality ingrained in blood.

Not surprisingly the novel’s men attempt to find various ways of controlling sex and sexuality, and their individual means of doing so provide an extremely illuminating insight into their subconscious. Mastery of situation and women are two criteria each of the Compson boys wishes to attain in his respective way, employing varying degrees and methods (physical, mental, emotional) of subjugation, none of which is successful. Benjy’s physical castration marks the beginnings of the control or repression of sexual desires. Jason believes

If what happened to him [Benjy] for fooling with open gates had happened to me, I never would want to see another one. I often wondered what he'd be thinking about, down there at the gate, watching the girls going home from school, trying to want something he couldn't even remember he didn't and couldn't want any longer. And what he'd think when they'd be undressing him and he'd happen to take a look at himself and begin to cry like he'd do. But like I say they never did enough of that. I says I know what you need you need what they did to Ben then you'd behave. And if you dont know what that was I says, ask Dilsey to tell you (158).

The realities of sexual intercourse blur throughout the novel with perception of sexuality and sexual behavior. Benjy must be subdued because his actions are morally unfit, although his inherent inability to copulate already renders him unable to perpetuate his mutated genes- indicating that the expression of sexuality can be as taboo as actual intercourse. Benjy, like Quentin, could be said to harbor incestuous desire for Caddy, yet lacks the cognitive and verbal abilities to designate it as such. While also lamenting her wantonness he strives, in his own way, to sublimate her behavior. Yet he can only appeal to Caddy's pity, crying hysterically when she loses her virginity, to no avail. It is his surrogate Caddy, the girl from beyond the fence, who leads to his gelding, for when Caddy leaves, Benjy's sustained desires require outlet and are thus projected onto other women. Since Benjy could never fully recognize his conduct as licentious and thus morally wrong, Mr. Compson must take on the duty to free him of his overtly sexualized actions through

physical means. Benjy thus represents a dual consciousness, whose willingness to subjugate Caddy for her behavior places him on the same plane as his brothers, but whose own sexually charged actions document the very thing he strives to repress. Faulkner suggests, then, that in the microcosm of the Old South, men attempt to regulate deviant sexual behavior to fulfill social, behavioral, or their own expectations. Yet as the novel's men continually fall by their own sword, these attempts at mastery lead to their ruin.

Yet while Benjy may have genuine feeling beyond the purely physical for his sister, Jason, the novel's most emotionally detached character, can only relate to women in a purely corporeal sense. Out of the three brothers, Jason is also the only character who does not remain a virgin, but must resort to prostitution in order to fulfill his desires: "I went on back to the desk and read Lorraine's letter. 'Dear daddy wish you were here. No good parties when daddys out of town I miss my sweet daddy.' I reckon she does. I gave her forty dollars last time. Handed it to her. I never promise a woman anything nor let her know what I'm going to give her. That's the only way to manage them. Always keep them guessing. If you can't think of any other way to surprise them, give them a bust in the jaw" (122). While the letter smacks of incestuous fantasy, we know that Lorraine is the prostitute whom Jason frequents, and maintains a domineering attitude towards. Women are a transactional object and, for Jason, sexual relationships function only once they become emotionally vacuous. However, the one situation in which Jason believes himself to be in control of women is itself an illusion, applicable only to a woman who evidently does her best to manipulate him herself. Although one could make

the case that Jason realizes this, his character's emotional bankruptcy figures in only the immediate, physical void she fills while occluding all else.

While, to Jason, Lorraine remains something of an honorable figure, he conversely manifests the belief of the women in his immediate family are forever working against him. As a corollary, the paranoia and consistent failures Jason experiences leads to his liberal scapegoating. He blames his mother for not being able to marry until she dies, Caddy results in his lost job and future prospects, and Miss Quentin tarnishes his good name throughout Yoknapatawpha County. Paradoxically, although Jason convinces himself he is being taken advantage of, he still remains certain of women's inferiority. However, when under intense stress, Jason's comprehensive, misogynistic framework begins to fragment. Specifically, when robbed by Miss Quentin, his misogyny is stripped down to its fundamental roots to his more basic desire for dominance: "I'm Jason Compson. See if you can stop me. See if you can elect a man to office that can stop me,' he said, thinking of himself entering the courthouse with a file of soldiers and dragging the sheriff out. 'Thinks he can sit with his hands folded and see me lose my job. I'll show him about jobs.' Of his niece he did not think at all, nor of the arbitrary valuation of the money" (191). This childlike fantasy reveals control as the single objective of Jason's anger. Money and his niece become a signifier symbolizing nothing, precisely the deconstructionist view of Jason Sr. But Miss Quentin does symbolize Jason's emasculation, and his identity rests wholly on a relational basis to the opposite sex: "he must see them first, get the money back, then what they did would be of no importance to him, while otherwise the whole world would know that he, Jason

Compson, had been robbed by Quentin, his niece, a bitch" (192). A lack of autonomy is thematic in the male Compson offspring, who, even in adulthood, still look to an outside source, nearly always in females, for an explanation for their failures and insecurities.

As Jason represents the pinnacle of abusive rhetoric in an effort to shroud his own failings, insecurity takes on its most disturbing, and pathetic, dimensions in the character of Quentin, who cannot cope with his debilitated masculinity. Instead of Benjy's literal sterilization and Jason's symbolic one, Quentin takes matters into his own hands and chooses self-immolation. Yet, early on, Quentin still believes in the innate power of his masculinity and its ability to bring Caddy to heel:

How many Caddy . . . I dont know too many there was something terrible in me . . . Father I have committed Have you ever done that we didn't do that did we do that . . . we did how can you not know it if youll just wait I'll tell you how it was it was a crime we did a terrible crime it cannot be hid you think it can but wait Poor Quentin you've never done that have you and Ill tell you how it was and Ill tell Father then itll have to be because you love Father then well have to go away amid the pointing and the horror the clean flame Ill make you say we did Im stronger than you Ill make you know we did you thought it was them but it was me listen I fooled you all the time it was me you thought I was in the house with the damn honeysuckle trying not to think. . . did you love them Caddy did you love them When they touched me I died (94).

Caddy's pity aside, Quentin's genuine belief that he can fool her, and everyone else, into believing he was the true suitor of his sister documents from the outset his unthinking thought process relying on the full force of unmitigated emotion alone. As a foil, Caddy maintains a calm, pragmatic perspective, enabling her to cut through her idealist brother's delusion, which, like Jason's own fantasy of control, resembles very much a childlike frame of mind. Incest, here, is romanticized. Quentin truly believes himself to be the all-powerful brother, a chivalric, knight errant, flying to the rescue of his tainted sister to live forever in containment apart from horrified society. What this vision does tell us, moreover, is that subjectivity is privileged over any sense of reality, which throughout the novel holds a subordinate position in relation to how actions are perceived. With the Compsons, however, this subjectivity is something more, in that it so often verges on total irrationality, and at times, the purely imaginative. If we look back to his father's seemingly ridiculous and often sensational statements on what he believes to be real, Quentin's difficulties in separating actuality from fantasy seem less anomalous. These familial patterns of behavior indicate that for the Compsons rhetoric, in whatever form one wishes to use it, is purely a means to an end without the necessity of being grounded in any form of truth.

In this instance, Quentin willfully imposes a perversion of the actual, by implicating himself and adding an abhorrent incestuous dimension, instead of wishing to camouflage Caddy's behavior. In the family dynamic, Quentin believes sexual behavior contained within kin is less disgraceful than the alternative. But his will to expose Caddy as his lover also serves to alleviate the profusion of anxiety he

harbors regarding his virginity, a concern of equal or perhaps even greater importance to him: "But I still couldn't stop it and then I knew that if I tried too hard to stop it I'd be crying and I thought about how I'd thought about I could not be a virgin, with so many of them walking along in the shadows and whispering with their soft girl voices lingering in the shadowy places and the words coming out and perfume and eyes you could feel but not see, but if it was that simple to do it wouldn't be anything and if it wasn't anything, what was I" (93). Quentin feels a literal non-entity in his virginity. Hence Caddy becomes the perfect figure to latch onto in order to fill the void created by his own inability to grapple with any conception of reality not exclusively linked to sex. As André Bleikasten notes: "Caddy, as we have already seen, is first and foremost an image; she exists only in the minds and memories of her brothers. . . . She is in fact what woman has always been in man's imagination: the figure par excellence of the Other, a blank screen onto which he projects both his desires and his fears, his love and his hate. And insofar as this Other is a myth and a mirage, a mere fantasy of the Self, it is bound to be a perpetual deceit and an endless source of disappointment."² Incest becomes an ideal outlet granting Quentin the ability to prove positive male agency as necessary for women's betterment, while destroying any doubt as to his chastity. However by placing himself on a pedestal as a bastion of nobility, Quentin retains only one mode of action once his insensible ploy is dismissed. Suicide or martyrdom, then, reveals an easy escape- Caddy can be blamed entirely for his failure to enter into functioning society, thus extricating himself from his own guilt, fragility and boyish idealism.

With the novel's men continually projecting their frustrations onto Caddy and others, the strength of women in *The Sound and the Fury* can be easily overshadowed by the male complications, and predominance of male narrators guiding us through the novel. Indeed, we often only get the female voice distilled through the narrative process of Quentin or Jason, and just as often filtered through hazy memories and disjointed structure. Yet Mrs. Compson's and Dilsey's voices are often heard unadulterated throughout the novel, and their relationship as foils provides a solid foundation for analyzing female roles and behaviors within the Compson family. Mrs. Compson and Dilsey each hold a representative place in the household. Caroline exhibits all the aesthetic qualities of a matriarchal figurehead without actually serving any practical function. In fact, her actions are nearly always injurious to the development of her children specifically. Dilsey, however, assumes all responsibility for the Compson family and perseveres, despite being in an inherently subordinate position due to race, as the family lynch pin.

Although more present than Caroline and instrumental in providing a strong moral center within the family, the narrative process leaves Dilsey's voice very much on the periphery until the final section. However, as Thadious Davis states, in *The Sound and the Fury* the blacks generally "remain in the background of both plot and structure even though they emerge in the conclusion as a major thematic idea."³ But this is, arguably, purposeful on the part of Faulkner, who while giving Dilsey less of an audible voice than the others, makes visible her decisive role in sustaining the family especially near the novel's final half. It is important to note that as the Compson family systematically collapses coinciding with the novel's progression,

Dilsey's voice becomes more distinct as the other narrators are increasingly pushed out of the foreground. Faulkner's appellation for the Gibson family in his Compson Appendix that simply reads "They endured," makes sense only after we reach the novel's final pages, where Dilsey in particular stands unaffected, and even strengthened narratively, by the Compson decay.⁴

Dilsey remains the crux of stability throughout Compson family history: "I seed de first and de last . . . I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin" (185). Her biblical connotations rightly mark her as a righteous figure who has witnessed the Compsons' rise and fall, standing as guardian for generations as the arbiter of moral virtue. Unlike Mr. and Mrs. Compson, Dilsey also expresses sincere consideration for the entire family, and has "raised all of" the Compson children from birth. One gets the sense as the novel closes that Dilsey represents the essence of uncorrupted morality as the last hope of preservation for the slowly decaying Compson name and the idyllic ways of the old South (20). Davis notes in binary fashion the implicit differences between Compson and Gibson: "Juxtaposed to the various kinds of lunacy demonstrated by the Compsons are the Gibsons- practical, 'common-sense variety' blacks whose individual and collective voices create an eloquent contrast to the white world and form, on a level of emotion and reason, a more viable approach to life."⁵ Although Dilsey's surrogate parenting and execution of household duties in a white household may typify the role of a Southern black female around the turn of the century, within the Compson family her role as mother suggests other permutations. Specifically, Dilsey reinforces the Compsons' need for a mitigating outside force that attempts to quell the constant family discord. Her parenting is not

limited to the children, but becomes a necessary guiding and sustaining force for the entire “luna[ti]c” family she strives to preserve. The novel’s final half indeed gestures towards the idea that as the family descends slowly into chaos it would soon reach a point of implosion if Dilsey, and the Gibsons collectively, were not present to add a sane element to the turbulent domestic atmosphere.

As a stark contrast to the Gibson’s collected practicality is Caroline’s disruptive presence, which in many ways tends to undermine Dilsey’s efforts to sustain the family unit. Rather than acting as a functional, mother figure, Caroline chooses to dramatize her lifestyle, crying at the mention of her children and after witnessing Caddy kissing, presumably, Dalton Ames “went around the house in a black dress and a veil and even Father couldn’t get her to say a word except crying and saying her little daughter was dead” (144). Caroline’s histrionics render her incapable of any meaningful or constructive expression. Instead, she perpetually blames Quentin, Mr. Compson, Caddy, and Benjy (who is often mentioned as a “judgment” upon her) for her woes, and remains a two-dimensional character capable of little more than fatuous whining. With Jason Sr. on the complete periphery of the family circle, Caroline presents an interesting (if no more viable) pairing to her husband because she continually forces her judgment on each member of the family, often making proclamations that disavow her relation to certain children. Yet Caroline’s eventual repudiation of her children seems less due to their later actions than to a gradually widening gap from the beginning. The little direct insight garnered about Mrs. Compson’s role as mother comes from Quentin near the end of his section: *“if I’d just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother”*

(109). Quentin's rumination provides a startling window into his feelings of motherlessness and sense of disenfranchisement from the nuclear family.

Keeping Jason Sr.'s textual obscurity in mind, Caroline's constant fears of bad blood playing a role in the destruction of her family actually push her further and further out of the role of matriarch, where eventually both parents are completely lost to their offspring. It could even be argued Caroline knows little or nothing about her family at all, and that selfish disinterest, and the neurotic fear of hereditary contagion, precludes her from being a formative mother figure: "you cannot hurt me any more than your [Jason Sr.] children already have and then I'll be gone . . . but who can fight against bad blood . . . Jason you must let me go away I cannot stand it let me have Jason and you keep the others they're not my flesh and blood" (66). Rather than seeking a unified family Caroline wills division and segregation from most everyone (besides Jason) in a conscious disassembling of the family framework she wants so badly to have.

The circulating issues of parenting and parentage given expression through Caroline and Dilsey point to a larger thematic analysis of sex as a destructive force. With the birth of her children, Caroline no longer possesses, or chooses to pursue, any function within the family as her role of child-bearer becomes unnecessary. The displacement she experiences within the household order eventually culminates in a type of role reversal, in which the function of parent, however unfulfilled it may have been by Caroline, is transferred onto her children. After his siblings move on, Jason is forced into an inversion of the mother-child dynamic that leaves him to placate and even coddle his mother in her infantile state. Philip Weinstein takes this

analysis even further to argue Mrs. Compson's true estrangement from the social and familial realm begins immediately following her marriage:

As though to emphasize the alienation of her married state, the text rarely pairs her with her husband . . . One might argue that her textual husband is Jason, with whom she maintains a peculiarly intense relationship . . . The picture of Mrs. Compson that emerges is of a woman whose life ceased to be narratable after her entry into marriage and its sexual consequences. She has no stories to tell that can accommodate in a positive way even a grain of her postconsummation experience. Her entry into mature sexuality is swiftly followed by her exit. Having delivered her children, she takes to her bed- the childbed, not the marriage bed, acting like a child, exacting from her children the sustenance she should be offering them.⁶

Once again, Faulkner links the consummation of marriage, sex and loss of virginity, to the direct malignant effects thereafter, including suggestions of incest. She and her husband are, no doubt, very much estranged from each other in their own home. Caroline unceasingly clings to her Edenic visions of the ideal Southern family while her deconstructionist husband refuses to subscribe to a life rooted in values, place, or even time. Caroline's only escape from her post-marriage reversion into childhood is to constantly contemplate her Bascomb past as a sort of stronghold of purity, or mental refuge embedded in another lifetime. Weinstein argues that she has, in a sense, "outlived her image of herself."⁷ As partial evidence to this claim, later in the novel Caroline no longer feels defensive about her maiden name's lower

status by convincing herself that the Bascomb blood is the only pure part of her children, without which they would altogether be doomed.

The lack of parentage the Compson children receive is also extended to the grandchild, Miss Quentin, whose father and mother remain in absentia. In cyclical fashion, accountability for Mrs. Compson's suffering, once resting almost entirely on Caddy's shoulders, finds outlet again with the birth of Miss Quentin who is readily labeled a facsimile of her mother: "In there? To be contaminated by that atmosphere? It'll be hard enough as it is with the heritage she has' Mother says . . . 'Why aint she gwine sleep in here,' Dilsey says . . . 'You dont know,' Mother says. 'To have my own daughter cast off by her husband. Poor little innocent baby,' she says, looking at Quentin. 'You will never know the suffering you've caused.' . . . 'But she must never know. She must never know that name [Caddy] in her hearing. If she could grow up never to know that she had a mother, I would thank God'" (125). Exactly whom Caroline blames for her "suffering," I argue, is deliberately ambiguous. Indeed purposely so, in one sense leading us to read that Caroline has appropriated Miss Quentin as a symbol for the sins of the past perpetuated, while another that she is reinforcing Jason Sr.'s role as originator of the family's corruption. Brought together, both readings indicate a nod to both ends of the spectrum from the resulting product, to propagator, of bad blood.

The ideological currents running through Caroline's arguments often portray her as a self-appointed arbiter of morality, blame, and in this instance even destiny itself. Believing that if Miss Quentin could simply "never know" she had a mother or be contaminated by her residual aura marks the overall flaws in

Caroline's logic and her resistance to reality. Even in Miss Quentin's infancy Caroline gestures towards preventing and solving projected aberrant behaviors through ideological nonsense instead of socially viable proactive measures, much as she mismanaged her own children.

As stated, ironically, the strongest women are those most oppressed by family or society. Caddy and Miss Quentin break the cycle of social order and their refusal to conform is precisely what garners them, at least, the greatest semblance of autonomy. However even my reading, my interpretation, of the two rebellious females perhaps cannot do justice to a fuller grasp of their significance. Part of this problem of interpretation and designation stems from the fact that I have read these characters only through others' reaction to them throughout the novel. Eric Sundquist states that when it comes to Caddy, "[t]here is probably no major character in literature about whom we know so little about in proportion to the amount of attention she receives."⁸ I would tend to agree with Sundquist's remark. In terms of her actual, textual voice, Caddy (and Miss Quentin) remains difficult to decipher partly for the reason that there are so many voices interrupting and overlapping one another throughout the text, often with Caddy as the object of their subjective appraisal. Caddy's own perspective seems to get lost somewhere in between. In a study focusing on Caddy, Minrose Gwin attempts to greater explain the gaps between second-hand knowledge and reality:

At this point our dilemma becomes linguistic: how to converse with space, motion, force. . . . And how to listen to the language Caddy speaks, to that voice we hear between and beyond the contours of narrative . . . in our

yearning to hear that voice as it *is* . . . and in our frustration at being able to catch only snatches and whispers of it . . . Burdened by the weight of consciousness and afraid we will not catch what it is we are meant to hear, we might hasten to fix Caddy in history and culture, in myth, as Other, as anima, as double, as nothing, as everything- and hence to erect some safe, recognizable boundaries around the feminine space of the text. . . . She is something more than we can say . . . She is the text which speaks multiplicity, maternity, sexuality, and as such she retains not just one voice but many. They make Benjy bellow and Quentin despair. They drive Jason to hatred. Their power is mammoth because they are “not one.”⁹

Although Faulkner’s readers may forever be lost in trying to erect borders around Caddy, one thing is certain: because she cannot be fastened in place or restricted to a single category is precisely the reason she remains so abhorrent, enchanting, esoteric, and influential to her family as they attempt to navigate, and find meaning for, their own lives through her. Sex thus works on very specific levels within *The Sound and the Fury* and, as Gwin notices, on a much broader terrain consuming each of the Compsons whose intermediary among their own dark subconscious, greatest fears and desires reside within the amorphous conduit of Caddy.

By isolating his subject in terms of content and form, while employing a circuitous, non-linear narrative style, *The Sound and the Fury* places us directly in the maelstrom that is the Compson family. While this may never give us a complete, or unequivocal, understanding of any given character, Faulkner distributes enough

clues throughout the text to grant at least a viable gateway into the Compson psyche collectively. The novel's four, distinct portions, each reflecting a different viewpoint provokes a psychological study more than anything else, as we are guided through the conscious and subconscious of each family member. Yet even those who are not granted their own narrative portion are hardly occluded from having their inner-selves put on display. Thus, I have purposely structured this brief chapter non-linearly in order to reflect Faulkner's own style, and to do justice to each individual character and the complicated workings of their mental constructs of reality. The logic behind an individuated character study is that it hopefully makes clear where each diverges from their kin, and where they intersect in terms of their combined instability. As Michel Gresset reminds us: "the reader is supposed to judge them [Compsons] by the yardstick of their inability to insert or integrate themselves into the community and reality at large."¹⁰ Indeed, if we are to locate one commonality within the Compsons as a family, it is their complete inability to assimilate into the larger body of the American public. By remaining in a state of willed isolation, the Compsons are unable to locate any form of autonomy beyond the chaos of their own household aptly reflected in their inescapable, and ultimately devastating, neurosis.

Notes

- ¹ All page citations from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (Norton, 1994).
- ² André Bleikasten, "The Most Splendid Failure: Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*" (*The Ink of Melancholy: Faulkner's Novels from "The Sound and the Fury" to "Light in August."* Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990), 405.
- ³ Thadious Davis, "Faulkner's 'Negro' in *The Sound and the Fury*" (*Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1983), 393.
- ⁴ William Faulkner, *The Compson Appendix* (*The Portable Faulkner*. Random House, 1946), 215.
- ⁵ Davis, 395.
- ⁶ Philip Weinstein, "If I Could Say Mother': Construing the Unsayable About Faulknerian Maternity" (*Sound and the Fury*. Charles E. Merrill, 1970), 432.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.
- ⁸ Eric Sundquist, *Faulkner: The House Divided* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1983), 10.
- ⁹ Minrose Gwin, "Hearing Caddy's Voice" (*The Feminine Faulkner: Reading (Beyond) Sexual Difference*. Tennessee: Knoxville University, 1990), 406-412.
- ¹⁰ Michel Gresset, "The Ordeal of Consciousness: Psychological Aspects of Evil in *The Sound and the Fury*" (*Mississippi Quarterly* 19:3 1966), 173.

CHAPTER 2

ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* chronicles three generations spanning one of the most turbulent periods in American history, before and after the Civil War. Employing the mythic character of Thomas Sutpen as a prime example of a slave-owning Southerner, the novel grapples with the dominance of slavery, and the racist caste system it perpetuates both on and off the plantation. Yet ironically, Faulkner's work portrays the most appalling aspects of slavery in the domestic, familial realm as opposed to typical field-laboring scenarios. Moreover, the importance of race comes to light in the various interactions among whites, mulattos, and blacks mainly through expressions of sexuality. Thomas Sutpen, Charles Bon and Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon engage in sexual relations (and marriages) with black women whose racial otherness acts to fulfill their respective exploitative needs. Those needs, however varied, fit in with Southern social expectations on the propriety and division of female and racial classes in which black females are especially degraded and, to quote Judge Roger Brooke Taney, have "no rights which a white man is bound to respect."¹

What I then wish to analyze within this chapter are how Thomas Sutpen's actions specifically create a destructive ripple effect that destroys his entire family- and whose disintegration coincides perfectly with the South's own wholesale fragmentation. More specifically, I intend to focus on the gender dynamics played

out between Sutpen and Eulalia, Bon and his octoroon wife, and Charless Etienne de St. Valery Bon and his black bride, and the logic behind each of these abortive marriages. Specifically, Sutpen exhibits the folly of perpetuating racial and gender distinctions of the Old South in an evolving postbellum American landscape. As Quentin relates, the South was “drifting closer and closer to a doomed and fatal war . . . when . . . [it] would realize that it was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage” (271).² Yet while Sutpen himself may fall prey to his own megalomania, Bon and his son are victimized by their patrilineal white blood and the difficulties they face by appearing white, but being black. As such, they never fully realize any stable identity due in large part to the long-established pseudo-feudal system of the South, and slavery’s effects on the social order long after 1865.

At the center of Sutpen’s childhood instruction in racial boundaries lies the plantation. The coterminous relationship between palpable plantation life and the metaphorical divide between white and black are discernable for Sutpen, who readily assimilates the images of indolence afforded by bondage as positive and worthy of emulation. Quentin believes Sutpen’s “problem was his innocence . . . born in West Virginia . . . where the only colored people were Indians and you only looked down on them over your rifle sights, where he had never heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but . . . sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them . . . didn’t even know there was a country all divided and fixed and

neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own” (231). This passage sets the stage for Sutpen’s development and later transformation into the stereotypical Southern slave owner, but also highlights the South as an isolated entity housing the institution of slavery.

As he matures and begins to concentrate on his life’s “design” in the West Indies, Sutpen helps quell a slave revolt in connection with the 1791 Haitian slave rebellion. This formative episode documents the first related instance in which Sutpen’s acquired knowledge of the tranquil plantation is pitted against the gruesome violence fueled by slavery. However, regarding his actions during the revolt, he adds an odd preface to his tale:

‘On this night I am speaking of (and until my first marriage, I might add) I was still a virgin. You will probably not believe that, and if I were to try to explain it you would disbelieve me more than ever’ . . . [and] Grandfather said . . . it was to him a spectacle, something to be watched . . . since his innocence still functioned and he not only did not know what fear was until afterward, he . . . did not even know that he had found a place where money was to be had quick if you were courageous and shrewd (he did not mean shrewdness, Grandfather said. What he meant was unscrupulousness . . . where high mortality was concomitant with the money and the sheen on the dollars was not from gold but from blood (261).

This seemingly completely irrelevant point references the importance of Sutpen's physical innocence to his potential to act under pressure. Because symbolically not yet a man, Sutpen finds marvel in his ability to muster courage in the face of violence. Yet his virginity, or state of "innocence" as Grandfather Compson deems it, also prevents Sutpen's realization of slavery's sheer barbarity. Juxtaposed to his first encounter with the idyllic languor of plantation life is Sutpen's encounter with slavery at the zenith of brutality, an incident during which his loss of virginity is concomitant with his disillusionment regarding slavery's reality. The strain of metaphoric, comparative notions of race related in some way to conceptions of the body is thematic throughout *Absalom, Absalom!*, which Sutpen foregrounds during this critical turning point.

These visions of Sutpen's beginnings bring to light much of his development and eventual turn to becoming a paradigmatic Southern plantation owner. Specifically, his relationship with Eulalia in Haiti foregrounds his views on women, gender roles, and racial expectations. Free or not, black women have little latitude in terms of rights in Sutpen's estimation. Despite Eulalia's light skin, the knowledge of her partial black blood leads him to immediately repudiate her and their child. During this same conversation with Grandfather Compson, Sutpen elaborates on his abortive marriage to Eulalia, ended due to a form of broken racial contract. Typified as a transactional agreement gone awry, Sutpen attempts to assuage Eulalia as he would another contracted party:

'And yet . . . more than thirty years after my conscience had finally assured me that if I had done an injustice, I had done what I could to rectify it-' and Grandfather . . . hollering . . . 'Conscience? Conscience? Good God, man, what else did you expect? . . . didn't the dread and fear of females which you must have drawn in with the primary mammalian milk teach you better? What kind of abysmal and purblind innocence could that have been which someone told you to call virginity? What conscience to trade with which would have warranted you in the belief that you could have bought immunity from her for no other coin but justice?' (277).

The sense of an implied knowledge between Eulalia and Sutpen (and whites and blacks generally) of mixed-race marriage as taboo leads him to rationalize the estrangement as wholly justifiable in the eyes of social convention. Although Compson, here, denotes some semblance of a voice of reason, he is not without his own prejudices regarding females and female vice. Indeed, the one place in which Sutpen's and Compson's interpretations of the situation's reality converge is in their misogynistic sentiments. For Compson, virginity, much as it is portrayed in *The Sound and the Fury* by Jason Sr., connotes a catalyst to, and metaphor for, Sutpen's folly. But on a more basic, instinctual level, Sutpen's inability to recognize the inherent "dread and fear" of women (also akin to Jason Sr.'s statements in *The Sound*) he should have received from his first female contact transcends even the naïveté created by his virginity.

With these strong essentialist statements in mind, it is interesting that Compson actually professes a greater regard for women as members of the human family. Sutpen's simplistic objectification of women leaves little doubt as to his ingrained views, but Compson seems to suggest a more mitigated, pragmatic voice. Both may agree that women (especially blacks) are inferior, but Compson argues the only way in which to attain "immunity" from their malignancy rests in "justice" alone, rather than any monetary compensation. However an outline of exactly what Compson means regarding his sense of "justice" is vague and does little to counter his actual denigrating beliefs. In any case, Sutpen's fantasy that he could possibly put a price on the emotional void left by his absence is shattered by Compson who brings into the fore the idea that women, too, are human rather than insentient beings who require at the very least acknowledgement as such. Sutpen is forced to recognize he cannot escape the guilt he attempted to downgrade through rationalization, and admits that even after "thirty years" he cannot disengage himself completely from his troubled conscience. Compson in fact seems to elicit the only human reaction from Sutpen throughout the novel, which by and large remains unseen in any of his other dialogues or descriptions almost always centering on his unfeeling nature.

Yet what Compson highlights- woman's need of placation through justice - indicates that Sutpen's sins of the past are inevitably inescapable due to a higher conception of morality not limited to Compson's outlook alone. Rather, such sentiments point to the shift in American thought following the Civil War that exposed the inequity of Southern values linked to race and gender. Compson's

comments (however much he, too, may be trapped in the mind of the Old South), connote an evolutionary characteristic suggestive of a deterioration of Southern antebellum mores and their increased anachronistic qualities. Conversely, even more than out of place or time, Sutpen's views often seem outright laughable in their stasis: "He told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside like 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'" (250). The striking comparison of medieval feudalism to the old South documents the European heritage of Southern male behaviors, while suggesting their almost comically antiquated nature. Thirty years after the fact the two contrasting viewpoints indicate that Sutpen cannot extricate himself from the antebellum Southern precepts increasingly becoming less and less viable in an evolving American landscape.

While Sutpen's disavowal of his first family as if he were a "twelfth century" king may seem detrimental enough to their future, he also symbolically chains them to a permanent stigmatization. After feeling somewhat cheated by Eulalia, Sutpen finds outlet in their marriage to reassert his masculinity, and thus dominance, over wife and child through the process of naming. Nomenclature is an act of empowerment for Sutpen but one of disenfranchisement for the Bons: "'Yes,' Quentin said. 'Father said he probably named him himself. Charles Bon . . . he would have insisted on it maybe, the conscience again which could not allow her and the child any place in the design . . . the same conscience would not permit the child, since it was a boy, to bear either his name or that of its maternal grandfather . . . he

chose the name himself . . . just as he named them all” (277). Sutpen’s ironic use of Charles, a name of Old German origin literally meaning “free man,” signifies a double entendre satirizing Charles’ lack of freedom as a black man and his abandonment by his father. Unable to assume the Sutpen title, Charles, although containing half-Sutpen patrilineal blood, is impotent to carry on the lineage because he lacks the formal, public indicator of descent in name. Sutpen occludes Eulalia, on the other hand, completely from his design that requires a genuinely white spouse to complete the trope of the Southern nuclear family. Mother and son, then, are left forsaken, without a male figure, but are also forever tainted. Eulalia, no longer a chaste woman remains unfit for future coupling, and Bon, the fatherless child is left without the anchor of a clearly defined bloodline to aid identity formation.

Yet Henry is also mentioned as being “named” by Sutpen. The ability to name, whose bestowal lies with the male mate acts in *Absalom, Absalom!* as far more than superficial designations of title, predicting or indicating the adverse qualities and states of existence inherited from Sutpen. Henry, or “home ruler” in Old German, fits with Henry’s mania over his sister. Rather than acknowledging his past wrongs and preventing future miseries from occurring such as would be his duty, Sutpen forces Henry to assume the duties of “home ruler,” or surrogate patriarch in place of his father. Moreover the novel’s title has undeniable implications pointing towards Henry, and highlights the importance of father figures and their influence throughout the novel. The biblical tale of Absalom is an obvious simulacrum of Henry’s demise propelled by Sutpen’s inaction and abandonment of even the children he recognizes as his own.

The great weight Faulkner places on names and origins signifies his overarching emphasis on the past, and one's heritage, as determining factors for those living in the South. The importance of a name rests in its representation of a certain symbolic past, much like the phrase "the South" conjures sentiments of static Southern mores discrete from the rest of the nation. While names are passed down from parent to child, codes of behavior are also transferred from generation to generation when they eventually become concretized not as subjective ideals, but as self-evident truths. To clarify, Sutpen's fixation on naming mirrors the failure of the South on a broader scale. As Panthea Reid Broughton notes:

Faulkner's fiction establishes just how insidious mental deadness or thought-inertia may be. The results are terrifying when man may be irrevocably judged and irreparably placed by a few ready linguistic handles such as *white, nigger, quality, trash, lady, whore, South, North, American, Jew . . .* but the most horrendous example of the power of a label is the word *nigger*. That word attempts to fix a person's behavior and to dictate interests, feelings, and even aspirations. Olga Vickery explains: "What starts as a verbal pattern of classification thus becomes a social order not to be challenged or changed."³

The belief that ultimately empty categories and signifiers (names, racial distinctions, gender roles, genealogy) that are fixed and perpetuated from birth could maintain a functioning social order, ultimately becomes unrealistic especially with the outcome

of the Civil War. In such societies, again reminiscent of feudal lords, vassals, and peasants, what ties the community framework together are seemingly superficial labels that actually hold vast symbolic weight. However, while Vickery rightly points out that “verbal patterns of classification” eventually become unchallenged fixtures, however dubious they may be, Faulkner’s work presents us with a slowly disintegrating social fabric where those appellations are, in fact, confronted by characters such as Bon, Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon and even Grandfather Compson, as in the earlier dialogue. *Absalom, Absalom!* thus documents a period of transition in the American South where such focus on caste and class is a model to be challenged, and whose diehard adherents such as Sutpen damn themselves by refusing to adapt to progress.

The clash between an attempt to uphold Southern mores and the often disastrous effects of doing so filters down from Sutpen himself to his children born only a little over two decades before the outbreak of the Civil War. Sutpen’s childhood in comparatively sheltered, egalitarian West Virginia provides a stark contrast of setting and values to his later transformation. Yet Henry, born into an increasingly cosmopolitan American landscape, has a different set of place-related anxieties to grapple with, moving from the Southern sphere of plantation life to the University of Mississippi, to New Orleans’ shocking hedonism. Henry’s change is not as undeviating as Sutpen’s may have been, and his conflicted conscience is much more salient. The source of his many dilemmas is Charles Bon: “Yes he loved Bon, who seduced him as surely as he seduced Judith- the country boy born and bred who, with the five or six others of that small undergraduate body composed of other

planters' sons whom Bon permitted to become intimate with him, who aped his clothing and manner and . . . his very manner of living, looked upon Bon as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights" (97). Bon epitomizes the attractively cosmopolitan Other whose very difference, like the indolent plantation owners so strange to Sutpen, for Henry becomes obsessively enchanting.

Yet seeking to navigate between the strong Southern standards intolerant to change and Bon's more urbane principles becomes exponentially more problematic for Henry with Judith's entanglement. In a Quentin-like fixation on his sister's virginity, Henry gradually reaches a crossroads between the propriety of his chivalric notions and the equally engrossing portrait of Bon:

"Henry, the provincial, the clown almost . . . who may have been conscious that his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity was a false quantity which must incorporate in itself an inability to endure in order to be precious, to exist, and so must depend upon its loss, absence, to have existed at all. In fact, perhaps this is pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that his sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride" (98).

The confused breakdown and simultaneous blending of identities and genders indicates Henry's manic instability but also the incompatibility of the two abstractions of reality he desperately forces to coalesce. Not only coalesce, but contain- Judith, her "virginity," her identity as "sister," "mistress," "bride," Bon as "lover," "husband," "despoiler," himself as virgin, the "despoiled." Henry's convoluted thought process indicates his failure to quarantine the various intersecting sexual elements that exemplify his greatest fears and subconscious desires. The antagonistic forces played out within his mind presage an ensuing conflagration if the sexual broodings ever threaten to be actualized, and foreground Judith's virginity as the last vestige of Southern "provincial" thought that remains most important to preserve.

Yet the "clown"-like nature of Henry's hysteria discounts the weight he places on virginity and provides contrast to Bon's distinct New Orleans attitude regarding women and sex. The discovery of Bon's courtesan wife spurs a discussion of racial valuations of sex, chastity, and women's diverging roles depending on race and location. Specifically, Bon elaborates how different New Orleans is from the rest of the nation in terms of the widely embraced black feminine "principle":

A principle apt docile and instinct with strange and ancient curious pleasures of the flesh (which is all: there is nothing else) . . . a principle which, where her white sister must needs try to make an economic matter of it . . . No: not whores. Not even courtesans: -creatures taken at childhood, culled and chosen and raised more carefully than any white girl, any nun, than any blooded mare even . . . For a price, of course . . . since they are more valuable

as commodities than white girls, raised and trained to fulfill a woman's sole end and purpose: to love, to be beautiful, to divert; . . . sometimes I believe that they are the only true 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 Henry, 'But you married her.' . . . And Bon . . . 'Ah. That ceremony. I see. That's it, then. A formula, a shibboleth meaningless as a child's game . . . a ritual as meaningless as that of college boys in secret rooms at night, even to the same archaic and forgotten symbols (121).

New Orleans' black women resign themselves to a discrete form of sexual slavery, so lauded by Bon, that locates their place of bondage in the brothel rather than on the plantation. Their innate sexual proclivity, "which is all," complements a eugenicist sorting and culling that transcends the "economic matter[s]" of white prostitutes in what Bon convinces himself to be a pseudo-platonic love. Marriage, moreover, is an abstract concept to be harnessed, exploited and discarded as the situation dictates- in this instance as a formality designating enslavement through "ceremony" much as taking possession of a slave would be through outright purchase.

Bon and Sutpen, although very different, each employs the "formula" of marriage as a means to an end and ironically have striking parallels in regards to their racial credo. Faulkner's examination of Mississippi and New Orleans antebellum life differentiates the two locales in terms of normative behaviors, but locates slavery, or racism, as the nexus between both Southern states. While Sutpen and Bon may differ on women's roles endemic to their specific regions, their

treatment of their illegitimate families is identical. With very little description of plantations, or life among Sutpen's field-laboring slaves, *Absalom, Absalom!* thus successfully locates the most disturbing effects of American racism not on the plantation with stock images of whips and cotton fields, but through sex, marriage, and the image of the discarded family.

As shocking as New Orleans may have been to Henry, his reaction is fabricated for us by the speculative narration of Shreve and Quentin, as are many of the novel's events. Even in inference, however, some salient facts remain true regardless of their application to a fictional setting, mainly revolving around the realities of the South's racial and gender-based caste system. Before receiving the more probable explanation of Bon's murder spurred by Henry's knowledge of their kinship, the reader is given hints by Quentin that Bon's illegitimate family would be an insufficient reason for the crime:

It would not be the mistress or even the child, not even the negro mistress and even less the child because of that fact, since Henry and Judith had grown up with a negro half sister of their own; not the mistress to Henry . . . a young man grown up and living in a milieu where the other sex is separated into three sharp divisions . . . ladies, women, females- the virgins whom gentlemen someday married, the courtesans to whom they went while on sabbaticals to the cities, the slave girls and women upon whom that first caste rested and to whom in certain cases it doubtless owed the very fact of its virginity; not this to Henry . . . he and his kind were forced to pass time away, with girls of his own class interdict and inaccessible and women of the

second class just as inaccessible because of money and distance, and hence only the slave girls, the housemaids neated and cleaned by white mistresses or perhaps girls with sweating bodies out of the fields themselves and the young man rides up and beckons the watching overseer and says Send me Juno or Missylena or Chlory and then rides into the trees and dismounts and waits (112).

Although Bon's practice of abusing negro mistresses may on the surface seem more refined than its usage on the Southern plantation, the results are nonetheless the same. One key difference, however, is the "sharp" levels of stratification regarding black and white women. By birth each falls into a discrete, immutable category that essentially defines the entirety of their existence.

However, there also lies the sense that the virginity so sacred to Southerners is shielded only by the mitigating influence of black females, exploited by whites such as Henry. Quentin's statements elucidate a strange perversion of family dynamics, where the ability to maintain visible hierarchies and proper constructions of the Southern family based on the necessary elements of virginity, bloodline, and race, is contingent on the black members of society. Without slaves, or any subaltern group of people onto which whites could project their sexual frustrations and delusions of dominance, the entire façade of the Southern fantasy would disintegrate, much as it did post-1865. In his critical work *To Wake the Nations*, Eric Sundquist notes the Hegelian tenets in Southern antebellum race relations: "For Hegel, the master's power is hedged by his discovery that his very identity as *master*

is bound to, and mediated through, another consciousness, that of the slave. The slave in turn, although he is in thrall to the master and lives to a degree for his enhancement, nonetheless wields power over the master by refusing to grant him autonomy and forcing him into a psychological posture of dependence.”⁴ While the lives of blacks are, obviously, disrupted and destroyed by the dogma of slavery, whites, too, are equally trapped in a design of their own making. Complete adherence to governing precepts is not simply expected, but vital to maintaining the intricate web of racial and gender-based dynamics upon which every relationship hinges. By leaving no avenue outside of the dominant ideology, any act which deviates from the norm is to be considered dangerous to the existing order and therefore must be corrected by any means necessary, including extreme violence, self-destructive behaviors, or other actions potentially compromising one’s conscience and identity.

With the main thrust of this analysis being the functions and products of racism on male-female relationships from the perspective of white (or in Bon’s case, mulatto) males’ actions and their corollary effects, one cannot fully understand these dynamics without investigating the obverse position of blacks and their own reaction to entrenched norms. The son of Charles Bon and his octoroon mistress, Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon, is as an exemplar for the struggles blacks face in Faulkner’s work. However, his character is of particular interest for three reasons. One, because the novel traces his development from childhood to adulthood, second, that he does not know the presence of his black blood, and third his relocation from New Orleans to the discrete world of Sutpen’s Hundred. All of these conditions

trigger a complicated series of events culminating in Bon's psychological complex, and eventual spiteful resistance, to his classification as black.

Clytie's involvement in St. Valery's life is paramount to his childhood developments. Traveling alone to fetch him from New Orleans, upon their return she keeps a strange, protective watch over the child, strictly regulating his social interaction: "Clytie, who . . . would . . . search . . . until she found that little strange lonely boy sitting quietly . . . with his four names and his sixteenth-part black blood . . . who regarded with an aghast fatalistic terror the grim coffee-colored woman who would come on bare feet to the door and look in at him . . . and who found him one afternoon playing with a negro boy about his own size . . . and cursed the negro child out of sight with level and deadly violence . . . Clytie . . . who made that journey alone to New Orleans and returned with the child, the boy of twelve" (203). The attempt to safeguard Bon from any playmates of his own race is less an act of internalized racism on the part of Clytie than a conscious choice to shield Bon from his true, black heritage. The reasoning for such an act lies in that Clytie, who has suffered the torment of being born into a tyrannized class herself, sees no reason why Bon should not have at least the psychological advantages of whiteness. In *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract*, Brook Thomas highlights that attempts to "pass" for white were certainly not uncommon in the years following the Civil War: "People designated as white are not confronted with the moral dilemma of passing, because they have nothing to gain by claiming to be black. In contrast, for someone designated black there is a moral dilemma, because to remain black means being denied deserved opportunity."⁵ Because of the United States'

unfulfilled agreement with freedmen post-emancipation, passing as white provides a viable outlet for blacks to procure the rights and opportunities they are prevented from due solely to race.

But if such complicated identity politics did prove fruitful during the Reconstruction era and afterward, in Faulkner's grim, and perhaps more realistic, account of the Deep South, such an ability remains impossible. Young Charles does, indeed, discover his true bloodline and immediately disappears, when, upon his return displays his new "coal black and ape-like" bride with an "authentic wedding license"(216). For Bon the presence of the wedding license acts to legitimate the performative marriage, and fulfills his desires twofold through his flaunting of a visibly black woman coupled with his own presence as a passable white, and the deliberate derision of whites' most sacred institution. Regardless, all facets of the marriage challenge the existing social order and thrust the question of miscegenation and selfhood based on race into the heart of *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Using his wife as a traveling showpiece, Bon hunted "out situations in order to flaunt and fling the ape-like body of his charcoal companion in the faces of all and any who would retaliate: the negro stevedores and deckhands on steamboats or in city honky-tonks who thought he was a white man and believed it only the more strongly when he denied it; the white men who, when he said he was a negro, believed that he lied in order to save his own skin, or worse: from sheer besotment of sexual perversion" (216). Bon's strong push back against any admission to whiteness indicates that his anxieties rest not as much in the trappings of blackness, but in the patrilineal Sutpen blood he wishes to repudiate. Earlier he is described as

a man “who had not resented his black blood so much as he had denied the white” (216). Moreover, by claiming no race, white or black, Bon remains in a type of liminal space between identities, never truly actualizing any. This identity complex is also manifest in Bon’s physical move away from the Sutpen household, into one of the old slave cabins on the property, suggestive of his willing deracination, further defining his position on the periphery of identities and social spaces. Thadious Davis argues in a similar vein that Bon “[n]onetheless . . . does not penetrate the black world. He remains as alienated from it as he is from his black wife and the Sutpen women.”⁶ Bon, then, is perhaps the character to be most pitied throughout *Absalom, Absalom!*, being the singular figure throughout the novel bereft of any reciprocated family bond, driven to the extremes of self-alienation by his complete displacement among abortive families.

The character of Thomas Sutpen is one entirely unique to Faulkner’s work. Unique because he is larger than life, mythologized within the text to represent something more than a man or typified slave master, but a potent symbol for the South itself. As Faulkner would reflect: “Sutpen . . . was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later, because one has got to belong to the human family, and to take a responsible part in the human family.”⁷ In a nod to the increased egalitarianism taking hold in America during the late nineteenth century and beyond, Faulkner hits on the key failure of Sutpen and the South in their inability to assume a role in the “human family.” If, perhaps, the novel concludes in a disheartening manner, it is purposeful on the part of Faulkner who conveys the

extreme danger of allowing a state of unbridled tyranny to structure a given society. The symbol of the family takes on vast meanings throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* and forces readers to reconsider what it means to take a conscious stance against social inequities, and the potential consequences of choosing not to do so.

Notes

¹ Crane, Gregg D., "The Lexicon of Rights, Power, and Community in *Blake*: Martin R. Delany's Dissent from *Dred Scott*" (*American Literature* 68.3 1996), 529.

² All page citations from William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (Random House, 1993).

³ Panthea Reid Broughton, "Race, Blood, and McCaslins: The Abstractions Grasped as a Fine Dead Sound," (*William Faulkner: The Abstract and the Actual*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1974), 174.

⁴ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 40.

⁵ Brook Thomas, *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 162.

⁶ Thadious Davis, "The Sutpens and the Blacks" (*Faulkner's "Negro": Art and the Southern Context*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1983), 138.

⁷ Arthur Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Sutpen Family* (NY: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), ii.

CHAPTER 3
GO DOWN, MOSES

Writing on *Go Down, Moses* Arthur Kinney expresses that “The episodes . . . are so structured that we are never permitted to forget the entanglement of various bloodlines.”¹ Not surprisingly, *Go Down, Moses* sets forth one of the most expansive genealogical frameworks throughout Faulkner’s novels, documenting eight generations over more than a hundred years. However this progression is far from linear; rather, Faulkner complicates the infrastructure of family ties and bloodline through instances of miscegenation that considerably disrupt the family order. The work is also unique in that it is broken into seven distinct episodes (Faulkner’s form mirroring the disjointed McCaslin lineage), each constituting a chronology of one, or sometimes more, McCaslin generations beginning in the mid-1800’s and ending in the mid-1900’s.

Published in 1942, *Go Down, Moses* traces Faulkner’s evolution as a writer from works like *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) in which race is mainly glossed over, to nearly fifteen years later when he faces completely the inequities of race in the Southern context. However, *Go Down, Moses* differs from prior works that also grapple with similar issues in that while *Absalom, Absalom!*, for instance, deals primarily with the period during the Civil War and beyond, *Go Down, Moses* refuses to situate the problem of prejudice at a specific point in time. Faulkner transcends the 19th-century Southern vacuum employing a more elastic use of time, continually

shifting his focus from the McCaslin plantation far into the past to a pre-civilized, egalitarian state of nature. One recurring, and important, example is that in *Go Down, Moses* blackness is not always negative, and in many instances blacks are gestured towards as the original progenitors of humanity itself. Indeed, the title's biblical connotations of Exodus, and the slave song which would follow, connects the creation myth of the Old Testament to the blacks Faulkner so often implicates as the forbears of mankind throughout the novel.

With such a great emphasis on heredity, I believe one important avenue for investigation lies in the McCaslin family and their various methods of grappling with identity through blood. Their worldviews are often mediated through the shared and unshared traits among family members. In a Caddy-like manner, Lucas Beauchamp provides the *carte blanche* onto which the Edmonds project their anxieties with regards to their subaltern matrilineal descent, along with their much broader ruminations on the history of man. Lucas is certainly not alone, however, in provoking such notions. Ike McCaslin's repudiation of his patrilineal blood exhibits another way in which to deal with the unease regarding heredity, and the distinct consequences such a decision fosters. Therefore focusing mainly on Lucas and Ike, I intend to vet further the ways in which the McCaslin family members, white and black, construe their entire world through genealogy.

Essentially *Go Down, Moses* focuses on a single family disrupted by the South's rigid conceptions of blood and race. The typically stark binary between white and black is vastly complicated by the fragility of the white McCaslins, whose skin color places them at a titular position of dominance, but who in reality have

extreme difficulty displacing the psychological power of their black kin. The novel's second section, "The Fire and the Hearth," portrays the history of Lucas Beauchamp, "not only the oldest man but the oldest living person on the Edmonds plantation" (37).² Lucas' importance, however, rests in his patrilineal descent from Old Carothers McCaslin, the progenitor of the two McCaslin bloodlines. Therefore it is also of great significance that although Lucas may be deemed black, he is actually mulatto, thus diminishing distinctions of blood, and rendering his lineage and race that much more problematic for his white relations.³ Yet in the eyes of Southern society, Lucas' heritage exerts little influence determining his future on the family plantation: "the oldest McCaslin descendant even though in the world's eye he descended not from McCaslins but from McCaslins slaves . . . who would own the land and all on it if his just rights were only known . . . coeval with old Buck and Buddy McCaslin who had been alive when their father, Carothers McCaslin, got the land from the Indians back in the old time when men black and white were men" (47). Through constant references to time immemorial, Faulkner poses an even bolder challenge to inert Southern mores by voicing his dissent in terms of a common, inalienable natural law. By doing so, and by incorporating such a large genealogical framework, the novel continually pulls the reader away from any time specific scenarios, as even those sections rooted in a particular moment or lifetime are inevitably upended by references to the prehistoric that frustrate the supposedly eternal racist principles of the South.

Evidence of the Edmonds' insecurity regarding their heritage is everywhere throughout "The Fire and the Hearth," never spoken and communicated to Lucas

specifically, but contemplated as a reflection of subconscious anxieties. Often what provokes these asides on the part of the Edmonds' are the physical characteristics of blackness that Lucas possesses, containing implications beyond the delineated, familial chain of the McCaslins to the whole of the human family: "*I am not only looking at a face older than mine and which has seen and winnowed more, but at a man most of whose blood was pure ten thousand years when my own anonymous beginnings became mixed enough to produce me*" (65). Faulkner grants the strength of Lucas to all blacks and inverts the American myth of white supremacy in support of the conflicting notion that any remaining "pure" blood belongs to those of African descent. The ideal of a pure racial family indeed permeated the South on a macro and micro level, as Clement Eaton relates: "The plantation society of the Old South emphasized the family to a much greater degree than was done in the North . . . Southerners tended to evaluate people not so much as individuals but as belonging to a family, a clan."⁴ Ironically, Eaton's words hearken to the primeval and uncivilized- Southerners relying on a primitive feudal system not constituted by a unified people but by discrete "clan[s]." While the Southern familial model may resemble something of a devolved tribal state, in Lucas' case the ancient represents something entirely positive. Not only can he trace his lineage to its McCaslin roots; the black race wields the potential to claim racial purity since the beginnings of time, while whites constitute a bastardized, ancestryless ethnicity.

Because, in binary terms, the Edmonds' continual lapse into a trance-like reverie regarding their matrilineal descent and race is often juxtaposed to Lucas' opposite reaction of total self-surety, it initially seems blood has far less significance

for him than it does for his white kin. The narrator states that: "it was not that Lucas made capital of his white or even his McCaslin blood, but the contrary. It was as if he were not only impervious to that blood, he was indifferent to it" (101). But that is not to say he is freed completely from its bearing as a resident on the McCaslin land. Although the argument could be made that Lucas' "indifference" to blood is what characterizes him and therefore equally characterizes his independence, his selfhood does become problematic when we realize that it requires another element for its actualization: the plantation. Lucas also readily identifies with the plantation's first owner, and progenitor of the McCaslins, Old Carothers. When confronting Roth early on in "The Fire and the Hearth," Lucas attributes his command of the situation to the original forbear while simultaneously implicating himself as his reincarnation: "I done already beat you,' he said. 'It's old Carothers'" (56). This double consciousness is also addressed on more explicit terms: "*So I reckon I aint got Old Carothers' blood for nothing . . . I needed him and he come and spoke for me*" (57). Although the family land becomes the paradoxical locale of the Edmonds' instability, for Lucas the farm symbolizes a sphere unconnected to the outside world over which he retains a certain dominance. Where seemingly all adverse conditions within a person can be counteracted by possessing a certain blood, Lucas requires the Edmonds' plantation for that blood to have a viable claim within those boundaries. Once removed from the McCaslin land, there is no guarantee that the McCaslin name or genealogy will hold any credence especially in terms of allowing a taboo race.

However, although I believe it is difficult to disregard the spatial requirements necessary for Lucas' McCaslin blood to hold any weight, one cannot ignore that Faulkner at once presents these dilemmas of space and time while simultaneously undermining them by dislodging the reader and the characters from their particular locale. Carothers helps to elucidate the importance of Lucas, far beyond his McCaslin traits:

Lucas . . . the face which was not at all a replica even in caricature of his grandfather McCaslin's but which had heired and now reproduced with absolute and shocking fidelity the old ancestor's entire generation and thought . . . a composite of a whole generation of fierce and undefeated young Confederate soldiers, embalmed and slightly mummified . . . *He's more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put together, including old Carothers. He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now except himself who fathered himself, intact and complete, contemptuous, as old Carothers must have been, of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own* (115).

While it is accurate to say that Lucas defines himself in terms of blood and ancestors in the McCaslin line, it would be myopic not to analyze how others in the McCaslin family use Lucas as a blank slate on which to impose their own lineal fantasies.

Lucas only seldom mentions his connection to Old Carothers, and his statements are always far less radical than his white family members'. For the Edmonds clan, Lucas signifies more than simply a resemblance to his plantation-owner ancestor; he is a container for an "entire generation" of Southern men and "Confederate soldiers." Lucas thus emblemizes the heart of the Old South's splendor, a vision he ironically would otherwise be occluded from due to race. Yet what these reflections from Carothers relate is not that Lucas actually represents any of these things, but that Carothers (and also his father) manifests these characteristics in his own gross obsession with familial legacy. Faulkner repeatedly presents a panoply of qualities attributed to Lucas, whether through the narrator or one of the Edmonds, in a strain of allusions to Genesis and other creation-type myths in which he is archetypally "*heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology*" of mankind. Thus Faulkner pushes the boundaries of what blood actually means—challenging not only one Southern family's ancestry by instilling a black man with the characteristics of patriarch, but extrapolating that model globally to all peoples of all races.

The substance of this analysis, while dealing with the clash over inherited traits, can be examined as directly related to notions regarding rightful ownership. Complications of ownership permeate *Go Down, Moses* as witnessed in "The Fire and the Hearth" where lineage creates manic instability in the white characters who do not possess the proper blood, and the same in Lucas who feels his claim to his own wife is voided by Zack's misappropriation. When Molly finally does return to Lucas' cabin, his prior sense of a joint, marital title is thrown into disarray: "What's ourn?"

he cried. 'What's mine?'" (49) Furthermore, although Zack relinquishes his hold on Molly for the time being (however only due to intimidation), Lucas remains unable to resolve the disparity between his legitimate notions of justice and whites' perpetual claim to anything blacks possess: "'How to god,' he said, 'can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife? And even if he could ask it, how to God can the white man promise he wont?'" (58)

As we leave Lucas, though, in "The Fire and the Hearth" and meet Ike in the subsequent sections "The Old People" and "The Bear," the incertitude regarding proprietary rights is complicated with the additional dispute over land. Cass's acquisition of the plantation from its "true heir," Isaac, "simply because he wanted it and knew he could use it better," propels property into the fore where it remains a major thematic point at issue.⁵ Yet with the narrator's quote above in mind, it is worth noting that brute force is not the actual reason Isaac gives up his right to the McCaslin land; rather, he repudiates it in an act of dissension and independence from his forefathers. Thus, as perception and reality are distorted for us in the novel, perceived ownership is exposed by Ike's abstention from the lineal land, and his often grander contemplations on inheritance, blood, and the question of absolute ownership.

In the penultimate portion of "The Bear," Ike fully defends his position relinquishing his title to the McCaslin plantation by evoking a higher law argument that "it was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath," as the only title to any of the Earth's natural resources lies solely in the hands of God. As we listen to Ike and Cass debate who indeed holds the inviolable claim to the plantation, blood memory

also takes on its most palpable form as “The Bear[‘s]” fourth portion, written in Faulknerian high style, describes in detail the McCaslin ledgers. What this lapse into the convoluted, ungrammatical narrative technique suggests is a breaking down of linear time, where the long McCaslin past is lifted from the pages of the ledger book and brought to life in the present, echoing the frequent narrative interruptions in *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner’s form also intimates the inherent conflict and confusion that ensues between attempts to reconcile the ledgers’ fragmented written evidence of events with the equally deficient, piecemeal oral knowledge of those same occurrences. While historically Westerners’ use of writing was meant to ensure clarity and indicated a civilized society advanced beyond a reliance on orality as a means of cultural preservation, in *Go Down, Moses* that dynamic is skewed. Rather, in the oral tradition of the South, where certain facts have the potential to be obscured or concealed completely by simply remaining unsaid, the ledgers take on an even greater significance as what should be a transparent log of births, marriages, and deaths actually reinforces ambiguity. The digressive conversation between Ike and Cass that continually interrupts their reading of the ledgers resembles the dialogue transcribed within the entries between Buck and Buddy: “Oct 3th Debit Theophilus McCaslin Niger 265\$ Mule 100\$ 365\$ He hasnt gone yet Father should be here then the first: 3 Oct 1856 Son of a bitch wont leave What would father done then the second: 29th of Oct 1856 Renamed him the first: 31 Oct 1856 Renamed him what” (254).

Notwithstanding, Isaac exhibits a distinct sense of surprise, that we too share, as the sordid facts of the McCaslin genealogy are unraveled: “the old ledgers . .

. he realized . . . probably contained a chronological and much more comprehensive though doubtless tedious record that he would ever get from any other source, not alone of his own flesh and blood but of all his people, not only the whites but the black ones too, who were as much a part of his ancestry as his white progenitors” (256). Isaac’s primary understanding of his family’s history evidently has been accrued throughout the years from individual “source[s],” reflective of the novel’s structure narrating seven distinct histories that help piece together the McCaslin puzzle. However, although equivocal, the ledgers counter that fragmentary tendency by constituting the only instance throughout *Go Down, Moses* in which all members of the McCaslin family are placed together in a single space, blacks and whites given equal precedence in terms of their influence on the McCaslin family’s complex evolution. The entries prove that the psychological conflict the Edmonds exemplify is symptomatic of even the prior McCaslins Buck and Buddy who, as noted, continually feel the need to conjure the spirit of Old Carothers to resolve conflict, stating: *Father should be here . . . What would father done.*” Their own failure to integrate into Southern society in many ways resembles Ike’s abortive attempt to garner independence by relinquishing his patrimony, noting a circular pattern of events where the firsthand subconscious of the Edmonds is replicated in the troubled ruminations of the ledger pages.

The ledgers succeed in offering insight into the McCaslin past, but also add to our understanding of arguably the most influential character in *Go Down, Moses*, and the one we know least about. Old Carothers McCaslin, the original forbear of the McCaslin blacks and whites, is described within the entries in unsettling terms

regarding his incestuous relations with his own daughter Tomasina. “The clan’s progenitor,” writes Kinney, “Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin . . . migrates from Caroline to Mississippi at about the same time that Thomas Sutpen . . . arrives by way of Haiti. But unlike Sutpen, who is also at the center of his family saga and whose influence also stretches well beyond him, we never see or hear Carothers: all we have are memories, reports, and reconstructions of him by his descendants.”⁶ Indeed, being privy to at least some of Sutpen’s past and voice directly allows the reader to construct a rather full analysis of his motives and rationale, while in the case of Carothers (like Caddy), we are only presented with the residue of his actions.

Yet the common strain between Sutpen and Carothers is their sexual conduct propelling the ruinous domino effect around which each novel centers. Like Sutpen, Carothers also believes that financial remuneration is sufficient enough to free him from responsibility. Carothers actually uses the ledgers not necessarily to disavow a portion of his past, but to document his payment: “Old Carothers . . . made no effort either to explain or obfuscate the thousand-dollar legacy to the son of an unmarried slave-girl . . . bearing the consequence of the act of which there was still no definite incontrovertible proof that he acknowledged . . . *So I reckon that was cheaper than saying My son to a nigger he thought. Some sort of love*” (258). Rather than any admission of culpability, Carothers instead displaces Tomasina from his life and conscience by remitting her a monetary “legacy” in place of the genealogical right she is entitled to. By forcing Tomasina to accept money in substitution of a family tie, Carothers nullifies, if only in a transactional sense, her claim to McCaslin blood.

Where he fails, much like Sutpen himself errs, is believing that money has the power not only to make problems go away, but to erase them completely.

What Carothers does not acknowledge is that Tomasina belongs to two families; she is not just a McCaslin, but a product of Eunice's own untold bloodline and relationship with Carothers. After fathering Tomasina with an unwed Eunice, Carothers attempts to rectify the familial break by arranging a superficial marriage between Eunice and Thucydus as a way to actualize the distinction of blood through separately established lineages. Perhaps succeeding in some manner with Eunice in distinguishing her as a discrete line made clear through her assumption of Thucydus' name in marriage, Carothers conversely leaves an open window for Tomasina's saga to live on when money alone does not succeed in patching the problem of her bastard child. Although Isaac knows beforehand that Tomasina is a relative, the ledgers make the bond a reality: "*His own daughter His own daughter*" (259). That relationship between father and daughter would also lead, as the ledgers indicate, to Eunice's suicide. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld meticulously documents the corollary effects of Carothers' licentiousness: "Eunice's suicide has profound ramifications. Almost certainly it contributed to her daughter's death . . . and the motherless upbringing of Tomey's Turl . . . both slave and half brother to Buck and Buddy . . . And as the ledger entries suggest, the sorry facts of their father's sexual encounters led directly to Buck's and Buddy's bachelorhood . . . and by extension to Isaac's repudiation of the land."⁷ Even Thomas Sutpen shies away from incest, the indication being that the willful contamination of one's own bloodline is in effect

suicidal, as exemplified by the systematic implosion of each succeeding McCaslin generation.

Muhlenfeld's catalog of troubled McCaslins points us in the direction of Isaac's repudiation of the land and its misguided approach in negating the ill effects of his father's misdeeds. "In theological terms," Annette Bernert writes, "Ike sought to counteract the guilt of his ancestry by acts of propitiation, by bribing the gods to overlook the sin, when what was needed was expiation, an act of real purification which virtually erases that sin by nullifying its effects."⁸ However that expiation never occurs on any terms either in Ike or any other character. The only lasting effect Ike has is denying any continuation of the McCaslin line, which in itself is counterproductive, and even irresponsible, because it (only spuriously) frees him from any accountability. Rather than help bring about change through activism, Ike surrenders his voice with his family's blood and resigns himself to a life of fruitless seclusion.

Even as an old man, Ike never truly lives up to the standards he claims for himself. His character, however, notably evolves from idealistic boyhood to a more realistic, and even nihilistic, perspective. The appearance of James Beauchamp's unnamed daughter in "Delta Autumn" brings the plot of *Go Down, Moses* full circle, and showcases Ike's most outspoken comments on race:

'That's just money,' she said. 'What did you expect? What else did you expect? You have known him long enough or at least often enough to have got that child, and you dont know him any better than that? . . . But not marriage,' he

said. 'Not marriage. He didn't promise you that. Dont lie to me. He didn't have to' (342).

For all of Ike's denigration of the mind of the Old South he inevitably falls prey to its racial regulations that, in his old age, have the tinge of being anachronistic. Although Roth does replicate Old Carothers' abortive method of monetary manumission, his black mistress presents us, finally, with a fresh outlook indicative of a revised social milieu. Unlike Eunice and Tomasina who are forced into intercourse with Carothers, she and Roth form a mutual agreement as proved by her response to Isaac's exclamation. Most importantly, in a total upheaval of Ike's purpose in repudiating his McCaslin land, Roth's mistress voices the fact that he is actually in part to blame for Roth's decisions, and hence unable to escape the cultural imperatives he supposedly rejects: "No. he didn't have to. I didn't ask him to. I knew what I was doing. . . . And we agreed. . . . I would have made a man of him. He's not a man yet. You spoiled him. You, and Uncle Lucas and Aunt Mollie. But mostly you. . . . Yes. When you gave to his grandfather that land which didn't belong to him, not even half of it by will or even law'" (342-43).

While Roth's mistress exhibits a fresh perspective unhinged from the racist values of the South, she also renews the McCaslin genealogy's original sins of incest and miscegenation, and ironically she is a product of both. As her incisive observations and cool demeanor estrange her from that prior model, though, Ike's antiquary comments are placed in sharp relief:

'Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America, he thought. But not now! Not now! He cried, not loud, in a voice of amazement, pity, and outrage: 'You're a nigger!' 'Yes,' she said. 'James Beauchamp- you called him Tennie's Jim though he had a name- was my grandfather. I said you were Uncle Isaac' (344).

This exchange is a near carbon-copy of the dialogue between Zack and Lucas who claims "I'm a nigger . . . But I'm a man too," proving the novel's propensity to reinforce the human in the McCaslin blacks as their white kin sit mired in an irreconcilable tension between moral and social righteousness (47). The dialogue between the unnamed McCaslin and Ike is further important as it provides the clearest, simplest, and most discerning commentary on the failures of the McCaslins and hence the equally outmoded consciousness of the South. Her "only salvation," Ike believes, is to "move back North" to marry in her "own race" (346). Ike's statement reinforcing the compartmentalization of races into black and white is highly problematic because Roth's mistress is neither black nor white, but mulatto. With the growing intermingling of races across America, Ike does not even seem to realize his advice is outmoded in a country no longer broken into two, distinct racial groupings, but constituted more by a heterogeneous population. Ironically, after nearly three hundred pages of Faulkner's ceaseless chronology of psychological catastrophes resulting from the fraught, and seemingly inescapable, racist caste system, he presents us with a woman who in every right should be demoralized, but holds strong to a sense of hope totally uncharacteristic of any other person within

the novel. Her reply indicates ridicule for his obsolete solution, and instead appeals to a compelling romanticism: “‘Old man,’ she said. ‘have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?’” (346) Love, of all things, becomes the most powerful sentiment in *Go Down, Moses*, and the uncomplicated ingredient necessary to eclipse the barrier between black and white.

Although the overarching message of *Go Down, Moses* can be identified as discouraging with little hope for a future devoid of societal mores structured around race, “Delta Autumn” brings us into the present, and with that, exudes an irrefutable optimism. The image of the delta evokes a sense of branching out, and a disintegration of the Southern cultural monolith:

This Delta. This land which man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires’ mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like niggers . . . where cotton is planted and . . . usury and mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to saw which one is which nor cares (347).

Race is suggested here as being subordinate to the American conscious where, with great focus on expansion, such an undeviating path as Southern values dictate no

longer harmonizes with the influx of cosmopolitanism and the need to join the rest of the nation in its path to progress. As I have attempted to point out the endless preoccupations with blood and heritage in *Go Down, Moses*, it is important to recognize that by the end of the novel the only thing the McCaslins ever accomplish is divisiveness and a gross misuse of time. With the expansion of a free market economy, the economic system of the South once totally contingent on slavery has little room for any totalizing encumbrance like a racial caste system simply because “no man has time” if they wish to keep pace with the financial and cultural boom. Thus, ironically, the money so derided throughout the novel from Old Carothers and Roth actually becomes a key factor contributing to the liberation of blacks and the American consciousness. Although Faulkner does not present a neatly packaged solution to any remaining Southern thought such as the “jim crow” laws, the feeling persists that the worst of slavery’s attendant racism is over, and the future of America, and America’s blacks, holds a possibly limitless potential.

In a striking observation Cass states: “we have to live together in herd to protect ourselves from our own sources” (161). But in *Go Down, Moses* that preservation among the McCaslins never occurs. What we witness instead is a family in crisis whose scramble to mend their family framework, and reconcile the ideal with the actual, is utterly futile with evidence suggesting that any restorative prospect was doomed from the outset. Although, for how manifold the McCaslins’ irremediable complexes respecting ancestry are in *Go Down, Moses*, a stable identity is the common goal for each. Yet by choosing to perpetuate the Southern myth of white supremacy, the McCaslins privilege a fabricated cultural construct over their

innate moral sense. Compared to Thomas Sutpen who has little (if any) awareness of others' humanity, the McCaslins collectively portray a family descended into chaos simply because they do not allow themselves to give voice to their conscience. The novel so overwhelms us with its vast cast of characters and their persistent asides that it is impossible to ignore the breaks in action each time someone pauses to reflect on his identity and motives and to question the ideology he otherwise outwardly obeys. Indeed, if anything, Faulkner's work exhibits not just the presence of racist Southern convictions, but the complications that ensue when people begin to question those intolerant preconceptions and the internal struggle between the human conscience and social dogma.

Notes

¹ Arthur Kinney, *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family* (NY: G.K Hall & Co., 1990), 35.

² All page citations from William Faulkner's, *Go Down, Moses* (NY: Vintage, 1970).

³ "The Fire and the Hearth" gives precedence to Lucas (born 1874), but he is not the first, nor the last, mulatto Beauchamp. Tomey's Turl (Terrel Beauchamp), Lucas' grandfather born in 1833 and the focus of the novel's first episode "Was," is a third generation Beauchamp descended from Old Carothers and his incestuous relationship with his daughter, Tomasina, who we meet later in the ledgers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Butch (Samuel Worsham Beauchamp) born in 1914 is Lucas' only grandson whose execution is made the focus of the novel's most recent, and final, episode "Go Down, Moses." The importance of "Was" and "Go Down, Moses" is partially that they bookend "The Fire and the Hearth" providing surrogates, or stand-ins, for Lucas as representatives of Old Carothers' mulatto descendants.

⁴ Clement Eaton, *The Mind of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1964), 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶ Kinney, 35.

⁷ Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, "The Distaff Side: The Women of *Go Down, Moses*" (*Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The McCaslin Family* NY: G.K Hall & Co., 1990), 205.

⁸ Annette Bernert, "The Four Fathers of Isaac McCaslin" (*Southern Humanities Review* 9.4 1975), 186.

CONCLUSION

INTERVIEWER: Critics claim that blood relationships are central in your novels.

FAULKNER: That is an opinion and, as I have said, I don't read critics. I doubt that a man trying to write about people is any more interested in blood relationships than in the shape of their noses, unless they are necessary to help the story move. If the writer concentrates on what he does need to be interested in, which is the truth and the human heart, he won't have much time left for anything else . . . since in my opinion ideas and facts have very little connection with the truth.

-William Faulkner with Jean Stein
The Paris Review, Spring, 1956.¹

Q: Mr. Faulkner, I'd like to ask you a question about Quentin and his relationship with his father. I think many readers get the impression that Quentin is the way he is to a large extent because of his father's lack of values, or the fact that he doesn't seem to pass down to his son many values that will sustain him. Do you think that Quentin winds up the way he does primarily because of that, or are we meant to see, would you say, that the action that comes primarily from what he is, abetted by what he gets from the father?

A: The action as portrayed by Quentin was transmitted to him through his father. There was a basic failure before that. The grandfather had been a failed brigadier twice in the Civil War. It was the- the basic failure Quentin inherited through his father, or beyond his father. It was a- something happened somewhere between the first Compson and Quentin. The first Compson was a bold ruthless man . . . and established what should have been a princely line, and that princely line decayed.

-William Faulkner
with students at the University of Virginia
February 15, 1957²

These two seemingly antithetical responses (given within a year of each other) dictate, on the one hand, an equivocal pandering to his critical audience in *The Paris Review*, and a more thoughtful, lucid response to the question of Quentin's

convictions and their origin. What binds them is that Faulkner's emphasis on a "connection with the truth" in the first response is actually manifest in the second. Blood, it seems, is part of the truth of the human experience especially if we look to Faulkner's reply to the student's question that abandons ambiguity in favor of an analysis of the Compson family's origins, and its evident influence on future generations not limited to Quentin alone. Rather than shirking the issue of heredity, or perhaps providing an example of Jason Compson's impact from *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner instead transcends those limitations by describing the "first Compson" and the subsequent fall precipitating the family's shift from a prelapsarian to postlapsarian state. If I have attempted to prove anything throughout this analysis, it is that in Faulkner's Southern milieu, blood is reality. While the context may change, the importance of birth and one's subsequent actions within the strictures of their family, and Southern credo, hold great importance not only for the individual, but for succeeding generations as well.

This thesis also shows the evolutionary trend present in the three novels, in which the limited consciousness of the Compsons and stress on the individual's clan lineage varies widely from *Go Down, Moses's* all-encompassing theory of heredity. Yet although this revision of content is quite noticeable, especially when reading the works in succession, the subject remains the same. In a 1933 introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner describes the relationship between art and the artist: "It is his breath, blood, flesh, all. . . . Because it is himself that the Southerner is writing about, not about his environment . . . We need to talk, to tell, since oratory is our heritage. . . . [T]he writer unconsciously writes into every line and phrase his

violent despairs and rages and frustrations or his violent prophesies of still more violent hopes.”³ Faulkner’s unwillingness to deviate from the subject of his homeland makes sense when we realize that his purpose is twofold- writing to lament the destruction of the old while refusing to ignore its violence and savagery. For Faulkner the South will always be the most important subject of discussion because the only proper way to manage the welter of conflicting emotions regarding the wistful nostalgia for the Old South’s glories and the horrifying brutality which cannot be occluded from that past lies in the need to “talk, to tell.” I would even argue that Faulkner himself is more of a Compson or Sutpen or McCaslin than we may realize initially. As we read the introduction to his seminal novel, the psychological distress present in nearly all his characters seems very much a latent function of Faulkner’s own mind that he exorcises by writing those characteristics into others.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the thematic mental and emotional discord depicted within each story is never resolved. Tensions tend to mount until they eventually come to a head and unleash irrevocable destruction on the perpetrators of the misdeeds and all peripheral characters involved. It seems that no one is free from the complications of living in an isolated sphere of immutable behavioral standards and prejudices. Although already made a focus of my final chapter, I believe it is valuable to emphasize that the one book offering a glimmer of optimism is *Go Down, Moses*. It is ironically voiced by Roth’s mistress who, according to Ike, resembles more of a Northerner than a Southerner. He tells her, in fact, to “Go back North,”⁴ and that she “sound[s] almost like a Northerner

even.”⁵ By holding the singular ability to maintain a distance from the Southern mind and context she provides herself an outlet for possible escape, and retains a clear, objective voice that does singular damage to the South’s already crumbling foundation. The dialogue between Ike and Roth’s mistress documents one of the most important scenes within Faulkner’s corpus, as it is one time we see an effigy of the Old South faced head on with the irrationality of his entire worldview, to which he can only reply: “You’re a nigger!”⁶ The context of the conversation makes Ike’s statement not only vacuous, but also ineffectual. Yet it nonetheless indicates an unbridgeable gap between the dynamism systematically deconstructing the Southern ideology, and those unwilling, or unable, to resituate themselves in a shifting American landscape.

Resolution, then, is as impossible for Faulkner as it is for his characters. Even following the Civil War, the rift between those attempting to maintain what was lost and others pushing forward would lead to the double-consciousness of the Southerner we see so saliently in Faulkner’s work. A student asked him in 1957 if he believed the characters in *The Sound and the Fury* were “good people,” to which he responded: “I would call them tragic people. The good people, Dilsey, the Negro woman, she was a good human being. That she held that family together for not the hope of reward but just because it was the decent and proper thing to do.”⁷ As much as we hope for the characters that instill some goodness into the world of Yoknapatawpha, even those such as Dilsey, the stronghold of endurance and sanity, are unable to escape the Southern tragedy. Perhaps then Faulkner saw that the only form of release from what Quentin calls the South’s “moral brigandage”⁸ is to rely on

the common, oral culture to face injustice, and through writing express the unsayable that is the unspoken mind of the Old South. Indeed, however irrational such a mindset may be to us now, Faulkner's novels document a remarkable point in American history where a societal status quo created a situation that led to rational, thinking people supporting an absolutist credo that would eventually be their undoing. I believe Faulkner, even today, would want us to have the necessary conversations (the one Ike refuses to have) confronting such exclusionary thought, to create awareness of cultural authoritarianism so that we may have enough sense and foresight to condemn those threatening to subvert the state of human equality his novels never reach.

Notes

- ¹ Jean Stein, "William Faulkner: An Interview" (*William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*. Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), 79.
- ² Frederick Gwynn, *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia* (*The Sound and the Fury*. Norton, 1994), 235.
- ³ William Faulkner, "An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*" (*The Sound and the Fury*. Norton, 1994), 229.
- ⁴ William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses* (NY: Vintage, 1970), 346.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 343.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.
- ⁷ Gwynn, 237.
- ⁸ William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Random House, 1993), 271.

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