

Dr. Bernice Schrank

PATTERNS OF REVERSAL IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

I. Narrative Framework and the Technique of Reversal

What is *Absalom, Absalom!* about? After several decades of analysis and commentary, critical opinion remains divided on this presumably crucial point. At the periphery of the discussion are various attempts to discover meaning in generic labels: those articles and chapters arguing that *Absalom, Absalom!* is either tragedy,¹ epic,² or myth.³ At the centre are two distinct conceptions of this novel, one concerned with the narrators and the subjective quality of truth, the other involved with Sutpen and the sociological implications of human action.

The subjective position derives from Olga Vickery.⁴ One of the earliest critics to deal with the novel's multiple perspectives, Mrs. Vickery holds that *Absalom, Absalom!* is as much concerned with the creation of truth as with its revelation. Later analysts of the novel's point of view have tended to exaggerate and thus transform Mrs. Vickery's insight. Instead of balancing narrative ambiguity and social meaning as she does, many recent commentators have seen the novel exclusively in terms of narrative technique.⁵ The perpetual uncertainty postulated by these critics reduces the novel to an insoluble detective story.⁶

Other critics have devoted considerable attention to the novel's social and moral dimensions.⁷ They see Sutpen, not the narrators, as central and they see him as socially representative. These critics not only find Sutpen's actions and motivations clear enough for them to judge Sutpen, they feel quite free to extrapolate to the whole Southern system. Like the later subjectivists, some socially oriented critics have tended to overstate their case. In their hands, the novel has become a casebook on Southern history.⁸

Where the extreme subjectivists find endless ambiguity, the social critics see profound meaning. Attempts to synthesize such diverse views may therefore seem unpromising. But the novel clearly encompasses Sutpen and the narrators, the problem of social significance and subjective distortion. This paper will try to connect Sutpen and the narrators by arguing that the two are joined by the novel's interlocking patterns of reversal. The entire Sutpen story, for example, hinges on a sequence of related reversals: Sutpen goes from riches to rags; the society he sought to reject, he comes to accept; the door he tried to open for all who would come to it is closed. But the most important reversal is Faulkner's inversion of cause and effect. By making the reader feel and know the effects of Sutpen's actions on the narrators long before the causes of his behavior are revealed, Faulkner (and it is Faulkner, not the narrators, who places effects before causes) creates a causal framework for binding Sutpen and the four narrators based on the technique of reversal. Miss Rosa's lifetime of outraged virginity, caused, the reader learns much later, by Sutpen's indelicate proposition, is the novel's first revelation. Mr. Compson's passivity, Quentin's hysteria and even Shreve's enthusiasm are the delayed side effects of Sutpen's actions, presented, like Miss Rosa's frustration, well in advance of their causes. Thus through Faulkner's reversal of cause and effect, the influence of Sutpen's acts is seen to extend beyond his life and to enlarge his responsibility from the narrowly familial to the social realm.

Before these interlocking patterns of reversal can be explored, however, it is necessary to determine the relationship between Sutpen and the narrators. Although they are connected, they are not equal partners. The title of the novel, in alluding to the Old Testament episode of David and Absalom, suggests Sutpen and his situation. The narrators are obsessed with Sutpen. Through actual or vicarious participation, they are as much affected by as affecting the Sutpen story. Their self-revelations, moreover, come about only as a result of telling the story. It seems to me, therefore, that the Sutpen story rather than the narrators' revelations is most important to the novel as a whole.

The difficulty, as the subjectivist critics have amply noted, is the symbiotic relationship between the narrators and the subject. Sutpen exists primarily through four narrators whose individual idiosyncracies and particular orientations tend, however unintentionally, to distort the

material they are presenting. Thus, although the Sutpen story is central, it seems, paradoxically, unknowable, at least in any absolute or objective way, because of Faulkner's narrative method.

The complications created by the four narrators' distortions do not, however, totally disable the reader. For a start, the four narrators themselves are in sufficient agreement to provide the careful reader with the basic outline and general direction of the Sutpen story. Then too there is a fifth narrator, more knowledgeable and detached than Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve, who helps shape the story. His mere presence reduces the reader's sense of dependence on the other narrators. And although much of the time he offers simple editorial clarifications ('Mr. Compson told Quentin'⁹), he also makes authoritative judgments (see his comments on the causes of the South's defeat, p. 345) and provides a solid core of factual material in the 'Chronology' and 'Genealogy'. But it is the novel's reverse patterning which imposes the most apparent order and meaning on the four main voices and their diffuse revelations.

The title provides an obvious example. As an authorial contribution, it is distinct from the four narratives. In affirming the son, any son, it refutes and condemns Sutpen's denial of Bon, and implies that the meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!* is the reverse of the explicit values and overt actions set forth in the Sutpen story. Reversal here provides a pattern for understanding and judging without the need for establishing Sutpen's motivation in any detail and without the worry over narrative subversion. The pattern established by the title, it is worth noting, is repeated in the novel's reversal of cause and effect with its peculiar stress on effects. Here again the overt act is all that matters, and distortions of motive and non-essential fact, the hobgoblins of so much subjectivist criticism, are in effect rendered harmless.

That the story in its external circumstances as well as its implicit meaning develops through a pattern of reversal is clear from the negative movement of Sutpen's fortunes. Sutpen, it is true, achieves material success: he owns the largest plantation in the county and he establishes a line of descent. Yet, by the end of his life, his position is completely reversed. While Sutpen's Hundred contracts to Sutpen's One, Sutpen is reduced to running a store. The dynasty he was so intent on founding is doomed in his lifetime, ending finally with the Negro Jim Bond who does not even bear the Sutpen name.

Moving from the fact of Sutpen's fall to its cause reveals yet another pattern of reversal. Sutpen's social failure seems related to a more profound failure of his moral vision. Having banished all considerations but the pragmatic from his life, Sutpen is forced to introduce morality in an attempt to understand the collapse of his Grand Design. But he believes, according to Grandfather Compson,

that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out (p. 263).

Sutpen's attempt at moral speculation is, thus, just another version of his lifelong pragmatism. From his morally truncated perspective, Sutpen is unable to recognize that the Grand Design is falling apart because he has injured his first wife and denied his son. In his view of things, he has not committed any moral outrage at all; he has simply made a mistake which, if he could only locate it, he would correct (p. 267). What Sutpen has done is to reverse the importance of the moral and the pragmatic and in so doing he destroys himself, his family and his possessions. Given this reverse patterning, it would appear that moral considerations are of prime importance in *Absalom, Absalom!* Such an interpretation is sustained by the implied comparison of the title.

II. A Comparison of David and Sutpen

When Absalom's death was reported to the king, David 'was much moved and went up to the chamber over the Gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee O Absalom, my son, my son' (II *Samuel* 18:33). Out of context the reaction seems natural enough; yet the impact of David's grief is clear only when it is realized that Absalom was not only in open rebellion against his father, who was also his king, but that the news of Absalom's death meant that the revolt against the throne had been crushed. On the political level, Absalom's defeat is the significant thing. However, because David is a father before he is a king, the loss of a son must overshadow any joy in David's own triumph, regardless of how right his cause or how wrong his son's actions. David's anguished cry is a reassertion, in spite of everything else and beyond everything else, of the primacy of the blood tie and selfless paternal love. In the conflict between political demands and human relation-

ships, the human values emerge supreme as indeed they must if life is to be preserved. David's cry implicitly recognizes that life is created and sustained through the family and that, without an affirmation of the family, the life principle is challenged.

The effort to preserve and perpetuate life is also seen in David's attempt to reverse the traditional order in which the guilt of the parent is inherited by the child. Although the child is guilty, David declares his willingness to sacrifice himself for his son. Such an avowal does more than emphasize the significance of the blood bond and parental love: it recognizes that the son provides the link between the father and posterity and that the son may be more important than the father. That these feelings are a part of David's anguish cannot be doubted inasmuch as God has promised him a dynasty which, although eventually successful, seems to be threatened by the death of his son Absalom.

By conscious reference to the David and Absalom story, Faulkner provides a moral yardstick with which to measure the relationships in *Absalom, Absalom!* and suggests the inverted nature of the novel's meaning. What is the Sutpen legend if not the David story in reverse?¹⁰ In fact, the negative relationship between the novel and its Biblical analogue makes the affirmation of the title particularly ironic.

Sutpen and David are connected through the central issue of the father-son relationship. Where David transcends the conventional response and attains a more human position, Sutpen remains trapped in the values of a society which allows and encourages him to deny his own son. What David affirms, Sutpen repudiates. In spite of Absalom's crime, David can still reiterate, 'O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son.' Sutpen feels he must deny his son to preserve his dynasty.

Where David accepts the responsibility for his son's act when he wishes that he had died instead of Absalom, Sutpen forces on his sons the burden of his own failure. Shreve, trying to decipher Bon's motivation, realizes that whatever Sutpen had done, whether he

meant well or ill by it, it wasn't going to be the old man who would have to pay the check; and now that the old man was bankrupt with the incompetence of old age, who should do the paying if not his sons, his get (p. 325).

As a father, David is active while Sutpen is passive. What David does freely, Sutpen cannot do even when it is demanded. From the start,

Sutpen does nothing. Because Sutpen neither acknowledges nor verbally denies Bon, Bon persists in the courtship, hoping to make Sutpen act. Yet Henry, not Sutpen, shoots Bon. Through his passivity, Sutpen pushes the full weight of action on to Bon and Henry.

While David illustrates the triumph of an instinctive and selfless paternal affection that persists in the face of Absalom's betrayal, Sutpen shows a singular inability to love in spite of Bon's demand. All natural feeling is canceled by Sutpen's pragmatic approach to procreation: it is not a son but a male heir that he wants. Sutpen's attitude, unlike David's, makes the father, who creates and bequeaths the inheritance, more important than the child. If Sutpen had felt at all, such limited and selfish considerations could never have prevailed so absolutely. But, lacking love, he is able to turn away his son when Bon does not fit into his scheme. And thus, he precipitates the destruction that befalls his house.

From the above, it is clear that the relationship between David and Sutpen reveals a pattern of moral reversals which provide unambiguous touchstones to the novel's meaning.

III. The Design of Failure

Given Sutpen's reversal of the moral and the selfishly pragmatic, four related patterns of reversal emerge. First, the system Sutpen accepts is marked by the same moral-pragmatic reversal as he is. Second, Sutpen accepts this negative system in the process of trying to reject it. Third, the appendages and imagery of Sutpen's aspirations and strength become indications of his failure and impotence. And fourth, the consequences of Sutpen's failure and the South's defeat for the succeeding generations in the novel, including the narrators, are to reverse the forward thrust of time and thus to make of the future an endless preoccupation with the sterility of the past.

The first point, that Sutpen and society mirror each other's weaknesses, depends on seeing in the Sutpen story a public dimension. This is not difficult since the failure of Sutpen's dynastic ambitions exactly parallels the destruction of Southern slave society. In its broadest outline, it would appear that the Sutpen story sums up the fate of a whole society, is in fact a representative rendering of the Southern experience.¹¹

Whatever the failings of that society, they can only be determined from Sutpen's social and moral blindness in denying the son, a denial which reverses the assertion of kinship given in the title and thereby provides the key to many of Sutpen's flaws. Socially, he has negated the family ties which form the cornerstone of society and which he has himself tacitly acknowledged in his attempt to found a dynasty. Morally, he reveals his incapacity to love.

The form of Sutpen's failure, however, is shaped by the social system. Granted that he does not love, why does he accept Henry and reject Bon? Bon, a Negro, cannot, within the Southern pattern, perpetuate the line that Sutpen has set up as his *raison d'être*. The failure is not only with Sutpen, but with the larger framework within which he operates. Thus, insofar as the rejection of the son objectifies a spiritual failure in Sutpen, it also points outward to society's flaw: the rejection of Bon represents, in social terms, the rejection of the Negro. Paralleling Sutpen's offense against the family, the South has committed a crime against humanity by denying a fundamental social tenet—the brotherhood of man.

Sutpen's selfishness also finds an analogue in the dehumanized and exploitative Southern economy. The plantation system enshrines the acquisitive motive above and eventually in opposition to everything else. The ability to say 'this is mine' inevitably leads to the equation of material possessions with natural superiority: 'Because I own this rifle, my arms and legs and blood and bones are superior to yours' (p. 229). This thinking not only lets the white man enslave the Negro, it allows him to draw class distinctions between himself and other white men. But the equation does not work out. For when material considerations take precedence over inherent value, the bases for judging real superiority are eroded and ultimately lost.

Such relationships, by allowing the material to overwhelm the moral, further illustrate the novel's reverse patterning. These moral reversals generate contradictions which finally destroy the society that produced them. By violating the moral order, the South calls down upon itself the wrath of the gods. Through the fatal war, the South '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' (p. 260). Goodhue Coldfield's denunciation insists that a society devoid of morality cannot continue to exist for long. And it is

not only Goodhue Coldfield, with his rigid and unappealing puritan bias, who proclaims the South's defeat in social-moral terms. The fifth narrator, too, observes in a tone of outrage that the South lost the war

not alone because of superior numbers and failing ammunitions and stores, but because of generals who should not have been generals, who were generals not through training in contemporary methods or aptitude for learning them, but by the divine right to say 'Go there' conferred upon them by an absolute caste system (p. 345).

The fifth narrator insists on the interrelatedness of the social and moral worlds of the novel. Sutpen's moral reversals have social analogues in slavery and the caste system.

Another aspect of the social-moral failure in *Absalom, Absalom!* involves Sutpen's acceptance of the Southern planter code. Why does Sutpen accept a code that will destroy him and his dynastic ambitions? In his youth, Sutpen suffered an outrage. When he came to deliver a message, 'the nigger told him, even before he had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back' (p. 232). Sutpen, forced to confront a social system based not on what you are but on what you have, cannot accept its basic injustice and inhumanity. But instead of rejecting the system he condemns, Sutpen comes to accept it. This fatal reversal, one more example of the novel's reverse patterning, derives from the rifle analogy.

Sutpen resorts to the rifle analogy because he cannot comprehend the plantation system on its own terms. He must therefore make use of a familiar situation similar to the one he has experienced:

He thought 'If you were fixing to combat them that had the fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make, wouldn't it?' and he said Yes. 'But this aint a question of rifles. So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what the man did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You see?' and he said Yes again (p. 238).

In spite of Sutpen's inexperience, he has extracted the only analogous elements in two different social structures. The rifle, like the plantation, represents power. Both are means of exploiting nature and man. When, years later, Sutpen rides into Jefferson with two pistols and his wild slaves, he momentarily unites those two elements of power.

But although the particulars of Sutpen's analogy are apt, the systems

which he implicitly equates are based on different, even opposing, values. The man with the rifle is right out of Sutpen's childhood -- a mountaineer who probably possessed nothing more than his rifle. For, where Sutpen lived,

the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say 'This is mine' was crazy; and as for objects, nobody had anymore of them than you did because everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep, and only the crazy man would go to the trouble to take or even want more than he could eat or swap for powder and whiskey (p. 221).

This life style has nothing whatever in common with the Tidewater Plantation, characterized by private property and caste distinction. Unlike the mountain country, the flat and fertile delta 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, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others, but they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices...that all men have had to do for themselves since time began (pp. 221-222).

Thus while the basis of the analogy may be accurate, the deductions Sutpen makes from it are wrong. The rifle is like the plantation, but the communal life of the mountains has little in common with the private property of the flatlands. Through a correct analogy, Sutpen nevertheless comes, in a typical example of reversal, to the wrong conclusion, accepting the corrupt and selfish social system he sought to combat.

Sutpen uses the analogy because of his innocence. His 'trouble', as Quentin puts it, 'was innocence' (p. 220). The implication that innocence, usually a positive idea, has, in another permutation of the pattern of reversals, a negative connotation leads to the suspicion that innocence has a double significance in the Sutpen story. Prelapsarian innocence was Sutpen's condition in the mountains. But at the age of about twelve, his family descends to the flatlands in which process Sutpen passes from positive to negative innocence. Objectively, the whole family is moving from innocence to experience in direct relation to its progress down from the mountains. The exact passage can be charted by the father's increasingly hostile reception in the taverns along the way.

Yet Sutpen has entered the world of experience with his innocence relatively untouched. He has observed the new world, but without comprehension:

He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men, not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room. *He had begun to discern that without being aware of it yet* (p.226, my emphasis).

Sutpen's observations place him in a transitional state between innocence and experience. He does not know the meaning of what he is observing, nor is he conscious that he is observing at all. Under these circumstances, innocence is negative because it consists in the absence of knowledge and the lack of experience. Innocence in the realm of experience is, after all, only a euphemism for ignorance. And this 'ignorance' is precisely the problem with Sutpen. His innocence or ignorance once he reaches the flatlands makes him susceptible to apt analogies with their ironically false implications. Because he cannot deal with reality on its own terms, he is forced to put his new experiences into the framework of his past though not yet lost innocence. Thus the man with a gun and the man with a plantation are equated and Sutpen is free to accept a system which he opposes.

Sutpen's failures are summarized by the novel's central images, the door and the gun, which reflect the novel's reverse patterning. A door serves a two-fold purpose: it can either keep out or let in. By excluding some and admitting others, the front door makes caste and class distinctions concrete in *Absalom, Absalom!* The men who come to watch Sutpen fight with his slaves never approach the front door. Wash Jones does not use that door until the Sutpen fortunes are so far gone as to render caste distinctions meaningless.

When Sutpen is barred from the front door, the abstract plantation system, without being understood, is nevertheless made both real and immediate. Sutpen half-consciously perceives that he has been dehumanized by the experience and he projects his humiliation outward. As he retreats from the door, he notices for the first time,

his sister pumping rhythmic up and down above a washtub in the yard, her back toward him, shapeless in a calico dress and a pair of the old man's shoes unlaced and flapping about her bare ankles and broad in the beam as a cow, the very labor she was doing brutish and stupidly out of all proportion to its

reward: the very primary essence of labor, toil, reduced to its crude absolute which only a beast could and would endure (p. 236).

His sister's animality, awful in itself, points to the entire system which controls and, Sutpen now begins to realize, brutalizes both their lives. With that understanding, Sutpen determines to detach himself from such dehumanization and assume his manhood not only for himself but for all who come to the door. He fully intends to transform the symbol of his rejection into the means of acceptance:

[He] would take that boy in where he would never again need to stand on the outside of a white door and knock at it: and not at all for mere shelter but so that the boy, that whatever nameless stranger, could shut that door himself forever behind him on all that he had ever known, and look ahead along the still undivulged light rays in which his descendants who might not even ever hear his (the boy's) name, waited to be born without even having to know that they had once been riven forever free from brutehood just as his own (Sutpen's) children were (p. 261).

But when the child comes it is turned away. To do anything else, Sutpen feels, would be a 'betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried forward' (p.274). The door, which was to break down distinctions between men, is used to justify the reverse. By denying Bon, Sutpen has in fact betrayed the child who stood in front of the door fifty years before.

Like that of the door, the gun's significance becomes inverted. The gun is, as in the rifle analogy, an instrument of power. It is therefore no accident that Sutpen comes to Jefferson with only a 'horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before' (p.14), using the guns to wrench civilization from the wilderness. The gun helps Sutpen triumph over nature and, he believes, it helps him maintain his power. When Bon threatens Sutpen's dynastic ambitions, the gun, now used metaphorically, describes Sutpen's mood. Sutpen 'was like a skirmisher who is outnumbered yet cannot retreat who believes that if he is just patient enough and clever enough and calm enough and alert enough he can get the enemyscattered and pick them off one by one. And Henry did it' (p. 269). The weapon most closely associated with Sutpen is now adopted by Henry. It is Henry, not Sutpen, who shoots Bon.

The death of Bon eliminates the Negro threat, but it also puts an end to Sutpen's dynasty. Henry, it is true, has repudiated his birthright

before the shooting. Bon's murder, by forcing Henry to disappear, makes that repudiation irrevocable. Sutpen is unable to produce new sons. As Sutpen's drive for a male offspring intensifies, the physical manifestation of power, the gun, is translated into a sexual metaphor of defeat, for Sutpen's power is rapidly becoming an illusion. Using the gun image, he realizes that he *'was now past sixty and that possibly he could get but one more son, had at best but one more son in his loins, as the old cannon might know when it has just one more shot in its corporeality'*. With Miss Rosa, Sutpen

had missed that time, though luckily it was just a spotting shot with a light charge, and the old gun, the old barrel and carriage none the worse; only next time there might not be enough powder for both a spotting shot and then a full-sized load (p. 279).

And with Milly, Sutpen fails again. The manifestation of powder has become an image of impotence.

The consequences of the previous patterns of reversal involving Sutpen's failure and its social analogue, the South's defeat, is a reversal of the life process. Both Sutpen and the South have lost the power for positive regeneration. Instead of moving from death and destruction to a general renewal, the life process seems to produce only death-in-life.

Jim Bond, the last Sutpen, best exemplifies the process of negative rebirth. Because he is Negro, he spells the end to Sutpen's hopes for a posterity. It is a fitting if bitterly ironic reversal that the Negro branch Sutpen denies survives, while the white does not. But since Bond is an idiot, he negates any larger hope for a more general renewal. Shreve's vision 'that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere' (p. 378) may not be Faulkner's, but the only hint of hope the novel offers is tenuous. When Quentin, at the end, says that he does not hate the South in spite of the grim story that sums it up, he is affirming a denial without asserting an affirmation. In fact, his hysterical repetition of 'I don't hate it' conveys, at least in part, the opposite feeling and is thus quite consistent with the novel's patterns of reversal.

The closing gloom is more than half-anticipated by the death-in-life atmosphere of the narrators. Instead of coming to grips with the present and, in so doing, shaping the future, they are preoccupied with the recreation and continuation of the past. Shreve, the Canadian, is, in

some senses, an exception, and he draws a line between the Southern and Northern sense of history:

We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? A kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your children's children produce children you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas (p. 361)?

At the very moment that Shreve tries to separate himself from the Southern obsession with the past, he reveals its power to compel attention. Shreve's involuted style and emotional pitch are here similar to those of the other narrators. His testimony of distinctness ironically becomes evidence of involvement. The weight of his statement bends toward recapitulating and at least temporarily participating in the alien past.

The narrators are essentially static: they do nothing. Whatever life they have is vicarious, derived from and revealed through the past. Shreve and Quentin's room is figuratively and literally 'tomb-like' inasmuch as by capturing the dead past they are being captured by it. Quentin knows this, yet after the first query (without a question mark, emphasizing his fatal passivity), he completely acquiesces:

Am I going to have to hear it all again *he thought* I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall never listen to anything else but this again forever so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do (p. 277).

For Quentin, there is no escape. The pressure of the past immobilizes him and his sense of historical determinism ('*a man never outlives his father*') further reinforces his death-in-life.

Mr. Compson presents Quentin's historical determinism in the fatalistic terms of Greek tragedy. He sees Sutpen as a hero doomed from the beginning. But such an interpretation of Sutpen and of tragedy reveals that Mr. Compson suffers from the same inertia that besets Quentin. His interpretation suggests a psychological tendency to elevate passivity into a principle of world-weary hopelessness. With Miss

Rosa, the withdrawal from life is more literal than with either Quentin or Mr. Compson. Her room, 'a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers' (p. 7), epitomizes her death-in-life existence inasmuch as it illustrates her retreat into a womb-like tomb. Even her rage is impotent since it is directed at a dead object. She herself has 'the rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity' (p. 8). Her life has been an unending fight to prevail over any affirmation of life, and she is successful. As long as the past goes on creating the future in its own image, the pattern of reversal characterized by negative rebirth will continue.

IV. The Reversal of Cause and Effect

Absalom, Absalom! goes beyond Sutpen's failure and the South's defeat to treat the problem of human action in the broader terms of cause and effect. Sutpen's actions set in motion a series of effects that will continue to echo through time regardless of explanations, rationalizations and justifications. Sutpen's behavior drives Bon to provoke his own murder, forces Henry into exile and makes Judith a widow before she is married. Bon's death leaves St. Velery Bon exposed and vulnerable, and thus helps to create the private anguish that produces Jim Bond. Sutpen's rejection of Milly and their unnamed daughter catapults Wash into triple murder which stops Sutpen, but not the effects of his action: Wash is killed; Judith and Clytie, almost totally unprovided for, endure the brutish conditions of existence that Sutpen rebelled against as a boy; and Miss Rosa is left to live out her life in frustrated rage not only because of her unwanted virginity but because she can never get back at Sutpen. It is not surprising that it is Miss Rosa, commenting to Quentin on Judith's reaction to Bon's murder, who insists on the continuity of effects: '*That was all. Or rather, not all, since there is no all, no finish; it is not the blow we suffer from but the tedious repressive anticlimax of it*' (p. 150). In this outward moving circle of accumulating effects, human control seems lost. The act takes on a life of its own quite distinct from its perpetrator. *Absalom, Absalom!* suggests, in fact, that actions create reactions which nothing can alter.

The theme of the unalterableness of actions is clear not only in the novel's treatment of the effects of Sutpen's behavior, but in the structure of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Cause and effect are consistently

reversed in the narration of the story. Results are obvious long before motivation is clear. Miss Rosa's picture of Sutpen as a preternatural monster reeking of hell precedes any revelation of what in Sutpen could have created such an impression and what in Miss Rosa would make her see him this way. To begin with the effect and then seek the cause has the advantage of making the reader a 'do-it-yourself' historian since he fills in the gaps for himself just as Shreve and Quentin, Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson do. If, in the end, Sutpen's nature and motivation are speculative, *Absalom, Absalom!* nevertheless provides a realistic picture of the historical event in which absolute certainty is impossible.¹² More importantly, however, the novel insists that the effects, since they go on long after the cause has ceased to operate, stand as the real judgment of the cause.

The focus on effects thus projects a sense of Sutpen's responsibility that goes beyond a consideration of his motives and intentions. The fact that he has touched not only the lives of his wives and immediate offspring, but people as far removed from him and each other as Saint Velery Bon and Quentin Compson, makes the result outweigh the intention. Quentin himself makes this point when he halts the recreation of Sutpen's story with thoughts that paraphrase and extend Miss Rosa's notion that nothing is ever finished:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm thinking Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us (p. 261-262).

Carefully separated from the legend and emphasized by the italics, Quentin's thoughts reveal (as do many other of his italicized meditations) not only Quentin's involvement in Sutpen's history, but his sense of its universality of implication. Quentin, perhaps, overstates the case. The novel may not implicate all humanity in Sutpen's acts, but it surely insists on a sense of human inter-relatedness based on causality. The chain reaction which Sutpen set in motion about fifty years before the

novel opens affects people like Quentin in the novel's present, and there is nothing to indicate that the chain is broken at the end of the novel. This interconnection through the nexus of causality is something that Sutpen never sees, although, ironically, he himself states the case:

Perhaps a man builds for his future in more ways than one, builds not only toward the body which will be his tomorrow or next year, but toward actions and the subsequent irrevocable courses of resultant action which his weak senses and intellect cannot foresee but which ten or twenty or thirty years from now he will take, will have to take in order to survive the act (p. 243).

Unfortunately, Sutpen does not survive the act.

I have finally come to the ultimate grounds for evaluating Sutpen based not on the narrators and their distortions, but on the accumulated patterns of reversal, particularly the novel's inversion of cause and effect: since all actions will have reactions the efficacy of which only future generations will know, it is necessary to accept the burden of one's actions. With Sutpen's moral obtuseness, it is not surprising that he refuses such responsibility. One of his evasions, as I pointed out earlier, is his search for the 'mistake'. Another is his retreat to destiny as the explainer and justifier of things:

Sutpen was talking about it again...and he said how he thought there was something about a man's destiny (or about the man) that caused the destiny to shape itself to him like his clothes did, like the same coat that new might have fitted a thousand men, yet after one man has worn it for a while it fits no one else and you can tell it anywhere you see it even if all you see is a sleeve or a lapel: so that his...destiny had fitted itself to him, to his innocence, his pristine aptitude for platform drama and childlike heroic simplicity (pp. 245-246).

In denying personal responsibility, Sutpen also denies the interrelationship of man to man. Causality is, after all, only a variation of the novel's theme of brotherhood. *Absalom, Absalom!* says that every action has a reaction and therefore that no one can detach himself from the fate of any other. It says, moreover, that the individual can never take an overview of all the implications of what he is or what he does and so he must act with extreme caution and a generalized concern. He must act as if what he does will affect countless others in often mysterious ways. These are things Sutpen never considers. But these are the very things that Faulkner pushes at the reader through the narrators.

The narrators change the story but they are changed by it as well.

Shreve and Quentin both begin to sound like Mr. Compson. Quentin thinks Shreve '*sounds just like father*' (p. 181) and mentally remarks the similarity thirty pages later as if to underline it: '*Yes, Shreve sounds almost exactly like father*' (p. 207). And Shreve answers 'Don't say it's just me that sounds like your old man' (p. 261). In fact, the four main narrators (and occasionally even the fifth narrator) take on similarities of style that suggest that they have, like water to a sponge, been absorbed by the Sutpen story.¹³

The stylistic interpenetration is reinforced by a geographical interconnection. Quentin and Shreve are described by the fifth narrator as being

both young, both born within the same year: the one in Alberta, the other in Mississippi; born half a continent apart yet joined, connected after a fashion in a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, that River which runs not only through the physical land of which it is the geologic umbilical, not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature, though some of these beings, like Shreve, have never seen it...(p. 258).

Like Quentin's image of the 'umbilical water-cord', the Mississippi, that 'geologic umbilical', represents connection.

This sense of intertwining is also seen through the novel's two-way flow of time. Time moves backward for the narrators who actively enter the past, 'so that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of that Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two -- Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry' (p. 334). Men, according to Faulkner, are separated neither by geography nor time. The present merges with the past through the very process of narration and the past, by the same process, impinges on the present. There were 'four of them there, in that room in New Orleans in 1860, just as in a sense there were four of them here in this tomblake room in Massachusetts in 1910' (p. 336).

Insofar as this reciprocal flow of time means that those of the present can move backward until they are spiritually united with the past, the effects of Sutpen's actions continue into the future. The process of implication, where each new generation makes contact with its antecedents, extends the influence of an action beyond its immediate present. Sutpen therefore stands condemned not only for his actions,

but for their negative effects on the present, as witnessed in the narrators, particularly Miss Rosa and Quentin, and the unborn future which inherits them. The patterns of reversal, especially the final and climactic reversal of cause and effect, thus create a basis for understanding and judging what happens in *Absalom, Absalom!* in spite of the novel's deliberate uncertainties.

FOOTNOTES

1. Walter Sullivan, 'The tragic Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 50 (Oct. 1951), 552-566.
2. James H. Justus, 'The Epic Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, (Summer 1962), 157-176.
3. H. L. Weatherby, 'Sutpen's Garden', *Georgia Review*, 21 (1967), 354-369. Mr. Weatherby seems to argue that with a little more effort and consistency, Faulkner might have made *Absalom, Absalom!* satisfyingly archetypal. Also, Donald M. Kartiganer, 'The Role of Myth in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 9 (1963-1964), 357-369.
4. *The Novels of William Faulkner*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959).
5. This position is found in Duncan Aswell's 'The Puzzling Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Kenyon Review*, 30 (1968), 67-84. "If none of the narrators reports reliably, we cannot use their analyses of events as clues to Faulkner's own attitude toward the past and the South. Each successive insight provides us with crucial information about the narrator who is offering it, but every addition to our knowledge of the Sutpen legend only gives further proof that it is impossible to interpret human experience objectively. . ." (p. 66). Also see Lynn G. Levens, 'The Four Narrative Perspectives in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *PMLA*, 85 (Jan. 1970), 35-47, and Floyd C. Watkins, 'What Happens in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 13 (1967-1968), 79-87.
6. Warren French's 'William Faulkner and the Art of the Detective Story' in *The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*, ed. Warren French (Deland, Fla: Everett Edwards, Inc. 1967), pp. 55-62, treats the detective story elements of the novel in a somewhat different and, I think, more helpful way.
7. Ilse Dusoer Lind, 'Design and Meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!*', *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), pp. 278-304; Melvin Backman, *Faulkner: The Major Years*, (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966); Peter Swiggart, *The Art of Faulkner's Novels*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967).
8. Backman's *Faulkner: The Major Years* illustrates the tendency toward evaluating the novel as a historical document.
9. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1951, p. 43. Subsequent references are placed in text.
10. Lawrence Thompson in *William Faulkner*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1964), p.65 makes the same point, but with different emphases and different conclusions.
11. Cleanth Brooks has argued in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 426-428, that Sutpen's innocence and his pragmatism are American rather than specifically Southern characteristics. Backman's study, *Faulkner: The Major Years*, pp. 88-93, with its exhaustive historical analysis, attempts to refute Brooks by placing Sutpen in the Mississippi tradition of frontiersman turned planter. Both Brooks' and Backman's positions have elements of truth. But I do not think that it is totally illogical to see Sutpen's innocence and pragmatism as generally American and yet argue that, when these characteristics take the form of rejecting Eulalia and Charles Bon, they are distinctively shaped by Southern attitudes.

12. See the continuing debate about Bon's racial identity. John Hagan, 'Fact and Fancy in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *College English*, 24 (1962-1963), 215-218, makes a case, quite convincingly, that Bon is indeed part Negro which is refuted by Aaron Steinberg's paper, '*Absalom, Absalom!*: The Irretrievable Bon', *College Language Association Journal*, 9 (1966), 61-67. Faulkner's 'Genealogy' is completely ignored by Mr. Steinberg who contends that Bon's racial identity is not resolved in the novel.
13. Miss Lind points out, in 'Design and Meaning', that the narrators' stylistic differences 'when engaged in casual conversation with each other' are abandoned when recreating the legend (p.290). See also Robert H. Zoellner, 'Faulkner's Prose Style in *Absalom, Absalom!*', *American Literature*, 30 (1958-1959), 486-502.