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# Faulkner's Narrative in The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom!

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Faulkner's Narrative in  
*The Sound and the Fury* and  
*Absalom, Absalom!*

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requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at  
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Faulkner's Narrative in  
*The Sound and the Fury* and  
*Absalom, Absalom!*

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## Introduction

William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) are both novels in which a number of characters try to recollect or reconstruct the image of a character who is no longer present. In *The Sound and the Fury* Benjy, Quentin, and Jason Compson reflect individually on their sister Caddy and her impact on their respective lives. The narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson, and Shreve McCannon, attempt to recreate through conversation the life and career of a man, Thomas Sutpen, who has been dead for forty years.

The narratives of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* both contain a variety of views of their central characters; however, each novel arranges its narratives in a different pattern. *The Sound and the Fury*'s independent and self-contained narratives present supplementary, or complementary, views of Caddy. *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narratives, on the other hand, constantly revise the reader's view of Sutpen. Ultimately, both novels' narratives actively involve the reader in reconstructing their central characters.

Each novel's use of multiple narrators also involves the reader in assessing the reliability of the various narrators. Individual narrators can be evaluated based on their motivations for relating their narratives, their bias toward the central character, and the validity of the information which they include in their narratives.

Finally, the reader must decide whether each novel's narrative taken as a whole clarifies or obscures his or her view of the novel's central character. Each novel's narrative seems progressively to distance the reader from its central character; on the other hand, there seems to be an opposing motion in each novel from confusion to clarity. The reader must ultimately decide how Faulkner resolves the tension between these two narrative trends in each novel.

Although the narratives of both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* lead the reader farther from the novels' central characters, the effect is different in each novel. *The Sound and the Fury's* narrative moves from subjective narration to an objective point of view in order to place the Compson family's loss of Caddy, and of love, in a larger social context. *Absalom, Absalom!'s* narrative, on the other hand, moves the reader progressively farther from Thomas Sutpen with successively more unreliable information about Sutpen's life and family. The confusion of even supposedly objective narration only further complicates the picture. *Absalom, Absalom's* narrative ultimately demonstrates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of successfully reconstructing either the past or the complex lives of human beings.

## Chapter I

## Faulkner's Narrative Structures

*The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* both contain a variety of views of their central characters; however, each novel arranges its narratives in a different pattern. The narrative accounts in *The Sound and the Fury* are independent and self-contained: the narrators may speak to the reader, but they do not speak to each other. Consequently, the reader must consider all of the narratives in assembling a final picture of Caddy. *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrators not only speak to each other; they also contradict, revise and correct each other's narratives. Thus, the reader must decide which pieces of the various narratives to include in his or her picture of Sutpen. The narrative structure of each novel calls for the reader's active involvement in reconstructing the absent central character.

Because both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* begin with varying degrees of confusion, the reader might doubt whether a clear picture of either Caddy Compson or Thomas Sutpen will eventually emerge. However, because *Absalom, Absalom!* seems more immediately accessible, the reader is probably more hopeful of finally learning the truth about Sutpen. The reader also hopes that the narrative structure of each novel will provide an organizational pattern that will help to clarify the initial difficulties

he or she encounters.

The first-time reader of *The Sound and the Fury* is likely to be initially bewildered by Benjy's section of the novel. The first few pages of Benjy's section introduce most of the techniques which typify his narration. Benjy's description of Luster's command to "'hush up that moaning'" (3) is surprising because he has not yet described the moaning itself. The reader is confronted with an effect of which he or she has to deduce the cause. And even if the reader is able make that deduction, there is still the question of what made Benjy moan in the first place. It is only later that the reader is able to associate the golfer's cry of "'here, caddie'" with Benjy's sister Caddy and fill in the gap in the narration. In fact, the first mention of Caddy occurs during another disjunction in Benjy's narrative; however, this time the gap is temporal rather than associative. Benjy's becoming snagged on a nail while crawling through a fence with Luster reminds him of a time when "*Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through*" (4). The unsuspecting reader doesn't realize that he or she is being transported to a scene from Benjy's childhood because Luster has already addressed Benjy as a thirty-three year old adult. Also, the reader has not yet encountered Caddy in the present and does not yet know who Caddy is. The reader is consequently disoriented.

Although it is not as immediately apparent, Faulkner



uses the same techniques to create confusion in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Here Faulkner's long sentences bombard the reader with information that he or she must sort out while receiving even more information. For example, the novel's opening sentence tells the reader that

From a little after two oclock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon they sat in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that--a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Quentin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them.

(3)

Thus, Faulkner creates the same impressionistic effect with a slightly different method. However, there is also an additional effect on the reader: because the reader must read more slowly, time in the novel also seems to proceed more slowly.

Faulkner also reverses cause and effect in *Absalom,*

*Absalom!* However, here he does so more transparently and, as a result, the effect on the reader is much different. Even before Rosa begins her narration, the reader knows, from Quentin's unspoken recollection, the basic facts about Thomas Sutpen--the building of his plantation, his marriage to Ellen Coldfield, the birth of his two children, his death, and that his son "widowed the daughter who had not yet been a bride" (7). Here the missing pieces of the puzzle seem more attainable, and a solution more probable, so the reader wants to fill in the missing facts and motives, and solve the puzzle.

There are two differences between Sutpen's story in *Absalom, Absalom!* and Caddy's story in *The Sound and the Fury* that might lead the reader to believe that he or she is more likely to find out the truth about Sutpen's life. First, the picture of Caddy provided by her immediate family should be highly subjective, whereas there should be attainable public knowledge about Sutpen, who was an active force in the Jefferson community. Secondly, because Sutpen has been dead for forty years, any available information, even if scarce, should be objective because there would be no need to protect the feelings of his family.

Although *The Sound and the Fury* is initially more difficult, particularly in the Benjy section, it has a much simpler plot structure than does *Absalom, Absalom!*. It is generally conceded that *The Sound and the Fury* has a plot

structure consisting of four parts. The question is how these four parts are related to each other and whether they ultimately provide a clear picture of the absent Caddy. Judith Bryant Wittenberg provides the most concise answer in *Faulkner: The Transfiguration of Biography* where she writes that

*The Sound and the Fury* is technically dazzling, the "same story told four times" in brilliantly executed and differing modes. But while the four sections have a cumulative effect of wholeness, each segment is virtually autonomous and self-contained. The whole is similar to a group of separate portraits on a wall. (142)

Each section of the novel does indeed appear to be both quite separate and quite different from the others. Each section is self-contained within a single day and is narrated exclusively by a single narrator.

Each section also concerns itself with different events. Benjy focuses primarily on events from his and Caddy's childhood, while Quentin is more concerned with Caddy's adolescence and sexual awakening. Jason, on the other hand, is more interested in the events of the present, which take place eighteen years after Quentin's death. Jason is primarily concerned with Caddy as a source of income which he can steal from her daughter Quentin. The novel's final omniscient section is not concerned directly

with Caddy at all, but centers on the confrontation between Jason and Caddy's daughter.

Although the novel's four sections have their differences, they do form a general progression from confusion to clarity. From the infantile mind of Benjy, the reader progresses to the disturbed adolescent Quentin. Jason's section then brings the reader in contact with a mind and a narrative which are both rational and coherent. Finally, the fourth section places the Compson family in the larger context of the surrounding community. Additionally, the narration of this section is rational, coherent, and omniscient.

In contrast to the obvious, progressive four-part division of *The Sound and the Fury*, several different narrative structures have been suggested for *Absalom, Absalom!* Although the number of these possible variations might suggest narrative disorder or disarray, closer examination reveals how intricately integrated the novel is. Regardless of the number of units into which the novel has been critically dissected, it still holds together structurally.

The simplest approach to the novel is the two part structure, proposed by Robert W. Hamblin in "Carcassonne in Mississippi: Faulkner's Geography of the Imagination," which divides the novel into five "listening" chapters and four "telling" chapters. Hamblin emphasizes the centrality of



Quentin Compson in the novel's narrative structure, with Quentin's hearing of Sutpen's story from Rosa and Mr. Compson in Jefferson both instigating and influencing his retelling of the story with Shreve at Harvard (160).

This two-part division also highlights the connection between the past and the present in the novel. At the end of the novel's first section, Rosa connects Sutpen's story to the present with her revelation that something is hiding in the dilapidated house at Sutpen's Hundred. The arrival of Mr. Compson's letter announcing Rosa's death then sends Quentin back into the past in the novel's second attempt to tell Sutpen's story. By the time the narrative has returned to Sutpen's Hundred at the end of the novel's second section, and has revealed that it is Henry Sutpen that Quentin discovered hiding there, Quentin has vicariously lived Henry's story. So the present and the past, the narrator and the narrated, are integrally united as Henry materializes in the present and Quentin relives the past.

The closing scenes of each of the novel's sections are also connected in another way: as has been noted by Francois L. Pitavy, in "The Gothicism of *Absalom, Absalom!*: Rosa Coldfield Revisited," the two scenes are continuous in time as well as place. The beginning of Quentin's trip to Sutpen's Hundred which closes chapter five and his remembrance of his arrival there which closes chapter nine each take place "on both sides of midnight" (209); however,

they are separated by four months for Quentin, and by four chapters for the reader.

A three-part division of *Absalom, Absalom!*, which focuses on combinations of narrators and listeners in three separate tableaux, has been suggested by Arthur Kinney in *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics: Style as Vision* (195). Thus, Rosa narrates her involvement in Sutpen's story to Quentin at her house in chapters one and five, Mr. Compson expands on Sutpen's story to Quentin later that evening on their front gallery in chapters two through four, and Quentin and Shreve later mutually recreate Sutpen's story in their dormitory room in the novel's final four chapters.

In addition to the interaction of narrators and listeners--or lack thereof--in this ordering of the novel, the setting of each of these places of narration is also important. James H. Justus, in "The Epic Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*," believes that these settings function as places in which the "ghosts" of the past can be invoked (38): Rosa's room is "dim hot airless" on a "dead September afternoon" (3); the Compsons' front gallery is "quiet and hushed in the wistaria twilight" (38); Quentin's and Shreve's dorm room is cold and tomblake (38). However, the ghosts do not exist solely in the physical settings; Rosa's voice is haunted by the ghost of Sutpen (4), and Quentin is a "barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts" (7).

This three-part division of the telling of Sutpen's

story also emphasizes the importance of the spoken word, as opposed to the written word, according to David Krause in "Reading Shreve's Letters and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" Krause believes that these dialogues are necessitated by the failure of the written word. He states that, although each of the novel's three main sections is initiated by a letter, the ensuing conversations are necessary as "acts of epistolary interpretation, acts of trying to say what letters themselves do not, will not, or cannot say" (155). Rosa's note to Quentin, that "quaint, stiffly formal request which was actually a summons" (5), is enough to guarantee his attendance, but it is a vocal performance which Rosa has in mind. It is a letter "without salutation or signature" (102), supposedly written from Charles Bon to Judith Sutpen, which leads to Mr. Compson's interpretation for Quentin of the lives of Sutpen's children. And it is Mr. Compson's letter to Quentin telling of Rosa's death which leads Quentin and Shreve to finish Sutpen's story, and Mr. Compson's letter, four months later.

A more traditional chapter-by-chapter approach to *Absalom, Absalom!* also demonstrates how well organized the separate narrative sections of the novel are, as well as how well connected they are to each other. For example, Estella Schoenberg asserts the coherence of the elements of Sutpen's story in *Old Tales and Talking: Quentin Compson in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Related Works*, where she

points out that,

while the Sutpen material contained between the opening and close of each chapter does not follow a straightforward chronology from the start to the finish of the book, it is chronological within each chapter. (124)

Consequently, it is easier for the reader to follow the separate sections of Sutpen's story than it is to assemble his entire story.

The beginnings of chapters additionally function to bring order to the novel. At the beginning of each chapter, the third-person narrator returns the action to the present day, sets the scene, introduces the narrator for that chapter, and then quietly fades into the background. Physical description is also deftly used to mark the passage of time in the present that has occurred between chapters. For example, the "snow on Shreve's overcoat sleeve" (141) at the beginning of chapter six has melted by the beginning of chapter seven where there is "no snow on Shreve's arm now, no sleeve on his arm at all now" (176). Chapter five, the one chapter that breaks this pattern, and is not introduced by the third-person narrator, is connected chronologically to the events that end the previous chapter.

The ends of chapters also bring cohesion to the novel. Chapters one and two end with a description of Ellen's reaction to Sutpen's fighting with his slaves as told by two



different narrators, Rosa in the first chapter and Mr. Compson in the second. The ends of chapters three through five are also linked. Chapter three ends with Wash Jones arriving at Rosa's gate and chapter four with his delivering his message that Henry Sutpen had shot Bon. The end of chapter five repeats this information, only this time it is told by Henry Sutpen to his sister Judith. Chapters six through eight are tied together by Shreve; both six and seven end with his asking Quentin to wait at a crucial point in Sutpen's story, and seven and eight both end with his suggestion that they "'get out of this refrigerator [or icebox] and go to bed'" (287).

It is possible to subdivide *Absalom, Absalom!* even farther and still find coherent structure. Philip J. Egan, in "Embedded Story Structures in *Absalom, Absalom!*," notes nine separate tellings of parts of the story of Sutpen and his family in the novel. Rosa narrates two sections of Sutpen's life--an account of him and his children in chapter one and an account of the events surrounding Bon's death in chapter five. Mr. Compson relates four narratives in his three chapters of narration. He tells Quentin of Sutpen's initial arrival in and interactions with Jefferson, Rosa's childhood and adolescent infatuation with Bon, the triangle between Henry Sutpen, Charles Bon, and Judith Sutpen, and the life of Charles Bon's son. Shreve recreates Sutpen's indecision about preserving his design, and reinterprets the

triangle between Bon, Judith, and Henry. It is left to Quentin to give the most consecutive and most complete account of Sutpen's life in the novel.

Egan sees two common structural patterns in these embedded narratives, which he classifies as "tragic biographies" and "frame structures" (201). The "tragic biographies" focus on a significant part of a character's life, and demonstrate the character's futilely facing a recurrent problem over a period of years in a series of parallel problems. This group of narratives would include Mr. Compson's narratives of Rosa's childhood and Bon's son's life, Shreve's recreation of Bon's life, and Quentin's narrative of Sutpen's life. Egan's "frame structure" narratives are framed by an object which still exists in the present, such as Bon's letter to Judith, but which frames a tale in which the characters have not survived. The framing of these unsurvivable tales by an inanimate object thus provides both foreshadowing and a sense of inevitability. Therefore, even the smallest narrative sections of *Absalom, Absalom!* are provided with a structural element which holds them together.

All of the above narrative structures proposed for *Absalom, Absalom!* are structurally cohesive and successfully order the novel; however, each emphasizes a different relationship between the novel's various narrators. The two-part structure emphasizes the importance of Quentin as a

corrective filter for the other narrators' information and conjectures. The three-part structure focuses on how the interaction between narrators and audience influences the various versions of Sutpen's story. The other proposed narrative structures consider the unique narrative contributions of each of the narrators. A primary consideration in evaluating the validity of these various structures is the reliability of each of the novel's narrators.

The simpler narrative structure of *The Sound and the Fury* assumes that the reader will be able to filter the three separate subjective views of Caddy through the broader objective context provided in the novel's final section to assemble a composite picture of Caddy. Although Benjy, Quentin, and Jason each present a different view, or aspect of Caddy, they are all viewing the same person. On the other hand, the conflicting views of Thomas Sutpen presented in *Absalom, Absalom!* could not all possibly be true. Therefore, the reader must additionally attempt to sort out the facts of Sutpen's life to develop a picture of the "real" Sutpen. Consequently, the way in which the reader approaches and evaluates the narrative contributions of each novel's individual narrators will be influenced by the way in which Faulkner structures the narrative in each novel.

## Chapter II

## Faulkner's Narrators

*The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* both use narratives from multiple narrators to tell their respective stories; however, each novel arranges its various narratives in a different pattern. In analyzing these various individual narratives it is necessary to consider not only their relationship to each other, but also the reliability of each individual narrator. Narrator reliability depends on narrator motivation, narrator bias, and the validity of the narrator's information. Narrators can also be evaluated not only on how they tell their stories, but also on what they include in their narratives.

Although each of *The Sound and the Fury*'s three first-person narrators focuses on a different part of the life of Caddy, the novel's central character, the arrangement of the three narratives forms a chronological ordering of Caddy's story. Moreover, the section of Caddy's life that each narrator relates suits his personality: the child-like Benjy narrates many scenes of Caddy's childhood; the arrested adolescent Quentin is concerned with Caddy's adolescence and loss of virginity; and mama's boy Jason, concerned with upholding Bascomb family honor, tells the story of Caddy's failed marriage and distant relationship with her daughter. By the conclusion of the third section of *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader has a seemingly complete picture of Caddy's



life, told from three very different perspectives.

Benjy's narration is motivated by his search for his long lost sister Caddy. Because he cannot differentiate between the past and present, he is unaware that he will not be able to find her; however, because of his ability to vividly recreate scenes from the past, he can repeatedly recall her presence, which then reminds him of his loss.

Benjy's movement from the present to the past is triggered by sensory impressions, such as the smell of trees, and objects, such as fire and Caddy's slipper, which he has associated with Caddy. For example, when Benjy relates that "Dilsey opened the firedoor and drew a chair up in front of it and I sat down. I hushed" (56), it reminds him of a childhood scene where Dilsey is told that "*He was just looking at the fire, Caddy said. Mother was telling him his new name*" (56). Benjy's day-long search for Caddy is motivated by his loss of, and attempt to recapture, her presence and love.

What is most evident in Benjy's narration is that Caddy represents the mother that he should have had, but didn't, in Mrs. Compson. Throughout Benjy's section, Caddy, as surrogate mother, fulfills the nurturing roles of a mother--comforter and protector, interpreter, and instructor. To the perpetually child-like Benjy, Caddy's loss leaves him a motherless child in a state of continuous mourning.

Caddy's role as teacher is evident in her first

appearance in Benjy's section of the novel. With her instruction to "*stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see*" (4), Caddy not only tells Benjy what to do so that he won't get caught in the fence, but also demonstrates what she wants him to do (4). In this short scene, she also teaches him to keep his hands in his pockets to protect himself against cold. Caddy uses age appropriate teaching methods to teach Benjy basic survival skills. Caddy also teaches Benjy basic vocabulary, by both showing him objects and telling him their names and functions, as she does with the ice in the branch (13).

Caddy's role as interpreter for Benjy first becomes apparent in her next appearance in Benjy's narrative. Although Benjy is unable to speak, Caddy is able to interpret what he wants and convinces her mother to let Benjy go outside with her (8). Because Caddy can accurately interpret Benjy's wants and needs, she is able to provide for him more effectively than the other members of the family, particularly her mother. For example, in the following scene, Caddy must mother both Benjy and her own mother:

"Look at me." Mother said.

"Benjamin." she said. She took my face in her hands and turned it to hers.

"Benjamin." she said. "Take that cushion away, Candace."

"He'll cry." Caddy said.

"Take that cushion away, like I told you."

Mother said. "He must learn to mind."

The cushion went away.

"Hush, Benjy." Caddy said.

"You go over there and sit down." Mother said. "Benjamin." She held my face to hers.

"Stop that." she said. "Stop it."

But I didn't stop and Mother caught me in her arms and began to cry, and I cried. Then the cushion came back and Caddy held it above Mother's head. She drew Mother back in the chair and Mother lay crying against the red and yellow cushion.

"Hush, Mother." Caddy said. "You go up stairs and lay down, so you can be sick. I'll go get Dilsey." She led me to the fire and I looked at the bright, smooth shapes. I could hear the fire and the roof. (64)

Caddy is clearly the better mother to Benjy.

In addition to her roles as teacher, interpreter and comforter, Caddy also serves as Benjy's protector. A primary example is Caddy's response of "'I'll slit his gizzles'" (65) to Jason's cutting up of Benjy's dolls. The ensuing fight is broken up only after the intervention of Mr. Compson. Although Caddy's childish reaction to Jason's

action contrasts with her mature interaction with Mrs. Compson, both scenes show that Caddy is willing to meet the enemy on its own terms in order to protect Benjy.

Because Caddy is such a vital part of Benjy's existence, she is ironically the biggest threat to his continued happiness. Benjy's existence, which he has rigidly ordered around Caddy's presence and objects which he associates with her, makes him extremely vulnerable to any changes in her or to her absence, even if only threatened. Caddy's first threat, at the branch, to "run away and never come back" (19) provokes Benjy's immediate tears, which end only when Caddy promises not to run away. Caddy's first use of perfume, her encounter with Charlie on the swing (47-48), and her loss of virginity all provoke similar responses in Benjy. This threat of loss, told in flashbacks, runs throughout Benjy's narration, parallel to present day scenes which record the effects of that loss. For example, Benjy's memory of Caddy's promise to him at the branch--"'Hush now.' she said. 'I'm not going to run away.'" (19)--is immediately followed by Luster's response to Benjy's present mourning of Caddy's loss: "*What is the matter with you, Luster said. Cant you get done with that moaning and play in the branch like folks*" (19).

In contrast to Benjy's narrative, which chronicles sensory responses, Quentin's narrative is structured around rigidly ordered abstract ideas. Like Benjy, Quentin also



recounts the personal strain of Caddy's loss; however, his concern is with her loss of virginity which leads, in Quentin's opinion, to his family's loss of honor. Quentin sees Caddy as his little sister who needs to be protected from men in order to defend the family honor. When she loses her virginity, Quentin feels impotent because she has preceded him in sexual initiation and because he is incapable of defending her honor. His claim of incest is disbelieved by Mr. Compson, and his challenge to Dalton Ames to leave town before sundown is equally futile (159).

Quentin's narration of Caddy's adolescence is disordered because it reflects his own conflicted feelings and sexual frustration. For example, Quentin's reaction when he learns of Caddy's loss of virginity leads him to brag of imaginary sexual conquests and then contemplate suicide:

poor Quentin  
she leaned back on her arms her hands locked about  
her knees  
youve never done that have you  
what done what  
that what I have what I did  
yes yes lots of times with lots of girls  
then I was crying her hand touched me again and I  
was crying against her damp blouse then she lying  
on her back looking past my head into the sky I

could see a rim of white under her irises I opened my knife. (151)

Quentin's concern is actually more for his own ability to play his role in society than for Caddy's fall.

Quentin's view of Caddy is primarily a distorted view of himself.

Jason's narrative, which is much more ordered than either Benjy's or Quentin's, focuses on Caddy's role as a mother to her daughter Quentin. Jason consistently views Caddy as a potential source of income, charging her one hundred dollars for a quick glimpse of Quentin (205). His self-justification is evident in his description of the aftermath of this incident: "And so I counted the money again that night and put it away, and I didn't feel so bad. I says I reckon that'll show you" (205). Jason later steals the money that Caddy sends for Quentin's maintenance because he resents having to take care of the product of Caddy's dishonoring the family.

Jason's view of family honor, like his mother's, is more concerned with maintaining appearances than with reality. Mrs. Compson's concern with Quentin's missing school is based more on her concern that the school authorities will think that she can't control Quentin than on concern with Quentin's receiving an education (180). Similarly, when Caddy comes into the store where Jason works, he is relieved that she "had sense enough to wear the

veil and not speak to anybody" so that no one meets her and is reminded of the family's shame (205).

Although Jason's presentation of Caddy is entirely negative, he inadvertently generates the reader's sympathy for her by juxtaposing her attempts to care for her daughter with his manipulation of both her money and her emotions. Jason's self-centeredness and self-justification make it impossible for him to imagine that anyone else could see things differently than he does. Consequently, he presents a positive picture of Caddy in spite of himself. Jason's control of the family also emphasizes the difference that Caddy's absence makes.

Although they produce three different pictures of Caddy, the three first-person narrators of *The Sound and the Fury* have shared some common experiences with her. The composite picture of Caddy which emerges is that of surrogate mother to Benjy, younger sister whose honor Quentin thinks he must protect, and absentee mother who is exploited by Jason. Although the opinions of the three narrators may differ, the basic facts that they present are similar.

A comparison of the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* presents a much different picture. First, except for Rosa Coldfield, none of the narrators has actually met the person whose life they are narrating, Thomas Sutpen. Therefore, what actual information they do have is second-hand and

suspect. Not only is their reliability in question, but so is the reliability of their source information. Also, the novel's major narrators come from three different generations and two different countries. All of the narrators have personal interests in Sutpen's story and are consequently biased. Because the narrators are aware of each other's versions of Sutpen's story, they use their narrative to contradict or correct the others. And Quentin's and Shreve's narration is a joint collaboration which includes two different types of biases. For all of the above reasons, the possibility of an accurate, reliable account of Sutpen's life emerging from the narrative seems unlikely indeed.

An additional narrative complication also needs to be addressed. It has been suggested that in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner subordinates the voices of his various narrators to his style so that, in the words of Warren Beck in "William Faulkner's Style," the narrators "speak with the tongues of themselves and of William Faulkner" (148). Within the novel, both Quentin and Shreve comment that the other sounds like Mr. Compson. Although it may be true that the characters may sound alike at times, it is also true that the content of their various narratives is very different, as is their means of obtaining their information.

The narrative in *Absalom, Absalom!* which should presumably be the most reliable is that of Thomas Sutpen



himself, who told parts of his story to Grandfather Compson on two different occasions thirty years apart. However, the fact that this account comes to Quentin third-hand through his grandfather and father causes some concern about its reliability. In addition, several elements within Sutpen's narrative cast even greater doubt on its reliability. Sutpen tells his story without any regard for logical sequence and continuity, completely omitting key elements, such as how he got to the West Indies (199). More importantly, Sutpen makes no claim for the reliability of his story; instead, according to Grandfather Compson, he is "just telling a story about something a man named Thomas Sutpen had experienced" (199). Sutpen similarly describes the Haitian insurrection, in which he is wounded, in a "detached and impersonal interest and curiosity" as "a spectacle, something to be watched" (201). It is clear that in Sutpen's narrative, as recounted by Grandfather Compson, he is not a participant in his own life. Consequently, his narrative is more characteristic of a third-person story than of a relating of fact by an eyewitness.

Each of the other narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* is even further removed from the events of Sutpen's story than is Sutpen. The only other narrator to have any personal contact at all with Sutpen is Rosa Coldfield, who was not even born until after Sutpen had settled at Sutpen's Hundred, married her sister Ellen, and started a family.

Although Rosa has some first-hand knowledge of Sutpen's life, she is also somewhat dependent on hearsay evidence, as are the other narrators.

Although Rosa's narrative exposes her subjectivity, and her ambivalent feelings toward Sutpen, it also points out several questions about Sutpen's background and character which were raised when he first arrived in the area. The first section of Rosa's narrative, in Chapter One, summarizes these doubts in her charge that "he wasn't a gentleman" (9). According to Rosa, Sutpen's arrival with "a name which nobody ever heard before" (9) suggests both a shady past and a need to hide among respectable people. Sutpen's marriage to Ellen gives him some credibility in the area because Ellen's father "knew who his father was in Tennessee and who his grandfather had been in Virginia" (11). Sutpen is also suspect in Rosa's eyes because of his age, twenty-five, and because he doesn't even want to be taken for a gentleman. Sutpen may have needed some semblance of respectability to be accepted in the community, but he was using the system rather than letting it define him.

Rosa's first narrative also sets the stage for later narratives by other narrators with its introduction of Sutpen's effect on his children. Judith emerges as adventurous and unconcerned with public perceptions, like her father, in the wild horse ride to church (18) and in

watching the fights going on in the barn (22). Henry, on the other hand, is made physically ill by his viewing of the fights. Rosa's admission at the end of this scene that "I was not there" (22) undermines her authority as first-hand witness to some of the scenes in her narrative.

Rosa's second narrative, in Chapter Five, begins with her assertion of her personal authority as narrator, because of her awareness of her audience, Quentin. One of her motivations is to refute the town's opinion of her. So she relates "what they have told you" (107) only to supplement it with what "they cannot tell you" (108). Rosa's second narrative is primarily concerned with her justification of her personal feelings for Thomas Sutpen and Charles Bon. Rosa is the one first-person narrator to have personally known Thomas Sutpen; thus she provides a different view of their relationship than that provided by the town. For example, Rosa's version of Sutpen's insult is different. Rosa claims that she forgave the "demon" Sutpen (138), contrary to what she thinks that the town believes. She also claims that "he had not thought of it until that moment, that prolonged moment which contained the distance between the house and wherever it was he had been standing when he thought of it" (136). The town, according to Rosa, believes that "when she [Rosa] heard it she realised like thunderclap that it must have been in his mind for a day, a week, even a month maybe" (138). Regardless of which of

these two views seems more plausible, both are conjectures which can not be proven.

Rosa's narration of her relationship with Charles Bon is even less reliable. She has never met Charles Bon in person, so her infatuation with him remains trapped in her own imagination. She is even prevented from seeing his dead body by Clytie and Judith, and consequently has trouble believing that it is in his coffin (122). Rosa also has no first-hand knowledge of his being murdered by Henry Sutpen since she was at her house in town at the time. So Rosa's actual knowledge of Bon has no more credibility than does the town's.

Mr. Compson is even further removed from Sutpen than is Rosa. He has some information from Grandfather Compson, who knew Sutpen, but much of his information reflects the general knowledge and opinion of the town. His viewpoint, then, is opposed to that of Rosa, who claims superior personal information. Mr. Compson's narrative begins by reflecting the town's reaction to Sutpen's initial arrival. The first part of his narrative, in Chapter Two, centers on three confrontations between Sutpen and the town: his acquisition of his furniture, his proposal to Ellen Coldfield, and his wedding to Ellen. The town's opposition to Sutpen is based on its suspicion about his background and his attempt to purchase respectability, which echoes Rosa's initial declaration that he wasn't a gentleman. In fact,



Mr. Compson admits that Rosa was "righter than she knew" (39) concerning Sutpen's motivation for his marriage. However, Mr. Compson's narrative emphasizes perseverance in attaining respectability and aligns Rosa's position of distrust with that of the town.

Mr. Compson's narrative, like Rosa's, also deals with Charles Bon. However, Mr. Compson is concerned, not with Bon's relationship to Rosa, but with the connection between Bon and Sutpen's children, Henry and Judith. Mr. Compson posits a love-triangle among the three tied together by the "pure and perfect incest" (77), a past life and octoroon mistress for Bon in New Orleans (91), and a marriage proposal from Bon to Judith (105). However, Mr. Compson's entire narrative in Chapter Four rests on a single piece of evidence, a letter which Judith gave to Grandmother Compson.

Although Mr. Compson's narrative might sound plausible, a closer examination suggests otherwise. Nowhere in Mr. Compson's narrative does Judith tell Grandmother Compson that the letter is from Bon; instead, the letter is "without date or salutation or signature" (102). In fact, Judith never even claims that the letter was written to her. Also, the letter does not mention love or marriage, only waiting. From the presence of this single ambiguous letter, Mr. Compson assumes that "there were other letters, many of them, gallant flowery indolent frequent and insincere" (102); and the presence of these hypothetical "insincere"

letters leads Mr. Compson to the conclusion that Bon loved Judith. Mr. Compson's entire narrative of Sutpen's children rests on ambiguous evidence, hearsay, and supposition.

The novel's final narrative, which occupies the last half of the novel, is a collaboration between Quentin Compson and his college roommate Shreve McCannon. Quentin's presence in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* has led some to suggest that Quentin's relationship with Caddy should be included in any consideration of him as narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* However, there are two reasons why this is not appropriate. First, as noted by Carl E. Rollyson, Jr., in *Uses of the Past in the Novels of William Faulkner*, "in the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner scrupulously avoids reference to Quentin's suicide, to Caddy, to Benjy--to all the Compson relationships, preferring instead to focus on the discourse between father and son" (80). Secondly, Quentin's connection of incest with the Sutpen children can be explained as only a projection of Mr. Compson's mind, since it is he who introduces it into the narrative.

In addition to a concern with the theme of incest, Quentin and Shreve also inherit a narrative characteristic from Mr. Compson, the creation of relationships and events from little or no evidence. Although their narrative might seem the most plausible, and is the most imaginatively created of the novel's narratives, it rests on a weaker

foundation than either Rosa's or Mr. Compson's narrative for several reasons.

First, Quentin's information comes second-hand from the previous narrators, and is consequently subject to their narrative errors or inventions. Despite its difference in tone, the similarity between Shreve's initial recounting of the Sutpen legend at the beginning of Chapter Six and Mr. Compson's previous version provokes Quentin to think that "*he sounds just like Father*" (147). Since Shreve is only repeating the version of the story that he had heard previously from Quentin, it is obvious that Quentin is greatly influenced by Mr. Compson's narrative.

Furthermore, Quentin and Shreve are consciously and intentionally inventing their narrative, changing the "facts" to suit their own narrative. Shreve's playful attitude toward the narrative is apparent in his stated intention to "play a while now" (224). Shreve's conjecture that Sutpen's first wife never told Bon that he was Sutpen's son is immediately followed by further conjecture. Shreve posits different possibilities concerning why she hadn't told him, including "maybe she didn't get around to telling him" (237) and "maybe she just never thought that there could be anyone as close to her as a lone child out of her own body who would have to be told how she had been scorned and suffered" (237). Shreve temporarily arrives at a possibility that he likes, that the mother was grooming Bon

for eventual revenge on Sutpen, before he finally invents a lawyer who was manipulating both Bon and his mother (241).

Quentin and Shreve not only invent facts, such as the father-son relationship between Sutpen and Bon; they also change events that previous narrators have accepted as facts. Shreve reverses Mr. Compson's supposition that Henry saved Bon's life during the war because he doubts Mr.

Compson's authority as narrator:

"Because your old man was wrong here, too! He said it was Bon who was wounded, but it wasn't. Because who told him? Who told Sutpen, or your grandfather either, which of them it was who was hit? Sutpen didn't know because he wasn't there, and your grandfather wasn't there because that was where he was hit too, where he lost his arm. So who told them?" (275)

Shreve's doubts call into question not only the reliability of Mr. Compson's narrative, but also the reliability of the narratives related by Grandfather Compson and Sutpen himself.

Quentin's and Shreve's visual recreation of the past also reinforces the imaginative, rather than factual, basis of their narrative as they merge with their characters so that "both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon" (280). Furthermore, their visualized conclusion that the reason for the murder was miscegenation has no basis in



either the previous narratives or in the available evidence.

A third-person narrator describes Quentin's and Shreve's visualization of the past in Chapter Eight and comments on the reliability of their conjectures. However, this narrator's lack of omniscience, and subsequent narrative authority, is evident from his commentary. He, or she, decides that "that drawing room of baroque and fusty magnificence which Shreve had invented . . . was probably true enough" (268) and that Sutpen's Haitian mother-in-law "whom Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented . . . was likewise probably true enough" (268). The third-person narrator also comments on the relative probability and reliability of the novel's various narratives:

And Bon may have, probably did, take Henry to call on the octoroon mistress and the child, as Mr. Compson said, though neither Shreve nor Quentin believed that the visit affected Henry as Mr. Compson seemed to think. In fact, Quentin did not even tell Shreve what his father had said about the visit. Perhaps Quentin himself had not been listening when Mr. Compson related (recreated?) it that evening at home. (268)

These comments undermine the authority of the previous narrators and cast doubt on all the novel's narratives.

*The Sound and the Fury's* first-person narrators present the reader with three different subjective views of Caddy's

life. The reader is then able to balance the bias of each narrator to form his or her own view of Caddy. However, in *Absalom, Absalom!* the actual facts of Sutpen's life are debatable, many of the events are invented by various narrators, and the non-omniscient third-person narrator undermines all of the novel's narratives, including his or her own. Consequently, the reader despairs of ever forming a clear picture of Sutpen.

## Chapter III

## Faulkner's Narrative Resolution

The existence of two conflicting narrative trends, in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, raises the question of whether Faulkner's narrative technique in each novel finally clarifies or obscures the central character. Both narratives seem to distance the reader farther from their central characters: *The Sound and the Fury* moves from Caddy's centrality in Benjy's life to her peripheral position, as mother and financial supporter of Quentin in Jason's life, while *Absalom, Absalom!* moves from Thomas Sutpen's status as larger-than-life demon and dynasty founder to his relegation, in Quentin's and Shreve's account, to indirect cause for Henry's murder of Bon. On the other hand, an opposing motion in narrative technique in each novel leads from confusion to clarity. *The Sound and the Fury* moves from Benjy's highly subjective and generally incoherent account to Jason's rational account. Additionally, there are now three complementary views of Caddy, which provide a fuller picture of her life. Quentin's and Shreve's final version of the Sutpen story in *Absalom, Absalom!* is the most plausible and most internally consistent, and is based on first hand information which Quentin supposedly learned from Henry Sutpen. Faulkner resolves the tension between these two narrative trends differently in the last section of each novel.

The last section of *The Sound and the Fury* effects resolution in several ways. Its third person omniscient viewpoint provides objectivity which the first person narrations of the first three sections lacked. Dilsey, the Compsons' family servant, functions as a foil to the disorder of the Compson family through her ability to maintain order within the house. And as the action of the final section moves outside the Compson house, the Compson family is seen in the broader context of the society around them.

The switch to third person narration in the last section of the novel serves several functions. Instead of receiving a subjective interpretation of other characters' actions by a biased narrator, as is the case in the first three sections, the reader is required to interpret both actions and their motivations for himself. Thus the reader's perspective on the main characters, particularly on Jason, whose actions appear much different when not filtered through his self-serving rationalizations, changes. The shift to objective narration also heightens Dilsey's credibility and allows her to function as a norm against which to measure the other members of the household.

Dilsey's actions in the last section of the novel point out the shortcomings of both Mrs. Compson and Jason. Dilsey fulfills many of the roles that would traditionally be filled by Mrs. Compson as the mother of the family.



Dilsey's compassion for Benjy and her acceptance of him, even to the point of taking him to church with her in spite of the opposition her action causes, contrasts with Mrs. Compson's neglect and lack of concern. It becomes evident that Dilsey's assumption of the cooking is not a result merely of her role as servant but also of Mrs. Compson's total ineptitude. Dilsey's genuine religious faith and Mrs. Compson's total disregard for her Bible show Mrs. Compson lacking in this area as well. The one area in which Dilsey and Mrs. Compson seem most similar is in their concern to maintain the appearance of family respectability in the outside world.

Dilsey's presence also exposes the lack of actual authority which Jason has as head of the Compson house. Her defiance of his authority is most evident at breakfast when Jason announces his discovery of the broken window and demands that Quentin be awakened. In response, Dilsey defends Quentin's right to sleep in one day of the week, asks Mrs. Compson why she allows Jason to "go on dat way" (278), calls Jason a bad tempered nag, and promises to protect Quentin if Jason tries to hurt her. Although Dilsey is defiant, she is acting in the best interest of another, in contrast to Jason who exerts his limited authority at the expense of others.

The limits of Jason's authority also become evident as the action moves outside the Compson house. Jason's curt

commands to the sheriff are met by the sheriff's refusal to help him because he suspects dishonest acquisition of the missing money. Jason's troubles increase in Mottson where he is beat up by an old man, is told to leave the show, is unable to find an open pharmacy, and is reduced to having to pay to be driven home. It is evident that in the eyes of the world at large Jason's importance is merely self-importance.

Not only is Jason less important in the novel's last section, but the entire Compson family has also been reduced in stature. Caddy, Mr. Compson, and both Quentins are all missing from the scene. Mrs. Compson is not respected inside her house and won't venture outside it. Dilsey and Benjy are the ones who have endured, but even Benjy is at the mercy of others.

Benjy's helplessness is very evident in the novel's last scene. His rigidly ordered world is upset by Luster's reversal of Benjy's usual route around the Confederate statue. Benjy's response of "bellow on bellow" (320) reminds the reader of Benjy's moaning over Caddy's loss in the first scene of the novel. After the reader has been given an objective view of Jason's cruelty to his family in the novel's final section, he is not encouraged that it is Jason who restores order to Benjy's world.

Lawrance Roger Thompson, in *William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation*, also finds significance in

the flower that Benjy is holding in this last scene, a broken-stemmed narcissus which Thompson feels is symbolic of the Compson family (49). Each of the three first person sections of the novel demonstrates that Caddy's brothers define her importance solely in relation to themselves: for Benjy she is a nurturer and substitute mother, to Quentin she is the object of incestuous desire, and to Jason she is a means of making money. It is only in the objective point of view of the final section of the novel that the self-centeredness of the previous first-person narrators becomes patently obvious. None of her brothers can present a clear picture of Caddy because they are too busy gazing into their individual mirrors. However, the more detached, objective reader is able attain a more balanced perspective.

*Absalom, Absalom!*'s final chapter, like the final section of *The Sound and the Fury*, is related by a third person narrator, which might lead the reader to expect similar resolution provided by objective narration. However, *Absalom, Absalom!*'s third person narrator, who had interjected opinions in previous chapters, refrains from commenting on Quentin's and Shreve's dialogue or actions here.

A second source of hope for resolution is Quentin's declaration that he discovered the truth during his trip to Sutpen's Hundred. Although Quentin's and Shreve's version of the Sutpen story is partially based on the conjectures of

Rosa and Mr. Compson, it seems the most plausible of the various versions presented, and confirmation by a such a vital participant as Henry Sutpen would provide the necessary validation.

Although Quentin's and Shreve's reconstruction of the Sutpen story is a cooperative collaboration, or vision, Quentin's recounting of his meeting with Henry Sutpen remains intensely personal. In fact, its personal, subjective nature negates whatever remaining hopes the reader might have for an objective, and therefore somewhat reliable, conclusion to the Sutpen story. The actual conversation only provides further confusion rather than clarification:

*And you are----?*

*Henry Sutpen.*

*And you have been here----?*

*Four years.*

*And you came home----?*

*To die. Yes.*

*To die?*

*Yes. To die.*

*And you have been here----?*

*Four years.*

*And you are----?*

*Henry Sutpen. (298)*

This circular conversation, which occurs solely in Quentin's



memory, confirms only Henry Sutpen's present existence, shedding no light on past events.

This mysterious conversation raises two important questions. First, if Henry Sutpen did not tell Quentin that the reason he shot Bon was that Bon was black, then how did Quentin arrive at this conclusion? If Henry is not the source of Quentin's inside information, then Quentin's and Shreve's account rests on no firmer ground than any of the others. Shreve assumes that Quentin learns, or guesses, the secret from seeing Clytie, Sutpen's black daughter, at Sutpen's Hundred (280). Another possibility is that Quentin guesses by seeing another black Sutpen descendant, Jim Bond, whom Quentin, in the present, describes as "the heir, the apparent (though not obvious)" (296). What these two theories don't take into account is that Quentin would have learned the truth about Bon through either of these means before he and Shreve began to reconstruct Sutpen's story and then withheld this information from Shreve. Also, both of these theories shift confirmation onto Quentin's shoulders, denying his account historical validity.

The second question that Quentin's conversation with Henry raises is why this encounter had such a tremendous impact on Quentin. Quentin's recollection of the meeting leaves him "breathing hard but slow, his eyes wide open upon the window, thinking 'Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore. Nevermore. Nevermore'" (298-99). What

does Quentin face when he sees Henry Sutpen? One possibility is that Henry is the living embodiment of Quentin's "barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts" (9), and that Quentin can't face the past. Another possibility is that Henry reminds Quentin of his own inability to transcend time, and that Quentin can't face death. Whichever of these theories may be true, if indeed either of them is, their subjective nature suggests that human nature is difficult to interpret in the present and even more difficult to resolve with second-hand information from the past.

Since none of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrators proves capable of conclusively resolving Sutpen's story, the task falls to either the reader, or Faulkner as author, if not as omniscient narrator. Successful resolution subsequently rests on the reader's ability to interpret any clues which Faulkner might have embedded in the text, specifically in the last chapter. Walter J. Slatoff in "The Edge of Order: The Pattern of Faulkner's Rhetoric" suggests that there are four "commentaries on the meaning of the whole Sutpen story" (171-72) at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*: the presence of Jim Bond, the end of Mr. Compson's letter, Shreve's summary of the Sutpen story, and Quentin's declaration that he doesn't hate the South. An independent examination of each of Slatoff's "commentaries" will determine if they can either individually or collectively provide the narrative

resolution for the novel which the first-person narrators failed to provide.

Jim Bond, as the last Sutpen, represents the failure of Sutpen's design, which has consumed the lives of all of the other members of his family and has occasioned the speculation of all of *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrators. Bond's presence is important not because it explains or resolves Sutpen's design, or story, but because it is evidence that Sutpen has failed. The voices that have tried to articulate Sutpen's story have also failed, leaving only the howling idiot Jim Bond to lurk around Sutpen's burned out mansion until someone can temporarily drive him away (301). However, like Jim Bond, Sutpen's story can not be driven away, which might suggest that even if these narrators can not successfully resolve Sutpen's story, the reader may be able to.

Mr. Compson's letter also fails to provide any resolution of the narrative. It announces the death of Rosa Coldfield, the novel's lone surviving witness to Sutpen's life, and eliminates the possibility of any further illumination of Sutpen's life from first-hand knowledge. Quentin's recollection of the letter's contents is spurred by Shreve's remark that "'more people have died than have been twenty-one'" (301), and shows his thoughts preoccupied by his own mortality. It also foreshadows Quentin's death, (as noted in the novel's genealogy), which will eliminate



yet another narrator of Sutpen's story. Furthermore, the contents of Mr. Compson's letter throw no further light on Sutpen or his family.

Shreve's summary also points toward the failure of narrative order and resolution. His sarcasm and assertiveness alienate Quentin and dismantle the collaborative imaginative partnership that came closest to finding meaning in Sutpen's story. Shreve's analogy of clearing the ledger by using "two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen" (302) is reminiscent of Sutpen's attempt to find the flaw in the recipe of his design. Shreve trades a method which almost succeeded for one that has already failed. Shreve's analogy further suggests that, just as Sutpen's attempt failed, and just as Shreve's attempt leaves him with one Jim Bond left over, the reader will likewise be incapable of resolving the narrative ledger by this method.

While Shreve's dissolution of their partnership further detaches him from the story he and Quentin have told, it forces Quentin further into the narrative where he must face his feelings about Sutpen, the South, and himself. Sutpen's story has forced Quentin to face issues which impact his personal life. Sutpen's relationship with Henry raises questions in his mind about his relationship with his own father. And Bon's murder because of threatened miscegenation, according to Quentin and Shreve, raises questions in Quentin's mind about modern Southern society.



Quentin's meeting with Henry Sutpen has also brought him face to face with concerns about his own mortality. Because Quentin has not resolved these issues in his own life, he is unable to resolve them in Sutpen's story either. Thus, the Sutpen story remains unresolved by Quentin; and, because all four of the novel's commentaries point toward narrative disorder and irresolution, it remains unresolved by Faulkner as well.

*Absalom, Absalom!* is the only one of Faulkner's novels which included a chronology and genealogy in its original edition. Since these traditionally function as devices to bring order to novels, their inclusion might suggest that Faulkner chose to provide objective facts and resolve contradictions here rather than in his role as third person narrator. However, closer examination of the chronology and genealogy show that the inconsistencies and contradictions are multiplied rather than resolved.

Among the new and contradictory "facts" which are introduced in the chronology are Judith's death from yellow fever rather than smallpox and Bon's birth in Haiti rather than New Orleans. However, the most interesting difference between the novel and the original chronology is the chronology's dating of Quentin's and Rosa's trip to Sutpen's Hundred as September 1910, despite the fact that Mr. Compson's letter in the novel, which announces Rosa's death, is dated "Jan 10 1910" (141). The genealogy also contains

its share of unsettling facts. For example, the reader would first learn of Quentin's untimely death, in 1910, here. And Shreve's comment that "'more people have died than have been twenty-one'" (301) takes on added significance when the reader notices the dates of Quentin's birth, 1891, and death, 1910 (309). The readers of the original novel would also be surprised to find Shreve a practicing surgeon in their present day world. It is obvious from these few examples that Faulkner had no intention of resolving the Sutpen story for the reader, but chose instead to confuse even the present day facts of the narrative.

Faulkner's narrative structures in both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* lead the reader progressively farther from the novels' central characters. *The Sound and the Fury*'s narrative moves from subjective narration to an objective viewpoint in order to place the Compson family's loss of Caddy, and of love, in a larger social context. *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrative, on the other hand, moves the reader progressively farther from Thomas Sutpen with successively more unreliable information about Sutpen's life and family. The confusion of even supposedly objective narration only further complicates the picture. *Absalom, Absalom!*'s narrative ultimately demonstrates the difficulty, if not impossibility, of successfully reconstructing either the past or the complex lives of human beings.

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