Bondage and Freedom in the Community in *Absalom, Absalom!*

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I

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...  

Every reader who has read *Absalom, Absalom!* knows that there are two settings: the South and the Northeast. In the South, Quentin has grown up and heard something of the Sutpen story. And now when he is about to go to Harvard, he hears more minutely the fragments of the story from Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson. Adding to his role as a listener, he takes part in exploring Sutpen's Hundred and finds the secret of the Sutpen family. In Cambridge, Quentin has told the story to his classmates, and now with the letter from his father which tells of the death of Miss Rosa, he reconstructs the story with Shreve. To the two places where the story is recreated and told, one more
place—which is naturally indispensable to any literary work and especially important to this book—may be added: any library, any living room, any classroom, anywhere the novel is read.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, four narrators—or three narrators because later Quentin and Shreve become as one—tell the Sutpen story with prejudice, hatred, sympathy, and imagination. The story by Miss Rosa and the story by Mr. Compson who has heard Sutpen’s past from his father who was an only friend of Sutpen are worth reading, but they include many mistakes. Quentin and Shreve who know the secret of the Sutpens and have more information than Miss Rosa or Mr. Compson rectify those mistakes and add what might happen and try to come to “the truth about human life.” Thus the mistakes of Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson may be corrected, but who corrects Quentin’s and Shreve’s ideas? Nobody. The reader must sort out “the truth” from all the information given in the book. And as all the narrators do, he or she must sometimes follow, sometimes modify, the information from the narrators and sometimes react directly to the Sutpen story which is gained as a whole, and make up the story on his or her own.

The novel ends with Quentin’s agony: “I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!” (378). Different from Shreve, who has once entered the world of the Sutpens and returns, Quentin has entered the world, seen its evils as his own, and can never come back. The reader who easily identifies the character of any novel may share Quentin’s deep sorrows. However, to focus his or her concern on one character is to be exposed to the danger of missing the core of Faulkner’s idea. Being detached form Quentin and trying to grasp the novel as a whole beyond Quentin, the reader will sense purgation and extract the truth.
Among many interpreters of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Cleanth Brooks is special in that he has stressed Sutpen's "innocence," and rather boldly classified Sutpen as "a Yankee." In his second book on Faulkner, he indicates the points of similarity between Sutpen and Gatsby. Indeed readers find a parallel between their lives. Both of these self-made men try to realize their dreams and never give up; both believe it possible to repeat the past; and neither of them knows the complications of reality. However, all the readers who have read over both novels will know the striking difference between the two: Gatsby's dream symbolizes the optimism of Americans, whereas Sutpen's dream, "design," is that of the South. Sutpen's story is universal in that his "innocence" is partly based on the "American Dream," but in *Absalom, Absalom!* the individual design and the society are much more intermingled with each other than those in *The Great Gatsby*. One also sees a pattern of incorrigible evil in Sutpen that Gatsby does not show: Sutpen victimizes the Coldfields and his own family for his "design," while Gatsby does not.

Sutpen's story consists of three accounts—Miss Rosa's, Mr. Compson's, and Shreve and Quentin's. Each narrator rehearses the key events in Sutpen's life with a different tendency of interpretation. First of all, the reader gets information about Sutpen since his arrival in the Yoknapatawpha County from Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson and judges him by his external appearance, because the revelation of his inner life is suspended. In Chapter VII, for the first time, Sutpen's childhood and adulthood are told fragmentarily by Quentin. The revelation changes Sutpen's status from a simple self-made man to a figure influenced by his circumstances. Faulkner had once before
applied this technique in *Light in August*, where also the past plays an important role for the central character, Joe Christmas. Through the technique the reader knows that both Sutpen and Joe have suffered traumatic experiences and become what they are.

Sutpen is born and brought up in the mountain community,

where he had never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them; he did not even imagine then that there was any such way to live or to want to live, or that there existed all the objects to be wanted which there were, or that the ones who owned the objects not only could look down on the ones that didn’t, but could be supported in the down-looking not only by the others who owned objects too but by the very ones that were looked down on that didn’t own objects and knew they never would. Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody ... and as for objects, nobody had any more of them than you did ... (221)

Like the camp in “The Bear,” his birthplace is an image of the society which exists in a purely natural setting using people’s natural skills. Sutpen is blithely unaware of class distinctions or other evils. From this kind of “Eden,” Sutpen’s family “fell into” (222) the community of the South. This symbolic image seems to suggest that Sutpen himself will naturally become depraved through the fall into the depraved South. And after the traumatic impact of being told at the door of a white planter by “the monkey nigger,” “never to come to that front door ... but to go around to the back” (232), he actually learns the evils of the South which go against the will of God. 6
Being shocked at the conduct of the "nigger," he rushes back through those two years "seeing a dozen things that had happened and he hadn't even seen them before" (230). What cuts across his mind is "a kind of speculative antagonism . . . inherited, by both white and black" (230) between his sisters, the other white women and "niggers." Also he remembers one afternoon when he saw his proud sister driven off the road by the "nigger" coachman saying, "Hoo dar, gal! Git outen de way dar!" (231) and the two white faces in the carriage glaring down at his sister. He threw clods of dirt after the dust the carriage raised, but all in vain. The shock at the door reminds him of these experiences and awakes him to the existence of the racial distinctions and of the caste system of the South. The comment which Sutpen later makes to Quentin's grandfather—"you could hit them [the niggers] . . . But did not want to, because they (the niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit" (230)—shows that Sutpen does not care a damn about the "Negro," unlike white trash who tend to identify racially with white aristocracy, even if their economic status is inferior to that of "Negro" slaves. At this turning point, he contrives the "design" not to kill planters but to become one of them so that he may combat the planters of the South who have expelled him.

To achieve the "design," he requires "money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family . . . a wife" (263). His "design," as Vickery suggests, "is and can be no other than a microcosm of the South; his values are its values." Once he discovers "what he just had to do" (220), he rushes at full speed. He is quite obsessed by the "design."

Owing to his "self-reliance of mountains and solitude" (241) and "bravery" and endurance, he sometimes takes the hue of a hero, and indeed his activity of crushing a slave rebellion in the West Indies reminds us of the
brave activity of Lord Jim. All of his faculties submit to achievement of the "design" and in the first half of his life "—destiny had fitted itself to him, to his innocence, his pristine aptitude for platform drama and childlike heroic simplicity'” (246). He has got money and slaves from the West Indies. However, when he discards his wife only because she is part "Negro" and "unsuitable to his purpose" (247), he puts in motion the series of events that will corrupt his plan. His heroism is tainted by one of the evils of the South—the racial discrimination.

On returning to the South, he embarks on getting the rest—a house, a plantation, and a wife appropriate for his "design" and becoming a planter of the South. At first, those in the community regard Sutpen, a stranger, "with deep suspicion and some consternation," because for them "the past was important and blood was important," not because they know that Sutpen has done wrong. Therefore, after the hostility to him has reached the climax on the occasion of the wedding, it is gradually mollified and "he was accepted; he obviously had too much money now to be rejected or even seriously annoyed any more" (72). Sutpen's success in the South is largely due to Southern moral laxity. He is valued, and especially to Wash, as the great Southern Colonel and "A fine proud man. If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth, that's what He would aim to look like" (282), though later Wash condemns Sutpen and the Southerners of the class to which he belongs:

... men of Sutpen's own kind, who used to eat at his table with him back when he (Wash) had yet to approach nearer the house than the scuppernong arbor—men who had led the way, shown the other and lesser ones how to fight in battles, who might also possess signed papers from the generals saying that they were among first and
Sutpen is presented as a person who has been perfectly swallowed up in the South.

Sutpen gets all that he needs, and his "design" seems to be achieved. However, his tragedy has already begun since he rejected his first wife because of her "Negro" blood. His failure comes from one of the codes of the South, as did his success. The "design" once told to Grandfather when the French architect ran away has changed appearance morally glamorous for thirty years:

Now 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 that 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 . . . (261)

However, when his part-Negro son, Bon, comes to the door, he has to refuse to accept him to protect the "design."

He does not hate the "Negro" personally, but accepts the codes of the South without question. If he tried to, he could conceal the secret of his first wife's and son's blood, for he did not recognize it and neither did Henry at a glance, but he cannot adapt himself to circumstances. Once caught by the abstractions of the codes, his free will is tightly bound. Though his
"design" is Sutpen's own choice at first, after that, he is driven by the evil qualities of the South. The corruption is "moral retribution" (267) to him who values codes higher than human emotions because of that suggested "innocence," in fact, amorality.

In the South, where "an absolute caste system" (345) is adopted, a white descendant in the male line is indispensable. Sutpen needs a son more than the plantation or the money he has lost during the war. In spite of great confidence in "the courage" and "the will" and "the shrewdness" (278), he is worried: there is little time left. Struggling against time, he tries to fulfill his desires. Now nothing but the scythe, the symbol of time, can stop Sutpen. Rosa illustrates his death as "severence" (172). Indeed, he is severed from his doomed life in which he is possessed with the codes of the South and unable to locate his error because of his "innocence," that is, ignorance of human morality.

Sutpen went through his sudden fall into the world of experience of the South and could not go beyond his "innocence" which, as Vickery states, consists not only of his unquestioning belief in the value of all the idols of the South but in his belief that the structure, the design, is itself the secret of its strength and its perpetuation, that he need only follow its ritual to grasp its substance and that he can do so with the same blunt honesty which was part of his mountain heritage.¹⁰

It is his belief that he has done well everything with proper purpose and principles, so it is impossible to imagine the reason why his success is at stake. There is no room for Sutpen to know his personal and social wrong.

Sutpen was once insulted by the planter system of the South and tries to combat it but ultimately serves and observes it. His self-centeredness and
amorality negate his humanity perfectly. He has become a demon-like figure for his excessive innocence about the evils of the South. The theme that one is caught by abstract substitutes and sacrifices human communion for them is universal, but we must bear in mind that Sutpen's tragedy happens in the South and that it is told through Quentin. When we think of the reaction of Quentin, we must again turn our eyes to the problems of the South.

III

Quentin has been beleaguered to tell about the South by Shreve and other friends since the past September when he entered Harvard, and he talked not about his own genealogy but about Sutpen's. This shows that the Sutpen story holds for him the key to the whole Southern experience. He tries to draw the deep meaning behind the story by reconstructing it.

As we have seen already, Quentin regards Sutpen not as a devil but as a man swallowed up in the evils of the South, though Sutpen himself is too simple to learn his situation. This image of Sutpen had not come into Quentin's cognizance until he visited Sutpen's Hundred in person and learned the secret of the family. Indeed, as Swiggart observes, the young narrator's trip to Sutpen's Hundred, and his brief conversation with the aging Henry Sutpen, constitute a bridge between the past and the present, between the South's tragic past and its significance for present and future generations of Southerners.

Both Quentin and Shreve, who has heard the story from Quentin, know the fact in advance and have colored it with their imagination.

Of all the Sutpen story told by Miss Rosa, Quentin is most interested in
Henry's murder of Bon. As can be seen in Chapter V, Quentin does not hear other parts of the story told by Miss Rosa but imagines the scene of the murder. It seems natural to the reader who has known *The Sound and the Fury* that Quentin, who has a sister, and had tried to kill her lover but came off second best, be involved in the Judith-Henry-Bon triangle, though it is doubtful whether Quentin as character and narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* is perfectly identified with the suicide Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*.

As for the reason why Judith's marriage was forbidden by Sutpen and Henry, neither Miss Rosa nor Mr. Compson knows its basis. On the other hand, Quentin and Shreve learn the fact, but the fact is kept in the dark until Chapter VIII. This holds the reader in suspense and, at the same time, heightens the tension in which Quentin agonizes and draws the deep meanings on the way to the revelation. Quentin is especially sensitive to the reference about the reason of the murder. When the story comes to the point in which Sutpen told Henry something about Bon, Quentin stops talking, thinking,

*Am I going to have 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 have to never listen to anything else but this again forever. . . . (277)

From this passage it is obvious that Quentin, who is in the same situation as Henry, comes near identifying with Henry and yet cannot but deny the point for the time being.

In considering the reason why Henry had to kill Bon, Shreve thinks the incest problem worth deliberation, though he knows that is not the reason. He sets Henry, Bon, and Judith in a strange triangle of incest. According to
him, Henry, a Mississippi clodhopper, expresses his admiration for refined Bon from the first, saying that he wants an older brother like Bon. Henry invites him to his home and turns both Judith and himself to devotion for Bon: "From now on mine and my sister's house will be your house and mine and my sister's lives your life" (318). And as the reconstruction of the story goes on and the fact that Bon is a son of Sutpen is revealed, the incest problem is taken as a serious problem.

The incest problem is not originally imagined by Shreve, for we find in Mr. Compson's comment a reference to Henry's homosexual and incestuous love:

... this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. (96)

Mr. Compson gave his ideas without the knowledge that Bon is Henry's and Judith's brother, but the idea has stuck in Quentin's mind. Shreve must have heard the idea tainted with the incest problem concretely by Quentin and known its significance from Quentin's way of telling it.

According to their reconstruction, Henry manages to go beyond incest because of his love for Bon after due consideration. When he hears from his father that Bon is his brother, he does not kill Bon but goes out and, after a little, participates in the Civil War with Bon. What he witnesses there are the terrible holocaust and wretched human situation. There, on the other hand, he feels Bon's humanity. In the extreme situation of the war, where there are no laws and traditional morality, he comes to acknowledge Bon's marriage
with Judith and prepares to go to hell:

"It isn't yours nor his nor the Pope's hell that we are all going to: it's my mother's and her mother's and father's and their mother's and father's hell, and it isn't you who are going there, but we, the three—no: four of us. And so at least we will all be together where we belong, since even if only he went there we would still have to be there too since the three of us are just illusions that he begot, and your illusions are a part of you like your bones and flesh and memory. And we will all be together in torment and so we will not need to remember love and fornication, and maybe in torment you cannot even remember why you are there. And if we cannot remember all this, it can't be much torment." (347-48)

This part is reconstructed not only by Shreve but by "the two the four the two facing one another in the tomblike room" (346), and so it is enough to the point that Quentin is deeply obsessed and distraught with incest.

Different from Quentin, however, Henry overcomes the incest problem. For him love is above the guilt of incest, which "all his heredity and training had to rebel against on principle" (340). Henry and Bon have achieved peace, a peace of despair. However, the curse of the South does not leave them. Though they overcome a family problem, the social problem still exists. It is too hard a barrier for them to overcome.

Their father, Sutpen, when he was rejected at the door, "all of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not . . ." (220). Since then he has devoted his life to his success in the South and accepted the Southern morality without question. Therefore, he does not hesitate to leave his part-Negro wife and son. Henry also does "not what he would do but what he would have to do" (355), that
is, rejects Bon, after he heard from his father that Bon’s mother was part “Negro.” Obviously, he does not want to kill Bon, for he pauses for the moment when he has to do it.

It is clear that Henry does not hate the “Negro.” He has grown up with Clytie who is a part “Negro.” And miscegenation between a white man and a “Negress” seems bearable to him, because he does not accuse his father who has shared the bed with black women. As a Southern gentleman, what he has to hate is a “Negro” who tries to ravish white women. To observe the codes inherited unconsciously, he has to kill Bon at the moment when Bon tries to enter the gate of Sutpen’s Hundred. He turns his love into ashes.

Henry is a born Southerner. Having been deeply immersed in the South, he takes the codes of the South as natural. Though Quentin and Shreve sympathize with Henry and imagine Henry’s agony, caught between the love for Bon and the codes of the South, the fact that Henry chose the latter cannot be concealed. Henry’s free will was bound by the narrow code. Even after the experience of the war, he could not be generous to the “Negro,” who had, in fact, saved his life. Quentin, as a born Southerner and a Southern gentleman, easily identifies with Henry and agonizes, because of the recognition that even his younger generation cannot escape from the curse of their fathers’ guilt in the South.

Quentin’s and Shreve’s sympathy tilts toward not only Henry but also Bon. Their conjectures suggest that Bon is not guilty. He had not come for revenge. What he wants is a single hint of recognition of his sonship. And if Sutpen acknowledged him, Bon would leave the Sutpen family. It is fair to say that the miscegenation problem here does have relation to incest, for Bon would carry out incest so that his father may recognize him. Bon’s tragedy as a rejected son also strikes Quentin and Shreve, and they take Bon as a kind of
tragic hero. In consideration of Bon and Henry, Quentin writhes and feels oppressed by the curse of the South.

IV

After the murder of Bon and the disappearance of Henry, nothing is to be heard of Henry except that he does not escape from life as Quentin does in *The Sound and the Fury*, but lives a hell of life. What has stimulated Henry to develop into a man of endurance from a weak and sensitive man? To answer this, Quentin and Shreve make conjectures about Bon's education during the war.

It seems true that Bon, like his father, deserted an octoroon wife with his child. In this respect, it is doubtful whether Bon had shown humanity enough to move Henry to join him in suffering. However, Quentin and Shreve deeply sympathize with him and romanticize his story. Shreve insists that it is not, as Mr. Compson says, Bon but Henry who is injured and carried on Bon's back during the war; Bon takes Judith's picture out of its frame and puts the octoroon's there because he wants to say to Judith, "I was no good; do not grieve for me" (359), not because he held any love for the octoroon wife.

Bon wrote a letter to Judith in which he delineates the calamities of the war and human responsibility in it: "you and I are, strangely enough, included among those who are doomed to live" (132). From this fact, Quentin's and Shreve's imagination surmises that Bon says the significance of life as follows, and it finds the words valid:

"Only there is something in you that doesn't care about honor and pride yet that lives, that even walks backward for a whole year just to
live; that probably even when this is over and there is not even defeat left, will still decline to sit still in the sun and die, but will be out in the woods, moving and seeking where just will and endurance could not move it, grubbing for roots and such—the old mindless sentient undreaming meat that doesn’t even know any difference between despair and victory . . . .” (349)

This language, as Swiggart puts it, “anticipates Faulkner’s Nobel Prize vision of the aboriginal spirit of man rising triumphant from the destruction of his cities.” Quentin imagines the existence of the suffering of such a sensitive man in the South and sympathizes with him, but cannot be relieved. He has already come near to Henry and cannot help agonizing.

Many of the characters in the Sutpen story are placed under the restraints of the South, the traditional community, and set higher values on the abstractions than flesh and blood experience. On the other hand, some struggle under their condition, take responsibility and try to expiate their people’s guilt—Judith and Clytie, for example. They stay at Sutpen’s Hundred all their lives and see and experience tragic lives. There is, however, development especially in Judith, and Clytie plays an important role, though her significance has been sometimes overlooked.

After Bon and Henry disappeared, Judith has patience to wait: “She waited four years . . . . It was the probation, the durance” (121). And it is known as a fact that she tended the wounded during the Civil War; after the war she cooked more than her family could eat and gave it to anyone who was hungry. Moreover, she learned to plough and collected money to pay for the headstone for her lover, Charles Bon. This is quite different from the younger Judith depicted by Mr. Compson as “the young girl dreaming, not living, in her complete detachment and imperviousness to actuality almost like
physical deafness" (70). From this passage, the reader can only imagine an unsophisticated and spoiled lady. However, she does not change fundamentally. To seek for her true nature, it is enough to remember her childhood, when she was not afraid of the fight between her father and a "Negro" or the restive horse. Her bravery shows that she is in this aspect a very Sutpen like daughter. However, she is full of humanity.

As for the relation between Judith and Charles Etienne, some critics have commented that Judith does not accept Charles Etienne completely. Kargi-ganer, for example, points out that Judith regards Charles Etienne as a part "Negro" and she is "finally unwilling to grant him complete acceptance." Indeed, she was in "a conflict between her love for him and her awareness of his Negro blood." However, her love is stronger than her adherence to the codes of the South. She nurses Etienne and makes money to pay for his tombstone from her love and she herself catches his disease and dies. Though she cannot expiate Sutpen's guilt nor remove the curse of the South completely, she takes her responsibility as fully as she can, and shows the possibility of humanity in Southerners. Her bravery and endurance may be inherited from her father, Sutpen, but she makes them of inestimable value with love. And Judith is helped to know this human dignity by Clytie. Clytie assists Judith all her life and after her death undertakes the responsibility left by Judith. She is not rejected as Bon because she is a black woman who is far from a dangerous element for white males; nevertheless, she is not fully accepted as a daughter of Sutpen. Sutpen allows Clytie to live with Judith in the same house, but his attitude toward Clytie is a little different from that toward Judith. On returning from the war he nestles his cheek against Judith but not against Clytie. Rosa cannot treat her without discrimination. Her narrowness toward Clytie is seen here and there in her
speech and attitudes, and it is clearly revealed when she says "'Take your hand off me, nigger!'") (140), on being forbidden by Clytie to go upstairs to see the end result of Henry-Judith-Bon tragedy. Their refusal to touch Clytie is crucial, because, through Miss Rosa's lips Faulkner states,

"...there is something in the touch of flesh with flesh which abrogates, cuts sharp and straight across the devious intricate channels of decorous ordering, which enemies as well as lovers know because it makes them both—touch and touch of that which is the citadel of the central I-Am's private own: not spirit, soul; the liquorish and ungirdled mind is anyone's to take in any darkened hallway of this earthly tenement. But let flesh touch with flesh, and watch the fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color too." (139)

They isolate Clytie spiritually by refusing to touch her.

Judith and Henry, on the other hand, scuffled with Clytie in the rough games in their childhood, and Judith and Clytie even slept in the same bed. Their touch nurtures the communion, and love. Therefore, Clytie is filled with love and does not want more than she has and serves them, as if she were always only a "Negress" maid. All her actions reveal her unselfish love for her half siblings. To expiate Henry's guilt, she brings Charles Etienne and takes care of him; and after the death of Judith, she brings up Jim Bond, a son of Charles Etienne. Though her method of nurture—isolating them from the outside world—does not seem good, it cannot be denied that she turns her love to these miserable orphans to atone for the wrongs her family have done. And she finishes her life, completing her service to protect Henry—last of the white Sutpens.

When Quentin and Rosa enter Sutpen's Hundred, Clytie is still "keeping that secret" not only "for the sake of the family which no longer existed" but
also "for the sake of the man who had been her father" (350). This means that Sutpen, too, is protected ironically by Clytie, a woman of "Negro" blood which he rejected to the last. When Clytie says, "'Whatever he [Sutpen] done, me and Judith and him [Henry] have paid it out'" (370), the fact is known that Henry has done something as a man of humanity. Sutpen's guilt has three children to make up for. Clytie lives longer and endures more than they, and she completes her work by setting fire to Sutpen's Hundred and eradicating all the evils of Sutpen family.

Judith and Clytie, struggling under the condition raised by males, do not escape or attack but endure with bravery. They are not easily caught by void abstractions as others but live by their own free will, placing love higher than the words of abstraction, taking their responsibilities, and completing them in death. Indeed, their way of living is admired by Faulkner, who thinks, "man's immortality is that he is faced with a tragedy which he can't beat and he still tries to do something with it." 16 Though they are women, they are regarded as "man," with flesh and blood.

V

The last of the Sutpens is a part-Negro idiot, Bond. Sutpen had desired a white male successor, but ironically the reverse is the case and only a mulatto survives. The existence of Bond haunts Quentin, because the name "Bond" seems to him to suggest the bondage of the South. Shreve, rather cynically, refers to the prosperity of Bonds and thrusts Quentin to the wall.

The reconstruction of the Sutpen story helps Quentin to a deeper understanding of the human situation. Quentin, one of the Southerners, has known the tradition and codes of the South and the situation of the South in which one is bound by them and forced to act as they require. Though
Sutpen's own "amorality" is one factor of the tragedy, the evils of the Southern morality influence him too much. Quentin is worried about the curse of the South, and all the more because even the younger generation cannot escape from it. On the one hand, Quentin identifies with Henry, on the other hand, he deeply sympathizes with Bon, who is a victim of the codes of the South. Facing an indeterminable problem, Quentin falls into a bottomless pit: "'Nevermore of peace. Nevermore of peace. Nevermore NevermoreNevermore'" (373).

Beyond Quentin in psychic withdrawal, however, we recognize another aspect of Faulkner's affirmation through Judith and Clytie. Even in Henry we can see Faulkner's belief in the possibility of endurance. Faulkner grieves for the situation of the South but is not disillusioned. Through organic structure, he makes us see "the truth" which

comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth.17

And the truth found here is the respect for "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice."18 Quentin's dejection so deeply impresses us that we cannot see "the truth" easily, but we must not ignore Faulkner's view behind the total structure.

Here again I would like to compare The Great Gatsby with Absalom, Absalom!. In the former, though Nick feels great disappointment, Fitzgerald implies that there may be a utopia in the West by depicting the Eastern destructive morality and having Nick go back to the West. In the latter, Quentin cannot find a place of safety even in the Northeast. Quentin will not escape from the curse of the South wherever he may go. Therefore,
Faulkner insists that one cannot and must not run away. If one is not put off, considers what to do with free will and takes the responsibility of humanity, he or she can achieve the truth. From this point of view, the reader can find a little hope even in Quentin, for he takes his responsibility with humanity. He is greater than the suicide Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*. Thus Faulkner offers a universal theme by depicting the South and Southerners minutely.

*Absalom, Absalom!* seems to end in despair in the light of the Sutpen story relived through Quentin. However, the reader who has read through it knows that there exists a hope which appears through the complex structure. And one who tries to find such hope will see it and relieve himself or herself from the tangled web of this tragic novel.

(This study is revised and included in my M. A. thesis.)

**Notes**

1. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 261. All the subsequent quotations from *Absalom, Absalom!* are from this edition and page numbers will be given in the text.
3. Shreve is another important figure not to be forgotten. Existing in the novel as a helper and an instigator, and experiencing the same act of reconstruction as Quentin does, he is situated nearer to the reader than any other and Faulkner sees him nearest “the truth.”
5. Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 299-300. This opinion has been disputed by some writers who feel Gatsby is less “demonic.”
6. Ilse Dusoir Lind, Olga W. Vickery, and Melvin Backman take the mountain


8. As for his "innocence," we must notice that all talk of "innocence" is by Mr. Compson, a bad interpreter. Mr. Compson is influenced by his father, General Compson, who was also a planter and felt sympathy for Sutpen. In fact, Sutpen's activity shows that he is a "demon" as Rosa and Shreve calls him so.


10. Vickery, p. 95.

11. In disagreement with Quentin, Shreve sees Sutpen as "Faustus, this demon, this Beelzebub" (178).


13. Ibid., p. 166.


15. Vickery, p. 89.

