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Sarah Latimer Marshall
University of Mississippi

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FATHERS AND SONS IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

by Sarah Latimer Marshall

The Old Testament story of David's design—to found a house from whose lineage would come a Messiah—contributed the nexus for *Absalom, Absalom!*, William Faulkner's story of Thomas Sutpen's design. The despair of the anguished, loving father, evident from David's archetypal lament over his son's death: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" [1] emphasizes the disparity between the two fathers. Of his sons, David loved Absalom best, Absalom who rebelled against his father. Thomas Sutpen's relationship to his sons lacks love; indeed, the relationship appears inhuman.

Perceptive critics recognize the irony implicit in Faulkner's use of the Biblical symbol. According to Walton Litz, Sutpen viewed his son's death as merely a stumbling block in his relentless pursuit of his design. Consequently, Litz considers the Biblical symbol "an ironic inversion of David's compassionate lament over his son's death."[2] Joseph Wigley, too, marks the bitter irony of the symbol. In fact, Wigley considers that the incompleteness of the parallel intensifies Sutpen's terrible single-mindedness of purpose.[3] David's design included sons who would implement it, but his design did not obscure the human, mortal relationship. David sired Absalom, loved him, and lamented his death. Thomas Sutpen, too, had a design which required an heir; his design, however, metaphorically fathered his sons. Sutpen intended to found a dynasty, not to insure his immortality, but to insure what he believed was his mortality.

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[1] II Sam. 18:33.

[2] Walton Litz, "William Faulkner's Moral Vision," *Southwest Review*, XXXVII (Summer, 1952), 203.

[3] Joseph Alexander Wigley, "An Analysis of the Imagery of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1956), pp. 18-19.

The lack of a normal father-son relationship, indeed the lack of a human relationship, between Sutpen and his first born son, Charles Bon, eventually destroyed the Sutpen dynasty. Faulkner unmistakably put Sutpen's design in the saddle.

A mountain-reared boy of thirteen or fourteen, sent on an errand by his father, appeared at the front door of a plantation house. Told by a Negro butler in livery "to go around to the back door even before he could state his errand, who had sprung from a people whose houses didn't have back doors,"[4] the boy "had actually come on business, in the good faith of business which he had believed that all men accepted"; the young Thomas Sutpen "did expect to be listened to because he had come, been sent, on some business." Dazed, pained, his incoherent reactions whirling chaotically in the vortex of his disoriented life, he fled to a cave to examine his wound. Confronted with the inhuman response to him as an individual, indeed, the lack of recognition of him as an individual, the boy wondered what he could do to right his world. Trying desperately to think, with nothing in his experience to aid him, he kept repeating, "'He never even give me a chance to say it'" (p. 237). Torturously, he beat his way to a decision. He decided that he would need what they had: "land and niggers and a fine house" (p. 238) to insure his future recognition as a human being and to regain and keep his self respect.

When he adopted his grand design—to get what they had—the boy rejected his mountain heritage and accepted a materialistic one wherein a man was measured by his possessions. Property meant little on the frontier. Its dwellers were concerned with the necessities of existence; no one wanted more than he could use. To the boy the difference between men was "measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room" (p. 226). As a consequence of Sutpen's rejection of his heritage and his acceptance of another measurable by a social-economic criterion, John Lewis Longley perceptively attributes to Sutpen and his design the debacle of the

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[4] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Modern Library Edition; New York: Random House, Inc., 1951), p. 233.

lives of Henry, Judith, and Charles Bon.[5] Finally the man, blinded by his design, comes full circle and repeats the inhuman rejection of an individual, first toward his first-born son and again toward the mother of his last child. Furthermore, he ruthlessly uses his second son, Henry, and, in so using him, destroys him.

What kind of man could be so blinded by his design as was Thomas Sutpen? Attitudes of critics concerning Sutpen reflect various attitudes of characters and further underline the difficulty of arriving at truth. Walter Sullivan comments that Faulkner achieves tragic proportions for Sutpen through the attitudes of the characters who place Sutpen far above his fellow man.[6] Some critics, in trying to place Sutpen in the proper perspective, accord to him the status of a Byronic, Satanic, romantic hero. The character of Rosa Coldfield more than that of any other character invests Sutpen with a mysterious, demoniacal aura out of which such a concept of him arises. She prompts Quentin to imagine Sutpen violently wresting a plantation and gardens out of nothing, "creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*" (p. 9). A man possessed of colossal nerve living in a court-house sized bare house and calling it Sutpen's Hundred as if it were a manor house, a man whose face revealed that he could and would do anything, a demon who erupted out of thunder and dust, a brave, proud, ruthless man—this impression of Thomas Sutpen hardens from the metal poured out in Miss Rosa's words.

Longley, doubtless remembering the portrait of Satan in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, recognizes Sutpen's evil as Miltonic in proportion.[7] He admits that Sutpen's blindness renders him incapable of either foreseeing or recognizing evil. Vincent Hopper, who also belongs to the Satan-hero school, accords heroic stature to Sutpen alone of the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!* as Sutpen defies the omnipotent, the "blind undirected forces of nature."[8]

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[5] John Lewis Longley, "The Problem of Evil in Three Novels of William Faulkner" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Tennessee, 1949), p. 11.

[6] Walter Sullivan, "The Tragic Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, L (October, 1951), 555.

[7] Longley, "Problem," p. 7.

[8] Vincent Hopper, "Faulkner's Paradise Lost," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XXIII (1947), 412.

Cleanth Brooks, while writing of Sutpen's fall, considers Sutpen a heroic and tragic figure who achieves a kind of grandeur. But Brooks, along with certain other critics, clarifies this tragic stature. The noblest characters in Aristotelian terms experience self-recognition and through suffering learn the deepest truths about themselves. Since Sutpen remained blind about himself, he cannot epitomize the tragic hero.[9] Because of his blindness, Sutpen, juxtaposed against a Lear or an Oedipus, appears unheroic.

Faulkner uses Wash Jones to reinforce this facet of Sutpen: this opposition of contrasting forces. Wash Jones "would look at Sutpen and think *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*" (p. 282). And yet this same Wash Jones could think: "*Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth*" (p. 290). To Wash, Sutpen was bigger than all the Yankees and all the South, a man of superhuman dimension, a veritable fusion of God and devil. Furthermore, while Shreve and Quentin talked in the cold Massachusetts night, they too arrived at a Sutpen bigger than life. Michael Millgate suggests that Quentin finally realizes that Sutpen becomes "ultimately a defeated and tragic figure only because of his rigid adherence to principles of racial and social inhumanity."[10] *Above all* more accurately portrays the reason for Sutpen's unheroic end than does *only*. In truth, the design was placed above all.

Unhesitatingly, Faulkner admits that nobody knew the truth about Sutpen, that he was too big for Quentin or Miss Rosa or anybody to perceive fully. Pitying Sutpen as Faulkner would pity anyone "who does not believe that he belongs as a member of a human family,"[11] Faulkner considers that Sutpen "was not a depraved—he was amoral, he was ruthless, completely self-centered." Such a situation, that of being amoral, would seem to remove one from the realm of good and evil. Some critics consequently remove

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[9] Cleanth Brooks, "Faulkner's Vision of Good and Evil," *Massachusetts Review*, III (1962), 712.

[10] Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 157.

[11] Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University* (Charlottesville, Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 80; see also pp. 273-274.

Sutpen from the realm of morals. But those critics—like Longley who unequivocally writes that "Sutpen's failure springs from a defect of human feeling, the simple inability to feel and understand the feelings of others"[12] and Ilse Lind who, accurately recognizing that Sutpen never outgrows his innocence, describes the failure as "a 'minimal' response to human spirit and its needs"[13]—remove Sutpen, not from the realm of morals, but from the realm of humanity. They perceive the broader implication: Sutpen does not belong to a human family. Passion, sick dedication to his lost cause, incapacity to love, refusal to recognize simple human value—these critical phrases indicate Sutpen's subjugation to his own design and emphasize his inability to love.

James Justus contends that Sutpen demonstrates the total absence of love by his equating of people, like things, with objects and that Sutpen furthers his design "by an accumulation of objects—a respectable wife, slaves, an architect, children, even the respected tradition of the land and its people."[14] Sutpen's innocence, "that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (p. 263), appalled Quentin's grandfather. He recognized that Sutpen believed that he should be able to manipulate morality just as he should be able to manipulate humanity. Only a deadly kind of innocence could blind a man to his own blatant inhumanity to man. This lethal innocence-blindness leads Sutpen to violate the sanctity of human hearts and to commit Hawthorne's unforgivable sin.

Innocence, blindness, or whatever name one gives as a foundation for Thomas Sutpen's design does not mask the difference between Sutpen and David. David has human concern for his son. Joseph Wigley heightens the antithetical contrast to David:

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[12] John Lewis Longley, *The Tragic Mask* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 210.

[13] Ilse Dusoir Lind, "The Design and Meaning of *Absalom, Absalom!*," *PMLA*, LXX (December, 1955), 903.

[14] James H. Justus, "The Epic Design of *Absalom, Absalom!*" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, IV (1962), 171.

> The rocklike Sutpen, warring upon the world, refusing to see his first son, sacrificing both his sons to the sanctity of his "door," and denying the mother of his child the respect he shows to a brood mare, *may* be the prototype of "modern man"; he is not *humanity*.[15]

In scene after scene Faulkner, while emphasizing Sutpen's blindness toward himself and his children, Sutpen's lack of compassion and love for his children, and Sutpen's calculated manipulation of people, carefully constructs an inhuman man.

On the night of the hunt for the runaway French architect, Sutpen first mentions the wife whom he had left when he discovered that she could have no part in his plan. Thirty years later he speaks again of his design to Quentin's grandfather. Facing the time when he will not be able to father a child, trying to understand his situation, not questioning the morality of the design, Sutpen objectively tries to decide wherein lay his mistake. He does not seek counsel from Mr. Compson; he merely questions aloud the course his design must now adopt. His design had required "money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife" (p. 263). These he had set out to acquire in good faith first on a sugar plantation in Haiti. When he learned there, after the birth of his son, a fact which would prevent children of this wife from being incorporated into his design, he simply informed her of his position, resigned all right to her heritage, and left Haiti, believing that his account with his wife was settled. Years later when his first-born son, Charles Bon, appeared at Sutpen's Hundred as the house guest and college friend of the second-born son, Mr. Compson imagines that Sutpen "must have felt and heard the design—house, position, posterity and all—come down like it had been built out of smoke" (p. 267). This confrontation with his own first son Sutpen coldly refers to as a mistake. He fails completely to notice the repetition of the boy symbol: the child seeking recognition at the door. He experiences no sense of moral retribution; he merely wonders where he has erred. Such innocence,

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[15] Wigley, "Analysis of Imagery," p. 162.

blindness, or whatever seems utterly incomprehensible in a human father.

Miss Rosa's words that tell Quentin of Colonel Sutpen's return from the war graphically portray a still strong and determined, but aging, man. She relates that the man dismounted in front of his daughter and said:

> "Well, daughter" and stooped and touched his beard to Judith's forehead, who had not, did not, move, who stood rigid and still and immobile of face, and within which they spoke four sentences, four sentences of simple direct words behind beneath above which I felt that same rapport of communal blood which I had sensed that day while Clytie held me from the stairs: "Henry's not–?" "No. He's not here."–"Ah. And–?" "Yes. Henry killed him." (p. 159)

The cryptic exchange reveals that Henry has killed Charles Bon. Judith thinks that her brother has killed her lover; Thomas Sutpen knows that Henry has killed his own brother, Judith's lover, Sutpen's son. Miss Rosa continues that the young girl bursts into tears and vanishes and that the father turns immediately to the next matter at hand. This lack of any kind of reaction–if not grief over Bon's death, at least regret that Henry has been forced to murder–seems as incomprehensible in a human father as does Sutpen's quandary about his mistake.

Henry did not kill Bon to prevent an incestuous marriage between his half-brother and his sister. More lay behind the murder than the blood relationship. Shreve and Quentin romantically reconstruct the war years with Henry and Bon. They imagine Henry, secretly hoping that the war will settle his problem, pleading for Bon's decision about his octoroon wife and child and his marriage to Judith. They fancy that Henry is actually relieved when Bon confesses his decision to marry Judith. Tying Henry's acceptance of Bon's decision to war weariness and the losing condition of the South, the boys somewhat absolve Henry in his final capitulation. Further imagining that Bon will reject Judith even at the eleventh hour if his father will only recognize him, the boys reconstruct

Bon's poignant words: "'He will not even have to ask me; I will just touch flesh with him and I will say it myself: You will not need to worry; she shall never see me again'" (p. 348). No, Henry did not kill Bon to keep brother from marrying sister. Somehow Sutpen learned of Bon's determination and of Henry's acquiescence. He now had to play his last card. Quentin's grandfather remembered that Sutpen arrived at the camp, spoke briefly to Henry, and rode away almost immediately. Shreve and Quentin dramatically reenact the scene in which Sutpen informed Henry of Bon's Negro blood. Henry, triggered by his father's revelation, begs Bon to spare Judith an ignominious mixed marriage. Bon retorts that Sutpen "'didn't need to tell you I am a nigger to stop me. He could have stopped me without that, Henry'" (p. 356). But Sutpen did not stop Bon; instead, he forced Henry to do the job. Sutpen knew what Henry, once possessed of complete knowledge of Bon, would do. The father, knowing his son, thus caused one son to kill the other. The boys rode together to the very gate of Sutpen's Hundred, where Henry shot and killed his brother. Is such devious manipulation of character, such sacrificing of two sons to an impersonal design possible to a human father?

Sutpen has now destroyed both sons. But his intrepid will forces him to consider beginning again. Hence he proposes marriage to Rosa if she first bears him a son. Affronted, the virginal old maid refuses. Sutpen, feeling time's winged chariot hovering ever closer, courts Wash Jones' granddaughter, who in time bears him a child. When Sutpen hears that Milly has borne him a daughter instead of a son, he denies "the mother of his child the respect he shows to a brood mare" and commits his ultimate act of inhumanity. His inhuman words: "'Well, Milly; too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable'" (p. 286), arouse in Wash Jones the realization, fatal to Sutpen, that Wash, Milly, and the baby have no human worth to Sutpen. Wash kills Sutpen with the weapon nearest his hand, a scythe. The boy child, wounded and permanently scarred by the wound, has hurt his last victim; the boy child, rejected as an individual, has rejected his last individual, has committed his last inhuman act. He has destroyed his sons and now himself.

Although no normal father-son relationship exists between Thomas Sutpen and his two sons, the father exercises a pervasive influence over the boys. Ironically, the first-born son, who is totally rejected as an agent for the design, manifests the determination of purpose necessary to implement a grand design. Charles Bon dedicates himself to his design just as totally as Thomas Sutpen did to his; Bon exhibits the same Sutpen tenacity as he continually seeks his father's recognition. But revenge does not motivate Bon's design. The human craving for the acknowledgment of the blood relationship drives him. He never intends to use the recognition as a weapon.

Bon arrives at Sutpen's Hundred much as Sutpen arrived at Jefferson: a grown man sprung from nowhere. A splendid, somewhat elegant, sophisticated creature, Bon inspires love as his father never did. Judith sees Bon only twice before he goes to the war. For four years Bon keeps his bargain with Henry and does not write to Judith. And yet when Henry finally overcomes his objection to Bon's morganatic marriage and its product, accepts the idea of the incestuous marriage, and allows Bon to write Judith about their marriage, she needs no other prompting. Henry, at first unaware of the blood relationship, adores, indeed idolizes, Bon. He adopts Bon's way of dressing and his method of riding (even though Henry's is superior); Henry even changes his course to law at mid-term. Hoping the information will cause Henry to reject Bon (at least as a suitor for Judith), the father tells the younger son of Bon's octoroon wife and child. Instead of rejecting Bon, the boy, although aware in his heart of the probability of Bon's marriage, rejects his father as a liar. Henry then goes with Bon to New Orleans to see for himself the woman and child and knows when he sees them that Bon will not renounce them. After four years of waiting for Bon to sever this connection, Henry wearily gives in to the brother whom he loves above everything. When Sutpen finds out about Henry's capitulation to Bon and faces the certain destruction of the design, the father plays his last trump. He could have kept silent and let Bon marry Judith. But to Sutpen this consequence would have made a mockery of his design and would have betrayed the little boy who had been turned away from the front door. Instead, he chooses to destroy his design with

his own hand. He tells Henry of Bon's Negro blood. Bon's reconstructed words: " '*So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can't bear*' " (p. 356), mark his death. Bon continues talking, and Henry realizes that Bon will persist in his plan to marry Judith. Bon, just as determined as his father, plays his last trump to force his father to recognize him. When Mr. Compson tells Quentin that Henry "loved grieved and killed, still grieving and, I believe, still loving Bon" (p. 97), he delineates the ambivalence in Henry's character.

Since Thomas Sutpen cannot manipulate Bon, he feels himself forced to cause Bon's removal. This he can do by using Henry, who is less of a Sutpen than is Bon. In Henry's dogged devotion to Bon in the face of bigamy and incest, he surely exemplifies the Sutpen tenacity. But when he allows himself to be his father's instrument, Henry's stature shifts. Judith, always more of a Sutpen than Henry, will doubtless marry Bon in the full knowledge of his Negro blood. Since Henry knows Judith's character, he feels that he must kill Bon to prevent the marriage. This difference between Judith and Henry manifested itself early in their lives. As a little girl Judith could lie in the loft and avidly watch her father pit his Negroes against each other and finally enter the arena himself, naked to the waist, as much a beast as the others: fighting, gouging, maintaining his physical superiority. But the same sight would sicken Henry, who would run crying and vomiting from the scene. Judith, not Henry, urged the Negro driver to race the carriage to church just as their father had. Mr. Compson reminded Quentin that Judith exhibited "the ruthless Sutpen code of taking what it wanted provided it were strong enough" (p. 120). If Judith wants Bon, she will take him; she will not hold a moral debate with herself between what is right and what she wants. Mr. Compson, while ascribing "the Coldfield cluttering of morality and rules of right and wrong" (p. 120) to Henry, emphasizes the difference between the children. He describes the provincial Henry "given to instinctive and violent action rather than to thinking" (p. 96). The careful construction of Henry as one who felt and acted immediately opposes the equally careful construction of the cosmopolitan older brother whose every action was predicated on thought. Thus Henry's killing of the person he loves above all becomes credible.

Thomas Sutpen's actions alone remain incredible–incredible, that is, if they belong to a human, credible only if they proceed from inhumanity. The man engages himself in mortal conflict with the world: to build a dynasty to insure his recognition as a human being. For implements he needs sons. He feels compelled to reject the first son and plans to build with the second. But when the first reappears, endangering the design, the now aging man razes the temple himself. Amid the ruins lies one son dead, the other a murderer. Undaunted, though older, Sutpen tries to rebuild from the ruins. Ironically, he fails to excavate for a new foundation. The bitter irony increases as the man gropes blindly amid the same rotten timber. Rosa Coldfield rejects his crass proposal to get another boy child, but his education of Wash Jones' granddaughter Milly succeeds. When Milly bears him a daughter instead of another implement, he insults her viciously. Wash Jones now plays the role of the boy turned away from the door; he protests Sutpen's inhumanity to Milly, the baby, and him. But the superb irony is wasted on Sutpen who fails to notice the repetition of the pattern: his refusal to recognize individual human worth.