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Absalom, Absalom!: Faust in Mississippi,
or, The Fall of the House of Sutpen

by Elizabeth M. Kerr

Gothicism in William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels is pervasive and varied; no two of these novels are closely similar in the strategies by which Faulkner adapted the distinctive features of Gothic fiction to serve his own purposes. Therefore, I shall concentrate on *Absalom, Absalom!* as representing the quintessence of Gothicism in Faulkner. My specific title will be better understood as I proceed: "*Absalom, Absalom!*: Faust in Mississippi, or, The Fall of the House of Sutpen." My introductory remarks will serve to remind this select audience of how other Yoknapatawpha novels illustrate these features.

The term *Gothic novel* is used with reference both to the original Gothic novel, as dealt with in literary history, and to modern fiction by significant writers which continues the Gothic tradition in order to evoke terror by exploring the darker side of modern life. The Gothic romance which has burgeoned for the last fifteen years or so exhibits the same basic features as the Gothic novel, past or present, but exorcizes terror, often spurious, by a predictable happy ending. In America, these romances are but a shallow, though enticing, branch of the deep and dark waters of what might be called the Father of Waters of American novels, the Mississippi to which Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha stream is a chief tributary.

The Gothic novel, which originated in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), anticipated and then accompanied Romanticism in literature in the revolt against the Age of Reason. Feeling, imagination, the instinctive side of man's nature and his darker impulses again became the concern of poets and novelists. The development of Gothic fiction in England was paralleled, with some time lag, by that of American Gothic. From the beginning, Gothic fiction linked medieval romance with romantic novels in such aspects as setting, time, character types, and themes. The Gothic novel as a subgenre disappeared because it became mingled with the main stream of novels: in England, in the works of Sir Walter Scott, the Brontës, and

Victorian novelists, particularly Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy; in America, in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. Certain elements have characterized Gothicism from its origin to the present: concern with the irrational and the unconscious aspects of the psyche; the use of setting and atmosphere to create a mood and to stimulate the imagination; the heightening of interest by mystery and suspense; the abandonment of realism as a major aim.

What might be called the naturalization of Gothicism in America is traced by Leslie Fiedler in his indispensable study, *Love and Death in the American Novel*.¹ Fiedler's analysis of Gothic fiction provides a basis for identification of Gothic elements in Faulkner's works which show his relation to both the European and the American tradition and which distinguish his influential contribution to American literature.

According to Fiedler, Gothic fiction in America differs in themes from that in Europe by substituting terror for love, death for sexuality, and dream and imagination for reason. The dream of Europe became the nightmare of America: the Age of Reason was inadequate as a philosophic basis for the conquest, in the New World, of the primitive in nature and in man. Behind Gothic terror lies the dream which men have pursued in their quest for truth, beauty, and happiness. Behind the popular Gothic romance, with its happy ending in which the daydream comes true, remains its shadow, the Gothic novel with its undispeled nightmare. As Blanche Gelfant said, "the obverse side of a Romantic aspiration toward beauty" is "a fascination with the horrendous."² The darkness and mystery of night and the dream side of the psyche are the essence of Gothicism. *American Dreams, American Nightmares* is a collection of essays dealing with the American experience, not with Gothic fiction: the title, however suggests the relevance of that experience to Gothic interpretation. From the nightmare of Europe, which Gothic novels and fiction with Gothic elements had reflected since 1764, settlers fled to the Eden of America, bringing with them their Utopian dreams. At the present time, despair over the fading of the dream and the prevalence of the nightmare is reflected in the upsurge of

¹Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., Delta Books, 1967).

²Blanche H. Gelfant, "Faulkner and Keats: The Ideality of Art in 'The Bear,'" *The Southern Literary Journal*, 2 (Fall 1969), 46.

Gothicism. The nightmare aspects of Gothicism, the perils, the horrors, the grotesque disorder, are heightened by mystery and suspense, but essentially the nightmare effect is created by the revelation of the blackness in human nature.

In both European and American Gothic, the psychic horrors include sexual perversions and aberrations. Relevant to these are the medieval tradition of courtly love and the related sentimental cult of chastity. Leslie Fiedler explained the consequent conflict of values: "The idealized codes of love demanded the pure love of the mistress; the flesh required sexual satisfaction; the love of God demanded the renunciation of both."³ The male-tempter and female-savior pattern, set up by the Clarissa Harlow tradition and the Faust-Gretchen story, was represented by basic character types common to both medieval romance and Gothic fiction. Woman was split, as Fiedler said, "into Dark Lady and Fair Maiden, savior and tempter, between whom the helpless male is eternally torn." Fiedler also explained that, in the American development, "The symbolic vacuum left by the deposition of the Father is filled by the figure of woman, as Maiden and Mother," as the consequence of the conflict between "salvationist myths" and St. Paul's concept, stressed in Calvinistic Protestantism, "of the female as tempter."⁴

The figure of woman as Maiden or Mother fostered the ideal of innocence, which was to be preserved in women mentally by taboos and physically by the rejection of sexuality except as a wifely duty. The youth of both sexes might, by rejecting sexuality, come to reject also maturity and reality. Hence the prevalence of taboo subjects, such as sexual perversion and miscegenation: knowledge of such subjects is attained by mature recognition of reality. Rejection of adult sexuality may contribute to narcissism and the narcissistic brother-sister incest, the most frequent kind in Gothic fiction: each is seeking the self in the other. Homosexuality, which in the family may be rooted in narcissism, is another kind of evasion of mature responsibility. In the South, the most prevalent and most abhorrent sexual offense is miscegenation, which Leslie Fiedler regards as "the secret theme" of *The Last of the Mohicans* and "of the Leatherstocking Tales as a whole."⁵ It is almost but not quite the secret theme of *Absalom, Absalom!*.

³Fiedler, p. 54.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 68, 79.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 205. Fiedler is inclined to see interracial homosexuality in any black and white male pair, regardless of age and circumstances, if they are on amicable terms.

Leslie Fiedler stresses the absence in the American novel of adult, heterosexual love. The transformations of European Gothic themes to express the "obsessive concerns" of American life, as identified by Fiedler, are all exemplified in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels. Romantic solitude sought in the Alps by travelling gentlemen was found in the New World by pioneers in primeval forests or unbroken prairies. Flight to escape oppressive society became in America flight from women and society to the wilderness and male companions. The iniquities of the Old World authoritarian church and state and the corrupt social institutions were matched by New World exploitation of nature and of man, as in the plantation system and Negro slavery. Anti-Catholicism gave place to anti-Calvinism. The defiance of damnation by Faust, "the diabolic bargain," became the center of the American Gothic novel, with the New World as the vast stage for superhuman ambition. In a society founded by rebels, rebels and outcasts could be redeemed in the general Romantic revolt against the past and its values. The supernatural had to be replaced by psychological phenomena which modern readers could accept or at least regard with "a willing suspension of disbelief": these phenomena include universal experiences such as dreams, rare occurrences, special psychic powers, and psychological abnormalities.

Common in both European and American Gothic novels are traditional character types. Prominent among leading male characters are heroes or villain-heroes descended from Elizabethan drama, culminating in the Faustian or Byronic hero—handsome, melancholy, mysterious, and passionate, with exceptional capacity for both good and evil.⁶ The Faustian hero has the additional quality of demonic power. The more virtuous romantic hero is less interesting. The leading female characters offer parallels to the males: the persecuted maiden rescued by the romantic hero is contrasted with the evil strong woman, often dark, and sometimes a prostitute. Faithful servants are likely to provide comic relief.

⁶ In *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism* (1927; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1964), Eino Railo traces the development of the Byronic hero in English literature (Chapter VI, "The Byronic Hero"). The type appeared in Gothic romance and in Scott's narrative poems before Byron gave it his name. Eric Bentley notes that villains in melodrama "stem from the archvillain Lucifer": "Melodrama," in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, Robert W. Corrigan, ed. (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965), p. 221.

Most typical of Gothic fiction and least common in other kinds of narrative are the grotesque characters, who are abnormal in appearance, capacities, and actions. Whether *grotesque* is limited to characters or is extended to imagery and to incongruous juxtapositions of all kinds, the terrible and the ludicrous are combined in some distortion of what is regarded as natural and pleasing, some nightmarish violation of the daylight world, some chaotic disruption of order and harmony. Without referring to Gothic fiction, Ihab Hassan notes the prevalence and the effect of the grotesque in Southern writers: "The grotesque, as clown and scapegoat, is both comic and elegiac, revolting and pathetic."⁷

Of the three images with which Irving Malin deals in *The New American Gothic*, the archetypal castle or its equivalent is prevalent in both popular Gothic romance and serious Gothic novels. Malin's second image, the voyage into the forest, also has been present in Gothic fiction from its beginning: in the American dream and the American experience, the solitude, mystery, and danger of the wilderness dominate the transformation of the Gothic into an American genre. A third kind of setting adds another nightmare image: enclosed places, representing retreat and asylum or imprisonment or both. Taking the phrase from Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Malin refers to the "other room" in the haunted castle, "the 'final door' through which the ghost-like forces march." The other room is the transformation in New American Gothic of the haunted castle, "the metaphor of confining narcissism, the private world."⁸

On the cover of paperback Gothic romances the castle is the background for the figure of a girl in flight. Flight is one of three Gothic narrative patterns of dream-like motion. The Persecuted Maiden may be fleeing, as Fiedler noted, "through a world of ancestral and infantile fears projected in dreams"; pursued by the villain and threatened with violation, she may also be fleeing from her own darker impulses. But the flight of the "typical protagonist of our fiction," Fiedler said, has been away from civilization, away from "the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to

⁷ Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 78. Most of the works cited by Hassan as exemplifying grotesques are thoroughly Gothic.

⁸ Irving Malin, *New American Gothic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp. 11, 80.

sex, marriage, and responsibility.”⁹ The hero may also be a man in flight from guilt, pursued by conscience and justice. In contrast with the flight–pursuit pattern is the quest, the positive voyage or journey directed toward a goal; it may be a quest for self–realization, for an initiatory encounter with the world. Dealing with some of the same post–Faulknerian authors that Irving Malin does, Ihab Hassan sees this fiction as ironic tragi–comedy, “a parody of man’s quest for fulfillment.”¹⁰ The quest may, however, be literally the equivalent of a familiar traditional theme, the search for identity which involves ascertaining the facts of one’s parentage and finding one’s father and family. The quest may be an evil one, such as murderous revenge, or a noble one, such as a search for truth and justice.

A third pattern of motion, purposeless wandering, contrasts with both flight and quest. The stories of Cain and Ishmael and the Wandering Jew have been absorbed into the Gothic tradition: wandering imposed as a doom or punishment casts a man out of society, sometimes literally into the wilderness.

The American naturalization of Gothicism was particularly easy in the South, where the plantation world somewhat resembled feudal society and where the ruined or dilapidated plantation mansion, like the Gothic castle, symbolized the collapse of a social order. The influence of Sir Walter Scott transmitted and preserved the Gothic tradition in the South and strengthened the Southern white Protestant version of medieval courtly love, the cult of the white goddess which could evoke fervid devotion only in a racially mixed society. Furthermore, Calvinistic repression of sex moved from New England to the South during the religious awakening of the early 1800’s, with the consequent equating of sin and sex; the image of woman as temptress became the obverse of the image of woman as savior. Fiedler sums up this duality by saying that the underside of adoration was “fear and contempt”: women were goddesses or bitches.¹¹

In America, only the South could provide writers with an emotionally satisfying parallel for the ruined castle. But the mood of tender melancholy inspired by the Southern ruin has a personal, family, and community significance lacking in most Gothic haunted

⁹Fiedler, p. 26.

¹⁰Hassan, p. 118.

¹¹Fiedler, p. 312.

castles. The Gothic romance and the Gothic novel were naturalized particularly and uniquely in the South.

Thus the South provided William Faulkner with a reality which could be depicted with the strong contrasts of the Gothic genre to reveal social and psychological truths less accessible to purely realistic and objective treatment. Seldom, however, does the modern Southern Gothic novel play it straight and depict society and characters in conventional fashion, in terms of the myth and the tradition. As in *Absalom, Absalom!*, strategies such as point of view, discontinuity, ironic inversion, exaggeration, and parody are employed to give new meaning to the old formulas and, in Fiedler's words, to evoke "the nightmare terror," the "blackness of blackness."¹²

Cleanth Brooks aptly describes *Absalom, Absalom!* as the greatest and least understood of Faulkner's novels; "more than a bottle of Gothic sauce to be used to spice up our preconceptions about the history of American society."¹³ But analysis of the ingredients of that bottle of Gothic sauce is useful in discovering how, out of traditional elements, Faulkner concocted a strikingly original work which by its implications reveals truths about American society and universal human passions. Albert J. Guerard, in reference to Thomas Hardy, observed that "what both surrealism and naturalism discovered was more than Gothic horror" and continued: "William Faulkner has consistently used the distortions of popular story-telling—exaggeration, grotesque horror, macabre coincidences—to achieve his darker truth; they are part of his reading of life."¹⁴ In *Absalom, Absalom!* that darker truth is "darkness to appall."

The significance of the Gothic tradition in any one of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels can be fully appreciated only when Gothic elements in setting, character types, themes, patterns of action, scenes, and episodes are identified. The setting of *Absalom, Absalom!* represents Faulkner's most impressive use of the moralized landscape which, as Fiedler remarked, has been taken over by later Southern writers, largely women: ". . . Mississippi has taken on for the imagination of the world the symbolic values attributed in the

¹²Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), p. 18.

¹³Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 295, 296.

¹⁴Albert J. Guerard, *Thomas Hardy: The Novels and Stories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 4.

earliest years of the gothic to Italy. Against a background of miasmic swamps and sweating black skins, the Faulknerian syndrome of disease, death, defeat, mutilation, idiocy, and lust continues to evoke in the stories of these writers a shudder once compelled only by the supernatural.”¹⁵

Absalom, Absalom! is the only novel by Faulkner in which the entire history of the “haunted castle” is given, from the time when it was created in the primeval wilderness by brute force directed by inflexible will. The mansion is first seen in its pristine state against a wilderness, then as the center of a prosperous plantation, followed by gradual decline during the Civil War until it was a “rotting shell” of a house surrounded by “fallow and rain-gutted and briar-choked old fields” when it finally went up in flames. William York Tindall recognized the house as the central image, a symbol to Quentin of the South.¹⁶ The creation of the house, as part of the Design conceived by a Faustian ambition, and its destruction are effected within two generations: Henry, son of Thomas Sutpen, was destroyed with the house after a four-year living entombment in that mausoleum, as Shreve called it. This compression and use of the recent past is an American modification of the Gothic traditional settings, relics of old civilizations and often remote in both time and place. The “castle” is haunted—by Henry, by Quentin, to whom the past was more vivid than the present, and finally by Jim Bond, the shadowy symbol of the retribution visited upon the Sutpen family in this “house of Atreus.”

The other “castle” is an ironic inversion of the tradition: in the unpainted, shabby, tomb-like Coldfield house, with its “quality of grim endurance” (p. 10), the “princess” Rosa was immured, a princess whom no prince ever wooed save with an unspeakable, outrageous proposal, a princess who was born old and never grew up, a rose who knew neither bud nor bloom in the “Coldfield” of her hate. The inversion is given an extra twist: not the princess but her father, by his own volition, was shut in a tower where he died.

Within both of these castles are closed rooms; those at Coldfield’s are the room where Quentin and Miss Rosa talked, “dim hot airless” (p. 7); the attic room into which her father nailed himself and died

¹⁵Fiedler, *Love and Death*, p. 475.

¹⁶William York Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Midland Books, c1955), p. 264.

of starvation; the room outside which the child Rosa listened at closed doors and from one of which her aunt made her escape. In the Sutpen house the "other rooms" include the one in which the fourteen-year-old Rosa, lurking from "one forbidden door to the next" saw the picture of Charles Bon (pp. 145, 147); the room in which, behind a closed door, Charles Bon was placed in his coffin; the darkened room to which Ellen Coldfield Sutpen retreated to live her last years; the "bare, stale room whose shutters were closed too" (p. 373) where Ellen's son Henry lived his last consumptive years and where he burned to death. All of these rooms, like the old Gothic dungeons and towers, symbolize the isolation and alienation of the characters, whose stories Quentin and Shreve recount in a closed room at Harvard of a frigid January night.

As the castle is translated into American terms, splendid or humble, so the characters show original variations and inversions of Gothic types, gaining significance by the deviations. At first glance, the Sutpen family resembles that of romances and *Clarissa Harlow* in which a tyrannical, patriarchal father tries to force his persecuted daughter to marry or forbids her to, unhindered in his purpose by his suffering and ineffective wife. Though Thomas and Ellen Sutpen fit the character types of the parents, Sutpen's interference with Judith's marriage plans is well justified and is only a minor aspect of his role. He is a Faustian obsessed hero-villain, exemplifying the "diabolic bargain" which Fiedler regards as central to the total significance of the Gothic novel.¹⁷ From the time Sutpen as a boy was turned away from the front door by a liveried Negro servant, he was driven, Rosa said, by a "compelling dream which was insane" (p. 166): she did not know the origin of the dream. The dream begat the nightmare, and both are characteristic of Gothic emphasis on the dream aspects of life. Northrop Frye, referring to one kind of tragic hero, very precisely described such a study of obsession as Faulkner's: "the obsession takes the form of an unconditioned will that drives its victim beyond the moral limits of humanity."¹⁸ William Brown identifies Sutpen's obsession as a paranoiac dream of grandeur, involving extravagant aspiration. Typical of paranoiacs is the

¹⁷Fiedler, *Love and Death*, p. 134.

¹⁸Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 40.

flaw that doomed him to failure, the innocence which made him unaware of the feelings of others.¹⁹

The other Sutpens also show original variations on typical Gothic characters. As romantic hero and heroine, Henry and Judith show a reversal of masculine and feminine characteristics: Judith was fascinated by seeing her father fight with Negroes, but Henry was nauseated. Judith, never the sentimental heroine, was always courageous and resolute, and during the Civil War played the role of the man of the family. Clytie, the faithful servant in the Gothic cast of characters, was never used for comic relief. Wash Jones, another faithful but somewhat comic servant of peculiarly American nature, did not become "a criminal tool of the tyrant," like some Shakespearean and Gothic servants.²⁰ On the contrary, in a final assertion of manhood he cast off his subservience and murdered the master he had faithfully served.

Sutpen's other family connections swell the roster of typical characters with untypical variations. Like Ellen, Eulalia Bon was a suffering wife, but both wives had married willingly and Sutpen did not deliberately inflict suffering on either. He outraged Rosa but did not persecute her; when she fled he did not pursue. Milly, the only victim of seduction, was willing and was easily bought, with the tacit approval of her grandfather. Charles Bon doubles with Henry as a romantic hero, but his glamorous charms slightly suggest the Don Juan type. Malcolm Cowley's description of *Absalom, Absalom!* identifies Charles as a Byronic hero: "It seems to belong to the realm of Gothic romances, with Sutpen's Hundred taking the place of the haunted castle on the Rhine, with Colonel Sutpen as Faust and Charles Bon as Manfred."²¹ Judith is the romantic heroine; traditionally her rival, the octoroon wife of Charles Bon, would be the Evil Dark Woman contrasted with the fair and delicate heroine. But the octoroon wife is more delicate and romantic than Judith and mourns at the grave of Bon while Judith stands calmly apart, "in the attitude of an indifferent guide in a museum" (p. 194).

The most obvious Gothic heroine is Miss Rosa, whose initial narra-

¹⁹William R. Brown, "William Faulkner's Use of the Material of Abnormal Psychology in Characterization" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Arkansas, 1965), pp. 127, 116, 138, 143.

²⁰Railo, *The Haunted Castle*, p. 51.

²¹Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), p. 13.

tive sets the Gothic tone. She is grotesque in appearance, like “a crucified child” in her too-tall chair. As Peter Swiggart notes, she is a kind of satire on Southern romanticism,²² with her poems to Confederate heroes, her dream-romance inspired by a picture of Charles Bon, her ludicrous attempts to play a feminine role. Her grotesqueness includes her becoming, in her dream of love, “all polymath love’s androgynous advocate” (p. 146). Her flight from Sutpen, unpursued, after her brief dream of being the sun in his life, was a return to the prison of her own house, where she became even in her own sight a “warped bitter orphaned country stick” (p. 168).

The actual center of the Gothic tale is Quentin Compson, to whom the story was told and retold until he not only lived it more intensely than his own experience—“*If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain*” (p. 190)—but identified himself with Henry, as Shreve identified with Charles Bon. The theme of the double, suggested by the passages when “it was not two but four of them riding two horses” (p. 334), is recurrent in Gothic fiction. The identification of Shreve and Quentin with Charles Bon and Henry suggests that the homosexuality ascribed by Mr. Compson to Henry, in explaining Henry’s attitude toward Bon, is true also of Quentin. Similarly, the incestuous love of Henry for Judith, in Mr. Compson’s account, is paralleled in *The Sound and the Fury* by that of Quentin for Caddy, whose existence is not even hinted at in *Absalom, Absalom!*, by narrators or in Quentin’s verbalized thoughts. Deviations from normal sexuality are climaxed in the marriage of Charles Bon’s son to a subhuman black woman. The fruit of this union is the last grotesque, the idiot Jim Bond. Rosa’s dehumanizing descriptions of Sutpen and Clytie and Mr. Compson’s butterfly metaphor for Ellen contribute to the impression of grotesqueness.

With such American-Gothic adaptations of setting and character types, the story of Sutpen as reconstructed by the narrators is a tragic Gothic tale of inheritance and doom. Within the total scope of the novel are encompassed all six phases of tragedy according to Northrop Frye’s categories, ending with the “undisplaced demonic vision” in which the chief symbols of that vision, the prison and the madhouse, are threats removed only by the burning of the house and the deaths of Clytie and Henry. Jim Bond is still threatened. But

²²Peter Swiggart, *The Art of William Faulkner’s Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 152.

despite the impressiveness of Sutpen as the hero in “the typical fall of the hero through hybris or hamartia,”²³ he is not truly a tragic hero. Robert Heilman distinguishes between the tragic hero who faces “basic conflicts,” “errs knowingly or involuntarily,” and “comes into a new, larger awareness” and the hero of melodrama who is “pitted against some force outside himself” and does not experience inner conflict.²⁴ The strongly melodramatic qualities in Sutpen as a villain—hero and the shift in emphasis from the fourth phase of tragedy, the fall of the hero, to the other five and to the fates of his victims contribute to the dominance of the Gothic over the tragic; this dominance is reinforced by the other elements of Gothicism.

Sutpen is a Faust figure, a man on a quest to achieve his superhuman Design. All of his physical journeys after he left the Tidelands as a boy were in pursuit of his Grand Design: to establish an estate and a dynasty which would, as Faulkner said, “take revenge for all the redneck people against the aristocrat who told him to go around to the back door.” His basic innocence, his belief that he could live by a rational design to be achieved by willpower, resulted in what Faulkner referred to as a “dehumanizing contempt for people.”²⁵ The humiliation which gave rise to Sutpen’s design was suffered in turn, ironically and fatally, by Wash Jones: his murder of Sutpen is thus parallel to Sutpen’s Design: revenge for humiliation by an act of self—assertion in defense of honor. Wash was sane; he reacted in hot blood against the man who treated him and Milly as less than animals and gave his own life to defend his honor. Sutpen was paranoiac; he carried out his Design in cold logic, far from the source of his traumatic humiliation. In effect, Sutpen becomes the double of the white planter who had him turned away from the door, but whom Sutpen’s Design had left unscathed.

Because Sutpen’s Design required a dynasty, his story involves the Gothic theme of inheritance. But the traditional refusal of the usurper to recognize the rightful heir becomes Sutpen’s refusal to recognize his own rightful heir, his elder son Charles Bon. Like Walpole’s Manfred, Sutpen turned to seduction as a last desperate means of preserving his dynasty. Manfred’s designs on Isabella, who

²³Frye, pp. 223, 221.

²⁴Robert B. Heilman, “Tragedy and Melodrama,” in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, Robert W. Corrigan, ed., pp. 248, 254.

²⁵William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 97.

was to have been his daughter-in-law, Isabella regarded as incestuous. Sutpen's designs on Rosa, his sister-in-law, would in English law have been incestuous in 1866 as in Shakespeare's time. Thus incest is suggested as a symbol of family continuity in all three Sutpen men, father and sons.²⁶

Unlike the traditional Gothic, however, the story of Sutpen and his Design, compressed into one community from 1833 to 1910, epitomizes a whole society. The relationship between Sutpen and Charles Bon, Faulkner said, "was a manifestation of a general racial system in the South," a "constant general condition."²⁷ This use of the Gothic to present social conditions in a powerfully imaginative heightening of a continuing reality is an achievement in the new American Gothic in which Faulkner is still unsurpassed.

Central to *Absalom, Absalom!* is the father-son relationship. The story of Charles Bon, as reconstructed by the narrators, also follows the quest pattern in developing the romance of Charles and Judith and in the theme of the search for identity and a father. The image of the journey in Bon's story centers in Sutpen's Hundred until the Civil War turned the quest for love to the quest for honor. The crucial journey of Bon and Henry to New Orleans, in December, 1860, followed Sutpen's journey there in search of evidence of Bon's identity. After the war, Charles's return to the quest for love, foreshadowed by his letter to Judith, brought upon him the fate to which his blood doomed him: Henry shot him to prevent incestuous miscegenation. According to the conjectures of Shreve and Quentin, Henry could condone simple incest. In a kind of desperate irony, Charles Etienne, son of Charles Bon, also defied the doom of blood but did so by marrying a primitive, brutish Negress. Cleanth Brooks observed that the pertinence of the Sutpen story "to the tragic dilemmas of the South" lies in the story of the children, "which embodied the problem of evil and the irrational."²⁸ The Gothic aspects underline these meanings.

Miss Rosa emphasizes the theme of doom and retribution; igno-

²⁶Brown, pp. 143, 145. In Chapter 5, "Two Wives, One Mother-in-Law," of *Roads to Ruin: The Shocking History of Social Reform* (Penguin Books, 1966), E. S. Turner deals with the struggle in England to legalize marriage to a sister-in-law, which was opposed on the grounds that it would legalize incest (p. 111); the Bill was finally carried in 1907.

²⁷Faulkner in the University, p. 94.

²⁸Brooks, pp. 319, 318.

rant of Sutpen's motives and the identity of Charles, she did in fact see the Design ruined and the children destroyed and was the victim of his treatment of people like animals. The authentic Gothic note, sounded in her references to "the two accursed children" and their "devil's heritage" (p. 135), is echoed by other narrators. Observing the patterns of "jurisprudential metaphor" in Miss Rosa's narrative, Marvin K. Singleton sees the frame of the novel as like a hearing on a Bill in Chancery before Quentin and Shreve. The medieval allusions and imagery, the feudal aspects of the plantation world and Sutpen's concept of his role, and Sutpen's pompous, legalistic speech further contribute to the Dickensian impression, appropriate to the Gothic mode, of age-old tradition and heritage. Singleton finds that the retelling of the Sutpen story resembles the custom in equity pleading that "Bills in Equity characteristically contained the same story, told three times over, though with a slightly different tonal emphasis each time. . . ." ²⁹ The destruction of the House of Sutpen is justified by divine and human justice.

The title Faulkner finally chose, *Absalom, Absalom!*, ³⁰ is a clue to the theme of inheritance. Because Sutpen's desire to found a dynasty was stronger than his paternal feeling, he never uttered the lament for either of his sons that David did for Absalom. All Sutpen needed was a male substitute for Henry. The title suggests another essential theme, brother-sister incest. Absalom killed another son of David, Amnon, for violating their sister, Tamar (II Samuel, 13). Henry, represented as desiring Judith himself and countenancing her incestuous marriage to Bon, killed Bon to prevent miscegenation. Thus the Biblical theme of brother-sister incest, not condoned by Absalom, becomes the Southern theme of miscegenation. The mystery of why Henry killed Bon is solved only at the end of the penultimate chapter, though Miss Rosa told about the murder in Chapter V. Thus Faulkner used the Gothic technique of suspense to give maximum force to this crucial explanation.

²⁹ Marvin K. Singleton, "Personae at Law and in Equity: The Unity of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 3 (Fall 1967), 367.

³⁰ The stages of composition of *Absalom, Absalom!* are traced by Joseph Blotner in *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1974). In the spring of 1933, Faulkner was trying to combine "Wash" and "Evangeline" with the title *A Dark House* (Blotner, p. 828). In the fall of 1934 he wrote to Harrison Smith: "I have a title for it which I like . . . : ABSALOM, ABSALOM!; the story is of a man who wanted a son through pride, and got too many of them and they destroyed him" (p. 854).

As revealing Quentin's quest for truth and understanding, of himself and the South, *Absalom, Absalom!* takes on a new dimension. His quest involved one physical journey, with Miss Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred, to find the solution to the mystery. The role of Quentin as listener and narrator, pondering over, wondering about, and reconstructing the Sutpen story, Faulkner expanded in revision to heighten the Gothic mystery and suspense,³¹ and to establish Quentin as the dominant character.

The first five chapters, preceding Quentin's journey to Sutpen's Hundred in September, 1909, contain Miss Rosa's information about the Sutpen–Coldfield story, the only first-hand information provided by a character–narrator. The Gothic tone is established both by Quentin's impressions and memories, in the “dim coffin-smelling gloom” of the wisteria-scented Coldfield house, and by Miss Rosa's account of the ogre of her childhood who became the hero whom she agreed to marry. Her summary of events includes Gothic “castle,” doom, heritage, hubris, violence, and mystery.

I saw what had happened to Ellen, my sister. I saw her almost a recluse, watching those two doomed children growing up whom she was helpless to save. I saw the price which she had paid for that house and that pride; . . . I saw Judith's marriage forbidden without rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse; I saw Ellen die with only me, a child, to turn to and ask to protect her remaining child; I saw Henry repudiate his home and birthright and then return and practically fling the bloody corpse of his sister's sweetheart at the hem of her wedding gown; I saw that man return—the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims—who had created two children not only to destroy one another and his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him. (p. 18)

The Gothic strategy here is not surprise but expectation: the question is not what happened but why. On review of the passage, the limitations of Miss Rosa's and the town's knowledge are apparent. To that knowledge, Mr. Compson, in Chapters II and III, added his conjectures about some of the mysteries indicated in Miss Rosa's summary and about the characters of the Sutpens and the

³¹ On March 30, 1935, Faulkner made a fresh start on the novel about Sutpen, with the title *Absalom, Absalom!* at the top of the page; Shreve and Quentin, at Harvard, are characters (Blotner, p. 889). Gerald Langford sums up this aspect of Faulkner's revision: *Faulkner's Revision of Absalom, Absalom!: A Collation of the Manuscript and the Published Book* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1971), p. 11.

Coldfields, the relationships between them, and the motives for their actions. In Chapter II of the manuscript version, Mr. Compson knew the identity of Charles Bon.³² In Chapter V Miss Rosa told her own story as she and Quentin drove out to Sutpen's Hundred: her feeling toward Charles Bon whom she never saw; the murder of Bon; Sutpen's return from the war; her brief engagement to Sutpen and her outraged flight from Sutpen's Hundred. At the end, as she and Quentin approach the house, she tells him: "There's something in that house. . . . Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living hidden in that house" (p. 172). What was hidden we learn two hundred pages later.

Up to this point, the building up of Gothic mystery and suspense depends on the point of view of the narrators and their limited knowledge of the facts, which Faulkner limited even more in the final revision of the manuscript.³³ From this point on, Quentin and Shreve are telling each other the story, which Quentin has told Shreve in part and is now completing after receiving his father's letter, dated January 10, 1910, saying "Miss Rosa Coldfield died yesterday" (p. 173). Quentin finally reveals what he had known ever since he went to Sutpen's Hundred in September: who was in the house; who and what Charles Bon was; therefore, what Sutpen must have told Henry before Henry left home and when he saw Henry in 1864; why Henry shot Bon; why Wash killed Sutpen. Some dust is neatly thrown in the reader's eyes when Shreve comments on how much more Quentin knows, since he had "been out there and seen Clytie," than Mr. Compson or General Compson had known. In a previous passage (p. 266), which was a late insertion in the manuscript, Quentin explained to Shreve that he had told his father what he learned after his trip to Sutpen's Hundred, but he did not specify what he told. Cleanth Brooks advances the plausible theory that only through Henry could the "dark secret" be known;³⁴ thus, to maintain Gothic suspense concerning identity of characters, Faulkner was carefully manipulating his narrative to achieve maximum delay in disclosing vital facts. Faulkner's strategy is justified by Shreve's and Quentin's identification with the other two young men and by their interpretation of psychological motives and reconstruction of

³² Langford, pp. 9, 82.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-11.

³⁴ Brooks, p. 438.

what can not be proved, as in the story of Charles Bon's mother and the lawyer. The central mystery has been explored by all of the narrators in a spiraling ascent to the truth as Quentin and Shreve conceive it: who was Charles Bon? why did Henry renounce his heritage? why did Henry shoot Bon? Three reasons were advanced. Mr. Compson's was that Bon's previous marriage to the octoroon, though not a legal barrier in Southern custom, might constitute a moral barrier in Henry's eyes; this was admittedly an unsatisfactory explanation (p. 100). The second reason, which introduces the theme of Bon's search for identify and a father, was that Bon was Sutpen's son and thus the marriage of Bon and Judith would be incestuous and would be part of the "current of retribution and fatality" started by Sutpen (p. 269). But Shreve and Quentin, aided by Mr. Compson's interpretation of Henry as homosexually in love with Bon and incestuously in love with Judith, imagine how Henry, assuming the arrogant pride of a scion of nobility, could justify the incest (p. 342). The third reason, confirmed by Faulkner's *Chronology and Genealogy* at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, is that Charles Bon had Negro blood. This also solves the mystery of why Sutpen put aside his first wife and child as not conjunctive to the Design (p. 264). Although Quentin must have known before the beginning of Chapter VI all that his grandfather told about Sutpen, as well as what his grandfather did not know, Faulkner omits these facts in Quentin's thoughts as he and Shreve imaginatively live the story of the other two young men. What, Shreve and Quentin ask themselves, could cause Henry to shoot Bon, whom he loved, in order to prevent the marriage with Judith which Henry initially promoted and persisted in promoting even when his father forbade it? Not the idea of bigamy. Not the threat of incest. Only the threat of miscegenation. Shreve and Quentin seem to be imagining in unison, as in unison they identified with Bon and Henry, in the dramatic reconstruction of the return of Henry and Bon to Sutpen's Hundred: Bon says to Henry, just before Henry shoots him, "*So it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can't bear*" (p. 356). Corollary to the themes of miscegenation and incest is the theme of Bon's search for identity and his willingness, Shreve and Quentin conjecture, to renounce Judith if Sutpen will give any sign of recognition of Bon as his son. Here the contrast with the traditional Gothic pattern underlines the significance of this situation: traditionally there would be a recogni-

tion scene and the true heir would be restored to his heritage. Thus by his refusal to recognize Bon, Sutpen brought his Design down in ruins, as the whole Southern system was brought to ruin by rejection of the sons it begot. The seriousness of the implications of the Sutpen story is emphasized by the complexity with which Faulkner handled the Gothic pattern and the creative collaboration he requires of the reader.

Any one of the chief techniques of Gothic fiction—the omniscient author; the first–person narrator, generally a major character and often the heroine; third–person, limited point of view—would have restricted Faulkner in establishing Gothic tone and building up Gothic suspense, as well as have prevented the dialectical method of conducting the “detective” search for truth and understanding. Miss Rosa’s impassioned style and her demonizing create the Gothic tone which is echoed with variations by the other narrators. Quentin and Shreve preserved her concept of and terms for Sutpen and realized that they sounded like Mr. Compson (pp. 181, 207, 211, 261). Eric Bentley’s justification of the dialogue of melodrama is pertinent to this Southern Gothic tale couched in nineteenth century language: “An elevated rhetoric is a legitimate and indeed inexorable demand of melodrama. Ordinary conversation would be incongruous and anticlimatic.”³⁵ Extension of Quentin’s point of view outside the dialogue plus occasional modification of that point of view by the author’s voice provide margins to give the necessary flexibility to the narrator technique. With this method, the author’s role is so inconspicuous that we do not look to him to explain Quentin’s motives for withholding information from Shreve. Deviations from plausibility in the Gothic tradition do not require rational explanation.

In comparison with the central mystery of Bon’s identity and Negro blood, so carefully sustained until near the end, other solved and unsolved mysteries are of minor consequence but contribute materially to the Gothic effect: Where Sutpen got his money? What deals he made with Coldfield? What he said to Rosa to outrage her? Whose picture Judith held after Bon was killed? Who was in the house?

The answer to this last question, upon which all of the other answers to the Henry–Bon–Sutpen mystery depend, is revealed in a memory passage in which Quentin finally relives the experience in

³⁵ Bentley, “Melodrama,” in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, p. 224.

the Sutpen house. This passage not only symbolizes the end of Sutpen's Design, which involved both estate and dynasty, but is the culmination of Gothic horror, exceeded only by the final holocaust. Quentin forced an entry, under cover of darkness, into the ruined mansion, now haunted by all he knew of the family tragedy; he confronted Clytie, the "tiny gnomelike creature in headrag and voluminous skirts," with "a bunch of enormous old-fashioned iron keys in her hand" (pp. 368, 369), and saw Miss Rosa knock Clytie down; he saw the idiot, Jim Bond, "saddle-colored and slack-mouthed . . . the scion, the heir, the apparent" (p. 370); finally the confronted Henry, yellow and wasted on yellow sheets in an airless room. The authentic horror of Quentin's memory justifies the compositional maneuvering necessary to place it near the end of the last chapter.

Michael Millgate refers to tableaux representing "a number of crucial moments of recognition, truth, disillusion" and cites some of them, such as Henry and his father in the library.³⁶ Gothic tableaux are the fictional equivalent of the tableaux of melodrama, as explained by Wylie Sypher: "The limit of the 19th Century imagination is the final expressive tableau, a stasis, a consummate act." The narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* all being products of the "19th Century imagination," it is suitable that they express themselves in the Gothic mode which resembles melodrama, held by Sypher to be "a characteristic mode of 19th Century thought and art."³⁷ The narrators' imaginations create for the reader macabre scenes, scenes of grotesque incongruity, and scenes of violence in the Gothic settings, past or present. The themes involve many such Gothic scenes and episodes, in addition to the images or episodes of flights or journeys already noted. The general somberness of tone begins with the scenes of the first dialogues, in Miss Rosa's darkened room and on Compson's front gallery at dusk. Only in the last scene, at Harvard, are the speakers clearly visible. Mr. Compson's letter, describing the funeral of Miss Rosa, ends the sequence of "present" events and initiates the last dialogue. The letter evokes in Quentin's mind the image of the ultimate holocaust in which Clytie, mistaking the ambu-

³⁶Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 164.

³⁷Wylie Sypher, "Aesthetic of Revolution: The Marxist Melodrama," in *Tragedy: Vision and Form*, p. 260.

lance brought by Miss Rosa for Henry for the Black Maria, burned the house with Henry and herself in it. This is Northrop Frye's "point of demonic epiphany."³⁸ Quentin's reconstruction of the past concludes with the combination of his own past with the narrative present in the death of Henry. Thus the major scenes in present action, what happens in 1909–10, are all Gothic. The lack of any daylight scenes in present action contributes to the Gothic atmosphere.

Quentin's memories and related scenes emphasize death and darkness. His experiences at Sutpen's Hundred before 1909 included his terrified flight with other boys from Clytie and Jim Bond and the scene with his father in the Sutpen family cemetery in the rain. The tombstones under the cedars symbolized Sutpen's megalomania. Under one tombstone lay the murdered body of Sutpen, finally humbled in death when, splendid "in his regimentals and saber and embroidered gauntlets" (p. 186), it was tumbled in the ditch when the mules bolted.

Such scenes of grotesque incongruity recur in the episodes of Gothic violence in Sutpen's story. Bernard R. Breyer's justification of violence as a literary tool in the work of Southern writers, including Faulkner, applies especially to the Gothic works which predominate in the fiction cited: "they wish to use it as the most dramatic manifestation of man's proud, perverse, volcanic, unregenerate . . . unreconstructed soul."³⁹ No major character in modern fiction better deserves this description than did Thomas Sutpen, who, even at the moment of his death, died in proud "innocence," unenlightened. His Design began when he was turned away from the front door of the mansion and suffered an affront to pride and dignity such as caused his own death. Between those initial and terminal points, Sutpen's life was a series of violent scenes: the slave insurrection in the West Indies, "a theater for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty" (p. 250), where he proved both his courage and his lusts and won a wife and a fortune; the building of Sutpen's Hundred in the wilderness, himself naked among the naked Negroes; his fighting with his own Negroes or whirling up to the church door "in a thunder and a fury

³⁸ Frye, p. 223.

³⁹ Bernard R. Breyer, "A Diagnosis of Violence in Recent Southern Fiction," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 14 (Spring 1961), 67.

of wildeyed horses and of galloping and of dust" (p. 23). The long episode in which Sutpen hunted the fugitive French architect, as if he were an animal or a slave, is full of Gothic pursuit and firelight and darkness. It is climaxed by the grotesque image of the architect in the tattered remnants of his French elegance, surrounded by the Mississippi wilderness, the niggers, and the dogs. This tableau is premonitory of the destruction of the elegance the architect helped to create and of the purpose the elegance was designed to serve. The murder of Sutpen by the scythe in Wash's hands, cut down by time, equals in horror the last scenes in the mansion. From Sutpen, Wash had derived a sense of his own dignity. Sutpen's greater concern for his mare than for Milly, mother of his daughter, destroyed at once Wash's ideal of manhood and his own self-esteem: he took his revenge for the same reason that Sutpen conceived his Design. Both Sutpen's death and Wash's are treated, however, with Faulkner's characteristic distancing of physical details of Gothic horror: we see only the raised weapons.

The sentimental, romantic scenes associated with the Gothic heroine are as notably absent in the story of Judith as the traditional scenes of violence are present in the story of the villain-hero, her father. As a woman, Judith was proud, resolute, and enduring. The only romantic scene is an unrealistic one imagined by Quentin and Shreve (pp. 294-95). Judith is described by witnesses in crucial scenes: giving Bon's letter to Mrs. Compson; standing in front of the closed door, holding her wedding dress; standing at Bon's grave; greeting her father; conducting her father's funeral. As the tombstones, the scythe, and his regimentals are symbolic objects associated with Sutpen, the letter, the dress, and the picture of Bon's wife and child are symbols of Judith's doom. If Judith had emulated her Biblical namesake and committed a deed of Gothic horror, she could scarcely have been farther removed from either the fragile, trembling, tearful heroine or the passionate, foolhardy one of Gothic romance.

The Grand Design in *Absalom, Absalom!* began with Sutpen's day-dreams and ended with nightmare. The prevailing Gothic tone and atmosphere and the abundance of traditional themes, patterns of action, and scenes are uniquely joined with a basic realism which avoids the clear moral contrasts of Gothic romance and of the Southern myth of the past, in which black and white take on

racial-moral symbolism. The social reality beneath the Gothic themes and patterns rests on this fact: all the descendants, legitimate or illegitimate, white or part Negro, suffer when denied rights, dignity, and love. In that social reality families and society are doomed. This truth emerges from the Gothic coloring and trappings if the Gothic tradition is fully recognized and the transformation and adaptation of it are appreciated. Michael Millgate is quite right when he identifies both American and European influences in *Absalom, Absalom!* and concludes: "Faulkner's familiarity with English and European literature has often been ignored or underestimated by American critics, and the result has sometimes been not simply a misunderstanding of the nature and sources of many of his images and allusions but an insufficiently generous conception of the whole scale and direction of his endeavor."⁴⁰ Millgate's discussion of the influence of *Jane Eyre* on *Absalom, Absalom!*, especially the parallels between Rochester and Bertha Mason and Sutpen and Eulalia Bon, suggests that hereditary insanity and hereditary Negro blood, however imperceptible, are somewhat equivalent taints as a barrier to marriage. Millgate fails to recognize distinctly American Gothic influences, such as the Faust theme, and he is incorrect in concluding that Faulkner's use of the Gothic tradition owes as much to European sources as to American ones. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner utilized all of the resources of the Gothic tradition to produce a distinctively American transformation of the Gothic novel; the fall of the house of Sutpen evokes authentic shudders but also has profound implications in relation to American social history.

⁴⁰Millgate, p. 162.