

1993

Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury: Quentin's Failure to Create a Mythic Reconstruction

B G. Till Betz
West Chester University

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Till Betz, B G. (1993) "Absalom, Absalom! and The Sound and the Fury: Quentin's Failure to Create a Mythic Reconstruction," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 11 , Article 37.
Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol11/iss1/37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Studies in English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in English, New Series by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

***ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*
AND THE SOUND AND THE FURY:
QUENTIN'S FAILURE TO CREATE A MYTHIC
RECONSTRUCTION**

B.G. Till Betz

West Chester University

In 1936, American publishers released two very different novels about the American South. One, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, upholds and perpetuates the mythos of the South: fine old families lounging on porches sipping mint juleps, pickaninnies strumming their banjos, and willful Southern belles and gentlemen triumphing over the repressive, vulgar regime of the carpetbagging Yankees. The other, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, strips away the glamorous, false myth and presents the facts as they really are: a disintegrating, rotten society epitomized by an ambitious West Virginian of poor white-trash stock, Thomas Sutpen, and a Southern boy who, with his Harvard roommate, pieces together the criminal and moral racism of the Judith-Henry-Charles Bon relationship.

Faulkner offers, in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, a contrast between the old myth of the South and the new, factual vision of that depressed and defeated geographical region. Faulkner even tells his fable of Quentin Compson in a discontinuous, nonlinear fashion; *The Sound and the Fury*, detailing events five months later than those of *Absalom, Absalom!*, was actually published seven years earlier. It makes sense, however, for a reader to examine the events occurring in *Absalom, Absalom!* first; Quentin is not yet as psychically removed or as psychologically isolated in inescapable fact as he is in *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin casually notes, in his narrative voice in *The Sound and the Fury*, of the three boys fishing that "They all talked at once...making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words." This observation exactly describes Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of the Thomas Sutpen story in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The two young men are capable, together, of making an unreality or myth into an "incontrovertible fact." Quentin loses this ability in *The Sound and the Fury*; or, rather, he cannot comfort himself by moulding the distressing fact of his relationships with Caddy, Shreve, Spode, Gerald and Mrs. Bland, and Deacon into more tolerable personal myths. Quentin fails at any kind of mythic

reconstruction of his personal life in *The Sound and the Fury*. He commits suicide knowing that he cannot get around the “unarguable truth” as he continues to examine it relentlessly “like under a microscope” (*Sound* 195).

One question must immediately be addressed in any interpretation of both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*: whether or not the two male Quentins are actually meant to represent one character. The two Quentins must, indeed, be the same person; it is no accident that both are young men from Jefferson, Mississippi enrolled in their freshman year at Harvard. John T. Irwin, in refuting another critic’s opinion that the two Quentins are not the same, remarks that “Poirier’s assumption that Quentin’s personal history, because it is contained in another novel, is therefore inapplicable to *Absalom* seems to be a particularly inappropriate principle to apply to the works of a writer like Faulkner, whose novels are parts of a single continuing story.” Irwin’s approach to Faulkner’s narrative style is a sensible one. Faulkner does write a sprawling epic across several narratives which the reader must interconnect in order to get a whole, though still not necessarily continuous, picture of Yoknapatawpha County. Cleanth Brooks and John Pilkington agree with Irwin in labelling the Quentin of December 1909 and January 1910 as the same one who commits suicide on 2 June 1910. Pilkington quotes Faulkner as saying, during his University of Virginia lectures, that “ ‘To me he’s consistent...Quentin was still trying to get God to tell him why, in *Absalom, Absalom!* as he was in *The Sound and the Fury.*’ ” No one doubts that the two Quentins of the two separate novels are at least different sides of a single personality. Otherwise, one could never argue that the Quentin who is so obsessed with his relationship with Caddy that he must commit suicide could be the same character who never once mentions his sister in *Absalom, Absalom!*. But, just as Shreve is Shreve McKenzie in *The Sound and the Fury* and Shrevlin McCannon in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin is cosmetically different though just as psychologically troubled in both novels. Quentin shows the madman’s frightening capacity for utter psychic absorption; it is just like the Quentin of *The Sound and the Fury* that, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, he should ignore all else in his manic reconstruction of the Sutpen saga.

In his article entitled “Gender and Generation in Faulkner’s ‘The Bear,’ ” Patrick McGee discusses the conflict between history and myth and thus offers some useful distinctions between these two difficult terms.¹ For the purpose of this analysis of history and myth in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, McGee’s comments

on Isaac McCaslin's reservations about the stark historical record of the commissary ledgers are particularly relevant. McGee notes Isaac's frustration with "the indifferent accounting of the ledgers" (50) and with the absence of a "moral order" or "an interpretive frame of reference that would guide every reading to the same totalization of history expressive of a proper beginning and ending, of a true myth of origins" (49). McGee further remarks that Isaac finds in the ledgers "a mystery...which can only be grasped through speculative reading and imaginative reconstruction" (49-50), and finally that "The only truth Isaac can find in the ledgers is the truth he puts there, the truth that arises out of his ability to re-imagine and to re-create the tragic moment that the markings in the ledgers merely hint at" (50). In other words, McGee persuasively argues that Isaac McCaslin is dissatisfied with an unbiased, chronological recording of past events, that is, history itself. Isaac craves truth but will only believe in an event that has been reconstructed according to his own speculative input. Like Shreve and Quentin before him, Isaac perceives himself as a creator of new Southern myths. But even more important, all three characters struggle with recognizing that history and myth are artificial social structures that interconnect even as they often contradict each other. That is why Faulkner depicts Isaac, Shreve, and Quentin as *revising* and *recreating* their texts; they begin with historical representations of fragmented truths and then graft onto these "facts" whatever moral interpretations they need to try to come to terms with the entire past event. This sort of mythic reconstruction of history is Quentin Compson's sole occupation throughout both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, with the one important variation being that in *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin has his roommate Shreve to share in his speculations, while in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin is essentially alone as he realizes his isolation from both myth and history.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Shreve approaches the history of Sutpen from a purely factual stance at first. Quentin sees Sutpen from an exaggerated, mythic perspective and has a harder time trying to release himself from his biased view than does the more unaffected Shreve. Quentin, finally, cannot accommodate the myth of the South with the scandalous facts about Sutpen's family. Shreve achieves satisfaction and a facile contentment from his extrapolations. Quentin, lying in the darkness and shivering, finds no happiness in the answers they have deduced. He cannot live with either the myth or the reality. The reader sees just how desperate Quentin has become by his suicide at the end of his section of *The Sound and the Fury*.

“History” and “myth” are terms that have become both very significant and complex in their social and linguistic contexts. Raymond Williams, in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, gives the primary meaning of the word “history” as an “organized knowledge of the past” and the secondary meaning of the word as the sense that “past events are seen not as specific histories but as a continuous and connected process.” But before Williams offers this definition, he briefly traces the early English use of the word and reveals that until about the fifteenth century “history” and “story” were “both applied to an account either of imaginary events or of events supposed to be true.” Faulkner imbues Quentin and Shreve with a similar disregard for labelling events as strictly fact or fiction; no fact is sacred as they piece together the “stories” of Sutpen and Judith, Henry, and Charles Bon, Shreve hoping to acquire a rudimentary understanding of the South and Quentin desperate to find comfort and security and his own place in history. Therefore, as Quentin and Shreve weave together history and story or myth, what becomes increasingly important is the storyteller’s success with and pleasure in his narrative. As Shreve becomes ever more enthusiastic and engaged in his story, Quentin retreats further inward, until the last scene of *Absalom, Absalom!* shows him shivering in the dark, cocooned and isolated. Even given the chance to rewrite history to his own specifications, Quentin fails to find a satisfactory vision. Attempting the same mythmaking process alone in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin fails utterly to find his voice as a narrator, jumping between disconnected impressions and events and eventually opting to commit suicide in order to create an absolute, incontrovertible end to his story.

Williams explains that the first meaning of “myth” was as a fable or story or tale, but that this definition evolved so that a “myth” came to mean “not only a fabulous but an untrustworthy or even deliberately deceptive invention.” And, while this negative meaning of the word persists today, Williams notes that a positive definition also exists: “myth” has an anthropological resonance that suggests a deeper truth about human thinking, development, and religious or spiritual practice than can be discovered by science alone. Quentin’s ambivalence to the mythos of the South reflects both his psychological turmoil and the complex contradictions inherent in any myth itself. For example, Quentin has absorbed the fable of Southern landowner as gentleman as part of his unconscious, regional ideology. He cannot, however, reconcile this myth with the apparent fact that Sutpen may not have always been a gentleman and that his ostentatious furniture could have

been anything but honestly purchased. The two men differ in their ability to accept ambiguity; Thomas Sutpen relishes the challenge of inventing lies in order to infiltrate the myth of the Southern gentleman, while Quentin Compson retreats from the psychological confusion. And when the myth Quentin and Shreve create is little more in places than sheer invention—they cannot be certain that Henry rejected Charles Bon as a potential brother-in-law because of his African-American blood—Quentin denies himself the compensatory pleasure of participating in Shreve's daring myth of a new human race fathered by Jim Bond.

Shreve first becomes interested in the Sutpen saga, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, while still grounded almost wholly in objective reality. He refers to Miss Rosa Coldfield as " 'this Aunt Rosa.' " He cannot understand how Quentin and the rest of the Compsons can feel such a powerful sense of duty and obligation for an old spinster if she is not related to them. Quentin explains poetically and even mythically that Miss Rosa is " '...an old lady that died young of outrage in 1866 one summer' " (218), but Shreve still does not truly understand the connection. Shreve is looking for an economic or familial relationship between the Compsons and Miss Coldfield; he does not understand the Southern sense of chivalry which requires that the womenfolk be protected.

Shreve continually interrupts Quentin's narrative with literal questions. He asks Quentin what the name was of " 'the nigger on the mule' " (*Absalom* 234) to whom Mr. Compson gave the reins when he and Quentin were out shooting quail. Quentin tells him that the servant's name was Luster—a fact that means very little to Shreve. It would apparently make better sense to the reader if Shreve, a stranger to Southern types, would only concern himself with the mythic image of a small black boy, dutifully holding the reins for his big, white master and cleverly tying the towsack around his head to protect himself from the inclement weather. Shreve, however, does not do this. He does not want to see Luster as a mythic stereotype, as Quentin almost surely does, but rather as an individual person. Shreve wants to envision Luster as a distinct entity not just as another (black) body filling a traditional, domestic position.

Shreve continues to demonstrate his devotion to factual history when he corrects Quentin's statement that Sutpen is from West Virginia. Shreve reminds Quentin that West Virginia was, in the early 1800s, still a part of the state of Virginia. Quentin's reaction to this factual correction is the identical, resigned one that Shreve gave when

Quentin corrected him about Miss Rosa's title of address: " 'All right all right all right' " (*Absalom* 275). Each man reacts quite strongly when shown not to understand fully the other's perspective. Shreve wants Quentin to go on with his story, without his expecting Shreve to comprehend how a family can feel responsible to someone who " 'was no kin' " (218). Quentin wants Shreve to let him go on with his story without stopping him to clarify mere historical details. Neither narrator is yet ready to allow fact and myth to be combined for a true but also imaginative history.

It is fitting that Shreve's important breakthrough into a partially mythic interpretation of the Sutpen family history comes when the two students discuss Sutpen's own epiphany. They are speculating about the liveried black servant from Sutpen's past, and Quentin suggests that he may " 'have had the felicity of being housebred in Richmond maybe' " (*Absalom* 290). Shreve, breathing excitedly, adds, " 'Or maybe even in Charleston' " (290). Shreve has now entered into the reconstruction of the Sutpen myth, so he volunteers his own suggestion about the Southern city in which the liveried house servant was trained. His choice of Charleston, a town second only to the capital city of Richmond for its antebellum splendor, is a good one. Shreve reveals, in this single, parenthetical sentence, his gradual initiation into the mythic community of the Southern aristocracy.

As the two men go on to discuss Sutpen's adventure of recapturing the truant French architect, Faulkner subtly underscores the fact that Shreve and Quentin are beginning to observe and recount their history from two much closer perspectives. Faulkner reminds his reader that although "both born within the same year: the one in Alberta, the other in Mississippi," they are connected by the Mississippi River, which serves as both a "geologic umbilical" and the "very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature" (322). This intentional image of the umbilical cord symbiotically linking Quentin and Shreve emphasizes the fact that Shreve is not only beginning to understand the Southern myth as Quentin relates it but also beginning to feel that he is an integral, albeit extended, part of that same myth.

Shreve has not, however, completely abandoned his conviction that any history is first a factual assessment of the truth. He asks Quentin how any of the listeners ever understood what the story-telling historians were describing unless they, the listeners, were there too. Shreve concludes by asking Quentin if he " '...wouldn't have known what anybody was talking about if [he] hadn't been out there and seen Clytie' " (*Absalom* 342). Shreve, here, sounds precisely like a

professional historian. He is questioning Quentin's veracity and making certain that Quentin is also a primary source of information. Shreve still cares more for the truth than for his experimental forays into the mythology of the South.

Shreve never fully embraces the Southern mythic mentality. He does seem, though, to be more receptive to the myth Quentin perpetuates than Quentin is to the history Shreve proclaims. Quentin remains quite somberly involved in his narrative; he does not, for instance, seem to hear Shreve's insistently repeated question about whether Sutpen did or did not reject a son born to him by Milly Jones. Quentin's ignoring of Shreve's question is doubly important; it shows that, in the Southern mythos, the elderly Sutpen would *never* reject a son and heir he wants so badly for his old age—which Shreve does not understand because he is not truly part of the Southern mindset—and that Quentin is so depressed by the tawdry fact of Sutpen, the Appalachian cracker, that he cannot share Shreve's enthusiasm and excitement.

Faulkner allows the distinction between known facts and myth to blur even further by identifying Quentin and Shreve's pleasure for their patched-together fable as "youth's immemorial obsession not with time's dragging weight...but with its fluidity" (*Absalom* 374). Time is, for them, a flowing stream of assorted images, not a firmly chronological narration of events. Neither Quentin nor Shreve is, at this moment, having any trouble slipping from factual truth to mythic invention, and back again. The essential difference between these two characters is that Shreve is better able than Quentin to handle the necessary synthesis of fact and myth. Quentin can tolerate the mythic picture of Sutpen as an elderly Southern patriarch who wants to beget a son, but he cannot live with the fact of Sutpen as a selfish, greedy manipulator who would abandon Milly Jones's child when he should have learned from abandoning Charles Bon. Quentin's mythopoesis of Sutpen as the founder of a great Southern dynasty must give way and be cheapened by Quentin and Shreve's factual picture of him as a man who would divide his own family against itself so that it could not stand, the "demon" of Miss Rosa's bitter tale.

Faulkner lulls his reader into forgetting the ideological differences between Shreve and Quentin while they collaborate on expanding the factual history of Henry, Judith, and Charles. Shreve invents long passages of explication for the Sutpen history, and Quentin passively assists. Then, suddenly, Shreve emphasizes the dissimilarities between himself and his roommate; he deliberately talks of physical experiences

that Quentin has not had. Shreve discusses, in worldly terms, Charles Bon's agony of indecision over whether or not to have an incestuous relationship with Judith. He asks, seemingly in a rhetorical way, " 'who to say if it wasn't maybe the possibility of incest, because who (without a sister: I dont know about the others) has been in love and not discovered the vain evanescence of the fleshly encounter' " (*Absalom* 404). The point, though, is precisely that Shreve takes for granted that Quentin has had the same experience as he. Quentin has not. He does have a sister, a sister with whom he is quite close, in a possibly incestuous way. He also has not been in love, has never had a physical relationship, and so cannot have discovered the impermanence of a solely sexual experience. He and Shreve are then sharply different when it comes to actual experience. Quentin still lives in a world of fantasy and myth. Shreve, while savoring his brief adventure into the archetypal Southern mythos, still holds firmly to his empirical investigations into history.

Quentin does not participate in either one of Shreve's scenarios, neither the one about Charles Bon and his sexual frustration in his relationship with Judith nor the one more directly concerned with Quentin's own innocence. Shreve even stops himself and gives Quentin plenty of time to respond: "he could have been interrupted easily now" (404). Quentin sits passively, though, withdrawing emotionally and almost physically from the immediacy of Shreve's speculation—"his shoulders hugged inward and hunched, his face lowered and he looking somehow curiously smaller than he actually was" (405). Quentin clearly likes his myths distant and unquestioned. As he and his roommate analyze the Sutpen story, and separate fictional myth from sordid reality, Quentin becomes increasingly more removed from historiographic creation. By his unprotesting silence, he allows Shreve to invent new myths to fit in with historic facts. Shreve, for instance, decides that it was really Henry, not Bon, who was injured in the War. Shreve takes this newly-manipulated fact and creates around it a mythological picture of the heroic, wounded Henry struggling out of Bon's arms and begging to be allowed to die. Quentin remains sitting impassively, "the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat" (432) transplanted into cold and foreign Northern soil.

After Shreve and Quentin have finished their synthesis of the scanty facts about Henry and Charles with the scandalous myths surrounding them, the Harvard freshmen finally go to bed. Quentin and Shreve then seem to reverse roles; Quentin now supplies the facts. He mentions that Bon and Henry were in the tenth graduating class of the

University of Mississippi. Quentin also corrects Shreve about the name of the Civil War battle in which Pickett's charge took place. Quentin's purpose in carefully preserving these facts is not what Shreve's would have been, however. He wants a person standing outside the mythos to think it old-fashioned and aristocratic that Bon and Henry were gentlemen enough to be admitted to one of the first classes at the University of Mississippi. He wants that same stranger to realize, too, that Pickett's charge, which took place on the battlefield at Gettysburg, is part of the fable of the South and thus bred into the consciousness of successive generations of young Southerners who need their glorious military myths to make bearable the crushing fact of historic defeats.

Quentin and Shreve end their version of the story with a mythic blending of factually separated consciousnesses. Shreve halts his narration of Miss Rosa's attempt to save Henry with the chiming of the one o'clock bells. Quentin picks up the narrative, *mentally* detailing the fire and Bond's howling. Shreve concludes by saying aloud, " 'And so it was the Aunt Rosa that came back to town inside the ambulance' " (468). The men have successfully incorporated fact and fiction into a single, likely history of what may have happened to the Sutpen dynasty. If *Absalom, Absalom!* had ended here, one could legitimately argue that Quentin, however reluctantly, is made to see the wisdom of combining new myth and historic fact with old Southern myth to create an accurate tale. The novel does not, though, end here.

On the final page of the book, Shreve offers Quentin a brief sketch of a new myth and the manner in which it could begin. He suggests that " 'in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere...and...as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings' " (471). This short, seemingly innocuous tale is truly a new myth in the making; it suggests a brave new world of anthropology and genetic selection in which the African race will become dominant and the center of Western thought. Shreve embraces the power of his mythmaking and remains unconcerned that he might have to jettison the truth to tell a good story. He is strong enough to accept the complex, often contradictory relationship between myth and history. Quentin, on the other hand, does not even allow this new myth to reach his consciousness. He is too busy protesting that he does not hate the South and thus all the myths of which it is made.

Quentin sees Sutpen as the exploded archetype of the Southern gentleman; he is not ready to see Jim Bond as the new archetype of the universal man. Quentin Compson is, then, left without any myth in which to believe strongly and without any certainty that history is really based on fact. Overwhelmed by Shreve's alarming and ambiguous admixture of myth and history, Quentin can only manage to lie in the darkness and shiver.

From the beginning of the second section of *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader sees Quentin now struggling alone to merge the myths of the South with the facts of his life. Quentin, here, is much less successful than in *Absalom, Absalom!*, in part because he does not have Shreve's ready assistance. As part of a continual internal monologue, Quentin tells himself, "In the South you are ashamed of being a virgin. Boys. Men. They lie about it" (*Sound* 89). He, though, cannot lie about this physical fact. His psychological inability to lie separates him from the boys and men of the South (and from Shreve too) who have no qualms about changing their personal histories to fit or to expand the myth. Quentin will not invent a mythic state of virility for himself despite his absolute desperation for some kind of fiction better than his depressing reality. This quotation offers only one example of Quentin's frantic need to discover some personal solace in the myth of the Southern gentleman.

Running through Quentin's mind are constant litanies of how Southern gentlemen ought to behave. Quentin's behavior never quite matches the myth, and he always feels inferior and psychologically isolated for acting outside the constraints of tradition. Quentin thinks, in the middle of preparing his toilette, that "*Father said it used to be a gentleman was known by his books; nowadays he is known by the ones he has not returned*" (*Sound* 92). He senses that his father would place him in the "nowadays" category of ungentlemanly behavior, so he obsessively settles his personal effects before he kills himself.

Gerald Bland is just as much a misfit in the tradition of Southern male gentility as Compson. While Quentin at least has a father who will lecture on the subject of Southern values, however drunkenly and cynically, Gerald has only his mother, a social-climbing "bitch." Mrs. Bland adopts the English persona of flannel-suited, Oxford rower for her son to supplement the disintegrating example of the antebellum Kentuckian. Quentin acknowledges to himself that "[Mrs. Bland] approved of Gerald associating with me because I *at least* revealed a *blundering* sense of noblesse oblige by *getting myself born* below Mason and Dixon" (104 emphasis mine). Faulkner expects the reader

to understand the irony of Quentin's thought: he has had, as usual, no control over his own place within the myth. Mrs. Bland accepts him for the fabled Southern gentleman he must surely exemplify; he does not at all, except by accident of birth. Quentin is the opposite of Thomas Sutpen, a man from outside the tradition who wants nothing more than to buy into its entire mythos.

Quentin does engage in some narrative reconstruction of the workings of Mrs. Bland's mind, but this recreation is on a much smaller scale than his and Shreve's efforts in *Absalom, Absalom!*. He mentally reconstructs Mrs. Bland's feelings towards Spode's impressive family connections: "I'm sure she solaced herself by being convinced that some misfit Maingault or Mortemar had got mixed up with the lodge-keeper's daughter" (104). But this is more idle speculation than the intensive analysis of a family's history he and Shreve engage in over the Sutpens' mysterious past. Quentin's interest in Mrs. Bland is anecdotal and brief, and it forms a strong contrast to the complex debates he and Shreve engage in in *Absalom, Absalom!* over the questions of incest and miscegenation.

Faulkner raises the issue of incest throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, but not the taboo of miscegenation. Quentin's relationship with his sister Caddy, with all its nuances of forbidden love and outraged jealousy, is not the main focus of this paper. But certainly, Quentin would dearly love to reconstruct the fact of Caddy's loss of virginity into the myth of pure Southern womanhood. With that end in view, he asks Caddy of her first sexual encounter: "did he make you then he made you do it let him he was stronger than you" (173). The reader sees immediately, in Quentin's shift from the interrogative present tense "make" to the declarative fact of the past tense "made" that he is editing and reconstructing as he talks to her. Quentin begs Caddy to show herself to be a victimized Southern belle of mythic gentility rather than a genuinely sexual woman. Quentin reconstructs, too, the voice of the verb in his narration of Caddy's experience; he changes the active "he made you do it" to the passive "[he made you] let him." Unlike Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, Caddy does not join Quentin in his fabrications. She knows that she was not forced to have sex. Quentin can neither rescue her nor turn to Shreve for help in this agonizing and private reconstruction puzzle. All Quentin can do is withdraw still deeper into his own psychosis and use his time idly rewriting myths less personally important to him.

He experiments, for instance, with linking himself to his father and to the manners of the bygone South; "Father and I protect women from

one another from themselves our women" (*Sound* 110). Quentin wants to assume the paternalistic, proprietary air of a Southern patriarch. He fails. Caddy is certainly not his woman. She owes no filial duty to him. His mother, Caroline Bascomb Compson, needs to be protected, or, at least, wants to appear so defenseless that she must be protected, but Candace does not. Caddy continually rejects Quentin's attempts to whitewash her behavior, so that, while Quentin may liken himself to his father as a protector of the female sex, he is actually impotent at his task.

Throughout the second section of *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin constantly mimics the mythos of the gentleman of the South. When Quentin confronts Herbert Head about cheating at Harvard, Head correctly recognizes that their conversation is like that of a play: "We're better than a play you must have made the Dramat" (124). Head means that Quentin's responses sound false, stylized, and probably memorized. When Head suggests that Quentin had possibly been fortunate enough to cheat and to go undetected, Quentin answers "You lie" and "I dont know but one way to consider cheating" (124). The syntax of his "I dont know but one way," rather than the more usual "I only know one way," sounds Southern in dialect, and the "You lie" sounds like the quintessential response of the easily insulted Southern man of rank. But Quentin is just playing a role. He saves his desperate, real importunity for Caddy, begging her not to marry the oily scoundrel Head. Quentin's actual dialogue with Herbert Head is as ineffectual as all his mental reconstructions.

Quentin again mimics Southern aristocratic behavior, this time more successfully, when he verbally manipulates the woman in the bakery shop. He first characterizes her as a witchy schoolmistress; "She just needed a bunch of switches, a blackboard behind her 2 x 2 e 5" (144). He manages, though, to get her to change her attitude toward the little Italian girl by exerting his practiced Southern flattery: " 'Yessum...I expect your cooking smells as good to her as it does to me' " (145). Faulkner wants the reader to notice Quentin's facile charm; his "Yessum" is the slurred, soft response of the subservient plantation slave. Just as in the Herbert Head example above, however, Quentin is not satisfied with the superficiality of rote Southern manners.

No matter how hard Quentin tries to find depth behind the myth of Southern gentility and no matter how much he strives to create his own, more satisfactory mythic system, he cannot forget his Southern roots. Significantly, in Quentin's last mental soliloquy on his father

just before his suicide, he recalls Jason's compulsive reminder that "for you to go to Harvard has been your mother's dream since you were born and no Compson has ever disappointed a lady" (*Sound* 204). Jason's statement calls for Quentin to perform his familial and Southern duty, not to show his personal love. And Quentin does not disappoint his mother; he finishes the academic year before he kills himself. Faulkner leaves his reader wondering if Caroline Compson would not have much preferred, anyway, that her beloved son Jason attend Harvard on Benjy's pasture money rather than her eldest son and the Compson heir-apparent.

Quentin also finds an innate contradiction between the fact of the relationship between black and white people and the myth of this racial connection. His racial confusions are further intensified by the fact that he moves from the deep South to New England and still encounters racial inequality. But since the issue of color is not as vital to Quentin as the idea of mythic Southern gentility, he allows himself to joke with Shreve about it. They talk about Deacon, the black man who meets the Southern boys coming North. Shreve says " 'There now. Just look at what your grandpa did to that poor old nigger' " (*Sound* 94). Quentin answers " 'Yes...Now he can spend day after day marching in parades. If it hadn't been for my grandfather, he'd have to work like whitefolks' " (94). The two men thoughtlessly perpetuate the myth of the lazy "nigger." The blacks, themselves, do not receive any acknowledgement that it is their right to be free; rather, Shreve and Quentin insist upon praising the whites who set the blacks free. Deacon, to them, is the epitome of the crafty freedman. Quentin and Shreve will not look beyond the Southern myth forced upon an entire race to the pathetic fact of one man's life. Actually, Deacon is a poor old man who earns his living by playing up to spoiled rich boys whose parents have sent them to Harvard. Quentin confines his vision of Deacon to the generalized myth of an entire race; he cannot allow himself to extrapolate enough to see Deacon individually.

Deacon, like Quentin himself though on a much smaller scale, is forced to try to create his own personal myth because he is trapped so solidly inside a stereotype. Quentin tells the reader just how both Southerners and Northerners label Deacon; he is a man who "could pick out a Southerner with one glance....He had a regular uniform he met trains in, a sort of Uncle Tom's cabin outfit, patches and all" (110-11). He is accepted as a crafty yet lovable old "nigger," and one of the reasons he wears his "Uncle Tom's cabin outfit" is that his patrons expect it. Yet, Deacon wants to find something of himself behind the

fable, so he ingeniously subverts the myth: the boy he hires to carry luggage for him is *white*. Deacon becomes a master instead of a slave; he calls for his servant, "Whereupon a moving mountain of luggage would edge up, revealing a white boy of about fifteen, and the Deacon would hang another bag on him somehow and drive him off" (111). Deacon, in the myth-turned-fact of his own creation, becomes the *slavedriver*. His vision is more courageous than Quentin's in *The Sound and the Fury*, and he continues to show the creative spirit of the feverishly reconstructing Quentin and Shreve in *Absalom, Absalom!* when he perpetuates and comes to believe as "incontrovertible fact" his own mythic fiction: "Someone spread the story years ago, when he first appeared...that he was a graduate of the divinity school....[Deacon] was so taken with it that he began to retail the story himself, until at last he must have come to believe he really had" (*Sound* 111).

Throughout *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin never achieves even the limited satisfaction in mythic recreation that he does in *Absalom, Absalom!* or, indeed, that Deacon finds in his small section of *The Sound and the Fury*. Quentin does manage, however, to dredge up some nostalgia for the picture of the black man patient in his timeless slavery. Returning to Mississippi for Christmas, Quentin sees "a nigger on a mule in the middle of the stiff ruts, waiting for the train to move...like a sign put there saying You are home again" (98). He notices "that quality about them of shabby and timeless patience, of static serenity" (99). Quentin enjoys this traditional mythic view of the black race, the stasis of the people. Timelessness is what he wants in his relationship with Caddy; it is what he treasures in his rapport with Dilsey and Roskus. Quentin does not, however, understand that, while myths can be frozen in time, factual realities cannot. Faulkner's creation of Dilsey as an endlessly nurturing, mythic earth mother can endure for Quentin while his own fantasy of a virginal Caddy must eventually give way to the visual proof of her pregnancy.

Another myth that briefly informs Quentin's consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury* is the fable of the Old West. This myth is best demonstrated by analyzing the Dalton Ames-Quentin Compson confrontation. Ames presents Compson with a wrenching "incontrovertible fact"; he tells Quentin that Caddy would have lost her virginity to someone: "its not your fault kid it would have been some other fellow" (183). Quentin cannot bear this stark truth. He would rather deal with a softened, romanticized myth, so he repeatedly threatens Ames—"Ill give you until sundown to leave town" (183)—thus attempting to become the Western lawman, a mythic figure

famous for controlling his own destiny as well as that of others. Ames, to Quentin's enormous surprise, answers him in kind; he demonstrates his marksmanship by shooting at pieces of bark in the water and then "[swinging] the cylinder out and [blowing] into the barrel" (184) of his pistol. Quentin fails, once again, to find a viable role for himself in a workable, social myth.

The major difference between Quentin's mythologizing in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* is that in *The Sound and the Fury* he does it in almost complete isolation. A few times in the second section of the novel, Shreve particularly desires to assist his roommate, but Quentin wants to brood alone. Shreve, Gerald, and Spoade try to help Quentin reconstruct what he has or has not done with the Italian girl though they, in truth, do not know. Julio shouts indignantly at the Squire, " 'Dont I see weetha my own eyes—,' " and Shreve immediately replies, " 'You're a liar...You never—' " (164). Shreve's gentlemanly, though circumstantial, assistance does not help. What does work is Spoade's country charm. In order to get Quentin released, Spoade de-mythologizes the Harvard student: " 'He's just a country boy in school up there...His father's a congregational minister' " (164), and, in a description that echoes strangely of the mythological Pied Piper, " 'Children and dogs are always taking up with him like that' " (165). The Squire releases Quentin. The reader must realize, though, that Quentin has no pleasantly escapist myths left.

Shreve tries one final time to mould the hard facts into a myth of Quentin's choosing. While Shreve is helping Quentin tend to his bloody eye, Quentin asks if he managed to hit Gerald even once. Shreve answers, " 'You may have hit him. I may have looked away just then or blinked or something. He boxed the hell out of you' " (*Sound* 188). The third sentence of Shreve's answer is the one true fact. But Shreve is willing to mould the facts so Quentin can make himself feel happier. Shreve eagerly suspends his disbelief, giving Quentin plenty of room to do any embroidering or mythologizing he would like. Quentin does not, however, take up Shreve's offer, the way he regularly does in *Absalom, Absalom!*. He is so weighed down psychologically by the force of a life full of "incontrovertible fact" that all he can think about is weighing his own life down, with the aid of a pair of six-pound flat-irons.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner creates a complex portrait of Quentin Compson's deepening psychosis. While Shreve is there to assist in recreating the Sutpen narrative, the

reader may be distracted from fully comprehending Quentin's emotional and intellectual paralysis. But when he strikes out on his own in *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin's utter inability to reconcile myth with history becomes painfully apparent. Quentin cannot survive in a world filled with ambiguities, but he also cannot resist the impulse to attempt to fictionalize each "incontrovertible fact." Ultimately, then, Quentin has no place in a world in which even the potent new Jim Bond myth may be possible.

NOTES

¹See Patrick McGee, "Gender and Generation in Faulkner's "The Bear," *Faulkner Journal* 1 (1985), 46-54. All subsequent references to this source are cited in the text. I am indebted to Professor John T. Mathews for recommending McGee's useful and interesting article.

WORKS CITED

- Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: First Encounters*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1983.
- . *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978.
- . *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* Edited by Noel Polk. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- . *The Sound and the Fury*. Edited by Noel Polk. New York: Vintage Books, 1987.
- Holman, C. Hugh. *The Immoderate Past: The Southern Writer and History*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1977.
- Irwin, John T. *Doubling and Incest/ Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975.
- Kinney, Arthur F., ed. *Critical Essays on William Faulkner: The Compson Family*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982.
- McGee, Patrick. "Gender and Generation in Faulkner's "The Bear." *Faulkner Journal* 1 (1985), 46-54.
- Pilkington, John. *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1981.
- Shaw, Harry. *Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972.

QUENTIN'S FAILURE

Singal, David Joseph. *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982.

Volpe, Edmond L. *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Co., 1964.

Wilde, Alan. *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981.

Williams, Raymond. "Myth." *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. rev. ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

———. "History." *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. rev. ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.