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CUTTING THE GORDIAN KNOT: RACE, GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN *MOBY-DICK* AND *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

A Thesis Presented

by

Alana Smith

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Specializing in English

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ABSTRACT

This thesis attempts to answer the following questions: What is the relationship between the American social system and its depiction in American fiction, principally in *Moby-Dick* and *Absalom, Absalom!*? and How can one disentangle the workings of race, gender, and sexuality in the American social system, when such a knot depends upon queer desire for its strength and energy to an exaggerated degree? Ultimately, I argue that one way to pull these threads apart is to implement a queer deconstructive approach informed by narrative theories of desire, but to begin to answer this question, I contend that the Romantic version of Satan is inherently queer and that as Byronic heroes, Ahab and Sutpen's queerness deconstructs the binaries that would ensure the "success" of their designs by magnifying and critiquing the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic class are predicated on socially constructed and interlocking binaries to assure the supremacy of (those who at least appear to be) powerful white, wealthy, heterosexual, cisgender men like Ahab and Sutpen. In my analysis of the queer impulses of Ahab and Sutpen, I draw on Jaime Harker's model of the Southern social system as predicated on an "unholy trinity" formed by the "whore," "nigger," and "queer" to advance a new approach to interpreting triangular relationships of power and desire in the American novel (Harker 112). In my analysis of Sutpen, I layer romantic triangles inspired by the work of René Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961) over the triangle of the "whore," "nigger," and "queer" to explore the ways in which mediated desire between "whores," "niggers," and "queers" disrupts cultural hegemony. Queer erotic dynamics involving Ahab are more often bivalent than triangular, but both *Moby-Dick* and *Absalom, Absalom!* feature queer erotic desire across racial boundaries, that reveal deep racial fantasies. I maintain that both novels are palimpsests of queer desire and that as Byronic heroes Ahab and Sutpen, though not the characters most frequently discussed in queer readings of *Moby-Dick* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, produce, benefit from and blend back into the queer milieu of each text. I end by arguing that Sutpen's Hundred metonymically stands in for the American South and that the *Pequod* represents The American Project in its entirety. It is my view that these novels model a hermeneutic (part: whole) relationship that makes them especially apt choices for probing this uniquely American matrix of social power and for highlighting the transformative potential of partially unearthed counter-narratives.

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Author

Alana J. Smith

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INTRODUCTION

In her introduction to *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick posits that the truth or falsity of “knowledge” is relative to its position towards any number of “regime[s] of truth” (8). This plurality of unstable knowledges is “structured by particular opacities” that generate “a plethora of *ignorances*” (8). If, as Sedgwick suggests, “the power of our enemies over us is implicated, not in their command of knowledge, but precisely in their ignorance” (7) then the way to combat the politically charged reification of ignorance is to “begin to ask questions about the labor, erotics, and economics of the...human production and distribution” of ignorances (8). Sedgwick is writing specifically about who gets to arbitrate the “truth” of sexual definitions (9), but her theorization of the dynamic of ignorance and power applies equally well to other interrelated “regimes of truth” that seek to define and control minorities through ritualized and institutionalized performances of cultural ignorance that are at once naturalized by and beneficial to those in positions of power (8).

Two scholars of the queer literary tradition of the American South, Jaime Harker and Michael Bibler, interrogate the ideological structures at play in the South and in the Southern novel in ways that are deeply resonant with Sedgwick’s approach. Both Harker and Bibler demonstrate that asking Sedgwickian questions reveals the “contradictions and inconsistencies embedded within [Southern] power structures” (Bibler 189). Harker extends her focus beyond Bibler’s to consider the role of race and gender in locating “cultural fissures [that] expos[e] hypocrisies and cruelties and enabl[e] disruptive alliances, however fragile” (117). Harker argues that “‘Whore,’ ‘nigger,’ and ‘queer’ become the unholy trinity on which the Southern community is based” (112). Harker’s

analytic model exposes the ways in which a hegemonic Southern identity is consolidated as white and male. The southern social order systematically excludes all those who are figured as Other and consequently reinforces feelings of white, male superiority. This triangle of denigrating epithets reveals the mutual constitution of these oppressions. By examining the works of Faulkner's major period, Harker locates the "Sudden eruptions of alternative knowledge and communities [that] happen constantly in Faulkner, across gender, race and sexual differences...[and that] threaten to undo the mainstream voice of Southern patriarchy" (117).

This thesis, drawing upon Sedgwick's theoretical foundations and Harker's work, will advance a new approach to interpreting triangular relationships of power and desire both in the Southern novel and in the American novel more broadly construed. Layering romantic triangles inspired by the work of René Girard in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961) over the triangle of the "whore," "nigger," and "queer," I explore the ways in which mediated desire between "whores," "niggers," and "queers" disrupts cultural hegemony. Race, gender, and sexuality form a Gordian knot, in that they present an intellectual puzzle. How can one disentangle the workings of race, gender, and sexuality in the social system, especially as it is mimetically depicted in American fiction, when such a knot depends upon queer desire for its strength and energy to an exaggerated degree? I argue one way to pull these threads apart is to implement a queer deconstructive approach informed by narrative theories of desire.

I have chosen two novels for my test case: *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Spanning the Romantic and Modern periods, these novels are alike in their reliance on speculatively and theoretically queer Byronic heroes and ideographs of

American regionalism: Sutpen's Hundred and the *Pequod*. Sutpen's Hundred metonymically stands in for the American South and the *Pequod* represents The American Project in its entirety. It is my view that these novels model a hermeneutic (part: whole) relationship that makes them especially apt choices for probing this uniquely American matrix of social power and for highlighting the transformative potential of partially unearthed counter-narratives. As Byronic heroes, Captain Ahab and Thomas Sutpen's queerness destabilizes binaries that would ensure the "success" of their designs by magnifying and critiquing the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are predicated on socially constructed and interlocking binaries to assure the supremacy of (those who at least appear to be) powerful, white, wealthy, heterosexual, cisgender men like Ahab and Sutpen.

In "Queering the Byronic Hero," I define the Byronic hero, justify Ahab and Sutpen's place in the Byronic tradition, and argue that Byronic heroes are proto-homosexual subjects endowed with complicated psychologies that mark them as theoretically and doubly queer. In "Mediated Desire in *Absalom, Absalom!*," I offer a reading of Sutpen's role in the Girardian triangular erotic dynamic that sparks his design. In "On the Raft Ag'in," I examine Ahab's bivalent erotic relationships through a Fiedler-inspired lens to reveal white American racial fantasies at play in *Moby-Dick*. I conclude by suggesting the implications of my readings for a broader analysis of American literature.

CHAPTER 1: QUEERING THE BYRONIC HERO

In this thesis I propose to untie, to the extent possible, the intricate, persistently queer knotting together of race, gender, and sexuality in *Moby-Dick* and *Absalom, Absalom!*—a knot principally embodied in the Byronic heroes of those landmark novels—aiming thus to illuminate an enduring cultural trope for persistent problems in American national identity. Consider the stunning scene in which Captain Ahab’s fiendish Byronism charges the instructions he gives the *Pequod’s* blacksmith for welding a special harpoon tip. The tip is made from twelve braided “nail-stubbs” gathered from “the steel shoes of racing horses” (371). Ahab insists on shaping the new tip on the anvil himself while Fedallah emerges to bless (or curse) the undertaking. When the blacksmith tempers the tip, the boiling water scalds Ahab’s face. Incensed, Ahab demands the blacksmith handcraft the barbs of the tip from Ahab’s own shaving razors. The barbs added, Ahab will not allow the blacksmith to temper the tip in water after giving it its last heating. Instead, Ahab insists, “I want it of the true death-temper” (371). Ahab calls:

‘Ahoy, there! Tashtego, Queequeg, Daggoo! What say ye, pagans! Will you give me as much blood as will cover this barb?’ holding it high up. A cluster of dark nods replied, Yes. Three punctures were made in the heathen flesh, and the White Whale’s barbs where then tempered.

‘Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!’¹ deliriously howled Ahab, as the malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood. (371-372)

When the blood oath is complete and the harpoon is fully assembled the “pole, iron, and rope—like the Three Fates—remained inseparable, and Ahab moodily stalked away with

¹ “I do not baptize you in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil”

the weapon; the sound of his ivory leg, and the sound of the hickory pole, both hollowly ringing along every plank (372). Entering his cabin afterward, Ahab hears “a light, unnatural, half-bantering, yet most piteous sound” and reflects, ““Oh, Pip! thy wretched laugh, thy idle but unresting eye; all thy strange mummeries not unmeaningly blended with the black tragedy of the melancholy ship, and mocked it!”” (372).

I begin by calling attention to this passage from *Moby-Dick* because it conveys a number of Captain Ahab’s Byronic qualities. I am not the first to remark upon Ahab’s Byronic valence. In the introduction to his seminal text *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962), Peter L. Thorslev, Jr. claims, “the most terrible figure in our classical American literature, Captain Ahab, has much of the Byronic Hero’s aspect” (3). The construction of the absurdly violent and personalized implement designed to hunt *Moby-Dick* is completed with an oath made in “heathen” blood in the name of the devil. In classic Byronic fashion, Ahab elevates Satan over God, as the phrase “Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!” indicates (372). The pious language of “baptism” is appropriated to describe a satanic blood oath (372). Ahab’s defiant impiety and affront to norms strike at the center of the Byronic type. Ahab’s decision to temper the harpoon’s razor tip by pricking the blood of the harpooners suggests that, beyond their crucial role in whale hunting, the harpooners’ status as “heathens” in Ahab’s eyes marks them as closely affiliated with Satan or fallenness, an association critically important for my argument throughout my thesis.

Fedallah, called only “Lucifer” by the blacksmith, appears mysteriously so as to officiate at the ceremony. Fedallah is elsewhere described in serpentine terms. Fedallah gives “half-hissed” replies (181). He glides everywhere (191). Fedallah is portrayed as

“tall and swart, with one white tooth evilly protruding from its steel-like lips,” and with “a glistening white plaited turban, the living hair braided and *coiled* round and round upon his head” that crowns his “ebonness” (181, emphasis mine). This language likens Fedallah to the serpent that tempts Eve in Genesis. In this formulation, Ahab becomes Eve in his fallenness, but in an interesting reversal, it is Ahab-Eve who calls Fedallah-Serpent to him. Ahab amasses and stows away his secret crew, led by Fedallah, on the *Pequod*. Ahab invites and intends the sinister atmosphere he creates.

Ahab signals his own complacent acceptance of the “black tragedy” of the *Pequod* (372). The “pole, iron, and rope” of the newly assembled harpoon are compared to “three fates” (372). This self-awareness of the tragic arc one participates in paired with a fatalistic resignation to predetermined suffering are paradigmatically Byronic qualities. That one of the most terrifying events in the novel involving Ahab is followed so swiftly by Ahab’s expression of pity for Pip signals the complicated, even contradictory, character of the Byronic hero. Ahab stalks away from the forge “moodily” (372). On the way to his cabin, the sound of the harpoon’s “hickory pole” echoes “the sound of [Ahab’s] ivory leg...ringing along every plank” (372). The modified harpoon sonically merges with Ahab’s body like yet another prosthetic appendage—each necessitated by Ahab’s first encounter with the whale, Moby Dick. In an earlier passage, Melville writes of Ahab that “While his one live leg made lively echoes along the deck, every stroke of his dead limb sounded like a coffin-tap. On life and death this old man walked” (192). It is nowhere more true that Ahab walks on life and death than when he leaves the forge to meet Pip in his captain’s cabin, the menacing harpoon at his side. Just as Ahab brings his attempts on Moby Dick’s life into focus by welding the harpoon’s tip, he is confronted by

the mad ramblings of Pip, a person his single-minded mission has already hurt. What is more, he has installed the young, black boy in his own cabin out of feelings of obligation, self-torture, and shared sensibility.

The critical commonplace is that the figure of the so-called “Byronic hero” extends a literary genealogy of character type first inspired by Satan in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) and mediated by Ann Radcliffe’s gothic villains (Thorslev 7-8). In recent years, however, other scholars have attempted to trace the origins of the Byronic hero to mythic characters like Prometheus and Mephistopheles and to historical figures like Julius Caesar, the Marquis de Sade, and Napoleon Bonaparte. Some look to post-Byronic heroes like the Nietzschean Superman to explain the trajectory of the Byronic hero. Critics have attempted to sketch the dimensions of the Byronic hero by tracking the development of Byron’s hero-villains from the earliest example in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto 1 (1812), to *The Giaour* (1813), to *The Corsair* (1814), to *Lara, A Tale* (1814), to *Manfred* (1817), to *Cain* (1821) and even to *Don Juan* (1824), which often functions as a bookend or an outlier to Byron’s experimentation with the Satanic hero-type. Despite this widely shared approach among critics, not all characterizations of the Byronic hero are uniform or uniformly appreciated by scholars. In a trend that begins with Byron’s own circle of intimates and the literary critics of his own lifetime, some scholars more than others have been willing to imbue the Byronic hero with the same mythic identity Byron wove around himself (Thorslev 11). Thorslev insists, “all of the elements of the Byronic hero existed before him in the literature of the age” (12). What makes the Byronic hero distinct and identifiable is the way his character weds together “these disparate elements into a single commanding image” (Thorslev 12).

As a construct for intellectual thought, the status of the “Byronic hero” has long been contested. Thorslev felt the need to define and defend the term “Byronic hero” in his 1962 book-length study. In 2002, McGann was still adding to this defense. Whether or not the Byronic hero is suitably distinct from other romantic heroes or gothic villains and deserves to bear this moniker is not essential to my argument. I am using the “Byronic hero” to name a recognizable set of qualities that distinguish Ahab and Sutpen from other prominent characters in American literature. I feel licensed to do this given the variability of Byronic heroic qualities and given the many permutations of the Byronic hero. It is safe to say that there is no one monolithic Byronic hero. The Byronic hero is different when viewed by different commentators. There is a network of texts and biographies that encode the Byronic hero. The mercurial nature of the Byronic hero makes it appropriate for me to focus on the Byronic characteristics that are most useful for understanding Ahab and Sutpen. To this end, I offer the following as my own definition of the Byronic hero.²

Byronic heroes dampen their own impulses as they toil endlessly towards a single, all-consuming goal. This goal represents the culmination of their revenge for their own profound loss or lack and its accomplishment justifies the manipulation and suffering of everyone around them. Like Satan who first inspired them, Byronic heroes are marked by their pride, rebelliousness, and cunning intellect. They are not evil incarnate; if anything these heroes are defined by the sympathy their fallen humanity inspires. Often portrayed as brooding or alienated, Byronic heroes live outside the confines of conventional or

² I am indebted to The Norton Anthology’s selection “The Satanic and Byronic Hero,” which provides one of the best distillations of the type and to Jerome McGann’s *Byron and Romanticism* (2002), which offers critical insight into the relationship between Byron and Milton and into the reception of the Byronic hero.

accepted morality. Their alluring mystery is heightened even further by their ability to hide their true disposition, history, and intentions.

Part of what makes Byronic heroes so compelling is their dual nature. True to tragic form, Byronic heroes soar to great heights before they fall. The psyches of these heroes are fundamentally split. Byronic heroes never stop hoping that they will attain their goals even when every imaginable obstacle is before them, but they are also fundamentally aware of the inevitability of their failure. Byronic heroes are powerfully seductive but do not allow themselves to be seduced. Even as Byronic heroes attempt to control the actions of others, they are controlled by their own actions. Byronic heroes see themselves as both victors and victims. Known for their cruel use of power and violence, these heroes are somehow also subject to deep feelings of self-reproach and remorse. Thorslev would say these heroes blend Miltonian Satanism and sensibility (188).

Byron borrowed heavily from the existing literary tradition when he experimented with his own heroes. Byron's heroes were then assimilated back into the literary fabric. This story about the Byronic hero explains the existence of characters like Mr. Rochester from *Jane Eyre* (1847) as well as far more recent characters like Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* saga. I am arguing that American characters also pick up this mantle, specifically Captain Ahab and Thomas Sutpen. *Moby-Dick* shows that Melville was a knowledgeable and dedicated reader of Byron. In "The Mast-Head," Melville writes:

For nowadays, the whale fishery furnishes an asylum for romantic, melancholy, and absent minded young men, disgusted with the carking cares of earth, and seeking sentiment in tar and blubber. Childe Harold not unfrequently perches

himself upon the mast-head of some luckless disappointed whale-ship, and in moody phrases ejaculates: —

‘Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!

Ten thousand blubber-hunters sweep over thee in vain.’ (135)

This humorous, whaling-inspired poetry echoes stanza 179 of canto 4 of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, which reads, “Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain.”³ Like Melville, Faulkner integrates Byron into his own novels. There are two famous Byrons in Faulkner’s body of work: Byron Bunch from *Light in August* (1932) and Byron Snopes in *Sartoris* (1927).⁴ Both Byrons are named in homage to Lord Byron. According to *William Faulkner, Letters & Fictions* (1987) by James G. Watson, Faulkner borrows from *Don Juan* in *Flags in the Dust*. In *Flags*, Horace writes a letter to Narcissus expressing his sexual frustration in the language of *Don Juan*, particularly Don Juan’s wish, “That womankind had but one rosy mouth / To kiss them all at once from North to South” (Watson 101).

There is even greater evidence that Faulkner read and admired *Moby-Dick*. In the July 16, 1927 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, Faulkner wrote, “I think that the book which I put down with the unqualified thought ‘I wish I had written that’ is *Moby Dick*” (NCE 640). Faulkner goes on to praise *Moby-Dick* for its most Byronic qualities. Faulkner lauds:

The Greek-like simplicity of it: a man of forceful character driven by his somber nature and his bleak heritage, bent on his own destruction and dragging his

³ As a child “Melville memorized such passages from Byron” (NCE 135).

⁴ Later republished as *Flags in the Dust* (1973) to contain an additional 40,000 words of Faulkner’s initial draft

immediate world down with him with a despotic and utter disregard of them as individuals; the fine point to which the various natures caught [and passive as though with a foreknowledge of unalterable doom] in the fatality of his blind course are swept—a sort of Golgotha of the heart become immutable as bronze in the sonority of its plunging ruin; all against the grave and tragic rhythm of the earth in its most timeless phase: the sea. (NCE 640)

The similarities between Faulkner's reading of *Moby-Dick* and the plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* are suggestive. In his chapter "Absalom, Absalom!: The Extended Simile" (1967), James Guetti remarks, "the parallels between Sutpen and Ahab are so striking as to be worth detailed comment" (82). Despite Guetti's relatively early pronouncement, few have made an effort to enumerate at length the similarities between the two imposing literary figures. Guetti's assertions that Ahab and Sutpen share "metaphorical visions" (103), similar failures (106), and similar focalizers (Ishmael and Quentin) (102) have gone largely unsubstantiated in the extensive critical literature. Because I am attempting, in part, to elaborate on the parallels between Ahab and Sutpen, I see myself as taking up Guetti's call.

I am not the only person to argue for Sutpen's Byronism. Following Faulkner's publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Malcom Cowley penned a book review titled, "Poe in Mississippi" that ran in the November 4, 1936 issue of the *New Republic*. Cowley is the first to align Faulkner directly with Byron, writing, "The daemon forces him [Faulkner] to the always intense...to write in a wild lyrical style, to omit almost every detail that does not contribute to a single effect of somber violence and horror" (205). Cowley takes Faulkner's cultivation of "a single effect of somber violence and horror" (205) as

evidence that “Faulkner’s real kinship...is with the ‘satanic’ poets from Byron to Baudelaire, and with the ‘black’ or ‘terrifying’ novelists from Monk Lewis and the Hoffman of the ‘Tales’ to Edgar Allen Poe” (206). Cowley continues to place Faulkner in the gothic, specifically the Byronic, tradition when he writes, “The daemon that haunts him [Faulkner] is the ghost of the haunted castle—though it is also Poe’s raven and Manfred’s evil spirit” (206). In his gloss of the novel, Cowley explains:

Thomas Sutpen, in 1833, comes riding into a little Mississippi town with twenty coal-black Negroes straight from the jungle. He despises his new neighbors, who in turn regard him as Satan in the flesh. He is the lonely Byronic hero with his mind coldly fixed on the achievement of one design. And the plantation house built with the help of his naked slaves—the great mansion literally drawn from the swamps—is the haunted castle that was described so often in early nineteenth-century romances. Like other haunted castles, Sutpen’s Hundred is brooded over by a curse. Years ago in the West Indies, Thomas Sutpen had deserted his wife and his infant son after discovering that they had Negro blood. He now marries again; he has two children and a hundred square miles of virgin land; but in the midst of his triumph the curse begins to operate: the deserted son reappears and tries to marry his own half-sister. Here the note of incest suggests Byron. (206)

It only substantiates Cowley’s claims that when Quentin first visualizes Sutpen while listening to Miss Rosa’s story in her gloomy office Quentin imagines:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts

half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect. (4)

What could be more Byronic? In this passage and in the passage about Ahab in the forge, both Sutpen and Ahab are distinguished by their semblance to Satan. But, as I have previously suggested, there is more to being a Byronic hero than being somehow like Satan. Both Sutpen and Ahab share a marked monomania. While Ahab may invest all of his efforts into bringing about the destruction of Moby-Dick, Sutpen toils and sacrifices for the construction of his plantation, his bloodline and his public image. Sutpen and Ahab's monomania both take on the outward appearances of feverish delirium. In Mr. Compson's telling, Sutpen first approaches Jefferson:

from the south—a man of about twenty-five as the town learned later, because at the time his age could not have been guessed because at that time he looked like a man who had been sick. Not like a man who had been peacefully ill in bed and had recovered to move with a sort of diffident and tentative amazement in the world which he had believed himself on the point of surrendering but like a man who had been through some solitary furnace experience which was more than just a fever, like an explorer say who not only had to face the normal hardship of the pursuit which he chose but was overtaken by the added and unforeseen handicap of the fever also and fought through it at enormous cost not so much physical as mental, alone and unaided and not through blind instinctive will to endure and survive but to gain and keep and enjoy it the material prize for which he accepted the original gambit. (24)

When Ahab first attempts to strike a deathblow against Moby Dick:

He piled upon the white whale's hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell up on it. It is not probable that this monomania in him took its instant rise at the precise time of his bodily dismemberment. Then, in darting at the monster, knife in hand, he had but given loose to a sudden, passionate, corporeal animosity; and when he received the stroke that tore him, he probably but felt the agonizing bodily laceration, but nothing more. Yet, when by this collision forced to turn towards home, and for long months of days and weeks, Ahab and anguish lay stretched together in one hammock...then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so infusing made him mad. (156)

When "the final monomania seized" Ahab "he was a raving lunatic; and, though unlimbed of a leg, yet such vital strength yet lurked in his Egyptian chest, and was moreover intensified by his delirium, that his mates were forced to lace him fast, even there, as he sailed, raving in his hammock" (156-157). When Ahab reaches tropical climes, his outward expressions of madness wane, but "even then, Ahab, in his hidden self, raved on" (157). Once a "living agent," Ahab has become a "living instrument" of his design (157). He is "Gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed, unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea" and "purposely sailed upon the present voyage with the one only and all-engrossing object of hunting the White Whale...He was intent on an audacious, immitigable, and supernatural revenge" (158).

Up to this point, I have attempted to demonstrate that Ahab and Sutpen are consummate Byronic heroes. My larger point is not that Ahab and Sutpen are Byronic

heroes who also *happen* to be queer. Instead, Byronic heroes are by definition queer. If, as I argue, the queer erotics of Ahab and Sutpen represent the best possibility to untie the knot of race, gender, and sexuality in *Moby-Dick* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, then that is only made possible because of Ahab and Sutpen's shared status as Byronic heroes. Here I am drawing upon two usages of the term "queer." I am using queerness to describe relationships predicated on non-normative desires (as opposed to explicit genital sexuality) and as a theoretical construct, divorced from notions of personhood and desire, predicated on an understanding that social constructs and identities that are unstable and multiple are always already queer. I have already begun to argue that Byronic heroes possess a number of personality traits that are unstable and multiple and, therefore, queer. The ability of Byronic heroes to move rapidly between polar positionings or to maintain the cognitive dissonance necessary to hold what at least appear to be contradictory, diametrically oppositional, or mutually exclusive identities affirms the queerness of the type. For example, once Ahab has been mutilated by Moby Dick he conceives of himself as a victim in perpetuity, and he uses his status as eternal victim to self-authorize all of his monomaniac behavior, including the behavior that will take the life of every member of his crew, except Ishmael. Sutpen has a similar mentality. Because he was born incredibly poor, raised in a profoundly unstable home, and humiliated by his interaction with the "monkey nigger," the harm he inflicts on every person he manipulates as he tries to bring about his design is unimportant to Sutpen. These men are not aware of their status as victims to the extreme that they do not recognize themselves as powerful men or even victimizers. Instead, they are fully conscious of both identities, but they are able to exaggerate each identity when doing so soothes either their ego or their conscience.

Byronic heroes possess more than a theoretically queer psychology. As permutations of a discernible character type, these heroes are also proto-homosexual subjects. The “bachelor hero,” who is designed to build on and critique the Byronic hero, is more commonly formulated as queer than its predecessor the Byronic hero. According to Steve Bruhm in “Byron and the Choreography of Queer Desire” (2007), “the Victorian bachelor is the domesticated urbanite’s answer to the kind of male homosexual panic experienced by the Gothic hero of the previous literary era” (19). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it in her chapter “The Beast in the Closet”:

The urban bachelor...personifies the most deflationary tonal contrast to the eschatological harrowings and epistemic doublings of the paranoid Gothic. Where the Gothic hero had been solipsistic, the bachelor hero is selfish. Where the Gothic hero had raged, the bachelor hero bitches. Where the Gothic hero had been suicidally inclined, the bachelor hero is a hypochondriac. The Gothic hero ranges from euphoria to despondency; the bachelor hero, from the eupeptic to the dyspeptic. (189)

In this instance, the gothic hero and the Byronic hero are near synonymous. In his argument that *Don Juan* represents a turn away from the classic Byronic hero and toward the bachelor hero, Bruhm acknowledges “readers of *Manfred*, *Cain*, or *The Corsair* will have no trouble aligning Byron’s heroes with Sedgwick’s definition of the Gothic” (20). The linear developments from the Gothic hero to the bachelor hero that Sedgwick articulates underscore that the Gothic (or really the Byronic) hero was always already queer and that these alterations only serve to make the queer elements of the Byronic hero more overt. Abigail Keegan concludes *Byron’s Othered Self and Voice* (2003) by

insisting that “Byron’s writing provides a kind of prehistory to the homosexual subject. His interest in characters who defy sexual conventions to the point of breaking laws and formalized codes and characters who prove to be unsuitable for domestic arrangements move toward signs of an emergent homosexual” (146).

Keegan attempts to articulate the queerness of the Byronic hero. Keegan finds Byronic heroes to be displaced homosexual subjects who indirectly manifest their queerness in their searching, sacrificial, and destructive tendencies; she contends that Byronic heroes are shaped by popular nineteenth century understandings of the sodomite as “a reviled figure” (9).⁵ Keegan argues that Byron was pressured by societal norms that make same-sex desire “unspeakable.” As a result, he crafted heroes who reinforced normative ideas about homosexuality and was forced to develop textual strategies to encode socially disruptive queer desires. While I find great resonance between my own thinking and Keegan’s work, I am less focused on the particulars of Byron’s own personal desires and more interested in how others have built on the literary foundation Byron laid.

Keegan sees insight and particular strategies in Byron that I also see as being present in, and in fact crucial to, Melville and Faulkner’s work. For example, Keegan writes:

Byron understands what it means to reproduce, to twist and turn a figure... While he cannot, for fear of risking his neck, mimetically produce figures of sodomy or sodomites, his reproductions of the tropes of abjection, unspeakability, threats to

⁵ Keegan identifies the tropes that cumulatively produced the sodomite as the effeminate outlaw, the foreigner, the criminal, and the figure with unspeakable secrets (145).

stable economies of genders, irreconcilable criminality, and a fascination with foreignness are the stock and trade of the Byronic hero...produc[ing] a sodomitic desire that is always elsewhere and always signed within the tropes of sodomy.
(49)

Melville and Faulkner are placed in similar binds and adopt similar techniques to “twist and turn a figure” and “to produce a [queer] desire that is always elsewhere” (Keegan 49). Keegan claims that one way Byron produces a desire that is so diffuse as to be hard for critics to pin down is that he uses the “contestatory autobiographical practice...of fragmentation” (113). In her reading of *The Corsair*, Keegan asserts that Byron simultaneously “challenge[s] the normalizing discourses of gender” and “subscribe[s] himself to the demands of homosexual silence” by “dispers[ing] his sense of self among three characters, two women and a man” (113). While I am not suggesting that Faulkner distributes his own sexual impulses between three of his characters, Keegan’s interpretation of Byron’s creative practice achieves the same literary effect as Faulkner’s choice to explore non-normative desire through the love triangle of Henry and Judith Sutpen and Charles Bon. By mediating his desire either through Judith or Bon, Henry is able to vicariously enjoy the idea of romantic and sexual relationships with both his dear friend, idol, and half-brother, Bon, and his full sister, Judith, without explicitly acting on either impulse or violating social behavioral norms.

Not only are Byronic heroes proto-homosexual subjects endowed with complicated psychologies that mark them as theoretically and doubly queer, but they also exhibit libidinal desires that are non-normative and queer. In the following chapters, I will unpack these desires as I see Ahab and Sutpen manifest them.

CHAPTER 2: MEDIATED DESIRE IN *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

One can gain a better view of Sutpen's queer Byronic desires by examining his interactions with the other points in Harker's triangle: women and people of African descent. Thomas Sutpen approaches women and marriage with the same cool objectivity and determination that he uses in the pursuit of every aspect of his design. Sutpen recognizes that taking a white and respected wife is necessary to legitimate his bloodline. Sutpen, we are meant to believe, discovers the black ancestry of his wife, Eulalia Bon, only after the birth of their son Charles. The daughter of a Haitian sugarcane plantation owner, Eulalia's class-status and her demonstrated ability to pass as white are not enough to convince Sutpen that his design can survive their union. Sutpen tells General Compson years later, "I found out she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I [Sutpen] had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside" (194). Sutpen's second wife, Ellen Coldfield, while of lower socioeconomic class than Eulalia, promises the security of white, bourgeois acceptance in antebellum Jefferson, Mississippi. Jason Compson III explains to his teenage son, Quentin, that Sutpen left the "masculine solitude" (30) of his newly raised mansion to "come to town to find a wife [Ellen] exactly as he would have gone to the Memphis market to buy livestock or slaves" (31). Here the calculating and cruel equation of women, livestock and slaves in Compson's characterization of Sutpen's attitude reduces all to the status of subhuman tools over which to bargain with other men. Sutpen, this statement suggests, would buy a slave to build and keep his plantation, an animal to work his land, and a wife to bear his children.

The comparison of slaves, women, and farm animals is solidified when it becomes clear that Sutpen has not just one but two non-white children. Immediately after leaving his first wife and child on the basis of their race, Sutpen begets a daughter, Clytie, with one of his own unnamed slave women that he has illegally brought with him from Haiti. Jason Compson III explains, “He brought the two women deliberately; he probably chose them with the same care and shrewdness with which he chose the other livestock—the horses and mules and cattle—which he brought later on. And he lived out there for almost five years before he had speaking acquaintance with any white woman in the county, just as he had no furniture in the house” (48). Jason Compson III insinuates that Sutpen’s choice of a slave woman as a sexual object stems from the same Spartan discipline, and it is “Spartan” discipline, under which he resides alone in an unfurnished, yet glamorous, home to conserve resources (30). While Jason Compson III is absolutely correct about how Sutpen came to have Clytie, the picture he paints is incomplete. Even if Clytie is the product of a lusty plantation romance, Clytie’s presence in the novel does more than signify the sexual pastimes of a solitary and misunderstood plantation owner. Clytie’s mother’s blackness is not simply a convenience or even an aberration of object choice for Sutpen. Instead, Clytie’s blackness allows Sutpen to create his own “monkey nigger” like the one he met when he was turned away from the plantation owner’s door in a formative adolescent experience. More than kin and less than kind, Clytie’s mixed status places her inside her father’s house but below the status of her half siblings. Clytie both plays with her siblings and waits on them. She can share Judith’s room but not Judith’s bed. Instead, like Sutpen in the cabin of his youth, she must sleep on a pallet on the floor. Neither fully a “house nigger” nor fully a daughter, Clytie is caught between

the pretensions of white refinement and servitude just as the silk finery of the original “monkey nigger” suggests. Like the “monkey nigger” of Sutpen’s coming of age, Clytie polices entry into the plantation manor. Just as the “monkey nigger” guarded against young Sutpen in all of his sartorial disarray, Clytie guards against Wash Jones:

Jones who before ’61 had not even been allowed to approach the front of the house and who during the next four years got no nearer than the kitchen door and that only when he brought the game and fish and vegetables on which the seducer-to-be’s wife and daughter (and Clytie too, the one remaining servant, negro, the one who would forbid him to pass the kitchen door with what he brought) depended on to keep life in them. (149)

At no time does Sutpen interact with a woman that he cannot use to advance or exemplify his plans. When Ellen dies and his disavowed son is murdered by his one acknowledged son, Sutpen seeks out another wife, not for comfort or companionship, but to rebuild his design after a tremendous “setback.” Miss Rosa, Ellen’s much-younger sister, is Sutpen’s brief marital prospect. After a mysterious falling out with Miss Rosa, Sutpen undoubtedly decides to sacrifice “respectability” as a crucial feature of any possible spouse. Instead, worn down by war and struggle and loss, Sutpen pursues an affair with his friend Wash Jones’ underage daughter, Milly. Jones is poor even before the failed Civil War. He lives on Sutpen’s Hundred in a small shack, hunting and fishing on Sutpen’s land and performing the role of groundskeeper in exchange for Sutpen’s generosity. In the post-bellum years, Wash is content to drink and keep store with Sutpen. Sutpen does not immediately attempt to marry Milly. Instead, he gets her pregnant. When the child, a girl, is born, Sutpen outright rejects Milly, the child, and by extension Wash.

In one of Sutpen's most cutting moments, he tells Milly only hours after his baby daughter's birth, "Well...too bad you're not a mare like Penelope. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable" (151). Wash murders his closest friend in a vengeful rage and then takes Milly's, the baby's and his own life rather than be taken into police custody, effectively insuring the end of the socially sanctioned Sutpen bloodline. Sutpen's surviving children, once a source of great hope for Sutpen, will never create new generations of Suptens free from the "taint" of black blood, which alone would legitimate them within Sutpen's design. After Charles' death, Judith never seems to consider marrying anyone else. Instead, she and her half-sister, Clytie, raise Charles' son in Sutpen's house. Before his death, Sutpen dismisses the generative possibilities of his one surviving (though vanished) white son, Henry. Henry was:

more insuperable to him [Sutpen] now than if the son [Henry] were dead since...his name would be different and those to call him by it strangers and whatever dragon's outcropping of Sutpen blood the son might sow on the body of whatever strange woman would therefore carry on the tradition, accomplish the hereditary evil and harm under another name and upon and among people who will never have heard the right one. (148)

The black blood introduced into Sutpen's family tree with his first relationship blights the rest. When Sutpen's Hundred finally burns to the ground, only Jim Bond, Charles Bon's grandson, remains of Sutpen's legacy. Jim, dramatically named "Bond," is "blacker" than white passing Charles Bon (no "d") ever was. Charles, who is half black, has his son, Charles Etienne de St. Valery, with an unnamed woman who is one-eighth black. Charles Etienne has his son, Jim Bond, with an entirely black unnamed "negress."

This means that Jim Bond is phenotypically blacker than his grandfather. Through Sutpen history, whiteness gives way to blackness as the men of Sutpen's racially mixed bloodline continue a tradition Sutpen begins with Clytie's mother of reproducing with unnamed black women. In a moment of reflection, Shreve reveals the racial calculus of the novel: "So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon. So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, don't it?" (302). Shreve continues:

Which is alright, it's fine; it clears the whole ledger, you can tear all of the pages out and burn them, except for one thing. And do you know what that is...You've got one nigger left. You've got one nigger Sutpen left. Of course you can't catch him and you don't even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you've got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Don't you? (302)

The lone survivor of the Sutpen line, Jim Bond, takes on the haunting dimensions of the racial vanquisher in Shreve's imagination. Shreve speculates:

I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it won't quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they won't show up so 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. (302)

Regardless of whether Shreve's pseudoscientific comment, presented in a matter-of-fact tone, is sincere or designed to lampoon readers of the novel who genuinely express racial anxieties about the displacement of white people in the West, Shreve's remark reinforces a familiar reading of Sutpen's Hundred as metonymically representing the American South.⁶ Jim Bond outlasts Sutpen's Hundred and by extension white, planter-class social control in a scene that taps into widespread racial fears present in the American South and that had predated Nat Turner's Rebellion of 1830. The Jim Bond in the text stands in for all of the "Jim Bonds" who will change the racial landscape of North America now that slavery is over.⁷ In making this point, Shreve echoes a recognizable discourse in Faulkner's time that sought a pretextual foundation for racism in hard science. In keeping with the Lombroso-inspired rhetoric of "degeneracy," Jim Bond's meager intellect is always closely associated with his dark skin. Jim Bond is described as a "saddle-colored and slack-mouthed idiot" (296) and "as the house collapsed and roared away," we are told, "there was only the sound of the idiot negro left" (301).

Jim Bond's Benjy Compson-esque wailing sounds the note of his continued existence in the face of the blazing house, a continued existence made even more poignant given the close associations of the house with Sutpen's will and the horrors of racial slavery. Throughout the novel, the house is anthropomorphized. In Miss Rosa's memory the house is a sentient speaker. Straining against Clytie to comfort Judith after

⁶ Harker, for example, argues, "The cultural critique in *Sanctuary* and *Light in August* laid the foundations for Faulkner's most thorough critique of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in *Absalom, Absalom!* The novel tells the story of the South in microcosm through the queer familial drama of the Sutpen family. The South's 'race problem' proves to be not outside but within the white southern family" (112).

⁷ Establishing the metonymic argument is essential to authorize my reading of the text as a reflection of American social life and not just American literature.

Bon's death, Miss Rosa imagines it is "*the voice [that] parted us, broke the spell. It said only one word: 'Clytie.'* I like that, that cold, that still: not Judith, but the house itself speaking again, though it was Judith's voice" (114). While the Civil War rages the house is "a skeleton giving itself in slow dribblets of furniture and carpet, linen and silver, to help to die torn and anguished men who knew, even while dying, that for months now the sacrifice and the anguish were in vain," and after the war ended, the "unkempt...shaggy desolation" of the former park is "aghast like the unshaven face of a man just waking up from ether" (105). As Quentin and Miss Rosa trek toward the house on this fateful night "the dead furnace-breath of air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh" (203).

This house of human flesh is located on a "hundred miles of land which he [Sutpen] took from a tribe of ignorant Indians, nobody knows how" (11) and raised from a primordial swamp by Sutpen's "wild niggers" (203). The history of Sutpen's Hundred, as many have noted, mirrors the history of the American South. By exploiting and displacing Native Americans for land rights and by enslaving a racially distinguishable people to clear and farm that land, the planter-class was able to create and preserve an aristocratic fantasy. It is this aristocratic fantasy that Sutpen attempts to access when he builds "a house the size of a courthouse where he lived for three years without a window or door or bedstead in it and still called it Sutpen's Hundred as if it had been a King's grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather" (11). Rather than a royal land grant, it is, Quentin imagines, nothing but Sutpen's God-like will that authorizes him to subjugate the land. Quentin daydreams that he sees Sutpen and his slaves "overrun

suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light*" (4). Both fantasies, of the land grant and the creation by divine fiat, fail to obscure the ugly, racially violent origins of Sutpen's Hundred and the Southern aristocracy.

Fittingly, Clytie is the one who gets to burn it all down. The house-made-flesh is cremated in a conflagration of flames sparked by Clytie and designed to protect an aged and ailing Henry who has returned home to die. It was Sutpen's will that "compelled that house to accept and retain human life; as though houses actually possess a sentience, a personality and character acquired not from the people who breathe or have breathed in them so much as...by the man or men who conceived and built them," but it is Clytie's will that prevents the house from further retaining any human life (67). In the triangular logic of the southern social system, Sutpen's Hundred took a "queer" to build it, "whores" (Clytie's unnamed mother, Milly Jones, and even Ellen Coldfield since to Sutpen, all women, even his wife by law, are essentially whores) to fill it, and a "nigger" to burn it down.

Clytie's actions effectively complete the curse on the House of Sutpen, but the "curse on the South" lives on as if "God Himself [is] seeing to it that it [is] performed and discharged to the last drop and dreg" (14).⁸ Ghostly figures can no longer haunt the dark house, but they do continue to haunt Quentin.⁹ From the beginning of the novel, Quentin

⁸ Every facet of Sutpen's design has failed: he, his wife and his recognized children are dead, his money and slaves are gone, and the house, his personal monument, is burned to the ground.

⁹ Faulkner's original title for *Absalom, Absalom!* was *Dark House*.

conceives of his “very body [as] an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts” (7). Quentin is as much an objective correlative for the racial sins of the father in the American South as Sutpen’s Hundred is. The last lines of the text contain Quentin’s panicked and unconvincing assertion that he does not hate the South. Readers of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) know that Quentin is ultimately unable to cope in a world structured around changing relationships to “queers,” “niggers,” and “whores” and takes his life while away at Harvard.

To understand the circumstances of Quentin’s death, it helps to understand the circumstances of Sutpen’s birth. Sutpen was born in 1807 in what would later become the state of West Virginia (179). Sutpen recollects his early childhood for the benefit of his confidant, General Jason Lycurgus Compson II, and explains his formative experiences with race and class. Sutpen remembers “the only colored people were Indians and you only looked down at them over your rifle sights” (179) and that “he just thought that some people were spawned in one place and some in another, some spawned rich...and some not...it had never once occurred to him that any man should take any such blind accident as that as authority or warrant to look down at others, any others” (180). Sutpen does not yet know that “there was a country all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men...had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others” (179). Sutpen still does not know that these privileged men:

had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices such as pouring the very whiskey from the jug and putting the glass into his hand or

pulling off his boots for him to go to bed that all men have had to do for themselves since time began and would have to do until they died and which no man ever has or ever will like to do but which no man that he knew had ever anymore thought of evading than he had thought of evading the effort of chewing and swallowing and breathing. (179-180)

When Sutpen's family moves to Virginia, the layers of his "innocence" are slowly peeled back (178). Sutpen's father is an alcoholic who finds trouble in a number of taverns as the family relocates. The first black man Sutpen ever sees is "a huge bull of a nigger" who emerges from one such establishment with Sutpen's father "over his shoulder like a sack of meal" in the process of throwing Sutpen's father out (182). The image of "the nigger's...mouth loud with laughing and full of teeth like tombstones" is frozen forever in Sutpen's mind (182). It is by watching his father get tossed out of taverns that Sutpen learns "the difference not only between white men and black ones" but also the "difference between white men and white men," one that cannot "be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room" (183).

Moving to Virginia expands Sutpen's worldview, but it does not improve the family's material conditions. After months of arduous travel, Sutpen's family has come to rest "in a cabin that was almost a replica of the mountain one... where his sisters and brothers seemed to take sick after supper and die before the next meal" (184). All of Sutpen's suffering is done in a dizzyingly unfamiliar environment. All around Sutpen "regiments of niggers with white men watching them planted and raised things that he had never heard of" (184). At some point, Sutpen realizes:

the man who owned all of the land and the niggers and apparently the white men who superintended the work, lived in the biggest house he had ever seen and spent most of the afternoon (he told how he would creep up among the tangled shrubbery of the lawn and lie hidden and watch the man) in a barrel stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes off and a nigger who wore every day better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to, who did nothing but fan him and bring him drinks. (184)

Sutpen is fascinated with the strange man. Every chance he gets, he lies in his hiding spot all afternoon “watching the man who not only had shoes in the summertime too, but didn’t even have to wear them” (184). Sutpen is perplexed that a “nigger” could have finer clothes than either he or anyone in his family could ever conceive of having, but still Sutpen does not “envy the man he was watching” (184). “He coveted the shoes, and probably he would have liked for his father to have a broadcloth monkey to hand him the jug,” but Sutpen is still not envious (184-185). Sutpen, for all of his new knowledge about the interlocking structures of power in the antebellum South, is still innocent. Sutpen has begun to learn that a man has power if he has another man to “hand him the jug,” but he has not learned to want that for himself (185). He is not yet psychologically the Sutpen who after the war would frequently “curse the store empty of customers” and “direct Jones” to enter the house “to fetch the jug” (149). Sutpen “no more envied the man [the plantation owner] than he would have envied a mountain man who happened to own a fine rifle,” and Sutpen cannot imagine the mountain man thinking, “*Because I own this rifle, my arms and legs and blood and bones are superior to yours,*” unless he were gloating about a “victorious outcome of a fight with rifles” (185). It is in this frame of

mind that Sutpen wonders, “how in the world could a man fight another man with dressed-up niggers and the fact that he could lie in a hammock all afternoon with his shoes off? and what in the world would he be fighting for if he did?” (185). The answer, Sutpen will soon learn, is *if you can't beat 'em join 'em*.

One fateful day, Sutpen's father tasks him with delivering a message to the man in the plantation, the subject of his secret preoccupation. Sutpen sets out for the mansion “in garments his father had got from the plantation commissary and had worn out and which one of his sisters had patched and cut down and to fit him” (185). Sutpen is “no more conscious of his appearance in [the garments] or of the possibility that anyone else would be than he was of his own skin” (185). On his walk up the drive he sees “still more niggers with nothing to do all day but plant flowers and trim grass” and fills his time “thinking how at last he was going to see the inside of it [the mansion], see what else a man was bound to own who could have a special nigger to hand him his liquor and pull off his shoes that he didn't even need to wear” (185). The actual events that take place when Sutpen reaches the door are all but blotted out by Sutpen's own intense feelings. Sutpen told General Compson:

how before the monkey nigger who came to the door had finished saying what he did, he seemed to kind of dissolve and a part of him turn and rush back through the two years they had lived there like when you pass through a room fast and look at all the objects in it and you turn and go back and through the room again and look at all of the objects from the other side and you find out you had never seen them before, rushing back through those two years and seeing a dozen things that had happened and he hadn't even seen them before: a certain flat level silent

way his older sisters and the other white women of their kind had of looking at niggers, not with fear or dread but with a kind of speculative antagonism not because of any known fact or reason but inherited by both white and black, the sense, effluvium of it passing between white women and in the doors of the sagging cabins and the niggers in the road and which was not quite explainable by the fact that the niggers had better clothes, and which the niggers did not return as antagonism or in any sense of dare or taunt but through the very fact that they were apparently oblivious of it, too oblivious of it (you knew that you could hit them, he told Grandfather, and they would not hit back or even resist. But you did not want to, because they (the niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit; that when you hit them you would be just hitting a child's toy balloon with a face printed on it, a face slick and smooth and distended and about to burst and you would rather let it walk on out of your sight than to have to have stood there in the loud laughing. (186)

This description of “laughing” black men with distorted and “distended” features like a face painted on a balloon that would burst if one hit it closely echoes Sutpen’s account of the first black man’s face he sees—the “huge bull of a nigger” with his “mouth loud with laughing and full of teeth like tombstones” (182).

Sutpen knows that hurting black men will not do any good. He briefly considers attacking the plantation owner but not the “monkey nigger” (189-190). Sutpen accepts that “It was not the monkey nigger anymore than it had been the nigger that his father had helped to whip that night. The nigger was just another balloon face slick and distended with that mellow loud and terrible laughing so that he did not dare to burst it” (189).

Sutpen possesses keen insight that his own father does not have.¹⁰ He recognizes that the plantation owner “was looking out from within the balloon face” and that “the laughter which the balloon held barricaded and protected” the plantation owner “from such as he [Sutpen]” (189-190). Sutpen thinks the plantation owner:

looked out from whatever invisible place he (the man) happened to be at the moment, at the boy outside the barred door in his patched garments and splayed bare feet, looking through and beyond the boy, he himself seeing his own father and sisters and brothers as the owner, the rich man (not the nigger) must have been seeing them all the time—as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutally evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and vicious prolixity, populate, double treble and compound, fill space and earth with a race whose future would be a succession of cut-down and patched and made-over garments bought on exorbitant credit because they were white people, from stores where niggers were given the garments free. (190)

Sutpen is able to share both the gaze of the balloon and that of the plantation owner. The language of reducing “queers,” “niggers,” “whores,” and (now) “poors” to subhuman creatures like cattle should sound familiar. Sutpen, like the plantation owner he both detests and desires, will grow to treat people he considers to be beneath him like cattle. Instead of imagining, as Shreve later does, that people of African ancestry will permeate the Western hemisphere, Sutpen reasons that the plantation owner is afraid that “white

¹⁰ [Sutpen] asked what the nigger had done and his father said, “‘Hell fire, that goddamn son of a bitch Pettibone’s nigger’...no actual nigger, living creature, living flesh to feel pain and writhe and cry out” (Faulkner 187).

trash” will “spawn” with “brutish and vicious prolixity” to “fill space and earth” with still more poor whites (190).

The way the “monkey nigger” seems to “dissolve” in front of Sutpen’s eyes (or at least his mind’s eye) illustrates that Sutpen’s trauma has far less to do with the enslaved than with the class of people who invent and benefit from racial slavery in the United States (186). Sutpen recognizes that black men are “inflated” but powerless symbols of the same Southern social order that weighs down on Sutpen’s own family and inspires Sutpen’s intense shame when he meets the “monkey nigger” at the door. He realizes that it takes the oppression of both poor whites and enslaved blacks to provide and preserve the “smooth white house and that smooth white brass-decorated door” that shields and glorifies the plantation owner (189). In the liminal space of the doorway to the “master’s house,” Sutpen’s thinking about the intersections of race and class undergoes a paradigm shift that sparks his design. Rather than express his shame by beating the “monkey nigger,” Sutpen steals away to a Platonic cave to process what he has learned and then heads off to the West Indies to make his fortune.

Sutpen, perhaps unconsciously, recognizes the queer dynamic between the “monkey nigger” and the plantation owner. Sutpen’s fascination with the plantation relationship unfolding before his eyes is at least as much about the languid sensuality of the barefooted, hammock sleeping, plantation owner as he is served by his dandyish, silk-festooned manservant as it is about his introduction to the interworkings of race and class. These erotically charged, intersecting identities titillate Sutpen. There is no plantation wife present in the scene to disrupt Sutpen’s view of homosociality tipping over into something approximating homosexuality. The triangular relationship between

Sutpen (the subject), the “monkey nigger” (the mediator), and the plantation owner (the object) places queer desire at the root of the fantasy that Sutpen will spend the rest of his life pursuing. Girard theorizes that as the author draws the mediator and the subject closer together, he heightens the triangular emotions of “anger, jealousy, and impotent hatred” (14). Here “closer together” can be understood both psychically and geographically. Until Sutpen is tasked with delivering a message to the mansion, he only views the “monkey nigger” from the safety of his hiding spot. It is in the moment when Sutpen’s physical proximity to the “monkey nigger” reaches its peak that he has the moment of revelation, shame, and fury that transforms his life.

While Sutpen obviously admires the plantation owner and emulates him by organizing his entire life around becoming a plantation owner himself, the “monkey nigger” is ultimately a larger shaping influence for Sutpen. Girard explains that the mediator appears more like an enemy than a model to be carefully imitated because the mediator appears to be an obstacle between the subject and the object. However, the subject does mimic the mediator and goes to great lengths to hide it. Sutpen may publicly wish to be more like the carefree plantation owner, but the pressure he feels to masquerade as a landed gentleman throughout the novel betrays a deeper psychic kinship with the “monkey nigger” who is forever an imposter. Like the “monkey nigger,” Sutpen puts on the airs of a higher class than he is born into. No adornment hides the cruel truth about Sutpen’s lowborn and dubious background. Sutpen can spend his black money shipping in all of the carpets and chandeliers he wants. His performance of planter-class life is always just that, a performance. No wife or child can naturalize his place in the crumbling aristocracy of the South.

In Girard's model, the adversarial stance the subject takes in relation to the mediator is largely self-deceptive. The subject deliberately positions the mediator as an impediment to his access to the "true" object of his desire and attempts to disavow "the bonds of mediation" when he grows increasingly frustrated by the barrier to his own fulfillment that he has set up for himself (Girard 10). Sutpen remains forever fixated on the one instant in which the "monkey nigger" acts as a physical barrier between himself and the plantation owner, and yet "he [Sutpen] never even remembered what the nigger said, how it was the nigger told, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (188). The Girardian subject "easily convinces himself" that his desire for the object is authentic and "deeply rooted in the object and the object alone" so that he can nurture the fantasy that he can desire the object without the involvement of the mediator (Girard 12). Even as the subject distances himself from the mediator, the mediator continues to grow in the subject's estimation until the subject is torn apart by his competing feelings of reverence and malice for the mediator (Girard 10). Sutpen begins to distance himself from the "monkey nigger" immediately after getting the humiliating orders. Sutpen "didn't even remember leaving. All of a sudden he found himself running and already some distance from the house, and not toward home" (188). Even after Sutpen is separated from the "monkey nigger" by stretches of hundreds of miles and dozens of years, every relationship Sutpen forms with a black man remains shaped by Sutpen's early encounter with the "monkey nigger."

Sutpen manifests his "impotent hatred" (Girard 14) of and psychic connection to the "monkey nigger" when he comes to understand the laughing balloon face and when

he begins to literalize violence against surrogate “monkey niggers” by wrestling naked with his own slaves during his self-styled “Roman holiday[s]” (44). The language used to describe Sutpen’s sparing matches is deeply erotic. Sutpen fights “naked chest to chest with one of his wild niggers” (203). “Camp fire” then “lantern light” provide the mood lighting (203). There is no foreplay and no cuddling, “no handshaking” and no “gratulations” [sic] (204). When Sutpen is done, he “don[s] his shirt” and “the nigger [is] flat on his back with his chest heaving” (204).

When Sutpen trades in the “parties of men” he invites “out to Sutpen’s Hundred to camp in blankets in the naked rooms of his embryonic formal opulence” to hunt, play cards, drink and watch the “spectacle” of him pitting himself against “his negroes” (30) for the “wife [Ellen] who would be adjunctive to the forwarding of that design he had in mind” (203-204), he has to begin hiding the fights he stages and participates in for the county men. Because all of Sutpen’s “spare time [is] taken up with furthering that design which he had in mind,” “fighting his wild niggers” becomes “his only relaxation” (208). Sutpen may think that he is successfully concealing his extracurricular pleasures from his wife by having “the men hitch their horses and come up from the back and not be seen from the house” (208), but Ellen knows about all of “that, or thought she did” (20). Ellen knows that her husband likes to invite strange men up to their stable to drink and watch slaves wrestle. Ellen “accepted that—not reconciled: accepted—as though there is a breathing-point in outrage where you can accept it almost with gratitude since you can say to yourself, *Thank God this is all; at least I know all of it*” (20). One night Ellen hears her son Henry scream and rushes down to the stable fully anticipating that she will see slaves fighting “like negroes fight to hurt one another quick and bad” (20). Instead, when

the men fall “back away from her,” she sees “not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another’s eyes as if their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too” (20-21). Ellen discovers “her husband and the father of her children standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at his feet and bloody too save that on the negro it merely looked like grease or sweat” (21). Even as Ellen “[kneels] in the stable filth to raise Henry” “screaming and vomiting” after witnessing his father deliver the knockout blow, she never stops looking “up at *him* [Sutpen] as he stood there with even his teeth showing beneath his beard now and another nigger wiping the blood from his body with a tow sack” (21). Unbeknownst to everyone assembled to watch the fight, there are “two Sutpen faces...looking down through the square entrance to the loft” also gazing on this turn of events (22). Unlike young Henry who gets sick at the sight of the blood and the violence, Judith and Clytie look on “unmoved” (30).

That Ellen’s “outrage” has given way to “acceptance”— and that she chooses “*Thank God this is all; at least I know all of it*” as her self-soothing mantra— reveals that, even before she finds Sutpen in the ring, she can conceive of Sutpen engaging with his slaves in a way that is far more salacious. The language Ellen uses belongs more to a wife that is aware of her husband’s infidelities than to a woman who is embarrassed that her husband has tarnished their respectability in her father’s community by inviting peripatetic men to watch a violent spectacle outside their house on a semi-frequent basis (20). The queer desire that drives Sutpen to fight compulsively is on display for everyone

to see. Whether or not Sutpen engages in acts of genital sexuality with his slaves, his libidinal infidelity is exposed.

If Sutpen knows from adolescence that some men may be tempted to abuse black men but that harming black men is an expression of misdirected anger, then what is Sutpen doing when he is fighting his slaves? He is not blowing off steam at the injustice in the world nor is he, as Miss Rosa speculates, either a showman heightening the drama of the matches by participating or a dispassionate slave master acting out of “sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy [or] domination” (21). Instead, Sutpen is expressing desire for black men the only socially acceptable way: through extreme, racialized violence. Sutpen’s decision to wrestle with his slaves is different in kind than either his father’s decision to “whup...Pettibone’s nigger” (187) or his grandson’s decision to fight black men at a “dice game” at a “negro ball held in a cabin a few miles from Sutpen’s Hundred” (164). Sutpen’s father attacks a lone and unsuspecting slave as part of a torchlit mob. He fights to boast about it later and to pretend that he is better off as a free (albeit poor) white man than as a poor enslaved black man. Charles Etienne de St. Valery fights out of feelings of internalized racism and the frustration of being excluded, as a white-passing, mixed race young man, from the companionship of both newly freed people of color and the white middle class. All three Sutpen men enter into Hegelian master-slave dialectics when they choose to inflict violence on black bodies. In his chapter “Master and Slave,” Girard explains:

The original synthesis, impossible in Hegel’s system, is precisely what the novelistic dialectic permits us to glimpse. The hero of internal mediation is an unhappy consciousness who relives the primordial struggle beyond all physical

threat and stakes his freedom on the least of his desires. The Hegelian dialectic rested on physical courage. Whoever has no fear will be the master, whoever is afraid will be the slave. The novelistic dialectic rests on hypocrisy. Violence, far from serving the interests of whoever exerts it, reveals the intensity of his desire; thus it is a sign of slavery. (112)

Sutpen may not relive “the primordial struggle beyond all physical threat,” but he does do it in a controlled environment. It is not particularly “physically courageous” to wrestle a man you own cradle to grave, body and soul, and could murder with impunity. Sutpen’s violence, marks him as participating in the “hypocritical” “novelistic dialectic,” rather than the original dialectic, and reveals the substance of his desires to be incredibly strong. Unlike either his father or his grandson, Sutpen’s desires are uniquely libidinous. Sexual impulses do not appear to factor into Sutpen’s father’s decision to all but lynch a slave or Charles Etienne’s choice to fight at the party.

Sutpen acts upon his desire for his surrogate “monkey niggers” by beating them to a bloody pulp as part of an eroticized master-slave power dynamic and by continuing to emulate them as internal mediators of his gentlemanly, plantation owner object. Girard would critique this formulation by suggesting that Sutpen has stopped imitating the slave and become a literal slave to his own desires (112). Watching Sutpen fight his slave, Ellen thinks that “their skins should not only have been the same color but should have been covered with fur too” (20). Sutpen becomes visually indistinct from his slaves on a number of occasions. Animalistic characteristics apply to Sutpen as well as his slaves. When Sutpen and his “twenty negroes” work together to raise the mansion, they are “plastered over with mud against the mosquitoes,” and they are “distinguishable one from

another” by Sutpen’s “beard and eyes alone” (28). The French architect’s realization that “his white client [Sutpen] and the negro slaves...went stark naked” under their “coating of dried mud” (26) adds a certain erotic undertone to Sutpen’s ability to camouflage himself among his men while “glinting like” a new race made of “glass or china” (198). Quentin speculates that the architect attempts to run away from his job planning Sutpen’s Hundred because he is “afraid he [will] starve or that the wild niggers (and maybe Colonel Sutpen too) [will] run out of grub and eat him” (177). The French architect does not believe that Sutpen holds himself above casual cannibalism and a little swamp muck.

Sutpen deliberately brings Henry to watch him fight by way of masculine initiation, much to Ellen’s chagrin. Sutpen inadvertently exposes his two daughters to the fight as well. It is in the crucible of racial difference, sexuality and violence represented by the fight that the queerness of all three children is formed. Girard argues that:

desire is always contagious. It becomes even more so [contagious] as the mediator draws nearer to the hero. Contagion and proximity are, after all, one and the same phenomenon. Internal mediation is present when one ‘catches’ a nearby desire just as one would catch the plague or cholera, simply by contact with an infected person. (99)

Henry, Judith, and Clytie “catch” non-normative and racialized desire from their father. All three engage in cross-racial relationships that can be read as queer.¹¹ Henry, by all

¹¹ Harker has a great reading of Judith and Clytie as substitute “mothers” for Charles Etienne de St. Valery, as spinster helpmates, and as lifelong co-sleepers that, time permitting, I would embellish to include a mediated triangular dynamic with young Charles Etienne that exposes the racial and classed structurings of desire (113-114). If Harker were to adopt a Girardian model, she would most likely advocate emphasizing Miss Rosa as a desiring subject whose access to Judith, her object, is internally mediated by Clytie (who’s protective touch reveals Miss Rosa’s mingled homophobia and racism).

accounts a certifiable “queer,” mediates his desire for his “whore” sister through his long lost, “nigger” brother.¹² Henry meets Charles at “a small new college in the Mississippi hinterland and even wilderness, three hundred miles” from New Orleans (58). Henry quickly becomes one of a number of boys “who ape” Bon’s “clothing and manner, and (to the extent which they [are] able) his very manner of living” and “look...upon Bon as though he were a hero out of some adolescent Arabian Nights who...had thrust upon him... a talisman... to invest him...with the ability and opportunity to pass from the scene of one scarce imaginable delight to the next without interval or pause or satiety” (76). Bon lounges “before them [Henry and his friends] in the outlandish and almost feminine garments of his sybaritic privacy” (76). Henry’s high esteem for and imitation of Bon cannot be overstated.¹³ Henry’s intense feelings for Bon are frequently formulated as a strange mixture of brotherly and romantic love. Mr. Compson nonchalantly explains to Quentin that Henry renounced his family and birthright for Bon, “Because Henry loved Bon” (71). Even after Henry and Bon have ridden away from Sutpen’s Hundred together, Henry cannot “say to his friend, *I did that for love of you, do this for love of me*” (72).¹⁴

The love Henry feels for Bon is not simply for Bon himself. Henry desires Bon as a way to commit “the pure and perfect incest” (77). Mr. Compson speculates, “perhaps [this] is what went on, not in Henry’s mind but in his soul”:

¹² Like his father before him, Henry mediates his desire through a well-dressed, even effeminate, man of color.

¹³ Mr. Compson is blunt, even if Henry, as a conventional Girardian subject, might not be.

¹⁴ “*Do this*” meaning do not try to marry my (our) sister, so that I will not have to kill you to stop the marriage on the basis that it would be an act of incest (and miscegenation and bigamy) for you to marry Judith.

the brother [Henry] realising that the sister's virginity [Judith's] must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law [Charles], the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband; by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride. (77)

Bon becomes a vehicle for Henry to romantically pursue his sister Judith. Henry "seduce[s] her [Judith] along with himself from that distance between Oxford and Sutpen's Hundred, between herself and the man whom she had not even to see yet" with letters and "as though by means of telepathy with which as children they seemed at times to anticipate one another's actions as two birds leave a limb at the same instant" (78). When Judith responds to Henry's letters about Bon, Henry reads "them all, without jealousy, with that complete abnegant transference, metamorphosis into the body which was to become his sister's lover" (83). There is some question as to whether Bon reciprocates Henry and Judith's romantic feelings, but Mr. Compson feels that:

Bon not only loved Judith after his fashion but that he loved Henry too... in a deeper sense than merely after his fashion. Perhaps in his fatalism he loved Henry the better of the two, seeing perhaps in the sister merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth.

(85-86)¹⁵

¹⁵ There is also some question as to whether Judith reciprocates Henry's incestuous feelings or genuinely cares for Bon.

Either way, Henry diligently encourages the relationship between Bon and Judith to satisfy his own erotic desires, only to have to kill Bon so that Bon will not marry Judith. Bon, so often construed as a mechanism for Henry to act out his desires for Judith, becomes the obstacle between the subject and the object that mediators typically play. Henry gives Bon “four years of probation, four years in which to renounce and dissolve the other marriage, knowing that the four years of hoping and waiting would be in vain” (77). After the war, Henry is forced to stand Bon down just inside the gate to Sutpen’s Hundred. Henry discovers Bon’s racial status long after he discovers Bon’s familial status. As Bon alleges in Quentin and Shreve’s telling, “it’s the miscegenation, not the incest” that Henry cannot bear (285). When Quentin and Shreve imagine the scene in the gateway, so like the liminal space of the doorway that young Sutpen found himself in, they picture this heart-wrenching exchange:

—*You are my brother.*

—*No I’m not. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry.* (286)

Needless to say, Judith never gets to make use of her trousseau. The first and only time Bon lies on Judith’s “nuptial couch” is as a corpse after Henry kills him, and Henry does not return to a bed in Sutpen’s Hundred until he is on his deathbed decades later (110).

The Henry-Charles-Judith love triangle is only one of a number of evocative Girardian dynamics in the novel. For example, Wash, the kind of man Sutpen might well have grown up to be if he had not been turned away at the plantation door by the “monkey nigger,” delivers to his preteen daughter Milly the first of the beads that his idol Sutpen will use to court her (226). Wash admires Sutpen’s “fine figure” and thinks that

“If God Himself was to come down and ride the natural earth...He would aim to look like” Thomas Sutpen (226). When Sutpen rejects Milly and the baby, Wash commits a triple murder-suicide, cutting down Sutpen with a symbol of his own failed fertility: a rusty scythe. Wash’s extreme reaction reveals the depth of his feelings for Sutpen. Just as Henry uses Bon to imagine being with Judith and Judith to imagine being with Bon, Wash pimps his daughter to Sutpen to fulfill his homoerotic desires vicariously. A longer speculative reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* might include an analysis of the ways in which Judith serves to mediate desire between Miss Rosa and Bon and Shreve functions as a mediator between Quentin and Mr. Compson. The Quentin-Shreve dynamic also doubles the Henry-Bon dynamic to create “Quentin-Henry” and “Shreve-Bon.” In short, Sutpen, though not the character most frequently discussed in queer readings of *Absalom, Absalom!*, produces, benefits from and blends back into the queer milieu of the text.

CHAPTER 3: ON THE RAFT AG'IN

Tasked with processing spermaceti, Ishmael famously recounts:

I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a weird sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands in it...Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say...let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves into the very milk and sperm of kindness. What that I could keep squeezing that sperm for ever! (322-323)

In “Melville and Queerness without Character” (2014), Michael D. Snediker remarks upon “the extravagance with which Melville’s characters seem oblivious to erotic contexts that strike readers as flagrantly sexual, or negotiate desire as though not even they (as opposed to readers) could decide if desire were a literal or a figurative phenomenon” (156). The passage above is an apt example of the phenomenon Snediker identifies. While Ishmael clearly means to denote the waxy material that is contained in the head of the sperm whale and that is so valuable for the making of many nineteenth century household goods, other associations with the word “sperm” seem more appropriately to match the substance of Ishmael’s wondrous oration. The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms “sperm” has been used to denote “the generative substance or seed of male animals (esp. of vertebrates)” at least since Chaucer published *Monk’s Tale* in

1386.¹⁶ Given this, it is likely that Melville intended for readers to find the earnest tone in which Ishmael waxes poetic about holding men's hands in a bucket of sperm oddly sexually evocative. The phrase "let us all squeeze ourselves into each other" is especially erotic. Snediker identifies important hurdles for Melville scholars who wish to read into queer dynamics on board ship. Snediker writes that readers of *Moby-Dick* encounter a "surfeit of nominally homoerotic bodies, all of which lack an interiority capable of erotic complexity or motivation" (159) and "who flicker between aesthetic and ontological categories without inhabiting either" (158). Because of this fascinating quirk of Melville's characters, I believe critics have been largely deterred from examining queer desires in the text that are more oblique than Ishmael's hope that he can go on "squeezing that sperm for ever!" (323).

Decades of readers going back at least to Leslie Fielder's 1948 essay have identified Ishmael and Queequeg as more than "fast bosom-friend[s]" (Melville 363). After their first night together in the Spouter-Inn, these strange bedfellows awake with "Queequeg's arm thrown over" Ishmael "in the most loving and affectionate manner" (36). Ishmael reflects, "You almost thought I had been his wife" the way "Queequeg was hugging me" (36). Ishmael, the fatalistic, world-weary seafarer, and his new "husband" Queequeg, a massive, heavily-tattooed, harpooner of overdetermined race, enjoy a "heart's honeymoon" until the "cosy, loving pair" ships out on the doomed *Pequod* (57). Ishmael and Queequeg continue to be close even after they have signed onto Ahab's quest for the white whale. When Queequeg must imbed a "blubber-hook" into a sperm

¹⁶ "sperm, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/186308. Accessed 2 March 2018.

whale the *Pequod* has lashed alongside, Ishmael and Queequeg must be “wedded” together “for better or for worse” by a long “umbilical” “monkey rope” anchored to each of their pelvises as a kind of counterweighing safety measure (255). Ishmael reports that “Some ten feet below the level of the deck, the poor harpooner [Queequeg] flounder[ed] about, half on the whale and half in the water” (255). When Queequeg “flounders,” he is wearing a “Highland costume,” a butcher’s skirtlike apron (255). Ishmael is quick to quip that “to my eyes, at least, he appeared to uncommon advantage; and no one had better chance to observe him” (255). Ishmael’s cheeky, appreciative comment requires little explanation. When Queequeg becomes deeply ill and he believes his death is immanent, he requests a coffin be made for his burial at sea. Thankfully, Queequeg survives his sickness and is able to turn his coffin into an engraved sea trunk. He carves the tribal knowledge contained by his tattoos into the wood of the repurposed coffin by way of artful embellishment. When Moby Dick capsizes the *Pequod* after Ahab’s final attack on his life, the vortex that threatens to sink the ship’s debris shoots Ishmael Queequeg’s coffin. Ishmael clammers inside and, in a humorous reversal, becomes the lone survivor of the whole adventure by taking refuge in Queequeg’s casket. While explaining the dynamic between Ishmael and Queequeg may be an exercise in rehearsed knowledge, it serves to highlight the way in which *Moby-Dick*, much like *Absalom, Absalom!*, contains a palimpsest of non-normative desires that simultaneously obscures and enhances the queerness of the Byronic protagonist. The libidinal desires I will focus on in my treatment of Ahab are semi-obfuscated in the text because they are not as explicit as those between Ishmael and Queequeg, but Ahab’s desires are also given greater credibility because they are not without precedent on the *Pequod*.

Consider the scene in which Starbuck and Fedallah vie for Ahab's sympathies in a struggle more parts tug-of-war than mediated Girardian triangle. The morning before Ahab spots Moby Dick for the final chase, he steps out on deck and is greeted by a literal calm before the storm of battle. Before Ahab's gaze:

The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all pervading azure, only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman's look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells...Hither and thither, on high, glided the snow-white wings of small, unspckled birds; these were the gentle thoughts of the feminine air but to and fro in the deeps, far down in the bottomless blue, rushed mighty leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks; and these were the strong, troubled, murderous thinkings of the masculine sea. But, though this contrasting within, the contrast was only in shades and shadows without; those two seemed one; it was only the sex, as it were, that distinguished them. Aloft, like a royal czar and king, the sun seemed giving this gentle air to this bold and rolling sea; even as bride to groom. And at the girdling line of the horizon, a soft tremulous motion—most seen here at the equator—denoted the fond, throbbing trust, the loving alarms, with which the bride gave her bosom away. (404)

From the railing of the *Pequod*, Ahab has a view of "the feminine air" giving away "her bosom" to her "groom," the "masculine sea," along "the girdling line of the horizon," which is formed by the "soft tremulous motion" of "the fond, throbbing" of the waves against the air to sound "loving alarms" (404). The union of air and sea, presided over by the officiating sun, is so complete that "those two seemed one" (404). "Only the sex" of

the air and sea “distinguish them” (404). The air is “pensive...pure and soft” and the dove-like, “snow-white...unspeckled birds” signal her “gentle thoughts” (404). Below the surface of the “robust,” “strong,” “heav[ing],” “man-like sea,” foreboding “leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks” symbolize “troubled, murderous thinkings” (404).

This landscape, to borrow a phrase from Snediker, presents a kind of “pornography-without-people” (166). Snediker is right to note “a queer sensitivity to the pleasure Melville’s language takes in itself,” but I disagree that the “erotic willfulness of words,” demonstrated in the scene above, is “in the service” of neither “character nor plot” (163). Instead, I propose that the pleasures animated objects appear to take in each other, or that the language used to describe their pleasure “takes in itself,” simultaneously encodes and discloses the pleasures of characters, here Ahab and Starbuck (Snediker 163). Just as Keegan sees Byron using the language of his *methodiste* to sublimate his own non-normative desires in his work, I take Melville to be sublimating Ahab’s non-normative desires in meaningful descriptions of nature (11).¹⁷

This gendered, matrimonial, and erotic landscape transforms as “untottering Ahab [stands] forth” and lifts “his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl’s forehead of heaven” (405). The air, just figured as a grown woman entering into marriage, now conveys “immortal infancy,” “innocency,” and “Sweet childhood” (405). The air plays with Ahab’s hair just as the narrator (who cannot possibly be Ishmael) has seen Ahab’s

¹⁷ Keegan explains: “Because of the prohibitions that surrounded discussions of sodomy, Byron intentionally developed a coded, evasive style for speaking of sexuality. Frequently during these chapters I refer to Byron’s ‘methodiste,’ which most simply means the way Byron encoded homosexuality within a text. It might refer to his manipulations of pronouns, substitutions or deletions of words, or any of a variety of practices I will point to. Byron’s circle of Cambridge friends evolved a code for writing about homosexuality in their letters. They named the coded writing their ‘methodiste’” (11)

children, “Miriam and Martha, laughing-eyed elves, heedlessly gambol around their old sire; sporting with the circle of singed locks which grew on the marge of that burnt-crater of his brain” (405). Ahab crosses the deck, leans over the side of the ship, and watches “how his shadow in the water” sinks and sinks “the more he [strives] to pierce the profundity” (404). “At last,” “the lovely aromas in that enchanted air” temporarily “dispel...the cantankerous thing in his [Ahab’s] soul” (405). The “glad happy air, the winsome sky,” begins to “stroke and caress” Ahab (405). The sexual associations of the air and sky continue to recede. Evacuating the sexual connotations of “stroke and caress,” the gesture becomes simultaneously maternal and alien. Ahab’s “step-mother world, so long cruel—forbidding—now [throws] affectionate arms round [Ahab’s] stubborn neck” and seems “to joyously sob over him, as if over one, that however willful and erring, she could yet find it in her heart to save and to bless” (405). Emotionally stirred, Ahab drops “a tear into the sea” that contains more “wealth” in “one wee drop” than “all the Pacific” (405). It is this display of tenderheartedness that inspires Starbuck to “[draw] near” Ahab, “careful not to touch him” (405).

In the closest interaction Ahab and Starbuck have to a heart-to-heart, Ahab confides, lapsing in and out of theatrical third-person, “for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! Aye and yes, Starbuck, out of those forty years have I not spent three ashore” (405). Ahab realizes that by spending, in his estimation, less than eight percent of his seafaring life on shore, he effectively “widowed that poor girl [his wife] when [he] married her” (405). Ahab reflects that he is “whole oceans away” “from that young girl-wife [he] wedded past fifty” (405). He “sailed to Cape Horn” the day after his wedding “leaving but one dent in

[his] marriage pillow” (405). A “wife?” Ahab asks incredulous, “rather a widow with her husband alive” (405). Ahab discloses what “a forty years’ fool...[he] has...been” (405). Saddened, he seems to seek human comfort and closeness. Ahab commands Starbuck, “Here, brush this old hair aside; it blinds me, that I seem to weep” (406). As if, in a moment of tender vanity, Ahab wants to be assured that Starbuck still finds him handsome and imagines him to have some fighting passion left in him, Ahab complains “Locks so grey did never grow but from out some ashes! But do I look very old, so very, very old. Starbuck?” (406). Ahab orders, almost desperately:

Close! stand close to me, Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God” (406). “I see my wife and my children in thine eye. No, no; stay on board, on board—lower not when I do; when branded Ahab gives chase to Moby Dick. (406)

Deeply touched and sensing that Ahab is experiencing a rare moment of shaken resolve, Starbuck fancifully entreats: “Away with me! let us fly these deadly waters! let us home! Wife and child, too, are Starbuck’s—wife and child of his brotherly, sisterly, play-fellow youth; even as thine, sir, are the wife and child of thy loving, longing, paternal old age” (406). Starbuck’s reverie fails to sway Ahab, whose “glance was averted” (406). Vexed, Ahab questions, almost to himself:

what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel remorseless emperor commands me, that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much as dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm? (406)

When Ahab's Cartesian musing is complete, he discovers that "blanched to a corpse's hue with despair, the Mate [Starbuck] had stolen away" (407). Ahab crosses the deck again to gaze over the opposite side of the ship. He starts "at two reflected, fixed eyes" in the water (407). Ahab realizes Fedallah is "motionlessly leaning over the same rail" (407).

These events all take place in "The Symphony." The title of the chapter suggests a harmonious composition of different elements. While the characters—Ahab, Starbuck, and Fedallah—do not achieve ideological or emotional harmony (gazes are always averted or reflected), a "symphony" of desires structured around meaningful "movements" plays out. Ahab's lateral movement (starboard to port or vice versa) signifies his pendulum swing from the salvation Starbuck offers to the damnation Fedallah's prophecy portends. Starbuck's white, puritanical piety and moral fiber is placed in contradistinction with Fedallah's closely associated dark skin and deviousness. The language that Ahab and Starbuck use to describe their sexual, romantic and familial lives echoes the language used to describe both the mixing of the elements and Ahab's mixing with the elements.

At first, I felt, like Ahab searching his shadow in the water, that meaning "sank and sank" as I "strove to pierce the profundity" of this chapter (405). But I realized that the anxiety Ahab and Starbuck seemingly felt discussing their families, insecurities, and desires was mirrored in the cagey proliferation of meanings ascribed to the air and sea (but particularly the air). When Ahab and Starbuck talk about their wives, instead of using the idiom of romantic, sexual love, they rely on words that communicate physical and emotional distance and indicate childhood innocence and a family life walled off

from sexual understanding. Ahab's "young girl-wife," whom he wed "fifty" years "past" and "widowed" after "leaving but one dent in [his] marriage pillow," resembles Starbuck's "wife and child" from "his brotherly, sisterly, play-fellow youth" (406). The disjunctive "stroke and caress" of a step-motherly, yet winsome, world's sky turns on the same discontinuity that makes the "the fair girl's forehead of heaven[']s" close association with Ahab's two young daughters "sporting" with his "locks" seem inappropriate given the same "fair girl's" explicitly sexual relationship with the bridegroom sea (405).

Are the "natural lovings and longings" that Ahab's "cruel remorseless emperor commands" him against for, as Starbuck imagines, Ahab's "wife and child of [his] loving, longing, paternal old age" (406)? If so, what are Ahab's permitted, unnatural "lovings and longings" (406)? Does Ahab wittingly create the homosocial (veering toward homoerotic) environment of the *Pequod* and continue to choose it for himself over the years of his career, to the demonstrated detriment of his family at home, because, as Fiedler contemplates, "the isolation...from women...[is] sought more or less consciously as an occasion for male encounters" (32)? Both Ahab and Sutpen dismiss their families as either subjects of remorse or products of a long distant "play-fellow youth" and seem close to embracing while gazing yearningly into one another's eyes. Just as Wash fantasizes that gazing at Sutpen mounted on his horse is like looking upon "God Himself," because God, in his physical instantiation, would aspire to have Sutpen's "fine figure" (226), Ahab finds looking into Starbuck's eyes "better than to gaze upon God" (406). Ahab tells Starbuck it is "better" to lock eyes with him than to "gaze into sea or sky" (406). This admission is loaded with meaning. The sea and sky are heavily

eroticized and deeply imbued with gendered significance. Ahab, therefore, finds more libidinous pleasure looking into Starbuck's eyes than he finds in the carnal embrace of either men or women or than the air and sea find in their "tremulous," conjugal embrace (404).

Throughout the whole chapter, Ahab appears to spiritually bob, like the horizon near the equator, between the "murderous thinkings" of his brooding, monomaniacal, masculine nature and the better angels of his feminized "pensive...pure and soft...gentle thoughts" (404). Personal demons, "leviathans, sword-fish, and sharks," loom beneath the surface of Ahab's outward appearance (404). Starbuck, characterized by his pacifistic and pious nature, meets Ahab's gaze above the level of the water, eye to eye, while Fedallah, forever figured in Satanic serpentine terms, meets Ahab's gaze in a reflection formed by the surface of the sea. Part pathetic fallacy and part spatial metaphor, the air and sea reflect Ahab's psyche as he is swayed by the forces of good and evil embodied by light-skinned Starbuck and dark-skinned Fedallah. Abandoned by a "corpse...hue[d]" Starbuck, Ahab "sides" with "motionless" Fedallah, the tempting Devil on his proverbial shoulder (407).

Ahab psychologically aligns himself with Fedallah by joining him on the far side of the ship, but this is not the only occasion on which Ahab chooses the close companionship of a person of color to the exclusion of the comradery of a white, higher-ranking sailor and abrades the systems of power and privilege that buttress his design. Choosing Fedallah, and all of Fedallah's incumbent, ethical associations, means that Ahab will continue to embrace his Byronic instincts and pursue Moby Dick, even when that leads to his own demise and to the destruction of his ship and crew. To achieve his

monomaniacal goal, Ahab must, at the very least, outlive Moby Dick; Fedallah's prophecy makes that impossible. To hunt Moby Dick, Ahab needs a crew hierarchized by age, skill and race. When Ahab befriends young, black Pip, he makes an intimate gesture that signals a transgressive breach of social decorum on board ship—a transgression that many members of the crew remark upon. Ahab invites Pip, who has lost his sanity as a result of his service, and frankly, mistreatment, on the *Pequod*, to come live in his cabin. As Pip and Ahab grow closer, Pip refuses to leave Ahab's side. To encourage Pip to stay below deck, Ahab tells Pip his crew "shall serve thee, as if thou wert the captain" (399). Alone in the captain's cabin, Pip madly soliloquizes:

Now were even poor Pip here I could endure it [the loneliness], but he's missing. Pip! Pip! Ding, dong, ding! Who's seen Pip? He [Ahab] must be up here; let's try the door. What? neither lock, nor bolt, nor bar; and yet there's no opening it. It must be the spell; he told me to stay here: Aye, and he told me this screwed chair was mine. Here, then, I'll seat me, against the transom, in the ship's full middle, all her keel and her three masts before me. Here, our old sailors say, in their black seventy-fours great admirals sometimes sit at table, and lord it over rows of captains and lieutenants. Ha! what's this? epaulets! epaulets! the epaulets all come crowding! Pass round the decanters; glad to see ye; fill up, monsieurs! What an odd feeling, now, when a black boy's host to white men with gold lace upon their coats! (400)

Pip imagines that he is entertaining "admirals" in uniforms adorned with "gold" "epaulets" (400). With "an odd feeling," Pip registers the social impropriety of a "black boy" hosting "white men" who chart the course of "seventy-fours" and "lord it over rows

of captains and lieutenants” (400). While Pip is only playing pretend (or hallucinating), his fantasy reveals the unique, even disruptive, position he occupies on the *Pequod*.

While I want to tread lightly when suggesting a homoerotic or pederastic dimension to the relationship between Ahab and Pip, the physical intimacy they share is evocative. Ahab and Pip share a living space, frequently hold hands, and express their strong connection in powerful terms. Ahab tells Pip, “Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings” (392).

Fiedler’s argument in “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” provides possible insight into the dynamic between Ahab and Pip. Fiedler argues that the “boys’ books” *Moby-Dick* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (as well as *Two Years Before the Mast* and Cooper’s Leatherstocking tales) present a persistent theme in American literature: homosexual miscegenation, “the mutual love of a white man and a colored” (29). Homosexual miscegenation poses a compound threat to foundational American myths. “Homosexual passion” contradicts the “myth of masculine love,” the myth of a chaste love between men that is designed to raise all homosocial institutions above the suspicion of homoeroticism, and miscegenation endangers the myth that the white man’s “real relationship with the Negro” is always supremacist, unloving and unshaped by guilt (27). Despite the ways in which homosexual miscegenation threatens to destabilize profound American social norms, Fiedler contends that these novels, set in dreamy, remote places (the wilderness and the sea) and authorized by boyhood fantasy and innocence, create a space for interracial, same-sex relationships to unfold without objection. These relationships reveal white America’s deep racial anxieties. The trope of “negro as homoerotic lover” serves to assure white men that when placed “in the role of

outcast,” they can “turn to the love of a colored man” (32). Readers take comfort in the knowledge that when the white man is truly “alone,” his “dark-skinned beloved will take” him, “without rancor or the insult of forgiveness” (Fiedler 33). The “dark-skinned beloved” will “fold [the white man] in his arms” and “comfort” him, as if his “offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly real” (Fiedler 33). The “offense” may also become “meaningless in the face of love” (Fiedler 33). For Fiedler, these tales “dramatize almost compulsively the role of the colored man as victim” and exaggerate “the disparity of color” to demonstrate that “we cannot really forget our guilt ever” (33). Fiedler reflects that the “apparent presence of a motivating anxiety, the sense always of a last chance” prevents these “final vision[s] of remission” from becoming “insufferable” (33). These stories reveal “the white American’s nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused—he dreams of his acceptance at the breast that he has most utterly offended” (Fiedler 33).

Under the guise of “passionless passion” and “an innocence above suspicion” (Fiedler 27), Ahab, the consummate “outcast,” can “turn to the love of a colored man” or in this case, boy (Fiedler 33). Pip, the “dark-skinned beloved” does take Ahab “without rancor or the insult of forgiveness” (Fiedler 33). Instead of enfolding Ahab in his arms, Pip takes Ahab by the hand and remarks:

‘What’s this? here’s velvet shark-skin,’ intently gazing at Ahab’s hand, and feeling it. ‘Ah, now, had poor Pip but felt so kind a thing as this, perhaps he had ne’er been lost! This seems to me, sir, as a man-rope; something that weak souls may hold by. Oh, sir, let old Perth now come and rivet these two hands together; the black one with the white, for I will not let this go’

Pip briefly mentions the wrong that has been done to him and suggests that perhaps no harm would have come to Pip if he “felt so kind a thing as this,” but Pip is quick to let bygones be bygones. Pip says that their hands, and he emphasizes their different complexions, could be riveted together because he will never let go. Ahab is delighted and returns the sentiment, “Oh, boy, nor will I thee, unless I should thereby drag thee to worse horrors than are here...Come! I feel prouder leading thee by thy black hand, than though I grasped an Emperor’s!” (392).

Pip is half-mad as a direct result of a decision that Ahab made. In the early part of the novel, Pip is not tasked with accompanying the mates and harpooners on their hunt for sperm whales, presumably because of his age or size. One day, however, Pip is sent out on one of the row boats to aid in the hunt. Pip gets spooked and when he jumps, he gets caught in the harpoon line and dragged overboard. Ahab is faced with a decision: rescue Pip or continue chasing the sperm whale. Ahab values the whale more than Pip, so he leaves Pip flailing in the ocean for several hours until after the whale has been secured. When the *Pequod* comes back to fish Pip out of the drink, he is out of his senses. Rather than allow himself to be confronted by his own moral culpability, Ahab displaces blame for Pip’s condition and positions himself as Pip’s savior. In classic Byronic fashion, Ahab, in his pride, elevates himself over heaven and God:

There can be no hearts above the snow-line. Oh, ye frozen heavens! look down here. Ye beget this luckless child, and have abandoned him, ye creative libertines...Lo! ye believers in gods all goodness, and in man all ill, lo you! see the omniscient gods oblivious of suffering man; and man, though idiotic, and knowing not what he does, yet full of the sweet things of love and gratitude. (392)

Pip never demands an apology and, by all indications, is determined to be a far better friend to Ahab than Ahab (or anyone else on the crew) has previously been to him. Pip is reluctant to leave Ahab's side, because he has been told "that Stubb did once desert poor little Pip, whose drowned bones now show white, for all the blackness of his living skin" (399). Pip assures Ahab, "I will never desert ye, sir, as Stubb did him. Sir, I must go with ye" (399). Pip's unrelenting love promises to heal Ahab's monomania. Ahab explains:

Lad, lad, I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming where Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health. (399)

Ahab does not really want to be changed. He does not want his Byronic disposition to be replaced with a normative one or to be guided by conventional morality. When Pip continues to insist on staying with Ahab, Ahab tells him, "If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab's purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be" (399). Pip objects, "Oh good master, master, master!" and Ahab, frustrated, responds:

Weep so, and I will murder thee! have a care, for Ahab too is mad! Listen, and thou wilt often hear my ivory foot upon the deck, and still now that I am there. And now I quit thee. Thy hand!...So: God for ever bless thee; and if it come to that, —God for ever save thee, let what will befall. (399)

Ahab takes his hand away from Pip and rejects any future responsibility for Pip's wellbeing. Pip is unable to save Ahab from himself and, of course, dies because Ahab is still incapable of putting Pip before his own personal vendetta.

It is indisputable that Pip is harmed in a whaling accident, but the language used to describe the relationship between Ahab and Pip is indicative of American racial slavery. For example, Pip evokes a master-slave relationship, one that would be more legible if only they were at home on land, when Pip addresses Ahab, “Oh master, master!” (400). Pip’s servile position on the ship before he is injured, his valuation below an animal (a sperm whale), and his faux imprisonment in the captain’s cabin are all indicative of Pip’s slave-like status.¹⁸ If Pip is, effectively, a slave boy in Ahab’s care, then the suffering that has already come to him is that of being enslaved and exploited, and Pip’s willingness to love Ahab despite the irreparable harm Ahab has done to him is all the more powerful (and fanciful). Ahab really is accepted “at the breast that he has most utterly offended” (Fiedler 33). Interpreting Pip as a slave, opens up a Fiedler-inspired reading. It is when Pip whines, “Oh, good master, master, master!” (as opposed to “Oh, good captain, captain, captain!” or the like) that Ahab menaces, “Weep so, and I will murder thee!” (399). It is as if invoking the pain the master-slave relationship has caused makes Ahab lash out defensively and disown his newfound sense of responsibility for Pip.¹⁹

If one first accepts the critical commonplace that the *Pequod* represents the United States, then Ahab’s quest for the white whale takes on new significance. Ahab harnesses the racialized labor of the ship to chase a vision of hyper-whiteness, a decision

¹⁸ In the cabin, Pip says, “let’s try the door. What? neither lock, nor bolt, nor bar; and yet there’s no opening it. It must be the spell; he [Ahab] told me to stay here” (400).

¹⁹ *Moby-Dick* was published in 1851, as growing antebellum political pressures around slavery threatened the country’s unity. Given this historical fact, it makes sense that the novel is closely attuned to issues of racial labor, racial guilt, and racial healing.

that is made possible by his rejection of the racial healing Pip offers.²⁰ Ahab literally steers the country in a destructive direction by placing such a high value on whiteness. Ishmael, like Jim Bond, is the lone survivor of the course a Byronic hero sets. Ishmael, though usually interpreted as white because of the stark juxtaposition between his treatment and the treatment that Queequeg receives during their adventures, is at least nominally mixed race. Ishmael likely chooses a name for himself. Hence, the famous opening line, “Call me Ishmael” (18). Ishmael’s biblical namesake is the mixed race child of Abraham and Sarah’s handmaid, Hagar. A spiritual castoff himself, Ishmael inhabits a hybrid identity and is one of the few characters to meet Queequeg’s “otherness” with genuine acceptance. The implication is that, not unlike the Jim Bonds, the Ishmaels who come to proliferate America will be biracial and accepting and will not idealize a totalizing image of whiteness.

²⁰ Alan Heimert has a great essay about the racialized labor of the *Pequod*. He argues that each of the regions of the country have a mate-harpooner team that exemplifies the dynamic that makes each of those regions flourish. Starbuck is the representative of New England and he is paired with Queequeg, a Pacific Islander. Flask is from the South and is matched with Daggoo, a black man. Stubb is from the West and rows out with Tashtego, a Native American.

CODA

Both Ahab and Sutpen present themselves to be white, wealthy, heterosexual, cisgender men. To achieve their Byronic designs, they must preserve (at least the appearance of) these identities and consolidate their power. Instead, Ahab and Sutpen both engage in relationships with black men (literally or figuratively slaves) that complicate their identity positions, diminish their power, and derail their best-laid, monomaniacal plans. Ahab experiences desires that contradict the reader's understanding of him as exclusively heterosexual. Ahab shares his power and authority as captain with Pip by bringing him into his cabin, ordering the crew to wait on him, and allowing him to begin to drain the madness from his fevered brain. Sutpen desires the "monkey nigger" and expresses that desire by fighting his own surrogate "monkey niggers," his slaves. Because Girard advances a contagion model of mediated desire, Sutpen can be interpreted as "spreading the disease" of his cross-racial, homoerotic desires to his children. Sutpen's children enter into (or threaten to enter into) relationships with one another that are (or would be) socially taboo for a number of reasons (homosexuality, miscegenation, incest, bigamy, etc.). When Henry is forced to kill Bon to prevent him from marrying Judith, he sets off a cascading, domino effect that foils Sutpen's plan for a dynastic bloodline.

In a Girardian sense, both heroes desire the obstacles they have placed between themselves and the fulfillment of their designs. Because both *Moby-Dick* and *Absalom, Absalom!* contain legible ideographs representing the United States and the American South, respectively (the *Pequod* and Sutpen's Hundred), I am authorized to read Ahab and Sutpen's erotic desires as commenting on American power structures (and racial

slavery in particular). Taking a cue from Fiedler, I argue that Ahab and Sutpen's racialized erotic desires disclose their need, not for racial healing per se, but to reconcile themselves to the knowledge that others must be hurt for them to succeed. To chase the white whale, which I interpret to mean benefitting from a myth of America as racially white, and to become an aristocratic gentleman, which I interpret to mean preserving the southern social order for the benefit of landed men, requires the subjugation of "niggers," "queers," and "whores."

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