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# The Tragic Possibilities of William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!

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The Tragic Possibilities of William Faulkner's

Absalom, Absalom!

(TITLE)

BY

Carol R. Gray

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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The Tragic Possibilities of William Faulkner's  
Absalom, Absalom!

Various Faulkner critics, such as Frederick Hoffman, Cleanth Brooks, Lawrence Thompson, and John Lewis Longley, Jr., have described William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom! as a tragedy or Thomas Sutpen as a tragic hero.<sup>1</sup> When William Van O'Connor discusses the rise and fall of the Sutpen family and the South, and Thomas Sutpen's and the South's flaw, he hints at tragedy.<sup>2</sup> Olga Vickery would partially agree with these tragic interpretations, for she states that Mr. Compson makes his narration a tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Richard Sewall writes that Thomas Sutpen is not a tragic hero but that Faulkner's vision in Absalom, Absalom! is tragic.<sup>4</sup> Other critics, such as Irving Howe and Walter Slatoff, believe that Absalom, Absalom! is not a tragedy or that Thomas Sutpen is not a tragic hero.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, problems arise as to the nature of tragedy and the suitability of a tragic interpretation of Absalom, Absalom!

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick J. Hoffman, William Faulkner, pp. 74, 76, 77.  
Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country, pp. 296, 307.

Lawrence Thompson, William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation, pp. 64, 65, 168, 169.

John Lewis Longley, Jr., The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup>William Faulkner, pp. 26, 27.

<sup>3</sup>The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation, pp. 89-90.

<sup>4</sup>The Vision of Tragedy, pp. 138, 143, 147.

<sup>5</sup>Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study, p. 223.  
Walter Slatoff, Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner, pp. 201, 202, 203.

The confusion might be explained in various ways: the critics' definitions of tragedy vary; some of the critics are using the term tragic loosely, using it in a non-literary sense; or the critics are interpreting the novel differently.

Regardless of how one may explain the confusion, the problem remains. Does *Absalom, Absalom!* constitute a tragedy? To answer the question adequately, one must consider a definition of tragedy itself. The requirements for tragedy must remain somewhat objective; for, as Longley writes, "at the end, tragedy, in order to happen at all, must take place in the consciousness of the beholder."<sup>6</sup> However, some characteristics seem necessary to any definition of tragedy, and some reasonable definition must be used if classification is not to become meaningless.

From the time of Aristotle's first definition of tragedy until the present, scholars have tended to agree that for tragedy to exist in a literary work there must be a particular character (or characters), a tragic hero, through whom the tragic vision may be presented. This tragic hero is a "man heightened and intensified."<sup>7</sup> He appears to be a little larger than life; he has a greatness or nobility about him. He is basically good but not

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<sup>6</sup> Pp. 165-166.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Jaspers, "The Tragic: Awareness; Basic Characteristics; Fundamental Interpretations" in Lawrence Anthony Michel and Richard B. Sewall, eds., Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism, p. 24.

pre-eminently so; for while he is admirable, he is also human. He must have a dignity and position above the average if his failings and fall are to be disastrous enough to seem tragic, but his character cannot be so far above the standard that he is unrealistic and unable to evoke sympathy.

This hero has a human failing or a flaw which causes him to fall from his preferred position. The flaw is usually a weakness in his character which allows him to make a misjudgment or a faulty decision in a major situation in his life. Once he has made this mistake, his world is disrupted and he is precipitated to depths of questioning, suffering, and despair which he has never before known. Of course the flaw may be continuous and may affect the hero's action over a long period of time rather than emerge in just a single instance. Intertwining elements of deterministic fate and his own free will have merged to produce his flaw and his resulting downfall. Forces or powers over which he has no control have probably determined the conditions which force him to make his judgment or choice, and heredity and environment have to an extent determined the character which contains his flaw. Yet he is not just a pawn to be pushed around by gods or by forces or conditions in the world. He has some control over his own life. He must be at least partially responsible for his fall if his disaster is to be tragic. The hero does have a choice to make; he alone makes the decision which begins his downfall. He could do otherwise if he had the strength and foresight or if

he had developed his character in a different manner, but instead he "enters into tragic involvement that inevitably must destroy him."<sup>8</sup>

Once the hero's choice is made and his destruction begins, "he is heroic in his capacity for committing himself to a tragic choice and then accepting the consequences."<sup>9</sup> In his courageous persistence to continue regardless of the physical pain and the spiritual and mental anguish that are parts of his suffering, the hero becomes aware of the "sense of ancient evil, of 'the blight man was born for,' of the permanence and the mystery of human suffering."<sup>10</sup> He begins to see as he has never before been able to see. He becomes aware of the disorder, inconsistency, evil, and injustice in the world around him. His suffering is made to seem incomprehensibly severe for his flaw; he cannot even compensate for his error. Yet he persists. His suffering continues and intensifies. But with the increase in pain, the hero continues to increase in fortitude and compassion. His noble character continues to uphold him as he acts in an increasingly admirable manner, forcing himself to endure each new torture. In his "monomaniac intentness,"<sup>11</sup> he is "capable of rising above both fear and common sense and of meeting destiny."<sup>12</sup> Thus, while

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Herbert J. Muller, The Spirit of Tragedy, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Sewall, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Muller, p. 24.

he falls from his position, he increases in dignity and nobility.

As a means of making the hero's conflict with the pervasive evil more striking and more concrete, the author may quite often, although not necessarily, particularize in a character the forces that are destroying the hero. This villain may have attractive qualities, such as a superior wit or intelligence, charm, an understanding of and ability to manage (or manipulate) people, or physical beauty; but his moral view and philosophy of life are contrary to the approved, established code. He is usually personally ambitious and contemptuous of others for their apparent stupidity. He succeeds in his evil plans and devious methods with little or no restriction. His view of life seems to predominate in the world as the hero is suffering. Yet he, too, like Iago or Edmund, will usually suffer in the end. He will be seen for what he is and will be temporarily restrained as man once again attempts to rid himself of one manifestation of existing evil.

While the importance of the villain has been diminished by the end of the tragedy, the suffering of the hero has not been mitigated or justified. The hero must experience the final suffering: he must die. But before his death, the hero gains self-knowledge. He searches and questions until he finds his error and benefits from it. He gains an insight into and understanding of his problems and life that he has not previously attained. For a time perhaps



chaos and evil and his blight are all that he can see, but he overcomes the destructive forces and he is able to meet life and his own death with the knowledge that he may never be able to understand the mysteries inherent in life and death but that the struggle to live by his own will is worth while. He has gone through pain and suffering and self-doubt, but he becomes a more compassionate and a more admirable man for it.

It is not enough that the suffering brings about a change in the hero, for "unless the pity and fear and the purgation of them are brought about by the spectacle as seen, there can be no tragedy."<sup>13</sup> Or as Sewall states, "the suffering must make a difference somewhere outside himself."<sup>14</sup> Because of the actions of the hero, the reader learns to value life more highly and to meet life with more knowledge, if with more sober thoughts. The worth of man emerges as the tragic but ennobling destruction of the hero gives life a fuller meaning. There may be no way of avoiding or alleviating suffering and the world may remain harsh and indifferent; but by meeting his fate, the hero has "not only reasserted the dignity of the human spirit but proved its strength by holding fast in uncertainty."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Longley, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup>"The Tragic Form" in Michel and Sewall, p. 128.

<sup>15</sup> Muller, p. 354.

The reader experiences pity and terror at observing the severe pain which the hero has had to endure, but the manner in which the hero has conducted himself in meeting that suffering creates a catharsis or release that makes the reader better for having experienced it. The pity and terror are created to provide the reader a vicarious experience, but the release and satisfaction involve more; the reaction involves an admiration for the hero's conduct, a gain in personal knowledge and understanding, and a reconciliation toward life because "the accepted order of things is fundamentally questioned only to be more triumphantly reaffirmed."<sup>16</sup>

The requirements for tragedy in a literary work are high, but the loftiness is a necessity if "tragedy suggests and brings to realization the highest possibilities of man."<sup>17</sup> Although it is essential to use the basic definition of tragedy flexibly, the requirements cannot be dismissed when judging a work for tragic possibilities. Consequently, for William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom! to be accurately called tragic, it should meet the various characteristics of tragedy as outlined above.

But before trying to determine if Faulkner's novel fits the basic pattern of tragedy, one must deal with an

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<sup>16</sup>Herbert Weisinger, Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall, p. 266.

<sup>17</sup>Jaspers in Michel and Sewall, p. 6.

even more fundamental problem. Herbert Muller writes:

By general consent there have been only four important periods of tragedy, all of them brief; the ancient Greek, confined to Athens of the fifth century B. C.; the Elizabethan, in the generation of Shakespeare; the French classical, in the generation of Corneille and Racine; and the modern, inaugurated by Ibsen. At that, there is some dispute about the genuineness of French classical tragedy, and much more about modern tragedy.<sup>18</sup>

Although the reasons for tragedy existing or not existing in literature at any particular time are not agreed upon, apparently the culture and the prevailing philosophies in the culture affect the possibility of an author producing tragedy. Muller continues, "None of the great Eastern civilizations have produced tragedy,"<sup>19</sup> apparently because "tragedy can be created only by free men, with minds and wills of their own,"<sup>20</sup> whereas the Eastern man has been subservient to the gods. But "a matter of increasing importance--the relation of Christianity to tragedy"<sup>21</sup>--presents a more pressing problem to the Western critic. Of course Christianity is not the only doctrine or philosophy prevalent in Western society, and it may no longer even be a dominating force. Yet Christianity has had such a profound and continuing effect on Western culture that it may have also affected the possibility of tragedy in literature. Sylvan Barnet argues that Christianity cannot be tragic since "Christian teleology robs death of its

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<sup>18</sup>p. ix

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 325.

<sup>21</sup>Michel and Sewall, p. vi.

sting."<sup>22</sup> Lawrence Michel believes that "there is a basic incompatibility between the tragic and the Christian view,"<sup>23</sup> while W. H. Auden believes that "Greek tragedy is a tragedy of necessity" whereas "Christian tragedy is the tragedy of possibility."<sup>24</sup> Sewall argues that Christianity adds a new dimension to the suffering and terror, for "Not to believe [means] to face, alone and unaccommodated, a void of meaninglessness to which the revelations of Christianity [have] added the ultimate terror: infinity."<sup>25</sup>

The relevance of the argument cannot be ignored in evaluating a work coming out of a basically Christian society where the author cannot help but be influenced by Christian values. If Christianity is antithetic to tragedy, then presumably any work reflecting Christian values is automatically not tragic. Abasalom, Abasalom! does contain some Christian elements. The novel has a Christian setting. Mr. Coldfield is a prominent Methodist. Rosa, Ellen, Judith, and Henry attend church regularly. Sutpen's flaw of inhumanity might be traced to lack of the Christian values of love, understanding, and forgiveness. The title

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<sup>22</sup>"Limitations of a Christian Approach to Shakespeare" in Michel and Sewall, p. 202.

<sup>23</sup>"The Possibility of a Christian Tragedy" in Michel and Sewall, p. 233.

<sup>24</sup>"The Christian Tragic Hero: Contrasting Captain Ahab's Doom and its Classical Greek Prototype" in Michel and Sewall, p. 234.

<sup>25</sup>Sewall, p. 51.

is an allusion to the Biblical story of David and his sons. But Sutpen, who presumably should be analogous to David, is known to attend church only twice--when he sees Ellen Coldfield and when he marries her--and he is not presented as a religious man. The analogy between the Biblical story and the Sutpen story fails, for since Sutpen is incapable of love, he is not a David and neither son can be Absalom. The title remains ironic. Christianity is in the novel as part of the background, part of the Southern society out of which the story develops; but Christianity, as a doctrine, is not a force which by itself changes or creates the conditions which produce the story. Since the Christian elements seem to have little significant effect on the total vision of the novel, the Christian aspects cannot eliminate the possibility of Absalom, Absalom! being a tragedy.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, it does not seem that Christianity and tragedy are necessarily antithetic. In Christianity suffering on earth can be endured if one continues to be faithful, for death is merely a means to everlasting life, reward and salvation. The effects of earthly torture are negated by the prospect of an ultimate, everlasting paradise. Yet it can be argued that terror and tragedy are not gone, for the individual is now faced with an even more terrible fate. He now faces the problem of believing or not believing

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<sup>26</sup>Michel himself restricts the application of his statement. He says that Faulkner is pre-Christian or Stoic. Michel and Sewall, p. 231.

In contrast to Michel, Cleanth Brooks calls Sutpen a "secularized Puritan" and Charles Bon a "lapsed Roman Catholic," p. 302.

in God; of choosing, through his own free will, and being accepted into an everlasting kingdom or receiving eternal, never-ceasing damnation. Perhaps the conditions for tragedy change slightly in a Christian setting, but the possibility of tragedy remains. The Christian may actively seek his suffering, but once the tragic hero has fallen, he meets his torture with a similar determination. Significantly, both Christianity and tragedy are ultimately concerned with the struggle against evil, with the worth of the individual, and with man's ability to rise above the evil that surrounds him.

As one reviews the characters in Absalom, Absalom! Thomas Sutpen emerges as the only possible tragic hero.<sup>27</sup> Sutpen does have a greatness or nobility that is above the average; he does "achieve a kind of grandeur."<sup>28</sup> He obtains the land and produces Sutpen's Hundred by his own hand. He helps build the house and plant the seed himself. When he finally succeeds, it is because of

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<sup>27</sup>It might be suggested that Quentin Compson is a tragic character, but the reader does not know enough about Quentin from the novel Absalom, Absalom! to judge him adequately. The Sound and the Fury must be considered simultaneously before the tragic possibilities of Quentin can be discussed. However, Sewall says "the tragedy is Quentin's," p. 143.

Thompson believes that Thomas and Henry are both tragedies of character whereas Charles Bon is a tragedy of fate' pp. 168-169.

Brooks argues that Henry has the "truly tragic dilemma," p. 303.

<sup>28</sup>Brooks, p. 307.

his own perseverance and intelligence. He is a leader, too. During the building of his house he is able to catch his Negroes "at the psychological instant by example, by some ascendancy of forbearance rather than by brute fear"<sup>29</sup> until they produce a mansion out of the mud of the swamps. Sutpen does not beat the strange-speaking blacks until they obey or put them under an overseer; but he guides and directs them by working naked in the mud himself until with pure determination and a little architectural help, together they erect a massive Southern plantation home. The French architect is persuaded to come and direct the building of the house and to remain until it is finished by some power of Sutpen's that does not consist entirely of threats and physical force. The architect does attempt to leave once, and he uses all of his ingenuity and engineering knowledge to evade his cannibalistic pursuers; but the attempt is made only once, he is not guarded or particularly watched by Sutpen, he is not mistreated, and he leaves freely once his job is completed. The erection of the house is a rather grand, if earthly, spectacle itself. The men of the community often come to Sutpen's Hundred to watch the Negroes and Sutpen make the bricks, build the house, and transform the swampland into a fertile plantation. His task is overpowering, yet he succeeds.

Thomas Sutpen is a leader in the Civil War also. He becomes a colonel and receives a citation signed by Lee.

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<sup>29</sup>Sewall, p. 139.

The number of officers in the Confederacy may have been excessive, and perhaps citations were common; yet one cannot imagine Sutpen remaining an inconspicuous footsoldier and not becoming an active and influential officer. And apparently his fighting ability is nothing new. As a very young man during his stay in Haiti, his almost senseless daring and courage saved his life and lives of the planter and his family. By some inexplicable means, Sutpen was able to crush the Negro insurrection on the sugar plantation and survive himself, although he was greatly outnumbered and severely wounded.

Sutpen's abilities are not entirely physical. He aspires to rise above the conditions in which he was born. He desires to better himself, which is usually considered admirable. Although Sutpen is certainly unschooled, he finds his way to the West Indies and succeeds there in the sugar business with no previous knowledge or experience in the field. Evidently the planter thinks enough of the young Sutpen to allow his only daughter to marry him. Though the daughter may be slightly tainted by her racial background and therefore limited in her marriage choices, the father probably would not consider just any man acceptable for his daughter. Later, the Mississippi country folk are critical of Sutpen's speaking the barbaric language of his Africans, but his ability to speak French is another indication of his versatility and intelligence--and perhaps of his superiority to the Mississippians, for they do not realize what the strange tongue is.



Sutpen is more than an average man. Seemingly, he can do almost anything he decides to do. But Sutpen is not superhuman. He certainly is not perfect. His very desire to succeed, his power to overcome, leads to his human failing, his flaw. He is never willing to stop at reasonable limits. He continues to push ahead to any extreme until he succeeds, regardless of how he does it or whom he hurts. Sutpen's design is always first. All else is negligible. Consequently, anyone or anything that might alter his design or cause him to fail in achieving his plan must suffer. He is so involved in his desire to become a member of the white ruling class and establish a dynasty of his own that he is really completely unaware of the feelings of others. He does not purposely hurt his first wife and son; but because they have Negro blood, they destroy his chance of fulfilling his design. Furthermore, Sutpen believes that the girl and her father have misled him because they have let him believe that her mother is Spanish rather than Negroid; consequently, he believes that he is not obligated to continue his part of the marriage contract. Yet Sutpen does not complain of the wrong that has been committed against him. He accepts the situation and attempts to make just retribution to his wife. He does not just leave; he provides for her and their son. As Cleanth Brooks notes, Sutpen is not actually immoral; he has his own code of behavior in which justice has been done. Sutpen believes that mere "justice is enough--that there is no claim that cannot be satisfied

by sufficient money payment."<sup>30</sup> Payment is given; he can now forget about the wife and child and begin over once again. No question of right or wrong nor any act of inhumanity is involved, as far as Sutpen is concerned. He is not being evil or cruel, for his problem is that he cannot distinguish between good and evil. He has

that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie and cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out.<sup>31</sup>

He has paid his debt; he is free of any obligation towards his family.

However, the payment does not release Sutpen; instead, it begins his fall. "Convincing himself that the claims of morality have been appeased by a financial settlement, his first crime against humanity is committed"<sup>32</sup> when he ignores his first wife and child. His downfall continues as he treats other characters in a like manner. He sees none of them as individuals but only as objects to be manipulated for his own purposes. He chooses to marry Ellen Coldfield not because he has any personal feeling for her but because she meets all of his requirements for an acceptable wife. She is the daughter of a respected shopkeeper and ardent churchgoer. She is above

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<sup>30</sup>Brooks, p. 300.

<sup>31</sup>William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! p. 263.

<sup>32</sup>Brooks, p. 293.

the social level of the white trash; yet he will not be marrying into the elite planter's society, for he still desires to achieve that station by himself. He can persuade Mr. Coldfield to approve the marriage because they have already been involved in a disreputable business dealing. Sutpen has no humanitarian desire to keep his cannibalistic Negroes from consuming the French architect when they capture the prey; but he cannot allow the Frenchman to be destroyed, for he needs the architectural knowledge to finish the house. The man is unimportant (the Negroes believe the Frenchman relinquishes his right to his life when he runs away), but the construction must be completed. Sutpen refuses to even recognize Charles Bon when he comes home with Henry, for that debt has long been paid. He destroys his son Henry by giving him the information that he knows will cause Henry to prevent the marriage between Charles and Judith. He offends Rosa by his proposal that they have a child before they are married and if it is a boy, then he will marry her. His inhumanity continues to the end. Milly Jones, the poor white trash girl, produces Sutpen's last hope for a male heir; but when the baby is a girl, Sutpen can only say that if Milly were a mare, he would take care of her.

Sutpen's inability to distinguish between right and wrong--his innocence of moral values--and his resulting fall are a product of the intertwining elements of pre-determined action and his own free will. Sutpen is born

to a white trash family in the Virginia mountain area. He is fated to this birth and to the river journey that eventually leads to his encounter with the Negro servant at the white man's plantation. But his actions cease to be entirely fated when he realizes that there are three different classes of men: Negroes, white trash, and the respected white planter. When the Negro servant orders Sutpen to go to the back door without even listening to what he has to say, Sutpen knows for the first time that he is not acceptable to all men. Back in the hill country he recognized that as a result of good or bad luck there were the "haves" and the "have-nots", but now he knows that this simple distinction is not enough. This initiation at the white planter's front door destroys his present conception of life, causes him to see the differences in the levels of society, and impels him to run away to become a member of the rich and powerful minority. The conditions for his initiation may be predetermined but his resulting actions are at least partially controlled by his own choice. But Sutpen retains his childhood innocence in that he never realizes that others are also searching for an identity and are human beings trying to make "at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that was once for the reason that it can die someday."<sup>33</sup> In trying to improve his own position and prove his worth,

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<sup>33</sup>Faulkner, p. 127.

Sutpen forgets his lesson and ignores the humanity of anyone else.

In contrast, it might at first appear that Sutpen is free to make the choice to rise above his white trash background and to choose the methods he will use to rise. He chooses to disregard his first wife and child. Later, he refuses to recognize his son Charles Bon. He willfully decides to tell Henry that Charles is part Negro because he knows that Henry will then not allow the marriage between Judith and Charles; thus, not only does he intentionally rid himself of Charles, but he also destroys Henry and his hope for a future dynasty. He purposely alienates Rosa by a suggestion that is sure to horrify her because he prefers not to entangle himself in a marriage situation that may not produce the son he craves. Repeatedly Sutpen is given an opportunity to overcome his lack of humanity, but because of his conditioned character, he repeatedly acts in a manner that he believes will help him achieve his design but which actually only forces him further downward. He has a choice, but in reality he can only act in one way.

Once Thomas Sutpen makes his fateful decision of dissolving his relationship with his first family and his destruction begins, he commits himself to his decision and attempts to meet the destiny he has created. Sutpen realizes that time is getting short for him and that the years in Haiti and the resulting disaster have put him behind in his schedule to achieve his coveted position.

He must now work even harder to attain his goal. He obtains his lands, builds his house, sows the fields, furnishes the mansion, chooses a wife, begets his children, and just as he might feel that he has accomplished what he has set out to do, his dream is once again shattered. At the time when he has finally established himself as a permanent part of the Jefferson community and might expect nothing in his future but further success, greater wealth, and a recognized dynasty, Charles appears and the Sutpen family is torn apart.

Almost simultaneously, the serenity of the Yoknapatawpha country and the South is disrupted as war breaks out and the inhuman and outdated social structure in which Sutpen has attempted to succeed collapses. Naturally, Sutpen's flaw by itself did not create the Civil War, but if his flaw can be considered symbolic or symptomatic of the South's inhumanity--the white man's utter disregard of Negroes as fellow human beings or as brothers in mankind--then perhaps Sutpen's personal blight is just one example in a whole view of destruction. The entire South does suffer. The Civil War is fought on Southern soil. Land is destroyed; homes are devastated. Burning and looting are commonplace. The people themselves react in various ineffective ways. Mr. Coldfield locks himself into his room and starves to death because he cannot face the situation or accept the change in conditions. Judith, Clytie, and Rosa, as representatives of the women in general, live rather aimlessly on the Sutpen plantation, producing a little garden, wasting what food they have, but principally just waiting for the men to return.

All purpose except staying alive, enduring, seems to have disappeared from their lives. Perhaps Charles' letter to Judith best illustrates the confusion, injustices, ambiguities, and ironies present. The Southern soldiers find stove polish in those boxes stamped with "that U. and that S."<sup>34</sup> when they are clawing for food, yet they only laugh; for "it really requires an empty stomach to laugh with, that only when you are hungry or frightened do you extract some ultimate essence out of laughing."<sup>35</sup> To talk of hunger and gunfire is mere redundancy for Charles. Although the mind is inured to hardship and privation, the body "is still immersed and obviously bemused in recollections of old peace and contentment the very names of whose scents and sounds I do not know that I remember."<sup>36</sup> Charles loses all faith in life as he believes that he and Judith are "included among those doomed to live."<sup>37</sup> But the incongruity of shipping the stove polish "to polish the stove before firing the house"<sup>38</sup> is not an isolated instance of misplaced values. Similarly, Sutpen manages to smuggle two mammoth marble grave stones into the country and force his troops to drag them through battle and retreat even though methods to smuggle or carry needed food or supplies fail.

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<sup>34</sup>Faulkner. p. 130.

<sup>35</sup>ibid.

<sup>36</sup>ibid., p. 131.

<sup>37</sup>ibid., p. 132.

<sup>38</sup>ibid., p. 130.

Eventually the actual war ceases, but the suffering does not disappear, nor do the conditions radically change. There are carpetbaggers from the North, and the die-hard Southerners retaliate through the Klan. But Sutpen refuses to join the Klan; he is only interested in trying to rebuild his wrecked plantation. He perseveres, but he is an older, tired man now. There will never be a productive Sutpen's Hundred again. He spends more and more of his time with the trashy Wash Jones and buys the fifteen-year-old granddaughter Milly for a few cheap trinkets. Sutpen's glory is gone, yet he never really complains. He tries to accept each new situation and overcome his problems so that he can finally achieve the position he desires. He never really gives up trying although he may subconsciously realize that his dream is lost. Sutpen's claim to an increase in dignity and nobility is ambiguous. He does persist, and he does commit himself to his tragic choice; but his perseverance becomes a blind adherence to a lost, social ideal, and in his increasingly degrading manner of trying to achieve his goal, he diminishes his own stature.

Although a villain does not dominate throughout Faulkner's novel, in Miss Rosa's narration, a villain does exist. Rosa sees the villain as a Satanic figure, but this villain is not working against the hero because the villain is the hero himself. The possibility of Sutpen being a tragic hero is not destroyed by his concurrent presentation as a villain. The combination of a villain and a tragic hero is not unknown in literature (Macbeth is the prime example), although the dual role may make an



effective and sympathetic presentation of the character more difficult. Since Miss Rosa's narration comes first, the reader must overcome his conceptions of Sutpen as a villain when he obtains the further evaluations of Sutpen's character and actions.

Rosa sees Sutpen as a man of a different breed. He has an unknown background. How he obtains his land and furnishes his house are questionable. He owns strange-speaking slaves who cover themselves only with mud as they erect his mansion. Rosa draws a picture of Sutpen carrying Ellen away after a disastrous wedding ceremony. Rosa believes that Sutpen corrupts his own daughter: Judith, too, enjoys the wildly reckless rides to church and the vicious, barbaric fighting in the barn. Rosa says Ellen was not unaware of his demonic powers; for as Ellen dies she asks Rosa to protect the two Sutpen children, Henry and Judith, even though Rosa is younger than they. The final proof of Sutpen's villainous character, as far as Miss Rosa is concerned, is his immoral proposal to her that they experiment before marriage and that if Rosa produces a male heir, then Sutpen will marry her. Rosa is appalled at the immorality of the suggestion, but she is even more repulsed by the manner in which he makes the suggestion. The idea seems to occur to Sutpen as he is working in the field, and he goes to Rosa and proposes the trial as if he were setting up a stud arrangement between animals with a neighboring plantation owner. Sutpen has no feeling for Rosa; she is just an object by which he might

once again establish the dynasty which he has lost.

Even as Rosa views Sutpen as an evil man, she is ready to admit his intelligence or cunning. Regardless of how Sutpen obtained his land and furnishings for his house, it took a man of uncommon sense to do it. His leadership during the war likewise indicates his capabilities. He is a very personally ambitious man. Sutpen thinks only of Sutpen, and anything that stands in his path will have to give way. The townspeople finally accept him--they may even admire him for his accomplishments--but they do not really trust him, for his code of behaviour is not their code. Sutpen appears to remain aloof as he keeps his past and his plans for the future to himself. He seems to have a contempt for almost all of the townspeople, or at least Rosa believes that Sutpen considered them inferior.

However, Rosa's view of Sutpen is a distorted one. Sutpen has personally affronted her; and she will never forget it, nor forgive him for it. Her whole view of Sutpen is colored by this one act. Everything that she has known or believed about him is changed by his unacceptable proposal. The reader can never know what Rosa's original attitude toward Sutpen was; for as she retells the story, her memory of Sutpen as she was growing up and during and after the war cannot be objective. Deeply hurt by him, she in return is going to magnify his faults and make the character in her narration as evil as possible.

She must not have always believed he was extremely villainous, for she did accept his proposal of marriage and

was looking forward to that marriage. Of course, Rosa was rapidly reaching the age of becoming an old maid and there were not many marriageable young men after the war; thus, Sutpen may have been her only possibility of marriage, her only chance of partaking of life. Yet her acceptance of Sutpen is more than mere availability; Sutpen was a wealthy man; he had the determination to succeed again; he was a war hero; he had the physical appearance of a majestic leader. Rosa was infatuated if not in love. Sutpen may be a villain, and he has some undesirable qualities, but his actions are not so much immoral and devious as amoral and thoughtless. Thus, Rosa's view is not a complete view.

The real problem in seeing Sutpen as a tragic hero is not that he is also partially a villain but that he never questions the reasons for his fall. Sutpen is given the opportunity to review and question his past actions when Bon appears and his grand design begins to collapse. But he does not see his flaw; he only believes that he has made a mistake that needs rectifying. He tells Quentin's grandfather, General Compson,

You see I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate.<sup>59</sup>

He still believes that he must owe a payment somewhere, but he cannot find where that payment is required. He came to

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

General Compson for an impartial mind to point out the mistake to him. It was

Not moral retribution you see; just an old mistake in fact which a man of courage and shrewdness (the one of which he now knew he possessed, the other of which he believed that he had now learned, acquired) could still combat if he could only find out what the mistake had been.<sup>40</sup>

But Sutpen is not harrassed by the tragic hero's doubts or self-analysis. The searching for his mistake after Charles Bon reappears is "as near an actual spiritual struggle as he ever [comes]."<sup>41</sup> The only other indication that Sutpen suffers spiritually over his acts of inhumanity, particularly his repudiation of his wife and son, is his telling General Compson that he did have to struggle slightly with his conscience.

Sutpen sat in the office that afternoon after thirty years and told him how his conscience had bothered him somewhat at first but that he had argued calmly and logically with his conscience until it was settled, just as he must have argued with his conscience about his and Mr. Coldfield's bill of lading (only probably not as long here, since time here would be pressing) until that was settled--how he granted that by certain lights there was injustice in what he did but that he had obviated that as much as lay in his power by being aboveboard in the matter; that he could have simply deserted her, could have taken his hat and walked out, but he did not.<sup>42</sup>

There is a quivering of self-doubt for Sutpen, but the hesitation is overcome because he has kept only twenty slaves out of all that he could have claimed. He has made just restitution according to his code.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>41</sup>Sewall, p. 142.

<sup>42</sup>Faulkner, p. 262.

Sutpen looks for his mistake, but when he does not find it, he seems to forget about it and merely determines not to make another error. He may realize that his design is collapsing around him and that his struggle to achieve it is futile, but his mental and spiritual anguish is relatively minor. He never searches; consequently, he never gains self-knowledge. He never sees anything differently from what he has seen previously. He never gains in insight because "of that innocence which he had never lost, because after it finally told him what to do that night he forgot about it and didn't know that he still had it."<sup>43</sup> At the end of the book, Sutpen remains in attitude essentially the same person he was when the novel began. He repudiates his first wife because she is partially Negro and, thus, does not fit his plan. He dismisses Milly Jones because she has a girl child and, consequently, does not fit his plan either.

This lack of growth in Sutpen diminishes his heroic possibilities. Earlier Wash Jones was not allowed within the house, and Sutpen would not associate freely with the white trash; but now Wash Jones is a business partner and a constant drinking companion. Before the war, Sutpen would become nothing less than a successful plantation owner; now he is a seller of cheap trinkets. As a young man he remained a virgin until he thought he had found a wife worthy enough to bear the children who were to

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

inherit his dream; now any available girl is good enough to produce an heir for him. He does not increase in stature; rather he shrinks to a common, disgusting, degraded, bloated man.

But Sutpen's lack of insight is just one example of failure in a whole panorama of failures. Mr. Coldfield locks himself away and starves. Rosa remains bitter. Wash Jones destroys Sutpen, his granddaughter, the new-born child, and himself. The octeroon family evolves into disillusionment, masochism, and finally idiocy. Henry wastes away, hidden in the decaying mansion. The only characters that seem to succeed in life at all are Judith and Clytie, possibly because they are willing to give of themselves, are willing to love others. Judith sees that Charles Bon's octeroon wife-mistress knows of Charles' death and can visit his grave. Judith and Clytie attempt to take care of and rear Charles Etienne, though they could have ignored him. Judith dies because she catches Charles Etienne's fatal disease while she is trying to nurse him back to health. Clytie attempts to protect Henry and watch over Jim Bond. Clytie, too, gives her life for another when she believes that Rosa wants Henry punished.

In the later evaluation of the legend, Shreve's opinion is, "The South. Jesus. No wonder you folks all outlive yourselves by years and years and years."<sup>44</sup> He goes farther. "So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen,

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 377.

don't it?,<sup>45</sup> but "You've got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left."<sup>46</sup> He concludes his evaluation by proclaiming "that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere."<sup>47</sup> Quentin's ambivalent reply that he does not hate the South does not alleviate the tension. Why does Shreve believe Quentin hates the South and why does Quentin pant in the cold air as he vehemently replies, if in fact he does not hate the South? Does this vision create affirmation? Yet if one considers Faulkner's 1950 Nobel Prize speech, Faulkner apparently attempted to create and believed that he had presented an affirmative vision; for through enduring, his characters and the South may achieve an understanding and nobility that will be their salvation. Perhaps all is not blackness. The South does manage to survive. But surely the prospect for a society that is eventually going to be controlled by a howling idiot, a society that has gone through suffering and destruction to produce a lunatic progeny, is not optimistic. Quentin can overcome his ancestry to the extent that he can become friends with a Northerner, but he is not helped by Sutpen's story. Quentin is still undecided about what he feels; he is still torn between the traditions of the South and the importance and worth of each individual. The ending may not be totally nihilistic, but neither is it optimistic; it remains ambiguous, too ambiguous for

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

the reader to glean sufficient hope to release him from his fear.

Since Sutpen does not resolve his problem and then does not rise above his situation, no catharsis for the reader is achieved. No hope for the future is given in Sutpen's life; for Sutpen not only never checks his inhumanity, he does not even recognize it. He fails and fails again because he cannot or will not see that he has a moral flaw. One cannot admire Sutpen's conduct, except perhaps for his perseverance, because he does not gain in dignity and knowledge. The reader does not hope that he would meet a similar situation in the manner that Sutpen has met his catastrophe. Sutpen does not become a glorified hero; instead he becomes a wasted, defeated man. The reader may feel sympathy for Sutpen, but the purgation necessary for tragedy is not created. In oversimplification Sutpen does not die well.

Absalom, Absalom! contains several literary characteristics of tragedy. The novel is concerned with man's very existence, with life and death, with man's recurring inhumanity to man. Sutpen has "some of the qualities and many of the trappings of a tragic hero:"<sup>48</sup> he has some qualities of nobility, he has a flaw, he falls, and he perseveres. Yet ultimately he fails to become a tragic hero because he never suffers extreme mental anguish, he never questions or learns, he fails to recognize his error,

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<sup>48</sup>Sewall, p. 136.



and he loses in stature. Since there is no tragic hero, there is no catharsis. The spectacle presented does not evoke pity and terror and purgation, nor does it give the reader reason to hope or to establish an affirmation toward life. Sutpen is utterly destroyed, and the reader is left to go elsewhere for help. Because of these deficiencies, Absalom, Absalom! cannot be called a tragedy.

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