4 “Everybody Seemed to Have to Have a Home”: History, Innocence, and the Nightmare of Belonging in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*

**Figure 8:** Storm’s regionalism assumes a global dimension if one takes into account projected spaces.

Regionalism: the word evokes local color, boundedness, perhaps provinciality.1 And yet, though there is a tendency in regionalist novels to depict their settings as pristine, authentic spaces outside of history (Kaplan 251–252), Philip Joseph rejects the notion that such novels are necessarily isolationist. Instead, Joseph argues that there have always been regional novels in which the local community remains “in dialogue with the outside world” (7). Likewise, Harilaos Stecopoulos argues that some novelists “counterintuitively found in regionalism

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1 I would like to thank Christa Schönfelder and Simone Heller-Andrist for their comments on the first draft, as well as Sarah Chevalier for her feedback on the final version of this chapter. Parts of the chapter are based on my unpublished *Lizenziat* thesis, “Past the Game of Fiction.”
the inspiration for transnational fiction” (24). The works of the German author Theodor Storm are a good example for this, for while virtually all of Storm’s texts are set in the author’s home region, Northern Frisia, this regional setting is opened up to the wider world through what Barbara Piatti has called projected spaces: locations that are remembered, dreamed of, or envisioned as future destinations (Piatti 362). As soon as one adds projected spaces to Storm’s fictional universe, his regionalism in fact assumes truly global proportions (Figure 8).

In the discussion that follows we will find that the regionalism of William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (1936) is likewise transnational in its scope. Absalom, Absalom! is set in Yoknapatawpha, a fictional county located in the state of Mississippi and home to many of William Faulkner’s novels. In their ostensible focus on the particular histories and institutions of the Deep South, the Yoknapatawpha stories belong to a tradition of regionalism that had emerged as an important current in American fiction in the post-Civil-War period (Ruland and Bradbury 193). And yet, in Absalom, Absalom! the outside world quite literally intrudes on the town of Jefferson, Mississippi, in the figure of Thomas Sutpen, who appears there in 1833, seemingly out of nowhere. On one hundred square miles “of tranquil and astonished earth,” he builds Sutpen’s Hundred, a grand plantation home, dragging “house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing” (4). Sutpen then marries Ellen Coldfield, a woman from a respected local family, and has two children with her, Henry and Judith. However, just when it seems that Sutpen will succeed in his “design” to become the founding father of a great Southern dynasty (194), the repressed past returns in the shape of Charles Bon, his son from a previous marriage with a woman whom Sutpen left when he found out that she was “part negro” (283). On the eve of the American Civil War, Sutpen’s design thus begins to falter, ultimately destroying his new family.

It is, however, only through the prism of several retellings that we come to know of Sutpen’s relentless pursuit of a particular fiction of home, and the fact that his story is continually retold emphasizes the extent to which his catastrophic history continues, decades after the events in question, to haunt Quentin Compson and other members of Jefferson, his home community. We will see, moreover, that these regional hauntings are in fact intimately related not only to U.S. national history, but also to the country’s geopolitical role in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By allegorically encoding the his-

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2 I would like to thank Barbara Piatti for allowing me to use the map in Figure 8.

3 Among the novels set in Yoknapatawpha county are Sartoris (1929), The Sound and the Fury (1929), As I Lay Dying (1930), Light in August (1932), The Hamlet (1940), Go Down, Moses (1942), The Town (1957), The Mansion (1959), and The Reivers (1962).
tory of slavery and racism, as well as the continuing U.S. involvement in the Republic of Haiti, the novel draws attention to the illusionary nature of fantasies of a new beginning, or dreams of splendid isolation. Instead, it evokes Karl Marx’s famous dictum that “[t]radition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (“The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” 32; see also chapter two), and gives literary form to this idea through equally Gothic tropes. Moreover, Absalom, Absalom! uses a technique that we may call uncanny narration in order to make readers undergo a similarly nightmarish experience as one of the novel’s protagonists, Quentin Compson.

In the preceding chapters, we have focused on the obstacles to belonging – social alienation, for instance, or injustices related to gender. In addition, we have examined the question of whether, at times, we ought to resist our urge to make ourselves at home because the ethical price to pay would simply be too high. In the discussion that follows, we will now have to examine what happens when someone would in fact prefer to leave the home behind, but finds to their horror that he or she simply cannot let go. In short, in assessing the potentially debilitating long-term impact of the family home and the wider community, Absalom, Absalom! constitutes an attempt to confront the nightmare of belonging, in order to unearth its potential as a basis for political action.

Postmemory: Excessive Past(s) and the Weight of History
The potentially overwhelming weight of history is made palpable in Faulkner’s novel through the sheer multiplicity of interlocking and sometimes competing narratives that, collectively, reconstruct the story of Thomas Sutpen. The novel opens in September 1909, with Quentin paying a visit to Miss Rosa Coldfield, an elderly lady who knew Sutpen personally (5). While the circumstances of Quentin’s visit are related by an extra-diegetic, third-person narrator, the embedded story of Thomas Sutpen is told in the “grim haggard amazed voice” of Rosa Coldfield (3). In fact, of the first chapter’s twenty pages, the final twelve consist almost exclusively of Miss Rosa’s embedded tale, making her a second-level narrator who virtually takes over the telling of the story. Similarly, of the second chapter’s twenty-three pages, only ten are told by the extra-diegetic third-person narrator, while the other thirteen consist of a monologue by Quentin’s father. Not unlike Ishmael in Moby-Dick, then (see chapter one), the third-person narrator in Absalom, Absalom! repeatedly loses control over the

4 For a reading of Marx’s ghostly imagery in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” see Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx 133–155. For responses by Marxist critics, see Michael Sprinker, Ghostly Demarcations.
5 For a similar argument, see Heinrich Straumann, Faulkner 199–200.
narrative, speaking, for instance, only eight words in the twenty-four pages of chapter three. Later, in chapter five, the novel seems to dispose of the extra-diegetic perspective altogether, presenting us with another thirty-two pages of Miss Rosa’s voice before, on the second-but-last page, the third-person narrator stages a surprise return. Instead of controlling and orchestrating the novel’s many retellings, the ‘omniscient’ third-person narrator thus appears in a curiously precarious position and threatens to be drowned out by embedded narrative voices.6

Moreover, if the various retellings are well-nigh unmanageable in their totality, the embedded narrators appear similarly overwhelmed by their stories, which they recount in seemingly boundless sentences, as if compelled stylistically to recreate the enormity of the past. Consider, for instance, the following gargantuan sentence, spoken by Quentin’s father:

[Y]our grandfather never knew if it was Clytie who watched, kept in touch by some means, waited for the day, the moment, to come, the hour when the little boy would be an orphan, and so went herself to fetch him; or if it was Judith who did the waiting and the watching and sent Clytie for him that winter, that December of 1871;—Clytie who had never been further from Sutpen’s Hundred than Jefferson in her life, yet who made that Journey alone to New Orleans and returned with the child, the boy of twelve now and looking ten, in one of the outgrown Fauntleroy suits but with a new oversize overall jumper coat which Clytie had bought for him (and made him wear, whether against the cold or whether not your grandfather could not say either) over it and what else he owned tied up in a bandana handkerchief – this child who could speak no English as the woman could speak no French who had found him, hunted him down in a French city and brought him away, this child with a face not old but without age, as if he had had no childhood, not in the sense that Miss Rosa says she had no childhood, but as if he had not been human born but instead created without agency of man or agony of woman and orphaned by no human being [...]. (159)

This lengthy quotation in fact constitutes only the first third of the sentence, and though the example may seem extreme, it is not at all uncharacteristic of the novel’s overwhelming style. Too much, it seems, must be told:

I will tell you what he [i.e. Sutpen] did and let you be the judge. (Or try to tell you, because there are some things for which three words are three too many, and three thousand words that many words too less, and this is one of them. It can be told; I could take that many sentences, repeat the bold blank naked and outrageous words

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6 For a more detailed analysis of the competition (and even contradictions) between narrators see, for instance, Rimmon-Kenan, *Glance beyond Doubt* 43–64.
just as he spoke them, and bequeath you only that same aghast and outraged unbelief
I knew when I comprehended what he meant; or take three thousand sentences and
leave you only that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for almost
fifty years.) But I will let you be the judge and let you tell me if I was not right.
(134–135)

Words, that is to say, cannot do justice to Sutpen’s story (“three words are three
too many, and three thousand words that many words too less”), and the enor-
mity of the narrative task affects the very language in which Rosa – who is the
narrator at this point – tells her tale: definite statements that she immediately
qualifies (“I will tell you [...]. Or try to tell you”); adjectives crammed on top of
each other (“bold bland naked and outrageous”); repetitions (“and let you be the
judge,” “will let you be the judge”), speculations (“could take”), and unresolved
questions (“that Why? Why? and Why? that I have asked and listened to for
almost fifty years”). If John Brannigan is right in suggesting that an “excess of
memory and history is [...] the prototypical temporal condition of the twentieth
century” (117), then perhaps *Absalom, Absalom!* is the century’s paradigmatic
novel, enacting this excessive temporality in the very texture of its convoluted
style.

Nevertheless, much like Rosa Coldfield, Quentin is aware that even the most
excessive of narrations cannot encompass the full reality of the past, but must
instead select, rearrange, and condense its components. In order to tell Sutpen’s
story, the characters must thus distort the reality to which their tales purport to
refer, thus adding to their material a dream-like quality:

It (the talking, the telling) seemed (to him, to Quentin) to partake of that logic- and
reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred, still-
born and complete, in a second, yet the very quality upon which it must depend to
move the dreamer (verisimilitude) to credulity – horror or pleasure or amazement –
depends as completely upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and
yet elapsing time as music or a printed tale. (15)

The “logic- and reason-flouting quality” of dreams finds its counterpart in the
storyteller’s need to manipulate time – to compress, for instance, the thirty-three
years between Sutpen’s arrival in Jefferson and his death in 1869 into a novel
that one can read in only a few days. Such passages that discuss the precarious
relationship between the reality of the past and its recreation as a text represent
an explicit metafictional discourse in Faulkner’s novel, and this explicit dis-
course in turn complements the novel’s implicitly metafictional style (i.e. the
extraordinarily long and complex sentences that flaunt the text’s artificiality
and constructedness). *Absalom, Absalom!* thus constitutes what Linda Hutcheon
has termed a historiographic metafiction: a novel that “problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge” (106).7

It is, in part, this problematic nature of attempts to reconstruct the past that Shreve, Quentin’s roommate at Harvard College, finds stimulating and even exciting. “Let me play a while now,” Shreve asks Quentin when the latter tries to interrupt his friend in the course of a free-flowing narrative improvisation on the story of Thomas Sutpen, and Norman W. Jones has rightly pointed out that there is a markedly homoerotic charge to the roommates’ “back-and-forth storytelling” (334). We learn, for instance, that Shreve is “naked to the waist” (Absalom 176), and that the two roommates sometimes glare at one another “not at all as two young men might look at each other but almost as a youth and a very young girl might out of virginity itself” (240). Thus seduced by each others’ imaginative prowess, Shreve and Quentin move further and further away from a version of the past based on verifiable fact, creating, “out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all” (243): a dream-like historical fantasy driven by their mutual narrative desire.

However, while Shreve, a Canadian, is for the most part able to enjoy this game of narrative seduction, the Southerner Quentin finds himself unable to gain unadulterated pleasure from their flights of fancy because he is weighed down by the effects of collective historical trauma.8 At one point in Faulkner’s novel, Shreve and Quentin explicitly address this crucial difference in their relation to the past:

[Shreve: I]t’s something my people haven’t got. [...] What is it? something you live and breathe like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children’s children produce children

7 It would be interesting to pursue in more detail how Faulkner’s novel engages with the tradition of the historical novel as a genre, particularly with the model provided by Walter Scott. For instance, as Ian Duncan points out in an essay on Waverley, Scott “follows Shakespeare to make civil war the classical setting of historical fiction: it is the fiery, bloody rift in the fabric of common life through which history and national character become visible” (173). What Duncan says here about the role of the civil war and national character in Scott can, of course, equally well be applied to Absalom, Absalom! – an intertextual link that is made explicit in Faulkner’s novel when we learn that Sutpen rides off to war on a “black stallion named out of Scott” (63).

8 For the distinction between existential and historical trauma see Dominick LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz 46–48 (also discussed in the introduction of the present study).
you wont be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett’s charge at Manassas?”

“Gettysburg,” Quentin said. “You cant understand it. You would have to be born there.”

“Would I then?” (289)

A particular way of relating to history is, Quentin and Shreve suggest here, passed on like a “birthright” from father to son, and can only be understood – if at all (“Would I then?”) – by those for whom the South has always been home.

Though Quentin has no personal recollections of the Civil War, he is thus unable to escape the impact of what Marianne Hirsch has called postmemory: memories handed down from one generation to the next, and therefore characterized by a deeply personal sense of emotional investment despite the temporal distance that separates the younger generation from the events concerned (Family Frames 22). In Absalom, Absalom!, the story of Thomas Sutpen is part of this postmemory that Quentin ‘inherits’:

[T]his first part of it, Quentin already knew. It was a part of his twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man; a part of the town’s – Jefferson’s – eighty years’ heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed [...]. Quentin had grown up with that; the mere names were interchangeable and almost myriad. His childhood was full of them; his very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. (7)

In the collective memory of Jefferson, Mississippi, Thomas Sutpen is such an overwhelming presence that Quentin is familiar with his story from childhood; Quentin’s memories are “myriad,” and his very self is not truly individual but instead “a commonwealth.” Indeed, so heavily does postmemory weigh on Quentin that his sense of self threatens to collapse:

[H]e would seem to listen to two separate Quentins now – the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with

9 Note that expressions such as don’t or can’t are spelled without apostrophes throughout Absalom, Absalom!

10 The fact that Shreve imagines that this birthright is passed on from fathers to sons (rather than from mothers to daughters) would, incidentally, provide a good starting point for a feminist reading of Faulkner’s novel.

11 I would like to thank Christa Schönfelder for bringing Hirsch’s concept of postmemory to my attention.
garrulous outraged baffled ghosts, listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts who
had refused to lie still even longer than most had [i.e. Miss Rosa], telling him about
old ghost-times; and the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to
be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born in the deep
South the same as she was [...]. (4)

Faced with the history of Sutpen and the Civil War, Quentin experiences himself
as both disjointed (“two separate Quentins”) and insubstantial (“a ghost”), and
consequently cannot bring himself to share Shreve’s sense of narrative exhila-
ration.

Thomas Sutpen and the Destruction of Home
If Quentin is unable truly to enjoy the game of historical reconstruction, the
same is true of Rosa Coldfield, who in contrast to Quentin personally witnessed
the destructive effects of Sutpen’s design on Jefferson and, more particularly, on
her own family. For one thing, Sutpen played a key role in the breakdown of the
relationship between Rosa’s father and his home community by proposing to
him a dubious financial scheme – “one of those things that when they work you
were smart and when they dont you change your name and move to Texas”
(208). Though morally outraged by Sutpen’s proposal, Mr. Coldfield realizes that
he “couldn’t quit thinking about it,” and in order to “get it out of his mind” he
decides to accept, fully expecting and even hoping that the scheme will fail (209).
Consequently, Mr. Coldfield is appalled when Sutpen’s unethical gamble eventu-
ally pays off:

Mr Coldfield never did believe it would work, so when he saw that it was going to
work, had worked, the least thing he could do was to refuse to take his share of the
profits; [...] when he saw that it had worked it was his conscience he hated, not
Sutpen; – his conscience and the land, the country which had created his conscience
and then offered the opportunity to have made all that money to the conscience which
it had created, which could do nothing but decline; hated that country so much that
he was even glad when he saw it drifting closer and closer to a doomed and fatal
war; [...] he would have joined the Yankee army [...], only he was not a soldier and
knew that he would either be killed or die of hardship and so not be present on that
day when the South would realise that it was now paying the price for having erected
its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of
opportunism and moral brigandage. (209)

In this episode, Rosa casts Sutpen in the role of the great tempter who seduces
a morally upright man and leaves him fundamentally alienated from a home
community that Rosa’s father now views as irredeemably corrupt. Indeed,
Mr. Coldfield henceforth hates the South “so much that he was even glad when he saw it drifting closer to a doomed and fatal war.” After the outbreak of war, Mr. Coldfield closes his store to Confederate troops and also refuses to sell any goods to supporters of the Southern cause (64). Eventually, he locks up the store for good, and when it is looted by troops who were “doubtless abetted, if only vocally, by his own fellow citizens,” Mr. Coldfield withdraws to the attic of his home, shutting himself in and nailing the door behind him (65).

The reason why Rosa cannot forget this story is that it led directly to the irreversible destruction of everything she had previously thought of as home. From the point when her father shuts himself up in the attic, Miss Rosa secretly provides him with food, hauling up baskets of provision to him “at night by means of a well pulley and rope attached to the attic window” (65). Rosa does this even though she herself supports the Confederate cause – among other things by writing “odes to Southern soldiers” since the first day of her father’s self-incarceration. When, after three years of living in the attic, Mr. Coldfield finally refuses to eat and starves himself to death, the family’s financial assets are entirely depleted, and Rosa finds herself “not only an orphan, but a pauper too” (65–66). In a very real way, then, both the material and emotional security of Rosa’s family home was shattered by Thomas Sutpen, who proposed the dubious scheme that led to Mr. Coldfield’s alienation from the home community, as well as, indirectly, to his suicide.

In addition, we learn that Rosa’s is not the only home that Sutpen destroys in the relentless pursuit of his design to found a Southern planter dynasty. Before he came to Jefferson, Sutpen had worked as an “overseer or foreman or something to a French sugar planter” in Haiti (199). After saving the planter’s family during an uprising, Sutpen becomes engaged to marry his employer’s daughter, who soon gives birth to Sutpen’s first son, Charles (204, 212). However, when Sutpen finds out that his wife is not, as he had been led to believe, part Spanish, but “part negro” instead (283), he provides for her “and put[s] her aside” because, as a ‘mixed-race’ woman, she cannot be “adjunctive or incremental to the design” that Sutpen has in mind (194). Sutpen thus ruthlessly breaks apart the family home he has just established because it fails to correspond to the particular fiction of home that he obsessively pursues: a grand plantation manor owned by a ‘pure,’ white family clan.

However, while Sutpen believes that he can simply leave the past behind, the abandoned first plantation home ultimately brings about the destruction of his second home in Jefferson. As a young man, Charles, Sutpen’s first-born son, enrolls as a student at the same college as Henry, the son from Sutpen’s second marriage with Ellen Coldfield. Unaware that they are half-brothers, Charles and
Henry become close friends, and at one point Henry decides to take Charles home with him to Supten’s Hundred. There, Charles meets Judith, Henry’s sister, and he soon begins to court the young woman who is in fact his half-sister. When Sutpen finds his suspicion confirmed that Charles Bon is his first-born son, he tries to convince Henry to put a stop to Charles and Judith’s incestuous courtship. Henry, however, refuses to act against Charles, loving his friend so much that he prefers to repudiate “father and blood and home” instead (79). Seeing that even the threat of incest does not move Henry decisively to intervene, Sutpen, after a long period of waiting, ultimately reveals the secret of Charles’s ‘tainted’ racial origin to Henry. Despite Henry’s intense affection for Charles – Norman W. Jones even speaks of a “romance” between the two friends (348) – Henry cannot bear the thought of racial ‘impurity,’ as Charles himself observes toward the end of the novel: “So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can’t bear” (285). In a climactic scene, Henry shoots Charles at the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred, his family home, and then disappears, leaving Sutpen bereft of a male heir and therefore, once again, foiled in his design to establish a great plantation dynasty.

And yet, if it is in some ways true that Sutpen’s second home was destroyed by the return of a son from the first home, we must at the same time bear in mind that Sutpen’s Hundred had never truly been a homely home. For instance, just as Sutpen’s first marriage had “certainly not [been] about love” (200), we know that Sutpen never had any romantic interest in his second wife, Ellen Coldfield, but instead merely married her to gain respectability through “the shield of a virtuous woman” (9). When Ellen, on her deathbed, asks Rosa to “save” her two children, or “Judith at least,” from their father (10), it becomes quite clear that Sutpen’s Hundred is a home only in the most impoverished sense of the term: a place of residence and physical shelter, but not, as Cleanth Brooks has pointed out, an emotional or psychological abode. The reason for this lack of interpersonal affection is that Sutpen’s design, though ostensibly valuing the family, in fact views it as merely “incidental” (Brooks, Towards Yoknapatawpha 292). Perhaps ‘instrumental’ would be an even better term, for we can say that, for Sutpen, the family constitutes only a means to fulfilling his design, rather than an end in itself (Bollinger 214). Sutpen thus violates one of Kant’s ethical imperatives, according to which rational beings must never be used as a means only:

[T]he human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in
all his actions, whether directed to himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded *at the same time as an end* [...]. (“Groundwork” 79, original emphasis).\(^\text{12}\)

In Marxist terms, Sutpen disregards the use-value of the members of his two families – their unique qualities and individual needs – reducing them to their exchange-value instead (i.e. to how much the wife and children can contribute toward his grand design).

The home at Sutpen’s Hundred is thus built on the same logic as the system of plantation slavery, in which the unique qualities and needs of the slaves are seen as entirely irrelevant, and where the only question of importance is their exchange-value: how much can be got out of them. It is in part because slaves are reduced in this way to mere means of production, without rights of kinship, that Orlando Patterson has described them as the “quintessentially homeless” persons (162), and though Henry and Judith’s situation at Sutpen’s Hundred is incomparably better in terms of legal recognition and material comfort, the ‘home’ that Sutpen has built for them is founded on the same dehumanizing logic. It is understandable, then, that the only reason why Henry calls Sutpen’s Hundred his home is that “everybody seemed to have to have a home” (263). Home, which for the fortunate is a place both of shelter and of kindness, for Sutpen’s son constitutes nothing but an inescapable, oppressive obligation.

**Knowledge and the Homes of Our Youth**

If Sutpen’s design thus has an enormously destructive effect on three different homes – the Coldfields’ as well as his two plantation homes – the roots of his design reach back to his own precarious childhood home. Growing up in the mountains of Virginia, Sutpen only knew people “who lived in log cabins boiling with children like the one he was born in,” in a society where “the land belonged to anybody” (179). While this description may initially tempt readers to imagine the Virginia home as a poor, but otherwise idyllic mountain community, Cleanth Brooks rightly observes that Sutpen in fact describes a “dog-eat-dog society” (*The Yoknapatawpha Country* 426). According to *Absalom, Absalom!*, everybody in this society “had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep,” and “the only colored people were Indians and you only looked down at them over your rifle sights” (179). In other words, the settler society that

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12 The German original runs: “[D]er Mensch und überhaupt jedes vernünftige Wesen, *existiert* als Zweck an sich selbst, *nicht bloss als Mittel* zum beliebigen Gebrauche für diesen oder jenen Willen, sondern muss in allen seinen, sowohl auf sich selbst, als auch auf andere vernünftige Wesen gerichteten Handlungen, jederzeit *zugleich als Zweck* betrachtet werden” (Kant, *Grundlegung* 43; § 48).
Sutpen describes is characterized by endemic violence and only the most precarious sense of equality among whites, with the main principle of cohesion being the settlers’ virulent fear of Native Americans. At the same time, even as a boy Sutpen sometimes overhears tales of a different society further south: a society governed by the rule of law and glowing with the splendor of plantation wealth. And yet, the boy never really pays much attention to such stories “because there was nothing in sight to compare and gauge the tales by and so give the words life and meaning” (180). What is emphasized here are the cognitive dimensions of the childhood home: they way in which familiar experiences function as yardsticks against which we measure the unfamiliar, and how some things may remain inconceivable because they are too different from anything we have encountered at home.13

It is, accordingly, the family’s move away from the Virginia mountain home that brings about a first important change in young Sutpen’s intellectual development. Interestingly, Sutpen’s father decides to move south with his family shortly after the mother dies, and even though Sutpen does not “remember the reason if he ever knew it” (181), the sequence of events suggests a link between the domestic tragedy and the family’s abandoning the old home. Moreover, the trauma of the loss of his mother may in part explain Sutpen’s fixation on becoming a patriarch.14 At any rate, when the Sutpens finally settle down again, they find themselves in a society that works very differently from the Virginia mountain community:

[Sutpen] learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out of the room. That is, he had begun to discern that without being aware of it yet. He still thought that that was just a matter of where you were spawned and how; lucky or not lucky [...]. (183)

Society in the Deep South is based on entirely different laws and conventions, and sharply divided not only in terms of race (which, after all, had been the case in Virginia, too), but also in terms of class (“a difference between white men and

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13 In this emphasis on the formative effect of the childhood home, Absalom, Absalom! is not unlike George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss. There, however, as we have seen in chapter 2, the enabling qualities of the home are foregrounded, whereas Faulkner’s novel pays at least as much attention to the potentially debilitating effects of homes that are fundamentally flawed.

14 From a psychoanalytic and feminist perspective, the fact that the death of Sutpen’s mother is mentioned only once and very briefly would support the idea that a repression of the motherly body is the driving force behind Faulkner’s story.
white men”). It is a place where “regiments of niggers with white men watching them planted and raised things,” and where a select group of white men living in big houses “owned all the land and the niggers and apparently the white men who superintended the work” (184). In this new society, young Sutpen also observes that many slaves wear “better clothes than he or his father and sisters had ever owned and ever expected to,” and that some of these slaves also live in better-kept quarters than poor white laborers like the Sutpens. At the same time, the dwellings of poor whites still seem to the boy mysteriously “nimbused with freedom’s bright aura, which the slave quarters were not for all their sound roofs and white wash” (184–185). Even though the family’s geographical change of home confronts Sutpen with a new and different type of community, the boy is thus not yet prepared to abandon his belief that all white men are, if not economically, then at least legally and politically equal.

In Faulkner’s novel, the family’s physical removal from home is therefore a necessary first step, but not a sufficient condition for radically new knowledge and deeper insight on Sutpen’s part. Instead, a ‘cognitive restructuring’ can only occur once additional factors come into play, and for Thomas Sutpen the decisive factor is an insult that undermines his previous trust in white equality and his own self-worth. When Sutpen is “thirteen or fourteen,” his father sends him to his employer’s plantation home to deliver a message, and the young boy looks forward to finally seeing the inside of the white master’s mansion (185). However, a black servant not only stops Sutpen from entering the house, but even tells him “never to come to that front door again but to go around the back” (188). In consequence of this insult, everything Sutpen thought he knew and understood is suddenly cast in a different light:

[H]e 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 through the room again from the other side and you find out you had never seen them before […]. (186)

An experience of defamiliarization thus follows the black servant’s insult, undermining not only Sutpen’s self-image, but also his previously unquestioned belief that a rich man could never think himself superior to a poor white boy like Sutpen (185). Baffled rather than outraged, Sutpen turns away from the plantation manor and runs, “not toward home,” but off into cave in the woods, “where he could be quiet and think” (188).

By having Sutpen run off into the woods and not toward home, the novel makes explicit that Sutpen’s reconceptualization of society and his own place in it does not – perhaps cannot – happen in the most familiar surrounding of
the home. Moreover, we soon learn just how profoundly the boy’s perception of the family home changes through his dramatic experience of humiliation:

[H]e began to think of Home. Home and [...] he thought at first he was trying to laugh and [...] he kept on telling himself it was laughing even after he knew better; home, as he came out of the woods and approached it, still hidden yet, and looked at it – the rough partly rotten log walls, the sagging roof [...], the leanto room which they used for kitchen [...], and his sister pumping rhythmic up and down above a washtub in the yard, her back toward him, shapeless in a calico dress and a pair of the old man’s shoes unlaced and flapping about her bare ankles and broad in the beam as a cow, the very labor she was doing brutish and stupidly out of all proportion to its reward: the very primary essence of labor, toil, reduced to its crude absolute which only a beast could and would endure [...]. (190–191)

The family home, previously “nimbused with freedom’s bright aura,” is now not even something to laugh at, but instead a place to be ashamed of for its poverty and squalor. Whereas once Sutpen believed that all white men were created equal, he now recognizes that the dehumanizing poverty of white families (i.e. labor that is “stupidly out of all proportion to its reward,” and “which only a beast could and would endure”) is constitutive to the hierarchically divided social system he had thought he knew intimately and understood.

However, though Sutpen now recognizes the extent to which the ‘private’ life at home is shaped by ‘public’ social circumstances, the conclusions he draws from this insight fall short of their radical potential. In part, this is because Sutpen’s upbringing has not provided him with the mental resources necessary to conceive of an appropriate response to his new insights. As Greg Forter observes, Sutpen for a time debates with himself the various ways in which he 

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15 A similar moment in which a character suddenly recognizes the abject poverty of his own, previously so familiar home occurs in Indra Sinha’s novel Animal’s People (2007). The novel’s main character and narrator lives in a slum called Nutcracker in the fictional city of Khaufpur (modeled on Bhopal, the capital of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh). When the protagonist hears someone observe that “this whole district looks like it was flung up by an earthquake,” his home appears suddenly in an entirely new light: “On hearing Elli speak this one word, earthquake, something weird and painful happens in my head. Up to that moment this was Paradise Alley, the heart of the Nutcracker, a place I’d known all my life. When Elli says earthquake suddenly I’m seeing it as she does. Paradise Alley is a wreckage of baked earth mounds and piles of planks on which hang gunny sacks, plastic sheets, dried palm leaves. Like drunks with arms round each other’s necks, the houses of the Nutcracker lurch along this lane which, now that I look, isn’t really even a road, just a long gap left by chance between the dwellings. Everywhere’s covered in shit and plastic. Truly I see how poor and disgusting are our lives” (106).
might respond to the black servant’s insult, which emphasizes that “more than one response is conceivable” (Forter 276). Recognizing, for instance, that “they (the niggers) were not it, not what you wanted to hit” (Absalom 186), Sutpen could have developed a revolutionary yearning to level both class and racial hierarchies. However, the odds are stacked against such a response on Sutpen’s part, as nothing in the boy’s experience has prepared him to think beyond the color line: “[H]e was seeking among what little he had to call experience for something to measure it by, and he couldn’t find anything” (188). Rather than conceiving of a kind of solidarity that transcends the boundaries of race, the first idea that comes to Sutpen’s mind is simply to shoot the owner of the plantation (189) – an idea that arguably reflects the endemic violence of his Virginia mountain upbringing. At the same time, Sutpen senses that this “wouldn’t do no good” (190; original emphasis), and still debating with himself, the insulted youth tries to find a more appropriate solution by drawing analogies between the current problem and his past experience:

‘If you were fixing to combat them that had the fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make, wouldn’t it?’ and he said Yes. ‘But this aint a question of rifles. So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You see?’ and he said Yes again. (192)

Building on the Virginia home’s logic of gun-toting violence, Sutpen decides that he can only fight rich white men successfully if he rises to their social level, with “land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with.” As is, perhaps, to be expected of a boy filled with the “self reliance of mountains and solitude” (195), Sutpen thus imaginatively models his “combat” against the white upper class on the individualist image of a gunfight, rather than envisaging a collective struggle of poor laborers – white and black – against the exploitative plantation owners.

It is, moreover, not only Sutpen’s domestic background that severely limits his chances for dealing appropriately with his crisis of self-worth, for we also learn that he was sent to school only for “about three months one winter” (194). Sutpen’s formal education thus proves woefully inadequate, too. One of the few things Sutpen remembers from his brief time at school is that the teacher once read to the class from a book about the West Indies, a place “to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn’t matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous” (195; emphasis added). The teacher’s account of how colonial fortunes are made thus matches closely the way in which, according to
Franco Moretti, the colonies tend to be represented in nineteenth-century British novels: it is “the mythic geography – *pecunia ex machina* – of a wealth that is not really produced [...] but magically ‘found’ overseas” (*Atlas of the European Novel* 27). Combining the resources of his limited home experience with the teacher’s misleading accounts of the West Indies, young Sutpen patches together his grand design of becoming a wealthy plantation owner. He is aware that the accomplishment of the design will require “first of all and above all things money in considerable quantities and in the quite immediate future,” and taking his teacher’s ideologically distorted account of rags-to-riches careers in the West Indies at face value, Sutpen decides to leave the U.S. for Haiti (196). At this point in the novel, we know already that Sutpen will destroy several homes later in his life, but by emphasizing the highly inauspicious circumstances of his upbringing – inured to violence, and exposed to misleading information during his brief and unenlightening time at school – Faulkner’s novel makes it possible for us to understand (though not condone) Sutpen’s subsequent course of action.

**Fantasies of Innocence: The American Adam**

It is, in fact, precisely because Sutpen suffers from such an inauspicious upbringing that a seemingly outrageous claim made several times by Quentin’s grandfather – namely that Sutpen’s tragic flaw was “innocence” – gains at least some plausibility. Despite the fact that Sutpen ends up destroying one home after another, Quentin’s grandfather insists that Sutpen at heart remained an innocent. Indeed, Grandfather Compson claims that Sutpen’s innocence was already apparent in the latter’s reaction to the black servant’s insult:

> His trouble was innocence. All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do it whether he wanted to or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself [...], never live with what all the dead men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on [...]. And that at the very moment when he discovered what it was, he found out that this was the last thing in the world he was equipped to do because he not only had not known that he would have to do this, he did not even know that it existed to be wanted, to need to be done, until he was almost fourteen years old. Because he was born in West Virginia, in the mountains [...]. (178)

16 In fact, Faulkner’s novel also emphasizes that the father “probably” sent his son to school, “not to better himself,” but out of “mere vindictive envy toward one or two men, planters, whom he had to see every now and then” (194). The two novels thus share the themes of patriarchal trouble, problematic father-son relationships, and inadequate schooling thus continues.
Explicitly related to his Virginia mountain background, Sutpen’s innocence is also associated here with a lack of knowledge ("had not known that he would have to do this, he did not even know that it existed to be wanted, to need to be done"). Moreover, while it would seem that Sutpen must inevitably lose his innocence in the very moment of recognition, Quentin’s grandfather maintains that this is not so. On the contrary, Sutpen kept his innocence “because after it [i.e. his innocence] finally told him what to do that night he forgot about it and didn’t know he still had it” (194). Later, Quentin’s grandfather defines Sutpen’s supposed innocence in an almost biblical sense as a lack of knowledge of good and evil, for the man had “that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out” (212). It is possible, in short, to portray Sutpen as a victim of deleterious social circumstances: a young boy from a motherless home who was both intellectually and morally ill-equipped to deal with either the psychological or the societal pressures of an impoverished existence in the Deep South.

If we therefore accept, for the time being, that the term ‘innocence’ may with some justice be applied to Thomas Sutpen, then it becomes easy to see that in many ways he corresponds to the type of figure that R. W. Lewis calls the American Adam. Michael Gellert argues that U.S. self Definitions have long involved the idea of a break with the past, and that this belief harks back to the Puritan notion “that America was the place for a new beginning in the history of mankind” (153). Gellert also notes that Thomas Jefferson – whose name the fictional town in *Absalom, Absalom!* carries – was among those who regarded the United States as a place where “the evils of the old European order […] would no longer interfere with the people’s ability to access their natural, God-given moral sense” (Gellert 149). For R. W. Lewis, it is from this particular view of history that the figure of the American Adam arises:

America, it was said insistently from the 1820’s onward, was not the end-product of a long historical process […] it was something entirely new. […]

The new habits to be engendered on the new American scene were suggested by the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and

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17 Of course, as Martin Gretchen notes, Sutpen initially wants to combat the Southern upper class but ultimately ends up joining and even defending it in the Civil War: “His personal fight becomes absorbed into the Southern conflict” (409).
self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. (5)

In this description, we can recognize a number of parallels to the figure of Thomas Sutpen: the emphasis on self-reliance, for instance, or the idea that it is possible to emancipate oneself from one’s history and make a completely new beginning (as Sutpen tries to do twice, first in Haiti and then in Jefferson). Moreover, in terms of chronology, it is suggestive that Sutpen’s life-changing experience of being insulted by a black servant, which lies at the origin of his design, occurs around 1820, and thus precisely when, according to Lewis, it became increasingly common in the American republic to emphasize a sense of historical rupture (“something entirely new”). There are, then, several reasons why it is possible for Quentin’s grandfather to style Sutpen as a tragic version of the American Adam: a self-reliant and self-propelling figure of “heroic innocence” (Lewis 1) who embodies the New World’s supposed potential for new beginnings, and who fails in his quest precisely because of his innocence.

At the same time, however, Absalom, Absalom! provides us with at least three different reasons why we should be wary of Grandfather Compson’s portrayal of Sutpen as an Adamic innocent. The first of these reasons is that Sutpen’s ‘new beginning’ in fact constitutes anything but a true break with his past. As we have seen, for instance, Sutpen’s belief in self-reliant action and individual autonomy is itself part of his upbringing and cultural inheritance. Accordingly, Laurel Bollinger is right in suggesting that the figure of Sutpen exposes the myth of the autonomous individual who can simply leave his or her history behind (231). In addition, Faulkner’s text is quite clear about the fact that Sutpen’s reaction to the black servant’s insult in part arises from his sense of duty to the past, for the boy believes that he could never again “live with what all the dead men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on” if he decided not to act (178). Paradoxically, then, Sutpen’s attempt to break with the past is motivated by his sense of being bound and responsible to it. Finally, though Sutpen seems like a figure “of no discernible past” when he first appears in Jefferson (7), we know that the past later does come back to haunt him in the figure of Charles, the abandoned son from his first marriage. If, then, Faulkner’s novel evokes the figure of the American Adam through the account of Sutpen given by Quentin’s grandfather, it does so to critique the

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18 We know from Faulkner’s novel that Sutpen is thirteen or fourteen when the insult occurs (185), and as Sutpen was born in 1807 (Absalom 380), we can date the event to around 1820.
ideological dream that the figure embodies: the fantasy of a new beginning unburdened from the weight of history.

A second challenge to the narrative of innocence propagated by Quentin’s grandfather is Miss Rosa’s rendering of Sutpen as a demoniac Gothic villain. According to Quentin, his grandfather was Sutpen’s “only friend” (220), and it is hardly surprising that a friend would want to depict Sutpen as innocent. By contrast, Rosa Coldfield has many reasons to detest Thomas Sutpen, since in her view he destroyed the home both of her father and of her sister Ellen, Sutpen’s second wife. After Ellen’s death, moreover, Sutpen adds insult to injury by telling Rosa that he might marry her if she were willing first to bear his child, in order to allow him to see whether it will be a boy or a girl: “if it was a boy and lived, they would be married” (228). Though Rosa at one point in the novel claims to have forgiven Sutpen, and even that she “had nothing to forgive” (138), much of what she says about the man in fact sounds rather like an indictment:

[H]e was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow. He was the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment cast by a fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath the earth’s crust and hence in retrograde, reverse; from abysmal and chaotic dark to eternal and abysmal dark completing his descending […], clinging, trying to cling with vain unsubstantial hands to what he hoped would hold him, save him, arrest him – Ellen […], myself, then last of all that fatherless daughter of Wash Jones’s only child who, so I heard once, died in a Memphis brothel – to find severance (even if not rest and peace) at last in the stroke of a rusty scythe. (139)

In this heavily Gothic denouncement, Rosa associates Sutpen with netherworldly forces (“demoniac,” “from beneath the earth’s crust”) and also invokes two other women on whose lives he wrought havoc: her sister Ellen and the fifteen-year-old Milly Jones, who, after Ellen’s death and Rosa’s refusal of Sutpen’s ‘proposal,’ bears Sutpen’s child but is then cast aside by him when he finds that she has given birth not to a male heir, but to a girl (an action that leads Milly’s father to kill Sutpen with a scythe; 234). Drawing a sharp contrast between Rosa’s and Grandfather Compson’s account, *Absalom, Absalom!* thus lends support to Harald Welzer’s thesis that memories are shaped by the desire for meaning of the person who remembers, and that socio-cultural story templates are used to establish the desired meaning (160, 186). While, on the one hand, there is Quentin’s grandfather, who uses the template of the American

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19 See also Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (7): “As much as we might think that our self-constructions are our own, we always draw upon socially available resources with which we construct our experience of ourselves and the reality surrounding us.”
Adam in his attempt retrospectively to absolve his friend, Rosa aims to exact narrative revenge by framing Sutpen as a Gothic villain.

**A House Divided: From Biblical Intertext to National Allegory**

If Rosa’s Gothic counter-discourse and Sutpen’s inability to make a new beginning challenge the image of Sutpen as an American Adam, a third challenge arises from the biblical title of Faulkner’s novel, which aligns Sutpen, not with Adam, but instead with King David, and thus with a morally much more ambivalent figure. Even as a boy, Sutpen appears a bit like the young shepherd David in his belief that he might single-handedly defeat a seemingly invincible enemy: Goliath in the case of David, and the racist system of exploitation in the U.S. South in Sutpen’s case. More importantly, however, the story of Sutpen’s children in several ways parallels the story of the children of King David. According to the biblical tale, Absalom is one of King David’s sons, and he kills his half-brother Amnon because the latter raped Tamar, Absalom’s younger sister, just as Henry Sutpen will eventually kill his half-brother Charles. Moreover, like Henry, Absalom ends up opposing his father (in Absalom’s case leading a rebellion against the king). What connects the two stories, more broadly speaking, is a focus on domestic turmoil and its familial as well as dynastic consequences.

In addition, the precise context from which the novel’s title is taken sheds some light on one of its key themes: on how history tends to come back to haunt us. In the biblical narrative, Absalom’s rebellion against his father proves unsuccessful, and when King David learns that the son was killed after the battle, he utters a heart-rending cry of mourning that provides the source for Faulkner’s title: “O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 19:4; KJV). As Peter von Matt rightly points out, the intensity of the king’s grief is likely to appear puzzling to most readers, since Absalom wanted to kill David and was, from this perspective, justly punished for rising up against his father (28). For von Matt, the key to this interpretive puzzle lies in David’s past, for the king, having fallen in love with Bathsheba, a married woman, conspired with one of his generals to ensure that Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, would be killed in battle (2 Samuel 11; see von Matt 28–29). The prophet Nathan subsequently foretold what the punishment for David’s actions would be: “Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house” (2 Samuel 12:11, KJV). Crucially, von Matt notes (28), it is in the very next episode that Absalom’s name is first mentioned (2 Samuel 13:1). This suggests that it is Absalom who will be the instrument of divine retribution: the “evil” arising out of the king’s own house. The sins of the father are, in this view, visited upon the son – which
is, as we have seen, precisely what happens in Faulkner’s novel, where both Henry and Charles become victims of their father’s ruthless design.

As noted in the introductory chapter, it is tempting to see such allusions to biblical and other well-known texts as home-making devices: a web of familiar intertextual references that makes a novel’s readers feel more at home. However, in the case of *Absalom, Absalom!* there are a number of problems with this view. For one thing, it is only for readers who know the bible well that the title of Faulkner’s novel could serve as guidance in the first place. For anyone who is unfamiliar with the details of the biblical narrative — i.e. the majority of the world population today, and arguably most Christians, too — the novel’s title is enigmatic rather than helpful, especially since the reference is not explained or elaborated in the text. In other words, as we have seen in the case of Steven Spielberg’s *E. T.* , religious intertexts can potentially serve as home-making devices, but their effect depends both on how, precisely, the references are deployed, and on readers’ available intertextual repertoire.

Moreover, despite the parallels mentioned above, the plot of *Absalom, Absalom!* also differs in crucial respects from the biblical story. Unlike Thomas Sutpen, for instance, King David never asks Absalom to act against his half-brother (i.e. Absalom takes revenge for the rape entirely on his own initiative, whereas Sutpen himself urges his son Henry to take action). Similarly, unlike Absalom’s half-brother Amnon, Charles does not rape his half-sister Judith, who would in fact be perfectly happy to marry Charles. Finally, while Absalom tries to depose his father and prematurely assume his position as David’s successor, Henry rebels against his father by repudiating his home and thus refusing to become his dynastic heir at all. In short, while the biblical narrative may seem to provide Faulkner’s readers with some reassuring interpretive guidance and thus make them feel more at home in the text, the manifold contrasts between the two stories end up complicating matters further.

Less conspicuous than these biblical intertext, but equally important in terms of the novels themes is its connection to Abraham Lincoln’s ‘House Divided’ speech. In this speech, which Lincoln gave after he had won the Republican nomination for Senator from Illinois in 1858, the future President argued that a “house divided against itself” could not stand, and that the U.S. government would not “endure, permanently half slave and half free.” (qtd. in McPherson 179; original emphasis). Lincoln’s image of a “house divided against itself” draws on two distinct intertextual sources: a parable told by Jesus, who was accused of having driven out a demon with the help of Beelzebub, and who defended himself by insisting that this was impossible because the powers of evil were not a “house divided” (Mark 3:25), and a nineteenth-century American discourse
that imagined the nation as reflected, and even embodied, in the domestic sphere: “Antebellum American writers celebrated the home as the symbol of ‘America,’ the site of nurture and republican fraternity, the embodiment of equality, affection, and toleration” (Egan 13). Given that the home was thus imagined as a symbol of the American nation, Ken Egan Jr. argues that stories about fallen houses (such as Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”) necessarily constituted a challenge to Antebellum (over-)confidence in enduring national stability (170–173). Focusing more specifically on *Absalom, Absalom!*, Eric Sundquist observes that both Lincoln and Supten try to save their ‘house’ from disintegrating, and in both cases it is the Civil War that forces a resolution of the crisis: “It is not by any means an analogy in which they or their designs are exactly duplicated but, rather, one in which they are mirror images in the sense that a mirror image reverses the figure to which it corresponds” (105) Just as is the case with the novel’s biblical intertext, the links to Lincoln and his famous House Divided Speech are thus far from simple one-to-one correspondences; rather, they serve to increase the text’s resonance and complexity because they create a dialectical tension between familiarity and alienation.

If we take the biblical intertext as a cue for allegorical decoding – allegory is, after all a scriptural mode of interpretation – and combine this with the text’s reference to Lincoln’s speech (which focused on the future of the American nation), then there is ample ground for us to attempt a reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* in terms of national allegory. In his introduction to the concept of allegory, Jeremy Tambling argues that the genre is still often misrepresented in modern literary studies as a rigid and abstract way of en- or decoding a text. At the same time, critics following the lead of Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man have challenged this view (Tambling, *Allegory* 1–2), and Fredric Jameson, too, insists that an allegorical reading does not necessarily constitute a narrowing or closing off of interpretive possibilities, but can instead lead to an “opening up of the text to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings” (*The Political Unconscious* 14). We have seen that both the biblical intertext and the thematic reference to Lincoln’s speech add to the complexity of *Absalom, Absalom!* and by systematically reading the novel as a national allegory, we will be able to perform precisely the kind of opening up that Jameson regards as the positive potential of allegorical interpretation.

Jameson himself has in fact commented on the concept of national allegory, making the controversial suggestion that it is “third-world texts,” in particular, that “necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory” (“Third-World Literature” 69; emphasis added). Aijaz Ahmad has rightly criticized Jameson’s rigid link between national allegory and “third-world texts” for its
unwarranted, binary opposition between a unified West and a supposedly monolithic third-world Other (95). Among other things, Ahmad points out that Jameson overstates the presence of national allegory in ‘third-world’ literature while at the same time underestimating “the presence of analogous impulses in US cultural ensembles” (110). In the light of Ahmad’s critique, we may speculate that there is a tendency toward national allegory in fiction from peripheral regions in general, irrespective of whether that periphery be located in the United States (e.g. the South), or in India, or elsewhere in the world. We may also ask whether a reader’s distance from a particular location makes it easier for him or her to allegorize the literal level of a narrative because regional details seem to serve no real function except to add ‘local color.’ This would imply, conversely, that the greater the extent to which readers feel at home in a particular culture, the less likely (or willing) they are to ‘devalue’ the thick descriptions of everyday local life by recasting them as merely allegorical ciphers for broader, national concerns. Finally, the ways of reading allegorically may themselves differ vastly among different interpretive communities, to use a concept proposed by Stanley Fish. Fish argues that it is from the interpretive community to which they belong that readers learn how to construct the meaning of a text, and that such communities therefore “determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (14). If this is so, then it may be communally shaped interpretive desires, rather than any particular textual features, that would explain the decision to recast a novel – *Absalom, Absalom!* – in terms of a national allegory. Put differently: there are different ways of making oneself at home in a text, and these techniques of interpretive home-making may have much to do with our own communal and cultural belonging(s).

**Plantation Domesticity: Slavery at Home**

Though the concept of national allegory is far from problematic, a reading of *Absalom, Absalom!* in these terms quickly proves productive because the story of the origins of Sutpen’s Hundred – Thomas Sutpen’s plantation home – displays several links to the colonial conquest of the New World and the history of the United States, in particular. Early in the novel, for instance, we learn that Sutpen takes the land for his plantation “from a tribe of ignorant Indians” (10). Later, at a time when he had only one “gold Spanish coin” left, Sutpen engages a French architect to design the plantation manor subsequently built by black slaves (26; see also 31). These elements from the novel allegorically encode important aspects of the history of the New World, which the Spanish ‘discovered’ and then plundered because, among other things, of its rich supply of gold, and which involved the dispossession of Native Americans as well as the enslave-
ment of black people. Moreover, the presence of the French architect can be read as an allegorical reference to the so-called Louisiana Purchase of 1803, in which the United States bought a huge territory – including the future state of Mississippi – from the French (Gordon S. Wood 368–370). Sutpen’s Hundred, the home of the family, is thus allegorically connected in *Absalom, Absalom!* to a broader continental and national history. In addition, we have already seen that Sutpen is a critical reworking of R.W. Lewis’s figure of the American Adam, whose national and allegorical dimensions we need hardly emphasize further.

What we do need to re-examine, however, is the notion of innocence that forms such a crucial component of the idea of the American Adam, for we can rewrite allegorically the notion of innocence if we relate it to the cultural role of slavery in the United States. If *Absalom, Absalom!* critiques the figure of the American Adam by putting Sutpen’s innocence in question in various ways – through Sutpen’s inability truly to begin anew, by Rosa’s Gothic version of Sutpen’s story, and through that story’s complicated intertextual relation to the story of King David and his son Absalom – then the fact that Sutpen is a slave-holder adds a crucial political twist to this critique. Carolyn Porter, for instance, has observed that the image of a slave-holding yet heroic innocent – this “wedding of the upwardly mobile American hero’s dream of success to the Southern planter-aristocrat’s paternalism” – is a particularly disturbing feature of Faulkner’s novel (173). Indeed, what this combination in the allegorical figure of Thomas Sutpen highlights is that the United States’ favored myth of national innocence is similarly troubled by the historical fact of slavery. The first sizeable shipment of Africans arrived in English-speaking North America as early as in 1619, and by the final decades of the seventeenth century slavery was starting to be systematically developed (e.g. Painter 22; Betty Wood 73–78). The ‘peculiar institution’ was thus well established when the American revolutionaries began to fight for independence, and numerous critics have commented on the paradox that the very men who feared ‘enslavement’ by the British, and who therefore declared their independence on the principle that all men were created equal, were themselves slaveholders (e.g. Middlekauff 119–126; Swaminathan 93). Moreover, if we accept the view that the American Revolution was compromised

20 Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Michael J Drexler note that, to this day, popular accounts of American history highlight its supposedly non-violent nature, ignoring “the bloody backdrop of the Haitian Revolution out of which” it emerged (8).

21 Thomas Jefferson – a Virginian like Sutpen and ‘patron saint’ of Quentin’s fictional hometown – in many ways epitomized this paradox, for not only was he the author of the declaration of independence and a slave owner, but he also vocally advocated the view that the British were pursuing a “deliberate and systematical plan of reducing us to slavery” (8).
by the unresolved problem of slavery, and that these conflicts made a later national crisis like the Civil War virtually inevitable (Blackburn 141, 229 and 397–409; Osterhammel 768), then we can say that for the young nation, just as for Sutpen, a willful fantasy of innocence concerning the past returned violently to haunt the present. As Eric Sundquist puts it concisely, “Sutpen’s crisis of innocence, as well as the flaw that engenders it [i.e. his first son’s ‘black blood’] is the nation’s” (102). From the very beginning of U.S. history, the existence of slavery compromised the nation’s revolutionary ideals expressed in the opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence – a challenge that the ‘innocent’ figure of Sutpen embodies.²²

This challenge becomes all the more forceful if we consider that it was precisely around the time of Sutpen’s childhood (i.e. in the early years of the nineteenth century) that there was a crucial shift of emphasis from domination toward ‘innocence’ in slaveholder ideology. This shift of emphasis was expressed through what Jeffrey Robert Young has called “plantation domesticity.” Young argues that, to most eighteenth-century planters, the idea that there should be bonds of affection between slaves and their owners would have been entirely foreign; rather, the masters “despised and feared their bondservants” (124). By 1815, however, there was a growing assumption among planters that African Americans were human beings, albeit perpetually child-like ones (Young 131). As Richard Godden points out, the “peculiar institution peculiarly demanded that its managers view their slaves as a threat but also, and simultaneously, as children of limited will, as Sambos to be loved through subordination” (254). By thus figuring the enslaved as part of the extended family belonging to the plantation home, slave owners could both diffuse their own fears of a black insurrection and imagine themselves as stern but ultimately benevolent fathers (Gudemstad 82). The notion of plantation domesticity thus allowed slaveholders imaginatively to transfigure the daily violence of racist oppression into loving gestures of parental care.²³

The link between Sutpen’s ‘innocence’ and the “plantation domesticity” of slaveholder ideology initially seems at odds with the fact, observed by Richard Godden, that Sutpen differs from the more established Southern planters precisely in that he does not style himself as a benign fatherly figure in his dealings

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²² See Gerald Horne’s *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* (2014) for a particularly critical account of the link between the American Revolution and the institution of slavery.

²³ In a deeply ironic reference to this paternalistic discourse of plantation domesticity, a Kentucky slave plantation in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* is called Sweet Home – a name about which one of the former slaves says early in the novel: “It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (14).
with the slaves (254–255). Instead, “naked and panting and bloody to the waist,” he engages in fierce wrestling matches with ’his’ negroes, “perhaps as a matter of sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy, domination” (Absalom 21). There is little sense, in other words, that Sutpen is merely benevolently watching over his black children; rather, he fights them so fiercely that his son Henry – whom Sutpen at one point brings with him to watch the father wrestling the slaves – ends up “screaming and vomiting” (21). Given Sutpen’s disregard for even a show of plantation domesticity, it is tempting to conclude, with Cleanth Brooks, that Sutpen is ultimately not a representative or typical Southern planter (Towards Yoknapatawpha 292–294).

However, the idea that Sutpen is not representative jars with Brooks’s simultaneous claim that Sutpen “outdoes in his vehement orthodoxy” the established planters (Towards Yoknapatawpha 293). How, we must ask, can Sutpen be untypical yet somehow more orthodox than slaveholders from the older, long-established families? One way of reconciling Brooks’s seemingly contradictory claims is to read Sutpen as a literal return of the repressed for the other planters, who would prefer to mask and forget the necessarily violent nature of slavery. For the old-stock planters, the foundational violence of the system of plantation slavery lies buried deep in the past; their forefathers may have had to break the will of men and women who had been born free, but they themselves preferred to see themselves as benevolent fathers to their inherited, child-like, ‘domesticated’ slaves. Raymond Williams has commented on this very common illusion that long-established property is somehow more innocent than recently accumulated wealth:

Very few titles to property could bear humane investigation, in the long process of conquest, theft, political intrigue […], extortion and the power of money. It is a deep and persistent illusion to suppose that time confers on these familiar processes of acquisition an innocence which can be contrasted with the ruthlessness of subsequent stages of the same essential drives. (50)

To be confronted with “the ruthlessness of subsequent stages of the same essential drives”: this is what happens to the planters when Sutpen arrives in Jefferson to drag his plantation “violently” from the earth (Absalom 4). Sutpen truly is both unlike all the established planters and at the same time more representative than they are of the reality of a slave economy, for his ruthlessness renders visible the foundational violence that the ideology of plantation domesticity attempts to conceal.

If so far our allegorical ‘opening up’ of Absalom, Absalom! has been limited, for the most part, to the evil of slavery in the U.S. South, then Sutpen’s Virginia
origin is the key element that allows us to recast his story in more broadly national, American terms. Edmund Sears Morgan has shown that the single most important good with which the revolutionary U.S. government bought the support of other nations in its struggle for independence was tobacco, produced on the Southern slave plantations, and particularly in Virginia:

Virginia was the largest of the new United States, in territory, in population, in influence – and in slaveholding. Virginians owned more than 40 percent of all slaves in the new nation. It was Virginia slaves who grew most of the tobacco that helped buy American independence. [...] Virginians drafted not only the Declaration of Independence but also the United States Constitution of 1787 and the first ten amendments to it. And Americans elected Virginians to the presidency of the United States under that constitution for thirty-two out of the first thirty-six years of its existence. They were all slaveholders. (5–6)

We can therefore say, with Morgan, that to a large extent “Americans bought their independence by slave labor” (5), and that Virginia constitutes the key link between the slave economy and national politics. Sutpen’s Virginia origin is thus crucial for the allegorical significance of *Absalom, Absalom!*, pointing as it does to the unsavory paradox that enslavement lies at the very heart of the United States’ freedom as a nation.

*The Specter of Race and Slavery Abroad*

The reason why a re-examination of this genuinely American paradox was particularly urgent at the time when Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* is that ‘race relations’ in the U.S. were in a deep state of crisis in the first decades of the twentieth century. While the so-called Reconstruction of the post-Civil-War years initially prioritized black freedom and emancipation, the desire for national reconciliation between white Northerners and Southerners eventually “trumped race” (Blight 2). A new phase in race relations thus began in 1877, when federal troops were withdrawn from the Southern states and the North implicitly acquiesced in the South’s demand that the region’s dominant whites were to deal with the ‘problem of race’ on their own terms (Blackburn 429–432). As C. Vann Woodward notes, while it was not immediately apparent what precisely the “new status of the Negro” would be, it became clear by the early years

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24 As Barbara J. Fields rightly notes, the term race relations is highly problematic: “Race relations as an analysis of society takes for granted that race is a valid empirical datum and thereby shifts attention from the actions that constitute racism-enslavement, disfranchisement, segregation, lynching, massacres, and pogroms-to the traits that constitute race” (151).
of the twentieth century that African Americans “would be effectively disfranchised throughout the South” through the system generally known as Jim Crow (6). The fact that the various retellings of Sutpen’s story take place between September 1909 and January 1910 in Absalom, Absalom! is thus significant, as it situates the novel’s present at a time when race relations in the post-Civil-War South had arguably reached their nadir (e.g. Osterhammel 1210). In addition, we learn that Henry, Sutpen’s son, secretly moves back to Sutpen’s Hundred in 1905 (Absalom 140), and it is perhaps no coincident that this allegorical, racist specter from the Civil-War past returns home in the same year that W. E. B. Du Bois founded the Niagara Movement (Grossman 101), which called for racial equality and is generally considered a forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The latter was founded in the early months of 1909, and the title of the NAACP’s monthly magazine, The Crisis, established in November 1910, bears eloquent witness to the social climate of the time (Ovington 16–17; Rampersad 472). The years 1909 and 1910 are thus not merely the temporal setting for the novel’s various retellings (as well as for Quentin’s eventual confrontation with Henry Sutpen; see Absalom 298), but also the period when the deepening crisis in race relations in the U.S. led to decisive developments in black self-emancipation. Henry, the long-lost son who killed his half-brother because of the latter’s racial ‘impurity,’ returns – and dies – in Faulkner’s novel precisely when the black emancipation movement began more directly to confront the social and legal consequences of Jim Crow.

Moreover, the fact that the most extended retelling of Thomas Sutpen’s story – Quentin and Shreve’s collaborative narrative – takes place not in the South, but at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, highlights the extent to which the North was involved in this crisis in race relations. According to Thadious M. Davis, segregationist practices had hardened not only in the South of Jim Crow, but throughout the nation, and they continued to do so after World War I, with the tacit approval of Woodrow Wilson’s presidential administration (411). The Northern setting of the novel’s retellings allegorically acknowledges the North’s involvement in the country’s racial crisis, and the fact that Shreve is Canadian extends the reach of Absalom, Absalom! even beyond the nation’s boundaries.

If Shreve allegorically internationalizes the novel, then Sutpen’s period of residence in Haiti from the early 1820s to about 1833 serves more concretely to highlight both historical and present dimensions of U.S. imperial policies. Haiti is described in Absalom, Absalom! as “halfway between the dark inscrutable

25 See Norman (4) on the complex history of the term Jim Crow.
The military struggle in Haiti for independence from France ended in 1804 (Popkin 140), and the constitution established in 1805 proclaimed: “slavery is abolished forever” (qtd. in Popkin 2).

By contrast, Leigh Anne Duck contends that, though formal slavery no longer existed in Haiti, the working conditions on the plantations were in fact virtually indistinguishable from those on the slave plantations of the U.S. South (34–35). John T. Matthews concurs with Duck’s account:

The Haitian Constitution of 1804 had abolished slavery, outlawed white landownership, and confiscated the property of French colonists [...]. Almost immediately mulatto offspring of former white landowners began to reclaim their land, violating the spirit of the measures and angering Emperor Dessalines. When Dessalines attempted to reinforce policies favoring Negroes, the mulatto class rebelled and Dessalines was assassinated. Meanwhile, agricultural failures stemming from the breakup of large plantations and the creation of small black-owned farms, especially in Haiti’s southern region, led to reforms designed by President Jean Pierre Boyer to return peasants to laborer status on large farms. These measures constituted the notorious Rural Code [...]. (253)

Under the Rural Code, the rights of black laborers were so severely restricted that the historian Eric Williams describes the effects of the bill as “the restoration of slavery, minus the whip” (334). And indeed, if we look at the text of Absalom, Absalom!, we find that the black Haitian laborers – de iure freedmen – are depicted in such equivocal terms that their de facto status as quasi-slaves becomes apparent. Accordingly, as Matthews points out, even Sutpen himself “may not register that the black plantation workers he oversees are not technically slaves; he cares only that they may be treated that way” (253). Moreover, even if the novel’s depiction of conditions in Haiti were incorrect (Blackburn 218), it would nevertheless have resonated strongly in the segregated United States of the early twentieth century, where African Americans were de iure equal but de facto increasingly discriminated against: “In sum, Thomas Supten travels to a locale shaped by economic and legal structures that prefigured post-Civil War
sharecropping in the U.S. South – the form of labor still experienced in Faulkner’s era, by up to 80 percent of farmworkers in some regions” (Duck 35). The ‘exotic’ space of nineteenth-century Haiti thus suddenly appears as very close to home.

Moreover, Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* at a time when the recent military occupation of Haiti by the U.S. was still frequently, and controversially, discussed in the national media.\(^\text{27}\) The occupation of Haiti in 1915, which ended in 1934, had been justified by the island republic’s economic instability, the causes of which reached back to the 1820s (i.e. precisely the time when Sutpen resided there):

As part of the negotiations to achieve international recognition, in 1825 Haiti agreed to pay reparations to France to the tune of 150 million francs in gold. France had demanded these costs to compensate it for the costs of the war and also to pay the former plantation and slave-owners for losses. This move by France was supported by the United States [...]. (Street 4; see also Bryan 43)

The 1825 arrangement, which constitutes the root cause of Haiti’s long-term financial instability, was thus supported by the slave-holding United States, whose government also withheld diplomatic recognition of the new black republic until 1862 (i.e. after the outbreak of the Civil War; see Herring 239; Gordon S. Wood 537). So crippling was Haiti’s historical burden of reparation that it remained one of the island’s major policy concerns even in the early decades of the twentieth century, despite the fact that Haitian governments had shown exemplary diligence in meeting debt payments (Hans R. Schmidt 32, 113, and 168; see also Popkin 152). In the meantime, and especially since work on the Panama Canal had begun in 1904, the U.S. showed itself more aggressively determined to maintain political stability in the Caribbean “as a means of preventing foreign encroachment that might threaten the developing American military, political, and economic hegemony in the area” (Hans R. Schmidt 43). If the Haitian republic’s economic instability ultimately provided a rationale for U.S. intervention, this instability can in turn be traced back to the reparation

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\(^{27}\) According to Ineke Bockting, it was in early 1934 that Faulkner began to combine four short stories which he had written between the late 1920s and the early 1930s into “a manuscript that he initially entitled *Dark House*”; by August 1934, Faulkner had decided on the title *Absalom, Absalom!* (1). When Faulkner began work on the novel, the U.S. troops were thus only just about to withdraw from Haiti.
payments the imposition of which the U.S. government had supported. Put differently: At the time when Faulkner’s novel was published, Haiti – much like the United States in general, and the South in particular – was still quite materially haunted by the unresolved conflicts between its revolutionary heritage and the historical burdens of racism and slavery. The allegory of *Absalom, Absalom!* is thus not, strictly speaking, national; rather, Faulkner’s regionalist novel simultaneously constitutes a truly transnational allegory of the United States and its long-term entanglement in hemispheric policies of racialized injustice.

**Gothic Revisited: Material Haunting and Uncanny Narration**

This notion of material haunting makes it necessary for us to return to the genre of the Gothic and its larger role in Faulkner’s novel, for it is precisely such historical remnants (or revenants) from the past that lie at the heart of this generic tradition. In admirably succinct fashion, Terry Eagleton has outlined how Gothic fiction, “this most subjectivist and supernatural of literary forms,” is also a grossly materialist genre:

> [A]t its centre lie disputed wills and struggles over inheritance, secret legacies and financial double-dealing. [...] Gothic is a form in which the dead take command of the living – in which the clammy hand of the past stretches out and manipulates the present, reducing it to a hollow repetition of itself. The present is awash with spectres and revenants, with transmitted curses and rumours of primordial crimes; but it requires no great labour of decipherment to see in all this how the deadweight of property and inheritance moulds an upper-class world, and the novels are not shy of laying bare these connections themselves. (*Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* 194)

We have already seen how the “deadweight of property and inheritance” affects Thomas Sutpen and his design, as well as, more generally, the Southern States and U.S. American involvement in Haiti. In addition, one of the figures who most haunts Sutpen and his acknowledged son Henry is Charles Bon, the child who returns to reclaim his dynastic inheritance. Further, “secret legacies and financial double-dealing” pervade *Absalom, Absalom!*: in the dubious scheme Sutpen proposes to Rosa’s father (who, in consequence, ends his life as a ‘madman’ in the attic), or in the figure of a lawyer hired by Charles’s mother, Sutpen’s first wife (a man whom Charles knows to be scheming for money; see *Absalom*

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28 See also Jeremy D. Popkin, who cites internal factors – “above all, the failure to integrate the poorer classes of the population into society at a time when other countries were moving toward greater democracy” – but also emphasizes the “role of foreign economic interests and the intervention of foreign governments, particularly the United States” as explanations for Haiti’s continuing problems (158; cf. Coupeau 53).
250). It is, once again, the Canadian outsider Shreve who comments on the importance of such material haunting – on the “defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such,” which constantly remind white Southerners “to never forget” (289). In addition, Shreve’s sly parenthetical question whether it might not be “the niggers that lost” reminds us that the white trauma of defeat in the Civil War, though real, is clearly not the full story. Tellingly, however, not a single black character assumes the role of embedded narrator in Absalom, Absalom!, which in some sense reproduces the practice of segregation on the level of the novel’s narration (much as in Mrs. Dalloway colonial characters tend not to be focalized from within; see chapter 3).

Gothic fiction’s concern with “guilty secrets from communal and family pasts” (Botting 115) is thus a key preoccupation in Faulkner’s novel. As Fred Botting suggests, in the course of the nineteenth century Gothic styles became “domesticated” (123), leading to a kind of “homely Gothic”: no longer set in gloomy castles or sublime Romantic landscapes, these texts focus on “horrors that are much closer to home” (113). One example of such ‘homely horrors’ would be the secret of Sutpen’s abandoned first family. In addition, Rosa at one point evokes the trope of the haunted Gothic home when she tells Quentin about a mysterious presence in Sutpen’s Hundred: “There’s something in that house. [...] Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for four years, living hidden in that house” (140). Only later do we learn that this “something” is Henry Sutpen, who has returned in his old age to the house of his father, and who will eventually perish there when it burns to the ground.

Sutpen’s Hundred, which had always been an ‘unhomely’ home, thus also becomes decidedly uncanny. As we saw in the introductory chapter, Freud argues that the uncanny arises from a return, in alienated form, of something repressed but long familiar (“The Uncanny” 148). In Absalom, Absalom!, the figures of Charles Bon and Henry are among the instances of this return of the repressed, as is the way in which Sutpen functions as a reminder of the inherent violence of slavery for the older and more established planters. More broadly, themes such as homoeroticism (Charles and Henry, as well as Quentin and Shreve) or incest and miscegenation (Charles and Judith) constitute a return of what has been repressed culturally in “Western history’s long tradition of sexism, heterosexism, and racism” (Norman W. Jones 343). In staging these returns, Faulkner’s novel plays on the “terrors and horrors of transgression” that Jeremy Tambling associates with the Gothic as a genre (7).
While Samuel Kimball uses the term *uncanny narration* in an article on *Moby-Dick* (see chapter one), he defines it in a much more general sense, noting that “‘narration’ and ‘canny’ share the same Indo-European root, *gno-*, meaning to know. Thus narration is in some sense a trope of the canny, a knowing how to tell, a telling knowledge; and to narrate includes the other side of the uncanny, the homeness of homelessness” (544–545).

Crucially, beyond such uncanny returns on the level of content or theme, *Absalom, Absalom!* is also told in a style that can best be described as uncanny narration. What this means is that the text uses particular stylistic techniques to create, within readers’ minds, a rough equivalent to a repressed but long familiar knowledge, thus heightening the novel’s emotional impact. The way in which this is done is, in part, through a combination of two techniques that we may call ‘perceptual overload’ and ‘fragmentary exposition.’ Consider, for instance, the following sentence, which appears toward the very beginning of the novel and which focuses on Quentin’s familiarity with the story of Thomas Sutpen:

> It was a part of his twenty years’ heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man; a part of the town’s – Jefferson’s – eighty years’ heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed between this September afternoon in 1909 and that Sunday morning in June in 1833 when he first rode into town out of no discernible past and acquired his land no one knew how and built his house, his mansion, apparently out of nothing and married Ellen Coldfield and begot his two children – the son who widowed the daughter who had not yet been a bride – and so accomplished his allotted course to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said, just) end. (7)

In hindsight, we recognize that the passage already hints at the fact that Henry will kill the suitor of his sister, Judith, for the text mentions “the son [i.e. Henry] who widowed [i.e. killed the husband-to-be of] the daughter [i.e. Judith].” Moreover, a few pages later, Henry is described as a “murderer and almost a fratricide” (10), so that one could even guess that the prospective husband is Henry’s half-brother. However, because these bits of expository information are dispersed throughout the text and often cryptically expressed (e.g. without the use of proper names, and formulated in an extremely circumlocutory manner), most readers are unlikely to be able consciously to process or remember the information.

This problem is exacerbated, moreover, by the incredibly long sentences characteristic of Faulkner’s novel, which are so complex that, as readers, we struggle to understand the main point of the narrative and therefore miss a great
deal of incidental information. At the same time, this ‘superfluous’ or excess information is arguably not simply lost altogether, but perceived and processed subliminally; it by-passes the conscious mind and is stored unconsciously, waiting to be (re)activated later on. The technique of uncanny narration thus first presents us with story fragments that are related to each other but dispersed throughout the text, subliminally familiarizing us with all the important information even as we fail to connect the dots consciously. The text then confronts us with the full story at some later stage, leading to the uncanny realization on our part that this ‘unknown’ story is in fact already familiar.

Perhaps the best example of this technique of uncanny narration is the way in which we learn that Charles’s mother was “part negro” (283). Before this crucial truth is revealed, fragments of information appear in no fewer than ten different passages dispersed throughout the novel. To understand more clearly how the technique of uncanny narration works, we need to examine some of these lengthy passages in detail, as it is their cumulative effect that makes uncanny narration possible:

(a) [Sutpen] told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside, like eleventh and twelfth century kings did: ‘I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside.’ (194)

(b) [Grandfather Compson described how Sutpen] 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 above-board in the matter; that he could have simply deserted her, could have taken his hat and walked out, but he did not: and that he had what Grandfather would have to admit was a good and valid claim, if not to the whole place which he alone had saved, as well as the lives of all the white people on it, at least that portion of it which had been specifically described and deeded to him in the marriage settlement which he had entered in good faith, with no reservations as to his obscure origin and material equipment, while there had been not only reservation but actual misrepresentation on their part and misrepresentation of such a crass nature as to have not only voided and frustrated without his knowing it the central motivation of his entire design, but would have made an ironic conclusion of all that he had suffered

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30 Another example of the technique is the scene in which Sutpen is killed by Wash Jones, one of his tenants. Parts of this scene are told on page 139, 145, and 151 (among others), but the fact that Wash Jones killed Sutpen because the latter had disowned his child with Wash’s daughter, Milly, is only stated explicitly on page 234.

31 The ten passages occur on the following pages of my edition of Absalom, Absalom!: 194, 199, 200, 205, 211–212, 218, 219, 220, 238, and 261.
and endured in the past and all that he could ever accomplish in the future toward that design – which claim he had voluntarily relinquished, taking only twenty niggers out of all he might have claimed and which many another man in his place would have insisted upon keeping and (in which contention) would have been supported by both legal and moral sanction if not the delicate one of conscience […]. (199)

In passage (a), we are told for the first time that there was something about Charles’s mother that made her unsuitable for Sutpen’s design, though what exactly the problem was remains unstated. In passage (b), we learn more about the situation: that there was “misrepresentation” on the part of the relatives, and that it is a kind of misrepresentation that would have been condemned by the dominant legal and moral order (i.e. Sutpen’s reaction to this mysterious misrepresentation had “both legal and moral sanction if not the delicate one of conscience”). The key truth has not yet been revealed (‘fragmentary exposition’), and this remains the case for some time to come:

(c) [Sutpen] also told Grandfather, dropped this into the telling as you might flick the joker out of a pack of fresh cards without being able to remember later whether you had removed the joker or not, that the old man’s wife had been a Spaniard […]. (203)

(d) [Sutpen: “The marriage was] an arrangement which I had entered in good faith, concealing nothing, while the other party or parties to it concealed from me the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and design which I had been working toward, concealed it so well that it was not until after the child was born that I discovered that this factor existed […].” (220)

(e) [They] sat in that drawing room of baroque and fusty magnificence which Shreve had invented and which was probably true enough, while the Haiti-born daughter of the French sugar planter and the woman who Sutpen’s first father-in-law had told him was a Spaniard (the slight dowdy woman with untidy gray-streaked raven hair coarse as a horse’s tail, with parchment-colored skin and implacable pouch black eyes which alone showed no age because they showed no forgetting, whom Shreve and Quentin had likewise invented and which was likewise probably true enough) told them nothing because she did not need to because she had already told it […]. (268)

Passage (c) both adds the information that the French planter’s wife “had been a Spaniard” and serves as an implicit comment on Faulkner’s own narrative technique, in which important information is “dropped into the telling as you might flick the joker out of a pack of fresh cards without being able to remember later.” Next, in passage (d), there is a suggestion that the ‘flaw’ in Charles’s mother was of the kind that can be detected after the birth of a child (though
the causal relation is not in fact stated explicitly: “after the child was born [...] I discovered that this factor existed”). Finally, in passage (e), we get a description of Sutpen’s first mother-in-law, who had “raven hair” and “parchment-colored skin,” and who Sutpen had been told was of Spanish descent.

Against the backdrop of slavery, the U.S. South, and the history of Haiti, and taking all of this information together, it would, in theory, be possible to realize that the ‘flaw’ in Charles’s mother must be racial in nature: a ‘taint in her blood’ that makes the marriage unsuitable in the eyes of the dominant white culture, with the claim that her mother is “a Spaniard” constituting the crucial act of misrepresentation on the part of her family. And yet, the fact that the five passages cited above are dispersed over seventy-four pages (“fragmentary exposition”), combined with the perceptual overload of Faulkner’s style – particularly evident in passages (b) and (e) – renders it difficult for any reader even to process the information, let alone to put the various pieces together. Once the ‘unknown’ truth about Charles’s mother is revealed in a straight-forward manner, however, the material that was subliminally perceived is (re)activated, generating on the part of the reader an uncanny sense of familiarity and belated recognition: it is strange but already long familiar.

Importantly, the technique of uncanny narration is not merely a way of sending shivers down readers’ spines. Rather, it constitutes a stylistic correlative to the novel’s concern with what we might call the nightmare of belonging. Much as is the case in a nightmare scenario, the novel’s interminable sentences propel us inexorably forward, as if we were running from some obscure threat. At the same time, when reading Absalom, Absalom! there is a strong sense of not getting anywhere, in part because of the novel’s frequent repetition of half-told stories. We have seen, for instance, that Rosa tells Quentin about a mysterious “something” hidden in Sutpen’s Hundred quite early on in the novel (140), and four pages later the text states more precisely that “somebody” – i.e. a human being – is hidden there. And yet, much later in the novel, we still do not know “whatever it was that was up stairs, [...] hidden up there for almost four years” (280). At the same time, given that all the characters from the story that so haunts Quentin are either dead (e.g. Ellen, Judith, Charles Bon) or clearly not hiding at Sutpen’s Hundred (e.g. Rosa), we in a sense already know that it can only be Henry who is hiding in his father’s house, even if we are not consciously aware of this knowledge. When Quentin finally stands face-to-face with

32 In other words, a temporal relation (first A, then B) is processed as a causal relation, a cognitive mechanism which Rimmon-Kenan calls post hoc, ergo propter hoc, providing the following example: “Milton wrote Paradise Lost, then his wife died, and then he wrote Paradise Regained” (Narrative Fiction 17).
Henry, the nightmare of belonging thus reaches its uncanny climax not only for Quentin, but for the reader, too:

And you are—–?
Henry Sutpen.
And you have been here—–?
Four years.
And you came home—–?
To die. Yes.
To die?
Yes. To die.
And you have been here—–?
Four years.
And you are—–?
Henry Sutpen. (298; original emphasis)

Though this is the first time in the novel that the truth about Henry’s return home is revealed, for the reader the revelation constitutes a “hollow repetition” of the kind that Eagleton regards as characteristic of Gothic fiction in general (Heathcliff and the Great Hunger 194). 33 Even in terms of style, the dialogue is crammed with repetitions, and Quentin realizes that “waking or sleeping it was the same and would be the same forever as long as he lived” (298). Waking or sleeping, Quentin thus finds that he cannot escape the power of postmemory, which forever binds him to his haunted, conflicted home community. The aesthetic purpose of uncanny narration in Absalom, Absalom! is that it simulates or enacts this condition for the reader, who is similarly weighed down by the sheer mass of the novel’s language, with its ceaseless stream of burdensome sentences and endlessly accumulating repetitions.

33 Note that the quotation from Absalom, Absalom! contains a narrative palindrome – “To die. Yes./To die?/Yes. To die.” – embedded in a larger, ‘semi-palindromic’ passage. Christina Ljungberg suggests that such palindromes “focus attention on the very act of signification” (i.e. that they have an implicitly metafictional effect), and that “they bring into play the figure of reversal and thereby challenge the unidirectional linearity of human discourse, spoken or written” (248). Both observations fit Faulkner’s novel perfectly. Moreover, Faulkner’s revisions show that he reworked the manuscript version in a way that heightens the ‘palindromic effect’ of the published passage (Langford 358; I would like to thank Christina Ljungberg for bringing Faulkner’s revisions to my attention).
The Weight of History and Loving One’s Home

A region weighed down by a story from its past – a past that is as transnational as the region’s present, ranging from France and Spain to Africa, Canada, and Haiti. It is a contested story that some attempt to frame in terms of innocence, while others tell it in the damning mode of the Gothic. It is a story of seemingly biblical proportions – about incest, fratricide, and war – with family homes being destroyed and a patriarch’s dynastic designs thwarted. Through all of this, the region’s black inhabitants continue to be denied their fundamental right to represent themselves: as narrators in the novel, but also as voters in Faulkner’s present. It is difficult to think of any other novel in which the tradition of all dead generations weighs so palpably on the brains of the living – like an endless nightmare that we, as readers, are made to share through the technique of uncanny narration.

It is Quentin, in particular, who can barely cope with this nightmare of belonging to a region that is so deeply flawed. And yet, when at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve asks Quentin why he hates the South, the latter denies that this is the case: "I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; ‘I dont hate it,’ he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark: *I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!* (303; original emphasis). Norman W. Jones interprets Quentin’s surprising reaction as an unconscious denial of his homoerotic desire for Shreve (340), while most other critics read it rather straightforwardly as Quentin’s desperate attempt to repress his hatred for the South (e.g. Betina Entzminger 117; Fargnoli, Golay and Hamblin 25; Jameson, “Third-World Literature” 86).34

However, while such interpretations are certainly plausible, there is also a more intriguing possibility: that Quentin really does not hate the South. Quentin’s reaction would then constitute, not a case of repression and denial, but rather a moment of horrified recognition of the fact that, despite everything he knows, he nevertheless cannot bring himself to hate the region that remains his only home. What leaves Quentin gasping in “the cold air” of New England, in other words, is his inability to hate a place he knows to be fundamentally corrupt – that in many ways would deserve his hatred. In a final twist to the novel’s

34 Roger Lundin tries to strengthen the case that Quentin is torn apart by his hatred by pointing out that Quentin commits suicide five months later on (179) – at least according to *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel which also features a character named Quentin Compson. However, Lundin’s argument is not unproblematic, for as Fargnoli, Golay and Hamblin (35) point out, Shreve has a different name in *Absalom, Absalom!* (genealogy: Shrelin McCannon) than in *The Sound and the Fury* (Shreve MacKenzie), which suggests that despite the striking similarities between the characters in the two novels they are not necessarily identical.
emotional drama, it is not Quentin’s unconscious hatred, but his ineradicable love for home that lies at the heart of his nightmare of belonging (that is to say, he would prefer simply to hate it, if only he could).

What is left unstated in *Absalom, Absalom!*, but arguably implied by this final twist, is that in order to deal successfully with the weight of history, it is not enough for us merely to keep on retelling it. Admittedly, such a ‘working through’ of one’s story may constitute a necessary first step; after all, Quentin arrives at his recognition that he loves the South despite everything only through the therapeutic act of collaborative narrative reconstruction; in this sense, Shreve’s game of narrative seduction does have a positive effect after all. At the same time, however, the realization that ‘supernatural’ or Gothic hauntings are, in fact, material also means that historical (re-)interpretation must be followed by material changes if the ghosts of the past are ever to be laid to rest. If the home is found undeserving of a love that nevertheless proves ineradicable, then the only remaining course of action is to try and work towards changing that home.

*Absalom, Absalom!* makes clear that this is far from easy, and that it certainly cannot be achieved by indulging in fantasies of Adamic new beginnings. Rather, while some American ideologists (and supposedly many modernists) believed in the possibility of simply ‘making it new,’ Faulkner’s novel focuses on the obstinacy of socio-political reality and on the circumstances under which Americans in the 1930s had to try and make their own history: admirable ideals of freedom and equality, but also a heavy burden of racist oppression and imperialistic interference in other regions of the hemisphere. This long history of injustice cannot, the text suggests, be redressed by the heroic actions of super-human individuals (as witnessed by the utter failure of Thomas Sutpen’s design single-handedly to defeat the plantation system that had destroyed his self-worth as well as his trust in the ideal of equality). We live, as Marx emphasizes, under circumstances not of our own making (see chapter two and above), and so heavy is the burden of our common history that only through a collective effort can we hope to escape the seemingly endless nightmare of belonging. Such unity, of course, never comes easily, especially in a society that is historically as deeply divided as Faulkner’s South – but it is all the more important for precisely that reason. However, to examine in more details the fissures within a particular

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35 As Kurt Heinzelman points out, Ezra Pound is often erroneously credited with having coined the phrase ‘make it new’ in 1914. Though Pound did use the phrase “in canto 53, written probably in the early 1930s,” it was Ford Madox Hueffer (a.k.a. Ford Madox Ford) “who came closest in 1914 to saying the equivalent of ‘make it new,’ at least in the sense that phrase has come to possess” (131).
community, as well as the factors that might help to overcome them, we must now leave the rural South of Faulkner’s novel and turn, instead, to the Northern English industrial town portrayed in Pat Barker’s *Union Street.*