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 exhilaration.

**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 eventually 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