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).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

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.  

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. 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:

[Supten] 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
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 “nimbed 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.15 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

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