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.\(^{16}\) 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, Supten 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”). 18 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).19 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.”