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