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 slaveholder 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...
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

\(^{22}\) 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