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## THE MYTH OF THE SELF-CREATED MAN IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to try and explain the reason for the downfall of the protagonist, Thomas Sutpen, in the novel *Absalom, Absalom!* through the lenses of two myths: the myth of the self-created man and the myth of the American Dream. We strongly believe that it is possible to unearth the key in the history of the character as we see it unfolding in the stories of different narrators. The figure of Thomas Sutpen emerges in the lights of these two myths together with the colours and voices of the rest of the South and bears the final stamp of the writer who intended to create him in that and no other way.

**Key words:** Thomas Sutpen, Sutpen's design, the myth of the self-created man, the myth of the American Dream, the South

### 1. Introduction

There was a word in the beginning, and with a word we shall begin. This word is the word of a person living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so much removed from the time when this book was created, and even farther from the time when the personages from its title trod on the face of the earth. Yet, the aim of the paper is to try and disentangle this intricate fabric of multiple overlapping voices in order to postulate one of the possible hypotheses for the meaning and understanding of the obscure character which is Thomas Sutpen. However, to stipulate anything about the creation, it is necessary to set ground for the investigation by stating a few basic bits of information about the creator himself.

Knowing that the author's wish is disregarded<sup>2</sup>, it will be said that "William Cuthbert Falkner was born late at night on September 25, 1897, and died early in the morning of July 6, 1962" (Towner 2008: 1). The additional letter which, as it can be

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<sup>2</sup> [...] were we to honour his wishes on the matter of his biography, we would not inquire into it any further than that. He was a quiet and intensely private man who once observed that 'it is my ambition to be, as a private individual, abolished and voided from history'; 'in the same sentence is my obit and epitaph too, shall be them both: He made the books and he died' (FCF 126) (Towner 2008: 1).

noticed, is missing in his birth name came to be used through a set of strange (or not so) circumstances. Namely, his great-grandfather, the founder of the family, Colonel William Clark Falkner

[...] had been a leading lawyer in the Mississippi town of Ripley, a military hero during the Civil War, the founder and the principal owner of a thriving local railroad, and the author of a commercially successful work of fiction. At the same time, the Old Colonel, as he was called, had killed two men during a feud early in his life, was voted out of his command by his own soldiers, appears to have made a small fortune selling a contraband behind enemy lines during the latter part of the war, built his railroad in part through shady transactions and the use of convict labour, and was eventually gunned down on the main street of Ripley by an embittered former business partner. (Singal 1997: 22)

The other figures, up to the figure of Faulkner's father, were becoming gradually less controversial, but it remained noted that Faulkner had been looking up to his great-grandfather throughout the course of his life (Singal 1997: 22), and he had found a suitable place for him in his works of fiction in a number of characters, among whom we shall find Thomas Sutpen (Singal 1997: 28).

The love of books, art and music was instilled in Billy Faulkner by his mother, Maud Falkner and her mother Leila (known as "Damuddy" in the close circle of the family) during his "happy boyhood"; another prominent figure who had a strong influence on Faulkner's story-telling aptness was "Mammy Callie [...] the black woman born in slavery" called Caroline Barr, who helped raise the children (Towner 2008: 2). It is right there, in Oxford, Mississippi, that the reason for the alteration of his family name is found, and the reason goes under the name of Lida Estelle Oldham. A childhood sweetheart, she got married to another man in order not to refute her parents' wish, causing for the young William to flee the hometown and enlist in the army. However, his application was rejected, possibly due to his shortness.

To help a friend in need, Phil Stone, a fellow Oxfordian and a Yale University student, invited William to come and spend some time with him, during which he guided the avid reading of the young Faulkner. There "a plan was hatched for him to enlist in the Canadian Royal Air Force for training that would eventually post him at the Western Front of the war in Europe. Such enlistment required massive deception on Billy's part: he started by changing the spelling of his last name to 'Faulkner,' learning and affecting a British accent, claiming an earlier birthday, and enlisting his hometown as Middlesex, England" (Towner 2008: 3). By the time he started with

the training, the war had finished, and he had to return home without having been to the battlefield for a single day. That is the moment when we see one of the great future artisans and conjurers feigning what is necessary to achieve the much-wanted effect. He spent his discharge money on an RAF pilot uniform, and he walked into his hometown “with a limp, claiming to have flown his airplane (while drunk) upside down through a hangar, which had resulted in the limp and a metal plate in his head” (*ibid.*). This quality he would preserve throughout his whole life, and he would be able to transfer it successfully to his characters in the works of fiction. They will have the beautiful characteristic of being chameleons, perfectly capable of blending with the surroundings, and reflecting the traits of the ones who are in their vicinity. “Self-representation and performance are manifested in Faulkner’s life in his regularly putting himself forward in the guises and disguises of the moment – gentleman dandy, soldier, and farmer are familiar ones – as well as in his art, where these and other personae are separate but interlocking elements of fictional representation” (Watson 2002: 5). Enshrouded in a good narrative to flank the impersonation, Faulkner came to realise that a good story is always the one which is told from many angles, and that the angles are always different depending on the point of view. Mixed in them, a single character emerges, singular in the plurality of voices which form them, flickeringly elusive, impossible to be pinned down even by the creator himself. That is why so many of his characters are painstakingly aloof, always at a safe distance from the reader who is ever striving to anchor it in some of the harbours of their interpretation. Still, just like the creator, they always vanish just when you think that they have been fully encompassed by the analysis.

Such evanescence is typical of dreams and apparitions, abstract ideas and ideals of a community, thus causing a lot of vague guesses at what they should be, and how they should be interpreted. One of such dreams is the American Dream, which “has two main tenets”, them being “... that everyone can aspire to levels of success that exceed their starting points in life, because where a person starts life is an accident that can be remedied; and second, that there is equality of opportunity to reach one’s goals, and that the game has a set of rules that are fair and capable of producing the desired success goals” (Leyda 2007: 172). This “accident which can be remedied” is the accident of history which has left a person more or less incoordinate with their aspired goals, and in order to be freed from all the illusions of one’s right to strive for these goals, a person must know their past. “Faulkner believed that history might serve as a guide to mankind because he believed that fundamental human nature did not change through the ages. Man did not, even in a different epoch, become an essentially different creature. The man of the present could recognise his own lineaments in the characters described in the *Iliad* or in the Old Testament” (Brooks 1990: 276). It is

in the past that lies the answer for the future, and just what that future might be like depends on the strength of a character, and the perseverance of sheer will. Thus, it is in the awakening (or ever sleeping?) South that Faulkner sets all his stories, because that is the corner of the earth, just as good as any other, to reflect the struggles of individual beings on their path of losing the shatters of time which have bound them to the body and history which they had no right to choose. The question is how much they manage to rid themselves of them, but the story of their endeavour remains, and that is the story which Faulkner is trying to put down on a piece of paper. In the book<sup>3</sup> which is in the focus of this paper, the struggle is singularly striking because no matter how much the protagonist tries, he remains ever doomed by his past, while his image emerges in the opposing reflections of different narrators. The interpretation will commence with an endeavour to answer the question, usually regarded as a simple one: Who is Thomas Sutpen?

## 2. “Sutpen’s Design”<sup>4</sup>

It has already been stated that it is very difficult not to resort to one’s past when one is trying to disentangle the web of their being. It is instinctively sought to lay out a story in a straightforward way to understand more clearly why something unfolds the way it does, and if individuals have a say in the chain of actions or not. That striving is not related only to the present time, but also to the olden time in which Faulkner saw the possibility of finding just one person who shares the same, or at least, similar traits to ours. Surrounded by myth, people tread on a very dangerous ground of not being able to differentiate the true from the speculative – they are just applying what they see and feel to how they interpret something. It is in this much removed past that the root of all literature is located, and at its core lies the human need to give the shape of everything in the form of a word – in order to understand better, people talk and share their knowledge with other members of their community, knowing or disregarding the fact that they will always slant the picture by their own interpretation of the “facts”. This obsessive need for talking and never really grasping the entirety of a story is founded on a very simple premise postulated by Quentin Compson:

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed,

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<sup>3</sup> “*Absalom, Absalom!*, in my opinion the greatest of Faulkner’s novels, is probably the least well understood of all of his books” (Brooks 2003: 17).

<sup>4</sup> The title of Dirk Kuyk, Jr.’s book.

let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-surface, to the old ineradicable rhythm ... (Faulkner 2005: 261)

This never-ending circle is started by the progenitor, by the first who never stops existing, but just spills over the other beings in whose blood he flows. "The protagonists of the archaic myths are those people 'of yore' in the shape of the first predecessor – demiurge – cultural hero"<sup>5</sup> (Мелетински 2009: 33). Just like in Borges' story *The Immortal*, it becomes painfully obvious that what people cannot break free from is the past which defines them, and that the story is forever one and the same. The code encrypted in their past dictates the present that they live no matter how much they try to create themselves as individuals against the horizon of sameness. One such character, with the idea of setting himself apart from the dire conditions in which he chanced to find himself, is certainly Thomas Sutpen, "a larger-than-life character that looms over the world of *Absalom, Absalom!* like a figure out of myth or legend but one that the narrators each characterize according to her or his own needs" (Anderson 2007: 87). Two important questions rise out of this description of Sutpen – which mythical figure comes to mind in connection with Thomas Sutpen, and who defines him?

The meaning of the title has been a well of ambiguity for the critics, although they know who the intended referent is:

Faulkner took it from 2 Samuel 18:33, which records King David's reaction to the death of his rebellious son: 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!' While Biblical reference affirms the son, it is not apparent in Faulkner's title alone who that son is – Henry, Bon, Quentin, or Sutpen himself. Nor is it apparent how David's plaint that he wants to die for his son applies to the novel's presumptive king, Thomas Sutpen. (Urigo and Polk 2010: 3)

The Old Testament narrative says both that Absalom "kills his brother Amnon for raping their sister Tamar" (Irwin 2003: 47), and while a reflection of Quentin's story from *The Sound and the Fury* can be noted, it is not too distant from what happened to Sutpen's children either. What should be kept in mind is Faulkner's motivation for using Quentin as one of the narrators: "I use Quentin because of his sister, and I use

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<sup>5</sup> All the translations have been provided by the author of the text.

his bitterness which he has projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people to get more out of the story than a historical novel would be” (Fargnoli 2008: 24). By heightening the tone of bitterness, Faulkner puts the frame to the story which, in his own words, is about “a man who wanted a son through pride, and got too many and they destroyed him” (Anderson 2007: 83). The cry that King David utters is not the cry for one son having killed the other, but for the death of Absalom, “the son who has risen up in rebellion against his father” (Sundquist 2003: 144).

That much the author has hinted at by giving such a title to the book about such a man. However, no matter how much the readers struggle to see Sutpen for what he really is, they will reach an impenetrable wall, and will be doomed to watch at the surface of the bricks made by other people to erect a building which should have its own identity. Needless to say, the bricks are made of various stories, various views which will always have their own stamp of the person who reared it. The story-tellers have the urge to tell the story, an obsession to pass it on, like in “The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” (Urgo and Polk 2010: 157), and just like in that poem, through telling the story, they invent the protagonist through the narration (Lockyer 1991: 41). Like a true modernist (which is possibly only the surface of a much deeper scheme which dictates that people from the beginning of time create themselves and their history in stories), Faulkner shows that even when they live, people exist in the lives of others as the interpretations of their actions and words, they exist through someone else’s eyes, although they for themselves know what the true meanings of their deeds are. When a person ceases to exist, however, there is no longer someone who may claim to know the roots of all the actions, but there is just the story of what was said and done, necessarily skewed by the same people who claim to have known the person. It is an inherent flaw in human existence, yet a beautiful one, because whole new worlds can be created based on such a premise. Faulkner himself is well aware of the fact that each one of us has the impulse to tell a story, and that everyone is inevitably biased, which will be reflected in the language, which represents the shackles of human life.

By acknowledging the limitations of each of his narrators, Faulkner admits to the subjectivity and relativity of language. But by granting the reader the great power of perception, Faulkner endorses the novel as an entity that does contain truths. Even that assertion of a central, fixed ‘truth’ is qualified in the implicit recognition that the novel’s every reader will revise the truth. *Absalom*’s greatest power is that it makes a definitive statement about the viability of language while it remains unfinished and open to possibility. (Lockyer 1991: 71)

Re-enacting the ancient process of passing the story on through generations, the story of Sutpen is “handed down from one person to another in a series of narrative chains” and it goes “from Quentin’s grandfather to Quentin’s father, to Quentin to Shreve and then to the reader so that what reaches the reader is very much a living tale” (Singal 1997: 214–215). Why is the narrative so compelling that it forces the tellers to keep the story alive? The Ancient Mariner had to expiate his sin, but why is it so important that the people of the South rekindle the story of Sutpen’s downfall?

According to Quentin who is telling the story to his Harvard roommate, Canadian Shrevlin (Shreve) McCannon in “the snowy, iron-clad Massachusetts” in January 1910, Thomas Sutpen “was born where what few other people he knew lived in log cabins” and he “had never heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them” (Faulkner 2005: 221). It is from such a place that he and his family came to Tidewater where he got acquainted with all the unimaginable things, where he became aware of his dishevelled clothes and scruffy appearance, where he was refused the entrance to a beautiful house of a rich person by “the nigger [...] who told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back” (Faulkner 2005: 232). Quentin’s grandfather sees the innocence of Sutpen’s reaction to this response, because, ever since that moment, he had embarked on a ship of his design in which he would combat the white people, but to achieve it he had to “have what they have that made them do what the men did”, and to achieve that he had to “have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with” (Faulkner 2005: 238). That is how, in the second third of the novel, it is discovered what it was that triggered the whole chain of actions which the reader gets acquainted with from the very beginning of the novel. Not forgetting that the story comes from Quentin, who is steeped in history, and whose motivation for the story lies elsewhere, Faulkner said the following about his own creation:

To me, he is to be pitied. He was not deprived – he was amoral, he was ruthless, completely self-centered. [...] He was going to take what he wanted because he was big enough and strong enough, and I think that people like that are destroyed sooner or later, because one has got to belong to the human family, and to take a responsible part of the human family. [...] He wanted to take revenge for all the redneck people against the aristocrat who told him to go around to the back door. (Faulkner 2003: 287–288)

Sutpen, seen through the eyes of Faulkner, is this towering figure which is impervious to human suffering, even feeling compassion towards the loved ones (if love he could), who only had a mind for his goal once he had set it. He is “a kind of superman who assaults the wilderness [...] without malice, to be sure, but also without any regret for what he is doing. Such innocence, as Mr. Compson properly points out, is inhuman and destructive. As the novel suggests, it is also self-destructive” (Brooks 1987: 157). The American Dream, as it has already been described, allows for Sutpen to create himself from the scratch, to disregard his history<sup>6</sup> and see himself as his own creation in the land which allows for all the men to start afresh. The idea of the self-created man lies in the core of Sutpen’s struggle, but there also lies yet another issue. The American Dream and the myth of the self-made man foster “the distinction between deserving and undeserving, a distinction that forms one of the foundations of American conceptions of class. Ironically, this distinction between deserving and undeserving can be seen in the ideology of paternalism as well” (Leyda 2007: 172). That is of vital importance for the understanding of how Sutpen is created as a character. He is an epitome of the self-made man who “wants revenge not against the injustice of that mastery which the powerful have over the powerless, but against those ‘artificial standards and circumstances’ that determine who are the powerful and who the powerless, against the artificial standard of inherited wealth and the circumstances of one’s birth” (Irwin 2003: 51). However, “rather than repudiate the paternalism that excludes him ...” he “embraces it and tries to move into the planter class even though he has recognized at some level that it is almost by definition an inherited status” (Leyda 2007: 175). It is the crack that divides the whole society and makes the South implode with its values.

Sutpen’s story in this way becomes a kind of mythic allegory of how the southern psyche, as Faulkner constructed it, was formed. The standard mythology had, of course, depicted the South’s founding fathers as established aristocrats who had automatically inherited their identities and culture along with the family silver. In *Absalom*, Faulkner was offering an alternative myth in which the Cavalier identity was less a direct legacy from a distinguished past than the product of the inherent frontier character of antebellum southern society. The identity was perpetuated, Faulkner’s narrative suggests, by children of the backcountry, who, coming into contact with the region’s prevailing system of social stratification, had become painfully conscious of their inferiority and cultural coarseness. (Singal 1997: 198–199)

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<sup>6</sup> Faulkner’s novels “reveal how heavily [he] draws on the past as a source of wisdom in its account of human triumph and failure” (Brooks 1987: 145).



That is the reason why Quentin's father always elevates Sutpen's story to the mythical levels, trying to explain the reasons why he gave his daughter the name of Clytemnestra, postulating that he had actually made a mistake, for he wanted to call her Cassandra, which he does on purpose "to create his own story", just as any narrator does (Urgo and Polk 2010: 30). It is history elevated to the level of a myth that can be recognized in the story of Quentin's father. However, the same destiny is the one which bounds and fetters Quentin, whose obsession with the past makes his blood boil in a cold Harvard room, while Shreve's coldness opposes Quentin's passionate rambling. Without Shreve, Quentin could never manage to fully comprehend the story of the past which stifles him: "A Canadian, and therefore even more removed from the traumas of southern history than a Yankee would be, he provides an indispensable measure of critical detachment that Quentin could not conceivably muster on his own" (Singal 1997: 217). Blissfully devoid of wars and intricacies of southern life, Shreve can call (and never fails to do so) Sutpen "demon" and Miss Coldfield "Aunt Rosa." While he "dismisses the past in cavalier fashion, Quentin, having been defeated by it, lets it crush him" (Brooks 1987: 158). Shreve is "the Modernist Faulkner that often sparred with its alter ego inside the psyche that held them both" (Singal 1997: 218).

In depicting the South in such a way, through Sutpen as a possible anti-hero, Faulkner could be sending yet another message to the readers and fellow countrymen of the world. Being confident about one's own indomitable power of self-creation, a person might end up in a blind alley in which no one will tell him how to continue because he has already passed all the signs of warning. Sutpen rejected the past, said that history was not valid and started afresh, but had he thought about it, he would have done many things differently. The other extreme is presented in Quentin, who lets the history of his people wash over him and take him to the open sea with the tide. Faulkner pinpoints the essential problem of not being able to see the problems of the past as possible future guidelines, and that is why, when people refer to the golden past of the Southern myth and the golden future projected by the American Dream, they should be aware that "it is the same precious metal" whose qualities they are ascribing to two, supposedly, different concepts (Brooks 1990: 272). "Faulkner did not scorn the American Dream. Rather, he mourned the fact that it had not been fulfilled" (Brooks 1990: 281). Faulkner has clearly singled out Sutpen "from the other ancestral father figures" to designate the possible reasons of the failure of the Southern myth, he might have wanted to indicate the parallel shortcomings of the American Dream at the core of which is the myth of the self-created man (Porter 1995: 172-173).

### 3. Conclusion

Sutpen is a mythical figure which exists in the narrative of three different people and all the ones who will come to hear his story from them. What lessons they as readers will draw depends on their education, upbringing, prejudice and preconceptions. It is difficult to get rid of them in order to achieve that elated state of being perfectly objective to judge other people's actions. In Quentin's story, Sutpen's life and his family serve as a perfect ground for him to cleanse himself, or at least find justification for his own actions. For a foreigner like Shreve, he is just the right tool for the explanation of the collapse of the southern idea and way of living. Rosa Coldfield sees him as a demon, but some glimpses of her affection towards him can still be seen. All these layers add up to the final idea of what Sutpen might have been truly like, but it can never be stated without some restrictions.

Just to illustrate this, a completely different interpretation of Sutpen's actions will be included, which, based on the text, can be perfectly justified, although Faulkner said something utterly different about his own creation. Namely, in the study "Sutpen's Design" by Dirk Kuyk, Jr. Sutpen had a good reason for not accepting his son from the first marriage, Charles Bon. It could be read, as most of the readers do, as a blatant rejection of the son who he got with a woman who tricked him into believing that she was completely white, while in fact, she was an octoroon. Although it can be understood that he had something against African Americans, he himself said that it was not that he wanted to take revenge on them, it was the white people that he wanted to make feel conquered. Dirk Kuyk, Jr. goes on to propose the following:

From the start, then, Sutpen meant his design to teach society the lesson that those lucky enough to have risen above brutehood should at least care about the feelings of the unlucky. Through his design Sutpen would not just preach his lesson but teach it by his own example. He would reach down and lift up the unlucky, a little boy, a nameless stranger knocking at his door. (Kuyk 2003: 208)

However, the boy who came to the door was not a nameless stranger, he was his own rejected son who did not fit in the frame of the happy, lucky family who would foster an unlucky child, thus causing the avalanche that smashes everything in its way at the end of the book. Can it be ruled out that this is the reason why everything unfolded the way it did? It cannot, for the intricate web of narrative weaving has once again provided us with more than just one key to the complex character that is Thomas Sutpen.

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