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The Mythic Conquest of Time in Faulkner's Fiction

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The Mythic Conquest of Time in Faulkner's Fiction

A Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

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Abstract

William Faulkner is famous for stating he agrees with Henri Bergson's optimistic philosophy of time, a philosophy that emphasizes human freedom and action precisely as they relate to time. However, many of Faulkner's characters are defined by their stagnant and lethargic personalities which cannot change; these characters are held immobile by an over-identification with the rich history of their mythic, southern past. This paper, through in-depth explorations of Faulkner's masterpieces, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and The Fury* seeks to consider human mythmaking as the key to understanding Faulkner's difficult works. This critical approach allows us to better understand these works as conflicts between diachronic (linear or "normal") time and synchronic time (mythological or circular) time or more simply conflicts between the brute, inexorable world of fact and the human, meaning making world that is often a specious undermining of reality and change.

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and The Fury*, Mythopoesis, Henri Bergson, the philosophy of time.

Introduction

Most philosophical ontologies take into account the density and fluidity of time. St. Augustine wrote of the “Now of the past, the now of the present, and the now of the future” (Augustine 89) in describing humanity’s tenacious, life-giving traits of memory, consciousness and expectation. Martin Heidegger mirrors St. Augustine in his *Being and Time* by describing the “thickness of time as it affects being”(Heidegger 290), delineating how the past rolls effortlessly into the moment, influences and is reflected on in the present, while the “silent force of the possible” (Heidegger 114) simultaneously energizes the present. Faulkner was well aware of philosophical speculation on time and even espoused the optimistic philosophy of Henri Bergson, which emphasizes human freedom precisely as it relates to time. Even though he is on the record as being in philosophical agreement with the fluid, temporal descriptions of being written above, it seems Faulkner was obsessed with a human self for whom time was stagnant or persons who quixotically wanted to arrest the inexorable flow of time.

The characters that appear in Faulkner’s masterpieces, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* almost all have relationships to time that hinder their full engagement with reality or themselves. What makes these works unparalleled is the painstaking, artistic form Faulkner created in order to convey viscerally to the reader that man’s relationship to time is at the core of his being. Faulkner is concerned with a topic many writers have examined and that is human ideals and their either positive or deleterious subversion of reality. However, Faulkner is singular in stressing how much time consciousness is an essential condition of the reality presented to man’s given condition. Since time centrally undergirds our fundamental makeup (for Faulkner being *is* time; time is not just one part of the fabric of our condition) Faulkner shows that man’s stance towards time is the measure of his mental health. Faulkner innately

knows that most of man's neurotic conditions will manifest themselves in regards to how he subjectively appropriates time's objective, empirical conditions that impinge on his consciousness. This is a battle between brute, material facts and interpretation; human experience and human meaning; ontic event and ontological significance. This conflict often manifests itself in a constant struggle in many of Faulkner's characters between external, linear, clock time and a timeless world that exists only in their minds; in fact, many times this mythical realm crammed with symbols charged with meaning is created solely to thwart the death, impotence and decay that linear time signifies. Robert Penn Warren writes of the dichotomy in Faulkner's oeuvre between reality and myth:

We can, in fact, think of the poles of Faulkner's work as *history-as-action* and *history-as-ritual*. We may also see this polarity as related to another which he was so fond of – and so indefinite in his formulation of – the polarity of fact and truth. We may see it, too, in the drama of his outraged Platonism – outraged by the world and the flesh (Warren 246).

History as action, Warren is stating, is the normal unfolding of human events. However, a great many of Faulkner's characters, instead of viewing history as the unfolding of new and creative actions, want to make life unchangeable and to return to "the way things were". Hence, they want to perpetually re-enact the past or ritualize it. These poles are fairly identical to another polarity Warren mentions that is present in Faulkner's oeuvre: "History as lived versus history as contemplated" (Warren 122). The last line of the Warren quote encapsulates the rigidity of the backward-looking Faulknerian narrator. There often seems, in the dense, bewildering beauty of Faulkner's prose an astonishment that things even exist in the first place. There is almost a sense of surprise that there is a rich, fecund world as opposed to no world at all. The febrile intellectuality of these characters, as they encounter reality, often shows how intensely they live

solely in their heads and how they are divorced from the flesh and blood world that inhabits linear time. It may not always manifest as outrage, as Warren suggests, but it is certainly the world of flesh, accident and contingency that ceaselessly corrupts the platonic, pure, and orderly ideals of Faulkner's brilliant, but inflexible chroniclers.

Faulkner's obsession with time and human mythopoesis can certainly focus our critical interpretation of his major works: we can view them as vivid conflicts of the factual versus the symbolic. *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury* illustrate that time's inexorable march of factual schema takes a powerful hold on the human mind; however, the human act of internal, symbolic world building always trumps it. Moreover, the amount of pain and loss that exists in the time bound world will often indicate how tightly protected the interior world will become.

Often, Faulkner's narrators do not have the ability to look towards the future or to believe that change can occur. The people Faulkner writes of are Southerners fixated on time and loss to a degree that so much so that, *internally*, the flow of time is either arrested or hopelessly degenerate. This pathology, of course, has tragic consequences. For example, the Faulknerian narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* exemplify and embody the post-bellum, disenfranchised Southerners who are left to pick up the pieces after the dream of a paradisiacal South is ruined by the Civil War. Carolyn Denard writes:

For Faulkner, the discredited are the defeated southern whites who after the Civil War were silenced by being from a region which had seceded from the Union, lost the war, and lived with the scarred legacy of the sin of slavery. After the Civil War, the South became the national stepchild. It was written out of the great American myth of

innocence, progress, and liberalism that characterized so much of early twentieth century America (Denard 21-22).

Coeval with their story being written out of the national myth, the narrators in Faulkner's novel seek to create a myth around their fall, in order to either understand it or to escape to a more dramatic, meaningful time. Unfortunately, because of the debilitated time they live in, the antebellum South and its major figures hold too great an allure and force Faulkner's characters to valorize and mythologize the past to the point that their own lives become static and insipid.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's narrators from the Compson family are more specifically dealing with the loss of their proud family heritage and a source of vitality and love in that family: Caddy Compson. However their loss is certainly a metaphor for the South's overall decay and decline. In this novel, Faulkner concentrates more on how the individual consciousness deals with pain and loss, often creating personal myths that engender within the mythmaker spiritual and emotional lethargy as well as a debilitated understanding of time. The personal ways in which the Compsons deal with family decline help to illuminate the South's larger immobility and stasis due to its inability to accept movement into the future. However, both novels, with their multiple narrators and varying versions of fact continually question our human ability to share "truth". They are both concerned with the elusiveness, the multi-valence of truth, or at least with man's persistent (and necessary) tendency to make of truth a personal thing: each man and woman, apprehending some fragment of the truth, seize upon that fragment as though it were the whole truth and elaborate it into a rigidly exclusive, total vision of the world.

The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre analyzes the "metaphysic of time" (Sartre 73) that he perceives emerging from Faulkner's aesthetic. Sartre rejects Faulkner's metaphysics, if not his

art, with the charge that the novelist has tampered with time. According to Sartre, the temporal reality that reveals itself to existential man centers upon a future that surges with hopeful possibilities for defining human freedom through decisive acts. Faulknerian man is an ontological oddity and according to Sartre, “views time as his greatest misfortune” (Sartre 76) because his creator has “decapitated time”(Sartre 76) cutting off the “thrust from the future” (Sartre 77) and overwhelming the present with a past that is always “superpresent” (Sartre 77). Sartre implies, quite brilliantly, that Faulknerian man is overwhelmed by memories of the past; a past that he over identifies with to the detriment of any hope that the future may provide. For Sartre and Bergson human expectation for future change is a large part of any person’s psychological makeup. However, the Faulknerian Southerner’s imagination is depressed and compressed by the fundamental lack of meaning in their present. The Faulknerian Southerner (as any person in an abject situation may do) seeks to infuse vitality into the stagnant present. However, in the deprived South, the future is bleak: the past is the only thing that is dynamic and rich enough to capture their consciousness. Thus, the Faulknerian characters are cursed with “an excess of memories” (78) which they convert into stories, reconstructing a “hard, clear and unchangeable”(78) past that transforms “the indeterminate present into a determined fatality”(Sartre 80). Sartre uses a Heideggerian phrase and states that having been “deprived of the ‘silent force of the possible’ (the future), this reduced man experiences time as a sinking in” (82). This sinking in leads to the unchangeable past and determined future, for to tamper with the past is to tamper with an identifying myth that gives life import and meaning, even if that import is tragic.

What Sartre does not say that needs to be stated explicitly is that Faulknerian man’s fixation on the past swells its significance into something bearing mythological (thus religious)

import. Because of the past's overvalued importance, the present time feels attenuated and weak; thus Faulkner's characters' futures are closed off to them because they feel the future holds no redemption, beauty nor excitement. Everything has already happened (fate's judgment has been rendered) and all that is heroic and poetic in human potentiality has been reserved to a time that is not one's own. Richard King writes of the backward looking South:

The South which Faulkner had grown up in, particularly the rural South, was cut-off, inward turning, backward looking. It was a culture frozen in its virtues and vices, and even for the generation that grew up after World War I, that South offered an image of massive immobility in all ways, an image, if one was romantic, of the unchangeableness of the human condition, beautiful, sad, painful, tragic – sunlight slanting over a mellow autumn field, a field the more precious for the fact that the yield had been meagre (King 17).

An important question is if Faulkner was influenced by Bergson (as many critics acknowledge) and his optimistic writings on human free will and time, then why are Faulkner's character's souls full of despair? Bergson, in an attempt to prove human free will against philosophical determinism, wanted to refute the prevailing idea of time that was analogous to an unbounded line composed of units or moments which are external to one another. This type of time (calendars, clocks,) was certainly being felt as the industrial revolution raged on in Europe at the turn of the century, especially since ever increasingly time was becoming money. This objective time that was simultaneously unbroken and disconnected emotionally allowed external time to be measured and to fix the occurrence of events. This time according to Bergson, was the spatialized, geometrized and mathematicized idea of duration. Bergson's counter to this was "pure duration" (Coppleson 186). This is the name for how we can become intuitively or

immediately aware in consciousness of how time affects our mental life subjectively. Pure duration is an understanding of how our personality is created as a whole from a series of subjective impressions and changes melting into and permeating one another, so that each element represents the whole, “like a musical phrase” (Bleikasten 145). In other words, pure duration is a complete rejection of any units of outer, linear time and focuses solely on what is going on inside the mind as we live. Pure duration rejects how linear time atomizes our experiences. Most importantly, it seeks to give a very concrete reality to our memories and the sensations and emotions they effect in the present. For Bergson, memories as they affect the present are not really memories, but part of the present because they effect what a person does in the present. This is what gives pure duration its musical quality of flow and feeling. Bergson calls duration the “form taken by the succession of our states of consciousness when our ego lets itself live, when it abstains from making a separation between its *present and preceding states*” (Bergson 73; *my italics*). The thing that makes pure duration counterintuitive is that the outer, empirical world so quickly erases the past that we have a difficult time believing that what we remember and feel in our minds is actually a real thing. But, for Bergson this flow of internal time is very real and it is a fundamental component of being a whole and moral human agent. In literature, for instance, characters could not experience epiphanies and moments of profound insight without carrying memories of past frustration which lends the moment special import. Pure duration grants a concrete reality to what humans carry with them.

Faulkner in an interview stated “ I agree with Bergson... Man is not a slave to time” (alluding to man’s ability to act freely in any moment in time) (Mortimer 21). It is obvious that Faulkner found something true about human ontology from Bergson, and it also helped him to understand what an abnormal consciousness would look like, a consciousness that suffered from

a paralysis, or a stasis that suffered from enormous fixation on the past. Bergson made a link between freedom and duration and this helps us understand the key difference between his ideal for human life and the way Faulknerian man lives. For Bergson duration allows us to continually make our future (and fate) new because in the present, decisive acts may reshape the ultimate import of past events (in light of new happenings). The past's meaning is open-ended for its ultimate contribution to an overall story is never completely written. Bergsonian man need not fixate on the past for he is free in the present to take action that may alter the past's significance. If Faulkner's characters do not embody the optimism that Bergson endorsed, it is because Faulkner could only agree with Bergson up to a point. *The Sound and the Fury* illustrates that Faulkner agreed that the interpenetration of all of man's experiences are part of subjective, internal time. Man still *experiences* his past in the present and the present and future are shaped by this constant comingling. However, this interconnected flow of time, for Faulkner, did not lead to a radically free being, but to a debilitating obsession with a past that could not be escaped. For many of Faulkner's characters the past flows into the present and...that's the gist of it. Bergson does not seem to acknowledge how loss and personal crisis could short circuit the smooth flow of time nor does Bergson examine, what Faulkner examines so well, that the memories and images we carry with us could be radically malformed and divorced from reality. Ernest Becker states that modern man "is the neurotic myth-maker" (Becker 199). Becker is referring to how, in the face of the collapse of communal myths, personal fictions and rituals allow humans to shrink the chaos of life into a controllable and manageable experience, but often to a life - denying degree. It could be argued that Faulkner devotes almost his entire oeuvre to how romantic ideals and personal myths are a neurotic and reductive undertaking that prevent people from having a hopeful and healthy understanding of themselves as time-bound creatures.

Chapter 1

Absalom, Absalom!

“Myth is an attempt to communicate a closed plot, a finite system offering its own coding in the midst of a world of negative knowledge and open-ended signs”-William Doty

The narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* do not experience pure duration. They are mourning a loss. Their inherited past does not bring love like a family lineage of passed down care and concern (one wonders about the absence of tenderness in these novels) and it does not resemble the humane-ness of a wisdom tradition that passes on helpful ways of being. These characters do not inherit their past; they are instead mesmerized and trapped by it. Thomas Sutpen is the ominous, dynamic figure of the past that captures these narrators. He is melded into many symbolic forms for these characters: the former glory of the south, the loss of a dream, the inability of man to oppose fate and entropy, the inability of man to create a pure genealogical lineage, and the loss of love. There is an absence haunting the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* The dominance of references to the past and of various past tenses as Faulkner talks about people and things present in a fictional world suggests that his characters serve repeatedly as referents for absent things. This is why they are considered ghosts.

The Faulknerian character is ghost-like, a type of thing and no-thing because of its refusal to think the present, the moment, the now, could possibly hold any plenitude. Here is a passage Faulkner almost certainly read, where Bergson admits how duration can negatively affect a man if he continues to desire the future to look like the past:

The void of which I speak, therefore, is, at bottom only the absence of some definite object, which was here at first, is now elsewhere and, in so far as it is no longer in its former place, leaves behind it, so to speak, the void of itself. A being unendowed with

memory or prevision would not use the words “void” or “nought”; he would express only what is and what is perceived; now, what is and what is perceived, is the presence of one or of another, never the absence of anything. There is absence only for a being capable of remembering and expecting. He remembered an object, and perhaps expected to encounter it again; he finds another, and he expresses the disappointment of his expectation (an expectation sprung from recollection) by saying that he no longer finds anything, that he encounters “nothing”(Bergson 212).

The nothingness that is the existential milieu for the Faulknerian narrators is created by a fixation on former beauty and meaning. For Rosa and Mr. Compson there is no duration, or change through time, but only the repetition of the miasmic past. They have enabled this impersonal agency because they have mythologized the past in order to attempt some participation with it and to attempt a sense of duration-bringing the past into the now. Also, Rosa and Mr. Compson’s styles of finding duration are intentionally differentiated by Faulkner from Quentin Compson’s attempt at achieving understanding of the past and present. Quentin, with the help of Shreve, performs a healthier attempt at fusion with the past, for the two friends reject the temptation to use the disembodied, conceptual ideals of Puritanism or antiquity to engage with history. As will be examined below, there is an added vitality to their sympathetic rendering of the Sutpen drama because the intimacy of their own human bond allows them to “sift and discard the false” (316) and empathically re-create what truly motivates human action: the seeking after blessing, affirmation and love.

Faulkner has *Absalom, Absalom!* truly show the difficulty of achieving a sense of time’s duration to those fixated on the past. The novel offers obstacle after obstacle to the seeker after continuity. The novel presents its material fragmented in time and distributed among multiple

narrators, each with a passionate involvement that produces differing versions of their mutual subject. The narrators themselves are continually frustrated by the paucity of historical details to which they must assign temporal intelligibility before they can link that past with the present. The establishment of continuity is further impeded by the intractability of their raw materials. There are three major reasons at the root of Rosa, Mr. Compson and Quentin's ruptured sense of time. First is the gigantic stature of the founder of a family, Thomas Sutpen, which inhibits his integration with his descendants in a normal family history. Second, the tremendous influence of Sutpen's "design," which tends to remove both himself and his heirs from the sense of a human choosing or agency within time. Third, their sanctification of the idea of a pure, white, family lineage as a carrier of southern tradition is tied to a Sutpen family that in actuality violently abrogates established, white, familial relationships.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* these elements of structure and substance work to inhibit the existential experience of time as an open-ended unity of one's own past, present, and future. However, in seeking a fusion of time in one's consciousness- one may actually prevent continuity. In *Types of Memory in 'Search of Lost Time'* Gaston Bachelard describes the difference between a linear, historical consciousness and mythical consciousness:

The historical consciousness attacks fragmentation directly when, through rational logic and imaginative conjecture, it confers upon mere sequence those motives and consequences which give meaning to linear continuity. Conversely, the mythical consciousness abjures this intellectual resolution of fragmentation in order to seek an emotional fusion with the material; it would know the past through an immediate experience of its reality by means of a ritualized reenactment of that reality. By thus identifying the past in the present and the present in the past, mythical thought overleaps

the temporal distinction between past and present that permits linear continuity within process to be discoverable, and generates instead a reversible or circular time sense (Bachelard 134).

Bachelard's dichotomy of historical, linear examination and mythical valorization clearly applies to *Absalom, Absalom!*. The novel's narrators are obsessed with myth for it provides emotional satisfaction. This is because myth provides meaning, structure, and coherence to fragmented, linear time. Because of this obsession with their own subjective interpretations of the past and present, the narrators miss out on the plenitude that reality, especially the present and future, may provide.

The contrasting time of myth and history can be restated with reference to a pair of terms used by the structuralists to designate the same difference in *temporal* emphasis. Ferdinand de Saussure first conceived the notion of dividing the study of language into the two separate spheres of diachronic and synchronic linguistics. The diachronic focuses upon change and development within language, or its historical and dynamic mode. The synchronic focuses upon the invariable structures of the internal relations between words within the total language system. This basic distinction between process and structure, between temporal evolution and timeless state, pertains also to history and myth: "History, as it traces the transience of generations and institutions, is situated along a linear axis. Myth may be considered the ultimate synchronic structure because it is supposed to represent an eternal pattern" (Selden 119).

There is, of course, in normal life a dialectical relationship between the dynamic and the static or chronological time and myth. It is how we make sense of life and its meaning and is the fundamental point of Bergson's duration. Through the experience of the dross of time, we are able to deduce and extract essential truths that are universal and non-linear. In time, as it

progresses we are eventually able to pull out patterns and “ideas” that are meaningful about life. Through the diachrony of experience, existence, and induction we are able to find through analysis and deduction values and essences. It is this relationship between these two modes of thought that Faulkner’s narrators seek. They seek to enrich linear time with ideas and essences of timeless import. Within the flow of time there are some things-archetypes, models, myths, that survive outside the coherence of linearity and are universally applicable. This is what T.S. Eliot (who attended Bergson’s lectures) means when he writes in *Burnt Norton*–“Only through time time is conquered”, meaning as time unfolds a-temporal truths make themselves known. Because “Faulkner’s concern with time is central, rather than peripheral” (Brooks 59) these synchronic and diachronic emphases are pervasive, shaping the story of Sutpen and the individual consciousnesses of the narrators. Examples of the diachronic are: the Sutpen story, in its linear, genealogical span of four generations; the events that detail the rise and decline of the south, and Quentin and Shreve’s construction of the Sutpen narrative, in which the causal relationships within a linear ordering have some plausibility. Examples of the synchronic are especially prevalent in the narrations of Rosa and Mr. Compson for they seek to assign to Sutpen deep, eternal, and mythic patterns that will help explain their frustrated reality. These are evident in the character of Sutpen as an archetype of the Creator; Sutpen’s story as parallel of Southern history; the biblical and classical allusions to the Sutpen family; and finally Ms. Rosa’s demon.

Faulkner opens *Absalom, Absalom!* with Rosa Coldfield, the narrator who most obviously allows her personal concerns to color her interpretation of historical events. She is a frustrated spinster and her shrill cry for vengeance opens the tale at its highest pitch. She is both physically and psychically misshapen. Venting upon Sutpen’s image the accumulated tension of a lifetime of hallucination – filled isolation, she pictures Sutpen as the incarnation of demonic

energy, alluding to horrendous crimes, “too dark to talk about,” (32) as the cause of the disasters that have overtaken Sutpen, his kin, and the South as well.

Thomas Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson, his construction of Sutpen's Hundred, and his marriage to Ellen, as presented by Rosa Coldfield, assume fantastically distorted proportions, because they are largely fabricated by the imagination of a woman interested not in what actually happened, but in what she wants to believe happened. Rosa Coldfield immerses the created events in the unreality of a dream-vision, which is without logic and reason. Sutpen's actions are presented to the reader without explanation, and hence without the plausibility afforded by a cause-effect sequence. Thus, Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson is afforded the qualities of some type of materialization out of thin air. The arrival is portrayed almost as a visitation by a demonic spirit:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man- horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk up- right like men; in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran.... Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them over- run the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing ... creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light* (pp. 8-9).

Rosa is both unable and unwilling to acknowledge the object of her vengeance as being a mortal man, motivated by the same hopes and fears common to humanity. She endows his actions with larger-than-life proportions, interpreting each as being effected by Sutpen's strange supernatural powers. Thus, Sutpen's Hundred is not a product of hard work by a band of wild Negroes and

one French architect, but is a demonic edifice “conjured into being by three Satanic words” (Lind 889). When Quentin tries to exert some rational control over Rosa Coldfield's distorted interpretation by stating that Sutpen simply "built a plantation," that "grim haggard amazed" voice cries out, "tore violently a plantation" (p. 9).

The language in Rosa Coldfield's narrative is deliberately inflated and carried to an extreme: "I saw that man return-the evil's source and head which had outlasted all its victims-who had created two children not only to destroy one another and his own line, but my line as well, yet I agreed to marry him" (18). The emotionally compelling quality of this language, which mesmerizes the listening Quentin, is suited to the Gothic framework of Rosa's perspective. Ilse Duso Lind comments, “More than any other literary tradition, the Gothic genre produces in the reader an affective response, by eliciting from him fear and terror through suspenseful anticipation” (Lind 912). By a skillful manipulation of a dreamer's disregard for logic and an outraged woman's tendency to distort reality until it seems fantasy, Faulkner dramatically presents the skeletal outline of Thomas Sutpen, divested of all reason and cause, and thereby creates suspense as Faulkner later catches up the reader through a purposeful use of withheld information. But even more importantly, through Rosa we are also given a glimpse inside a type, the disgruntled Southerner, who seeks a manageable and comprehensible point of transference (a scapegoat) for the fall of the once proud South. Rosa's spiritual condemnation of Sutpen and her projection of demonic forces onto him reveal her personal concerns with theological meaning and the formation of a world where a Christian God will make sense of suffering and defeat. Thus, the sole purpose of the Civil War, interpreted by the Puritan narrator, is to be a beneficial act of God and to "stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth" (11).

Mr. Compson brings to his narration a seeming repose and expansiveness which is a welcome counterbalance to Miss Rosa's blind subjectivity. Enlightened, informed, comprehensive in his judgments, Mr. Compson at first arouses the confidence of the reader as a seemingly unbiased narrator. His ironic eye easily pierces the romanticisms, enthusiasms, and self-deceptions of others. A skeptic in religion, a rationalist in his general approach to life, an educated classicist, his elaboration gives the legend an apparent foundation in fact. But his observations have dubious validity; they are the projections of a profound spiritual resignation. Olga Vickery describes Mr. Compson's sumptuous, decadent resignation:

His world-weariness, his love of paradox, his fascination with the exotic, all suggest that he has absorbed the malaise of fin de siècle decadence into his private philosophy. The cast of his imagination is unhealthily voluptuous. Only his love for the refinements of eroticism could do justice to the institution of octoroon mistresses in New Orleans (Vickery 202).

Mr. Compson's skepticism is profound; he is a fatalist because he "is at heart a defeatist" (Vickery 204). His grandiloquent allusions to "the horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs," (79) and to the "blank face of oblivion to which we are all doomed," (88) endow his narrations with the atmosphere of moral gloom. Ultimately, Mr. Compson sustains the aura of catastrophe which Miss Rosa's forebodings initiated.

Although Mr. Compson, unlike Rosa Coldfield, has no personal contact with Sutpen, he does possess the Southerner's inherited veneration for those long-dead heroes who deified themselves by fighting against General Sherman. To Quentin's father, not only is Thomas Sutpen such a man, but his "design" is interpreted as a microcosm of the history and heritage of the South. Because Sutpen's story becomes "the complete statement of Southern ambition,

execution and success, guilt, doom, and destruction ... as exemplified by the action of one man," (102) Mr. Compson, the doomed Southerner, is compelled, like Rosa Coldfield, to exaggerate the figure central to his narration. But unlike Rosa's Puritan influenced view, the vision of Sutpen as imagined by Quentin's father is without the demonic aura of a Satanic nature. On the contrary, Thomas Sutpen, as protagonist of Mr. Compson's narrative, is the man of heroic stature who is celebrated in Southern myth. As Lynn Levins states, "Through an elevation effected by exaggeration, the social situation assumes cosmic proportions and the central participant becomes the Greek hero operating against a backdrop of fate and eternity" (Levins 40).

Because Mr. Compson's protagonist is elevated to heroic proportions, Fate, the classical avenging force, requires a catastrophe the size of the Civil War to oppose the striving of its opponent. The war is described as that "fateful mischance" laying waste the "black foundation" on which Sutpen's Hundred had been erected and "removing its two male mainstays, husband and son" (78). Although Sutpen is doomed to failure in Rosa's, Mr. Compson's, and Shreve's narratives, it is only in Mr. Compson's section that he is ennobled after his fall because of the magnitude of what he has tried to do: "Weighing ... circumstance against human nature, his own fallible judgment and mortal clay against not only human but natural forces" (53), Thomas Sutpen, the Greek hero contending against his fellowman, his environment, and Fate itself, dares to attempt his "design" in defiance not only of society, but of eternity too. By recreating Thomas Sutpen as a heroic protagonist of a classical drama, Mr. Compson intimates a sense of degenerate voluptuousness and a decadent, thus *aesthetically* meaningful, tragic fate for not only Sutpen, but the South and Mr. Compson's own family's decline.

The obsession these two narrators have with Sutpen results from the primary human impulse of meaning making, or deriving essences from time. Robert Penn Warren quotes

Bronislaw Malinowski's explanation of the ontological necessity of mythmaking: "Studied alive, myth...is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements" (Warren 33). The cravings of these two narrators to re-engage with a primordial origin suspends them in stasis. They feel an intuition that Sutpen belongs to a time which they cannot enter, retrieve, or comprehend—a mythical time that is absolutely discontinuous with the historical time in which they live. They are gripped by a reenactment of a tribal mythos that explains their present. Sartre objected to the peculiar quality of the Faulknerian past that made it discontinuous with historical time and with the fictional present. Donald Sutherland, however, argues that this past is suited to "assume the contours of myth" (Sutherland 102) (thus Sartre overlooks some of what makes us human — which makes sense since existentialism *would* have a hatred of the essentialism of myth). Sutherland suggests that:

Faulkner's real basis of composition is an absolute past, not a consecutive history....I think that his hard and immobile past, separate both from us and from the continuity of history, is the only kind of past that convinces us. Abrupt and absolute, it has the 'density of being' required for legend, and as legend it very likely replaces for us in temporal terms the static Puritan theology (Sutherland 103).

There is a density of being in the past that the present lacks for the narrators and this density is great enough to replace orthodox religion. In their desire to make their present, debilitated time more meaningful, Faulkner's characters insist on static terms of ultimate value, just as Puritan theology once did with its own rigid proclamations of truth similarly suffocating the vital forces of life (e.g. Hester Prynne). Because of the upheaval and carnage of the Civil War that

increased doubt among religious believers, the antebellum past and its density had no problem replacing Christianity as a system of understanding the world for the Southerner.

In an effort to enter the time to which glory and Sutpen belong, these characters mythologize. Mircea Eliade states that a myth acquires “prestige because of its temporal singularity” (Eliade 10)- its action is always placed in a time that has passed and is unavailable ever again. Most importantly its content is usually the story of the origins of something:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, a fabled time of the “beginnings”. In other words, myth tells how through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence....Myth, then is always an account of a “creation; it relates how something was produced, began to *be* (Eliade 12).

Sutpen’s incredible authority over his narrator’s imaginations is derived from the prestige accorded to the original, the creator, the founder at the “beginnings”. As it was for archaic man, so it is for modern man, especially as he finds himself in a weak time or as Cleanth Brooks calls it, an “indistinctive end of time, time attenuated from its origins in greatness” (Brooks 51).

However, it is the later narrator, Quentin Compson who is more able to transcend the weak time of the present with a new understanding of the past. For Quentin, and his roommate Shreve McCannon, who merge their identities with those of Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, the present enters the past instead of the past invading the present. Obsessed solely with the figure of Sutpen, Rosa and Mr. Compson have identified him as a timeless archetype within an abstract pattern removed from actual events. Quentin and Shreve, although puzzled by Sutpen’s character, are more concerned with the construction of a plausible narrative about his descendants. They choose to investigate the causes and consequences of events as they are acted out by the Sutpen generations. The vitality of their narration is due to how much they stress the

conflicts and loyalties between characters who are *recognizably human*. Judith, Henry, and Charles are not, like their father, frozen into stasis above or out of time.

The final re-creation of Thomas Sutpen is a composite product of these two narrators, whose different backgrounds lend them differing emotional involvement in the reconstruction of the legend. A Southern “birthright”(211) enables Quentin Compson to absorb the Sutpen story "without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it" (212). To Quentin, every person born in the South possesses a special insight into this land which gave him birth, because all are united by a common heritage that compels its descendants to look, not to the future, but forever backward into a shared past. To Shreve McCannon, the Canadian, the intellectual Northerner separated by a thousand miles from his heritage, Quentin cries out: "You can't understand [the South]. You would have to be born there" (361). Cleanth Brooks classifies Shreve McCannon as the modern "liberal" twentieth-century reader "who is basically rational, skeptical, without any special concern for history, and “pretty well emancipated from the ties of family, race, or section” (Brooks 17). For Shreve, the word tradition does not carry near the import it does for Quentin. This is because tradition in Canada is not so fully imbued with meaning or still so near to living history:

Because it's something my people haven't got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there ain't anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves ... and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget. What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? A kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entailed birthright father and son and father and son of never

forgiving General Sherman, so that forevermore as long as your children's children produce children you won't be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas? (361)

In direct contrast to Quentin, who is unable to disengage himself from the Southerner's shared heritage, Shreve McCannon is the Canadian "emancipated from the ties of family, race or section,"(362). The movement from Rosa to Mr. Compson to Quentin to Shreve is one, then, of decreasing involvement. This last perspective, the viewpoint of the distanced Canadian, adds control to an intensity that needs, at times, relief through contrast. In this last composite recreation of the Sutpen legend, Shreve McCannon does most of the imaginative reconstruction. But he, to a great extent, retells the same story to Quentin that Quentin had earlier told him, in hopes that he might understand what motivates Southerners to act as they do or even "why they live at all" (174). Shreve's attitude gradually changes from one of ironic detachment to utter amazement as Quentin narrates the genesis of Sutpen's "design", the insults to Rosa Coldfield and Millie Jones, and Quentin's encounter with the still living Henry Sutpen. However, it is Quentin's presentation of the love drama, enacted by Judith, Henry, and Bon, that totally dissolves the invisible geographical boundary separating the Canadian from the Southerner's world and actively involves him in the process of re-creation.

One important consequence of this salvaging process is the unusually intense intimacy it creates between Quentin and Shreve. The narrator describes them as two virgin lovers whose mode of telling the Sutpen saga becomes:

a happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each before the demand, the requirement, forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the others faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in) and in the hearing and

sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived in order to overpass to love, where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault nor false (316).

Faulkner may be making a point about community and human cooperation. Quentin and Shreve's friendship allows them to understand human motivation and love better than the other characters and they also do not fall into any dangerous solipsism. In the vitality of their youth, which quickly breathes life into antiquated values, Shreve and Quentin are able to tell the same tale, even to finish one another's thoughts -"both thinking as one, the voice which happened to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal" (303). This harmony of mind and feeling gradually deepens until it brings about an identification of Shreve and Quentin with the protagonists of their tale. The narrators, through a kind of "transubstantiation by empathy" (Forrer 42), become Charles-Shreve and Henry-Quentin--"now not two of them but four, the two who breathed not individuals now yet something both more and less than twins, the heart and blood of youth" (294). The tale told is a "chivalric romance, celebrating the eternal verity of the love that inspired the songs of the troubadours" (Forrer 44). One of the few omniscient narrators' authorial comments reveals that Quentin, in re-creating the Sutpen legend, discards the false and conserves the true in what is to him the less important and less interesting aspects of the imagined story "in order to overpass to love" (316). All distinctions between the present and past virtually disappear, all barriers of culture, race, and class are temporarily suspended or hurdled while they imaginatively act out the inevitable collision between the two unyielding wills of Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen. By granting the young men the most successful interpretation of history, Faulkner must certainly be making a comment on human isolation and its need for controls so that the isolated mind does not err too greatly. Quentin needs Shreve's help, for it is

Shreve's geographical distance *and* human presence that grants their narration more objectivity. Thus, it is Quentin and Shreve's intimacy that helps them understand love and thus they are granted the sympathetic imagination that uncovers the love story at the heart of the murder at the gate of Sutpen's Hundred.

However, this escape from pernicious myth-making is short lived for Quentin. As *The Sound and the Fury* shows, no less than his father, Quentin Compson also experiences life as a sickness unto death. Quentin is less a person than a severely disoriented state of consciousness evoked by relatives and neighbors who constantly impose upon him, willy-nilly, haunting images of the past. The narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* likens Quentin to "an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering" (12) from the Civil War. Quentin seeks to escape this inherited past at Harvard, only to discover that Northerners like Gerald Bland, Mrs. Bland, and Shreve will not let him forget his Southern heritage. Shreve is definitely intrigued: "Tell [me] about the South," Shreve demands. "What's it like there. What do they do there. Why do they live there? Why do they live at all" (174). The "burden of southern history" (Kartiganer 31) here becomes for Quentin a curse upon his life, and throughout his narrative, Quentin increasingly despairs of having any other future except the dreary prospect of "forever" hearing and answering such demands that he justify his existence (277, 373). His ritualistic retelling of Sutpen's story mirrors his search for anything trustworthy that would promise him release, now or later, from this curse. But this quest only issues in his bleak vision of an endless cycle of repeated events or what he calls "the old ineradicable rhythm" of history (261) that denies him any means of spiritual transcendence. The model of ultimate reality for Quentin is an insurmountable history that buries him alive in the crypt of the past.

Chapter 2

The Sound and The Fury

“Myths are created by adults, by means of retrograde childhood fantasies...and the hero is credited with the mythmaker’s personal infantile history.” – Otto Rank

Whereas *Absalom, Absalom!* exposes the personal and arbitrary nature of public and shared myths that seek to mold *historical* understanding, *The Sound and the Fury* calls into question the validity of *everyday*, human epistemology due to its structure being founded on individual, fictive constructs. In the first novel we are shown the capricious nature of myth building and how personal circumstance affects a construction of history; however we are only shown glimpses of how Rosa, Mr. Compson and Quentin’s everyday lives are affected by their own subjective appropriation of reality. But in *The Sound and the Fury* we are presented with how the human mind itself is predisposed at a *primary operational level* to the type of pathologies that come to fruition in *Absalom Absalom!* In switching novels, our examination of how myths are used to make sense of large events changes to studying how the individual mind uses mythopoesis to grapple with the chaotic conditions of *everyday* reality. *The Sound and the Fury* exposes the incredibly personal nature of how a mind encounters, appropriates, and often distorts the seemingly most objective fact. The novel delineates the workings of the mind as it makes sense of personal loss and scrutinizes the individual and mythic structures which determine “truth”. It brings to light the linguistic and chimerical nature of reality. In this novel the history-drenched South is not to blame for human pathology; instead we are shown a glimpse of the faultiness of human nature which lies in none other than its most irreducible condition: self-consciousness.

As Faulkner proceeds from one section to the next, there is a gradual clarification of events, a rounding out of the fragments of scenes and conversations which Benjy initially reports. Thus, with respect to the plot, the four sections are inextricably connected, but with respect to the central situation they are quite distinct and self-sufficient. Each of the brothers' sections presents a version of the same facts which are "at once the truth and a complete distortion of the truth" (Vickery 280). This furthers the theme of the novel, which is the relation between the act and man's apprehension of the act, between the event and its interpretation. Myra Jehlen remarks that it is Faulkner's understanding of the subjective nature of all pronouncements of fact that marks Faulkner's own skepticism "towards language and the validity of any literary statement" (Jehlen 321). It is well known that Faulkner describes *The Sound and the Fury* as four successive failures to tell a single story. Based on this, James Guetti has written,

The basic emphasis in Faulkner is not upon some ultimate ideal of truth or reality, or even upon some standard ideological dichotomy or paradox, but upon the unreality of imaginative structure of any sort and upon the radical linguistic nature – as opposed to ideological nature – of the problem of order (Guetti 11).

This novel telescopes more inwardly into the human need to order the universe because it does not just question mythmaking but *indicts language itself as a form of myth creation*. Words are just sound coming from nerve stimulus and emotional confusion, springing from a need to respond to the condition of being thrown into an overwhelming world. Words are no more significant than Benjy's moan, and as Macbeth states, they "signify nothing". Nothing that is, except the human desire for order. Ernest Cassirer suggests in his book *Language and Myth* that the primal human experiencing of the cosmos was inseparable from its articulation. He argues

that discursive logic and creative imagination subsequently came to be differentiated, but in the primary realm of mythic conception, “distinctions between subject and object, between logic and metaphor, do not apply” (Cassirer 29). The “language-ing act” (31) expresses the union; it does not merely talk about an experience, but it *is* that experience. Cassirer writes, “Whatever has been fixed by name, henceforth is not only real, but is Reality. The potential between ‘symbol’ and ‘meaning’ is resolved: in place of a more or less adequate ‘expression’, we find a relation of identity between name and thing” (44). Cassirer still believes that language has this mythical power, because it is able to harness the mysterious, dynamic forces of the world into articulate form. Cassirer states at length how language and myth come from the same intuitive and creative desire:

Language and myth stand in an original and indissoluble correlation with one another, from which they both emerge but gradually as independent elements. They are two diverse shoots from the same parent stem, the same impulse of symbolic formulation, springing from the mental activity that desires a more heightened and concentrated encounter with sensory experience. In the vocables of speech and in primitive mythic figurations, the same inner process finds its consummation: they are both resolutions of an inner tension, *the representation of subjective impulses and excitations in definite objective forms and figures* (79-80 my italics).

I think what Cassirer is postulating and what Faulkner believes is that personal appropriation of language is a mythic construction. Language, narratives and stories are human ways of pulling the dynamic, chaotic movements of time into more controllable channels of understanding. Language can create an image-inary and satisfying order with which to understand the world. For example, in some way, having the tropes *ego*, *id*, and *super ego* (when the mind is probably

slightly more dynamic and fluid), or being able to group a fantastically, frighteningly beautiful tree under *Cherry Blossom* is as pacifying as any creation myth or death ritual.

The fact that Benjy is dumb is one of the most striking and innovative symbols in literature; he is representative of the difficulty for all humans to achieve communion and of the closed nature of the Compson brothers' worlds. This is why Caddy's true being is unapproachable even while she is the secret muse and soul of the novel. Andre Bleikasten describes Caddy as "at once the focal and the vanishing point, the bewitching image around which everything revolves" (Bleikasten 423). One could argue that Caddy is little more than an empty signifier, a name itself devoid of a meaning except that meaning attributed subjectively by her interpreters. To invoke Saussure, Caddy is not a positive term; the word Caddy assumes meaning only in relation to the contextual network where it appears. Since from one section to another Caddy is drawn into different verbal milieus, woven into different textures, the word is invested with ever-renewed significances. Caddy is a sign, with all the arbitrariness of the sign, and Faulkner's awareness of the chancy and shifting relationships between word and thing, language and meaning, is emphasized on the very first page of the novel by his deliberate punning on *caddie* and *Caddy*. This seems to confuse Benjy and also the reader who is not yet in a position to understand why the word *caddie* makes him moan with grief.

Benjy is the first of the Compson brothers whose time is out of joint. Benjy does not have the mental ability to order the moments in his "consciousness" into some type of meta-narrative. He does not have the ability to turn ontic event into ontological significance. Brute materialism overwhelms him for it cannot be turned into meaning. Olga Vickery writes that Benjy's world "is made up not only of sensations but of sensations to which he attributes an independent existence" (Vickery 282). This explains his problems with *caddie* and other

moments where he shows an inflexible identification of one word with one object. For instance, as Robert Penn Warren has shown, very seldom is the name of the speaker replaced by a pronoun in his section. Each person is freed from meaning making labels such as brother, father, Negro or white. For Benjy each is forever fixed as Jason, Quentin or Luster.

Whereas Quentin and Jason remember the past in a fixed way, Benjy really cannot remember anything. As Faulkner said of Benjy in 1955:

To that idiot, time was not a continuation, it was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment, it all is now to him. He cannot distinguish between what was last year and what will be tomorrow, he doesn't know whether he dreamed it or saw it (qtd. in Kartiganer 330).

Time as duration, or Bergsonian time, is what Faulkner is alluding to here and it is this sense of time that Benjy, by virtue of his idiocy does not possess. Memory does not serve him as it serves the normal mind. He is not able to integrate past images and words into his stream of constantly created perceptions that make up his consciousness. This is the past, which for most people is the hermeneutical circle which we carry into the everyday and as Bergson puts it, this past "gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances" (Bergson 98). Instead of past and present being a continuum, each influencing the meaning of the other, they have no temporal dimension at all.

Even if Faulkner ultimately rejects Bergson's optimism, the Benjy section clearly illustrates the human need to be aware of the internal flow of time as experiences interpenetrate one another and lend one another significance. Although *The Sound and the Fury* pictures the harmful effects of imaginative constructs, shown through Benjy is the sad result of one having no meaning making system at all. Benjy is different from many Faulkner characters, in that he is

not enslaved to the past or cultural myths however he still is a character that has no experience of pure duration and is instead enslaved by sensory experience.

Without some type of myth to order the constant on-rush of brute facticity, Benjy is overwhelmed with material events and the coming and goings of Caddy. Benjy, in a primitive way, reaches out and tries to make some sense of Caddy's import. Caddy is obviously a source of fundamental love and vitality for Benjy. Thus, in an almost totemistic, mythical way he persistently associates her with elemental things such as fire, the pasture, and of course, the smell of trees. His dependence on her physical presence, her scent of trees, is subject to constant threats which he fends off to the best of his ability. Caddy is part of a rigid order that holds off the chaos of reality. In the disturbing last sentences of the novel we are presented with how Benjy's ordering of the world is a trope for all of Faulkner's wounded, meaning makers. Benjy is momentarily pacified as Luster corrects his course and goes right instead of left around the town square:

Ben's voice roared and roared. Queenie moved again, her feet began to clop-clop steadily again, and at once Ben hushed. Luster looked quickly back over his shoulder, then he drove on. The broken flower drooped over Ben's fist and his eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered place (199).

The Benjy section's most important theme is its staging of the human consciousness' basic need to arrange its world, and most significantly its arbitrary, desperate and even pathetic nature.

Whereas Benjy's world contains a dearth of interpretation, Quentin's world has too much. His linear time is completely ridden through with mythical abstractions. His endless brooding is but Benjy's moan become articulate though no more rational. Reality for Quentin is

primarily change, time's slow emaciation and attrition of family honor and things held dear. Change figures most importantly in regards to the sexual identity of his sister Caddy, and his interpretations are designed to create a sense of permanence in which change is eliminated. Caddy's development from child to adolescent and her subsequent loss of virginity epitomizes that change which, in Quentin's mind, is the essence of confusion:

Until after the honeysuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey halflight where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form from antic and perverse mocking without relevance inherent themselves with the denial of the significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who.

Against this vision of boundless impression, but troubling formlessness, Quentin invents a myth of incest between himself and Caddy. It is a way of preserving things in a moment of twilight – an idea of a golden age and also a condition of light – a vague, hazy time that makes it easier to ignore the passage of time. Quentin refers to twilight as “that quality of light as if time really had stopped for awhile” (107). In his most agonizing recollections of Caddy, he sees her at twilight sitting in the cleansing waters of the branch and surrounded by the scent of honeysuckle, and the three main elements of the scene: twilight, the water, and the honeysuckle take on an obsessive significance for Quentin himself and become recurrent themes in his section. The honeysuckle assuredly represents Caddy's sexuality that is a major component of Quentin's dream world that consists of living in a cocoon of stillness and plenitude.

Quentin's shadowy, hallucinatory being stems from his relationship to time; his memories constantly overtake his present so that his consciousness is neither completely in the

now or in the past. He not only thinks in a removed way from his reality, but he takes ritualistic actions in order to bolster and concretize his abstract ideas. He fits into Robert Penn Warren's statement that the Post-bellum Southerner's true desire is to change the South "back to its old unchangeableness; to escape from *history-as-lived* back to *history-as-contemplated*; from *history-as-action* to *history as ritual*" (Warren 246). Rene Girard famously has stated ritual does the true heavy lifting of transforming the world into mythic realities: "Ritual is the other half of the mythic statement. When myths speak only of the absolute reality, rituals ground it in the relative" (Girard 37). Michael Millgate notes,

Whenever Quentin acts, his concern is for the act's significance as a gesture rather than its practical efficacy. He seeks quixotically for occasions to fight in defense of his sister's honor, knowing in advance that he will be beaten, and concerned in retrospect only that he has performed the act in its ritualistic and symbolic aspects" (Millgate 298).

It is the fight with Gerald Bland which reveals most clearly the degree to which Quentin's obsessions have divorced him from actuality since throughout the struggle it is the remembered fight with Dalton Ames which remains for Quentin the superior reality. The mythographer Jonathan Z. Smith makes a relevant point about ritual:

Ritual is above all, an assertion of difference...Ritual creates a controlled environment where the variables and contingencies of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are (qtd. in Doty 428).

Obviously Quentin's performances are attempts to escape his debilitated present into synchronic time. Quentin is Faulkner's most time obsessed character and the one who is the

most cut off from free, decisive action or contemplation of the future. Jean Paul Sartre has Quentin in mind when commenting:

Such is the nature of Faulkner's time. This unspeakable present, leaking at every seam, these sudden invasions of the past...The past takes on a sort of super-reality; its contours are hard and clear, unchangeable. The present, nameless and fleeting, is helpless before it. It is full of gaps, and, through these gaps, things of the past, fixed, motionless and silent as judges or glances, come to invade it. Faulkner's monologues remind of aeroplane trips full of airpockets. At each pocket, the hero's consciousness "sinks back into the past" and rises only to sink back again. The present is not; it becomes. Everything *was* (Sartre 267).

Quentin's obsession with time is a largely due to the influence of his perverse and sadistic father who fails Quentin utterly "in all his roles of progenitor, confessor and counselor" (Kartiganer 304). Quentin's mind recalls his father almost as much as it does Caddy. Over and over Quentin's brain stumbles back upon his father's ideas on family tradition, honor, and most of all the workings of time. In Cambridge, when Quentin first enters the watchmaker's shop he recalls "Father said clocks slay time. He said time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life" (54). Mr. Compson espouses the Bergsonian distinction between external time and inner duration. However, for the Southern patriarch there is neither expectation of the future nor any idea of progress or human becoming. As we will see below, Mr. Compson believes that time cannot be conquered (it is a ravenous beast eating away at pure substances slowly becoming impure over time) *but may be momentarily held at bay by inner duration or interior musings* on one's "climactic experiences" (76).

Quentin's father does not believe any human action may transcend time, create earthly renewal nor hint at eternity. For him, all life is passive, and time is just a wearing away of hope and desire. As Warwick Wadlington puts it, for Mr. Compson "crisis becomes attrition and passion is a banal repetition." (Wadlington 361). He is a congregational minister but tells Quentin "Christ was not crucified but worn away by the minute clicking of time's little wheels" (79). When presenting Quentin with his grandfather's watch he makes his most telling statement about time:

I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; its rather excruciatingly apt that you will use it to gain the *reductio ad absurdum* of all human experience which can fit your individual needs no better than it fitted his or his father's. I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you may forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it. Because no battle is ever won he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools (97).

Mr. Compson is encouraging his son to daydream and escape to subjective experience, but ultimately warns that this will never hold back time's eroding, mechanical progression. Not long after this Quentin remembers his father saying "man is the sum of his climactic experiences...Man the sum of what have you. A problem in impure properties carried tediously to an unvarying nil: stalemate of dust and desire" (76; the ellipsis is Mr. Compson's). For Mr. Compson there is no escape from time's entropic erosion of lineage, culture, and the meaningful moments of a man's life. He refers to man having "climactic experiences" (in his inner life) but then in the same breath negates their import and gives them an arbitrary connotation by calling them "what have you." After all how can man truly have decisive moments if "no battle is ever

fought” ? Mr. Compson believes external time and clock time are not a real part of the human experience (as the reference to *reduction ad absurdum* indicates) but that time is still an external force that carries what was once pure to a void of dust. External time wears away all hope and longing until it is buried in the mausoleum of entropic attrition. Thus Quentin breaks his watch and withdraws into his own mind where events and sensations exist statically suspended until they suddenly cease to exist at all.

Quentin does not fully accept his father’s diagnoses of time. Quentin’s “romantic idealism is at odds with his father’s cynical realism” (Millgate 304). His search is for a means of arresting time at a moment of achieved perfection, a moment when he and Caddy could be eternally together in the “simplicity of their childhood relationship” (Minter 345). Quentin’s idea of announcing that he and Caddy had committed incest was, paradoxically, a scheme for regaining lost innocence. Quentin seeks to create a new myth about him and his sister, one that can arrest time, concretize their vague feelings, and combat his father’s views on the futility of human hope and desire:

it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity and then the sound of it would be as though it had never been...if I could tell you we did it would have been so and then the others wouldnt be so and then the world would roar away...(112).

Confronted with his father’s despairing views on time and his own impotence (he is easily subdued and embarrassed by Dalton Ames) Quentin is desperate to believe in the power of words alone. Quentin himself is like the three young boys in Cambridge talking about what they might do with the prize money for a fish they neither have caught nor have any hope of catching: “They all talked at once, their voices insistent an contradictory and impatient, making of

unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires become words” (75). Quentin tries to convince Caddy of the reality of his fantasy, not that they have literally made love but that words have a substance more real than bodies.

Caddy does not go along, she does not share Quentin’s idea that words are fully creative (in the beginning was the word) instead of imitators of already created things. This is Quentin’s willful decadence, and is a version of his subsequent suicide “in that it puts the world away, using metaphor as a wedge between language and life” (Kartiganer 334). Indeed, Quentin’s suicide is intentionally symbolic, for he constantly associates it with still water while both Caddy and time itself, in his mind, are always associated with water that is vitally alive.

Tragically, but fascinatingly Quentin’s creative urge has paradoxically drowned out his life force. The symbolic statement of his death is more meaningful to him than having a heartbeat in linear time. He makes his death ritualistic, thus making it symbolic and a concretization of a mythical belief. After Quentin lies to his father about his incestuous act with Caddy, Mr. Quentin recognizes what Quentin is saying is a mythical abstraction designed to resist time: “You wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror and then exorcise it with truth...you are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh” (112). According to Freud sublimation has two parts: repression and (unconscious) creation. Myth then is certainly sublimation. Faulkner here gives a beautiful summation of how myth is a psychic sublimation meant to transform the raw, chaotic, flesh and blood world into a symbolic realm where personal, time-bound narratives leave time and carry the weight of cosmic and universal import.

Due to Quentin’s effete impotency, Jason Compson is determined to avoid the muddled, abstract thought of his older brother. He prides himself on having no illusions about his family

and not being entrapped by certain fanciful, Southern myths. He is determined to be a clear headed pragmatist, and relies on his role as family provider as clear proof of his efficacy and agency. However, in Jason, Faulkner presents us with another human subject that has a detrimental relationship to reality that is engendered by an imaginative construct. Jason, in his desire to be utterly practical and to avoid the wallowing abstractions of his brother and father, seeks to transform time into its most practical modality possible; Faulkner, has fascinatingly created a character who has completely reified time and all the objects of reality. For Jason, in every sense of the phrase, time *is* money. Faulkner probably did not have to look hard to find Quentin's opposite. Quentin's opposite is not Shreve (who is removed from Southern tradition) who still loves history, books and imaginative speculation. Instead, Quentin's opposite is Jason, "the symbol of the New South" (King 223). Jason is a Marxist critic's dream come true, and his reified consciousness exemplifies how a completely, economically rational mind drains the world of beauty, compassion and warmth.

For Jason Compson, placed over the world is an overhead projection transparency with dollar signs attached to everything. He is always making note of the time of the clock on the wall at the country store where he works. In fact, everywhere his eye glances he catches sight of a commercial transaction: from the band setting up to play in the town square to his niece Quentin to the food that his black servants eat. Also, Jason innately understands that monetary value is relative. Its value is dependent upon its relationship to the time involved to accrue a particular dollar amount. At almost every moment he mentions money he invokes time also. He thinks of the philanthropist who "buys himself" (Jason is one of Faulkner's funniest characters) a Chinese missionary: "I often think how mad he'll be if he was to die and find out there's not any heaven, when he thinks about that five thousand a year. Like I say, he'd better go on and die

now and save money” (122). Jason, if he could, would reify faith itself (for it is based on not having all the information), joking that the man is not being pragmatic enough for he is not insured a return on his investment. It would be better to die now in order to find out whether there’s a heaven for sure, before hedging more on that future return. Also, Jason dabbles in that mysterious, nebulous construct that is time congealed into the measurably concrete: the stock market. All of his musings on the stock market and his dealings with his broker are fused with talk of time. Jason’s frustration with his broker is that he is paid to keep Jason abreast of the latest stock reports, but he never reports the numbers in time, thus negating the worth of his payment. When looking at their dialogues one could swear he is not only Jason’s stock broker but his time broker as well.

This type of appropriation of reality and immersion in linear time takes its toll on Jason, for he is frantic, disoriented, and prone to headaches. In *Quentin*, we were shown a certain peaceful calm that contemplation and mythic thought provided; Jason, without any form of transcendence seems almost as frantic as Benjy, trying to take account of all the material events that are occurring.

It seems that some type of transcendent thought allows one to have a true subjectivity. With a belief structure, one does not have to slavishly respond to the outer world’s encroachment at every moment and one can be often be reserved when faced with other’s demands, actions and challenges. The ideal can help conquer the moment. Of course, *Quentin* is an example of a subjectivity cut off from the outer world to a dangerous degree. However, because Jason’s ideal is the fluctuating, violent, commercial world, he has no separation from an idol that is incredibly proximate. Thus, his inner self is compromised and he exemplifies the Foucauldian “subject”, a

human whose consciousness is not at all separate from its historical moment, a subject whose subjectivity has no integrity and instead spills out into the landscape.

Quentin knows that his world is a fable. But Jason does not know that he has created a myth to live by, too. It is that he is the hardworking martyr of his debilitated family. He, however, *confuses* the real and the illusory, and seems unaware that he arranges his own punishment to feed his complex. Standing between him and reality is his need to hold on to two opposing views of himself: one that he is completely sufficient, the other that he is the scapegoat of the world. On one hand Jason considers himself an effective operator, family head, and crafty swindler. On the other hand he nurtures the dream of his victimization, his suffering at the hands of the Compsons, the law, his boss Earl, and even the “Eastern Jews” who manipulate the stock market. Jason and Benjy complicate our understanding of how Faulkner views myth, for it seems that those two men need some type of interpretive lens placed over reality. With our examination of Dilsey, Faulkner’s views on myth become even more complicated.

With “April Eighth 1928” the novel removes us from living inside the closed and sealed worlds of Benjy, Quentin and Jason. From the total immersion of the private monologue we move to the detached external view; from confusing versions of reality we get an orderly, consistent portrait of the Compson family. Dilsey’s difference from the Compson’s existence is starkly drawn just by novel’s changed stylistic form. Her faith in a myth that is not utterly private gives her point of view a sense of normalcy and calm; a sharp contrast from the Compson’s desperate solipsism. The polarities of Dilsey’s and the Compson’s lives are emphatic, especially in the juxtaposition of the Easter service, in its celebration of eternal time, and Jason’s mad chase, or his striving in linear time. Dilsey’s patience is also exemplified next to Caroline Compson’s needy demands.

The chaotic hold that time has on the human mind in the first three sections seems to fade away as we follow Dilsey's work. Dilsey's engagement in meaningful, sustenance - providing action seems to enliven her as her form meets its purpose in her cooking. The clock is a miniscule part of the scene. Dilsey meaningfully has a firm grasp on chronological time, even an ability to understand that her inner time is what regulates the broken clock in the kitchen's ultimate import:

The room grew warmer. Soon Dilsey's skin had taken on a rich, lustrous quality...as she moved about the kitchen, gathering about her the raw materials of food, coordinating the meal. On the wall above a cupboard, invisible save at night, by lamplight and even then evincing an enigmatic profundity because it had but one hand, a cabinet clock ticked, then with a preliminary sound as if it had cleared its throat, struck five times.

"Eight oclock," Dilsey said. She ceased and tilted her head upward, listening. But there was no sound save the clock and the fire (170-171).

Dilsey has a grasp on linear time, without the need of solipsistic, mental constructs. Faulkner clearly wishes to emphasize that Dilsey has a clear grasp of inner *and* external time, but he skillfully illustrates where her source of perspective originates. It derives from her grounded nature, where life revolves around "fire" and "raw materials". Whereas Quentin and Jason seek to manipulate time, Dilsey is engaged in using fire to transform raw nature into sustenance.

Dilsey's abiding manner, her ability to "endure" as Faulkner describes it in the appendix, is embodied dramatically in the figure of Reverend Shegog. He is described as "a meagre figure, hunched over upon itself like that of one long immured in striving with the implacable earth" (177). Yet he transcends this "shabbiness and insignificance" and rises, as one woman puts it, to a vision of "de power en de glory."

To this vision of “de power and de glory” may be contrasted the idea of “the sound and the fury” as examples of how Faulkner dramatizes the human encounter with reality. As opposed to Quentin’s abstraction of time into moments of stasis, the religious imagination embodies a faith and acceptance of life that resists the passage of time by never struggling against it. Dilsey does not struggle against time like Quentin, nor does her time unfold like Benjy and Jason’s with each moment a shock of a new and frightening Now. Her Christian myth involves a healthy conjoining of *eternity and time*: eternity gives her a hopeful sense of the future that allows her to live out an ethical and moral purpose that unfolds in the unity of all time. Dilsey famously states “I’ve seed de first en de last” (181) when referring to the Compson family. Her ability to endure has allowed her to gain experiential insight from both the glory and decline of the Compson family which is of a single, enduring piece in her mind. “Only through time is time conquered” T.S. Eliot states and this applies to Dilsey. In her own subjective appropriation of reality organized by traditional myth, Dilsey sees love as an a-temporal essence that continues to pervade time. This traditional ordering of time frees Dilsey’s ego from having to support itself with its own mental creations. Her religion provides external, communal constructs that provide her libidinal and mental energies proper channels of expression. Ernest Becker states, “Religion allows man to project his fear and desire onto the cosmos where it belongs, instead of tearing those down around him” (Becker 224).

Community is at the heart of the difference between Dilsey’s myth and the Compson’s. Without the support of others with a shared belief system, one’s personal appropriation of reality can become solipsistic or even psychotic. Having others embody our own inner thoughts gives our myth validation and relaxes our desperate strivings for order. The meaning of this need for others to affirm oneself was seen by the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber. He called it

“imagining the real”: seeing in the other person the self-transcending life process that gives to one’s own self the larger nourishment it needs.

However, the novel does not end with Dilsey’s time transcending moment and this gives us a clue to Faulkner’s stance on the overall efficacy of her Christian myth. The novel ends with Jason frantically chasing after Quentin and his stolen money, and the idiot Benjy’s wailing for any type of order whatsoever. Time obviously has not stopped since the Reverend Shegog dropped the good word on the Negroes of Jefferson. Challenging Dilsey’s religious vision is the same sense of time in motion, and of a reality intractable to any mental construct. Also, Dilsey’s mythic system makes no room for her resistance or dissent against her humiliating condition among the Compson family.

Conclusion

Although both novels deal with the creation of myth as a meaning-making device and even a survival technique that holds chaos at bay, each novel differs in how it exposes the arbitrariness of myth construction and internal world-building. The narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* are fundamentally concerned, through the figure (in every sense of the word) of Sutpen with what happened to the former glory of the South. Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve all innately know something quite singular and beautifully tragic happened in the South, but its meaning escapes them. The first three of these story-tellers are seeking reasons for the loss of the Civil War, the loss of a way of life, and why they are at a loss for words in understanding their own makeup. The nebulous aspect of their own conditioning spurs them to know and understand, for their consciousness is tinged with ennui and sadness. However, in *The Sound and the Fury*, the narrators are grasping to understand a world without beauty and vitality, i.e. a world without Caddy Compson. These narrators, whose minds' internal workings we are privileged to glimpse, are not concerned with understanding the course of history, but are concerned with formulating a response to heartbreak and pain. *The Sound and the Fury* very deliberately reveals that these formulations help the narrators order and deal with their world. Therefore, the two novels differ only on a superficial level. Both of them, at their heart examine how loss and pain stimulate a desire to understand and know and this leads to creative, mental structures that may or may not be sound.

Thus, when scrutinized closely, these two novels may have the same theme, which is that the corruption of the self is due to it being denied *pure* knowledge. If we come to see the narrators of *The Sound and the Fury* as all navigating a world that has lost its best qualities, Caddy must certainly represent a vigorous and fertile energy that left the South. Consequently,

both novels are centered around characters making sense of loss through elusive figures who somehow, to the fallen narrator in exile, hold some type of lost plenitude. Faulkner's narrators maybe do have an outraged Platonism, for they can barely make out the fullness of an edenic past, and they understand their fall is one that St. Paul so memorably states in Corinthians: "Now we only see through a mirror dimly." Faulkner's central epistemological concerns about the human condition probably have some type of theological meaning. To Faulkner our human fall is an epistemological one, and the truly vast incommensurability between truth and human knowledge is where faulty communication, misinformation and failed discourse arise. It could be argued that this gulf is also the wellspring of evil and tragedy.

After examining the narrators from both novels we can conclude that Faulkner understood that myth could stifle, shrink and destroy life. However, in the character of Jason we see the problem of modern man: the rational banishment of mystery, of naïve belief, of simple minded gratitude and hope. Faulkner sees a certain power in Religion for it can give hope and keep man from frantically searching for absolutes that do not exist within finitude or seeking to manipulate other men. It holds open the dimension of the unknown and the unknowable, the fantastic mystery of creation that the human mind cannot even begin to approach, the possibility of a multidimensionality of spheres of existence, of heavens and possible embodiments that make a mockery of earthly logic. And in so doing it mitigates the absurdity of material existence. However, religion too can turn into rigid complacencies, reified systems of thought and often may repress vitality in its worshippers. It seems Faulkner, in placing events after Dilsey's church experience, is commenting on the fact that healthy myth still has to live on in time; it has to be a *living* illusion. The ideal myth for Faulkner maybe one that never rests on its

laurels, one that is held accountable by its community so that carefully, its language stays as dynamic as time.

If for Faulkner, our corrupted states involve problems of *knowing*, real salvation would involve a fresh epistemology where subject and object could merge seamlessly in complete communion and understanding. This is, of course, impossible, but love can invoke the idea of a coupling, that through intimacy, understands the other. Faulkner privileges two communities: Dilsey's church with its "power and glory" rivaling "the sound and fury", and the communion of Quentin and Shreve, who make the effort to *live into* each other's perceptions. This demonstrates that Faulkner sees humane community as the answer to our isolated conceptions of reality. Alone, *and* in groups, we perceive in error, but through continual labor, mutual encouragement and love, we can correct each other's faulty and incomplete formulations.

Faulkner seems to espouse a living, mythic consciousness, one that possesses what the Post-Colonial theorist Homi Bhabha calls a "ludic liminality" which could be understood as a communal playfulness that exists on the cutting edge of time. Bhabha calls for a living myth that continually comes back from beyond cultural constructs to be part of "revolutionary time" and to re-inscribe our "cultural contemporaneity" and redefine our human communality. Bhabha's ludic liminality is similar to pure duration for it "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present, *not the nostalgia, of living*" (qtd. in Doty 451). Maybe the correct way to approach myth lies in the forms of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*. These novels, as they move from narrator to narrator, relentlessly correct what has come before. In them there is a playful dance forming a beautiful mosaic of difference, pain and comedy. The best myth may be the one that has incorporated into its structure self-revision during motion through time; after all as Pascal

stated, “to live is to play at the meaning of life.” Faulkner’s brilliant, restless forms are *living*; they are never satisfied and seek to continually grasp at the truth, while humbly calling it failure. In his art, there is a rhapsodic discontent, probing the gloom, finding insight but never staying still.

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