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**NARRATING HISTORY, CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY:
THE POSTMODERN TURN IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S
ABSALOM, ABSALOM!, THE SOUND AND THE FURY,
AND GO DOWN, MOSES**

(Výklad dějin a vytváření identity - postmoderní obrat v románech
Williama Faulknera Absolone, Absolone!, Hluk a zuřivost, a Sestup, Mojžíši)

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

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1. Introduction

The gradual and contestable transition from the modern to what has come to be labeled as the postmodern era has been characterized as unnerving. This transition, it is said, has unsettled and is still in the process of disquieting all areas of human enterprise and knowledge. The term postmodernism encompasses a disputable set of ideas and features; its time frame and applicability to different subjects are also questionable. It is this very aspect of questioning that most aptly delineates the process by which postmodernist outlooks approach the contemporary world. At the core of this questioning lies an incredulity toward any reality and truth. Rather, reality, postmodernism says, is constructed and defined solely by language. This foregrounding of language before the existence of external reality casts a new light on the creation of meaning and identity in the postmodern world.

The modernist endeavor to find the essential core in one's identity disintegrates in the postmodern understanding of identity as a cultural construct that is determined only in relation to its surroundings. Without these relations, be it familial or societal, identity - and for that matter all meaning - bears no substance and faces the perpetual threat of becoming lost. A sense of loss informs postmodern philosophy, and it entails the uncertainty and relativism of all meaning. The contexts that might define an identity are fluid. Modernist texts evince a need to impose some kind of order on the chaos and instability of the modern world. This order would be usually sought in the form of narrative; based on language, narrative is a structure that invents and grants meaning to life. Postmodernism also permits the proposition that narration is the device with which human beings create and frame their histories. History has recently come to be viewed as depending solely on the workings of language: as there is no referent, no verifiable past, history is ultimately a set of stories, and its substance dependent on their emplotment, genres, and stylistic devices. Therefore,

postmodernism obliterates the line between history and fiction, as both are founded on the same structural principles.

As history is discovered to be a literary genre and a product of the imagination, the boundary between fiction and history becomes entirely blurred. According to postmodernist view, human beings now resort to imaginative storytelling to draw links between the transient and indeterminate machinations of the world, notwithstanding the prevalent suspicion that even narratives cannot convey human experience in its entirety. In the growing pessimism of the contemporary world, a realization has emerged that accounts of life are inevitably always irresolute. On the one hand, narratives produce history, and they can invent tradition and identity, but on the other, postmodern perceptions doubt the ability of narratives to finalize meaning. This constitutes the postmodern paradox of the simultaneous reliance on and distrust of language. Postmodern literature reflects on these issues of identity formation, representation and historical relevancy. There are, however, certain literary works dealing with these very same questions that originate in aesthetic theories and movements other than those of postmodernism. These works either betray postmodernist tendencies in content and form or, alternately, can be considered through the lens of postmodernist theory.

William Faulkner's writing in many ways lends itself to analysis within both of the above categories. It goes without saying that Faulkner's novels and stories are, first and foremost, highly modernist. They depict the fragmentary experience and alienation of man in the modern twentieth century world; they create the autonomous, fictitious world of Yoknapatawpha County as a possible alternative to the "real" world; they strive to unravel characteristics that are universal to all mankind; and they are preoccupied with the quest for an eternal "truth", to name only some of the main modernist features of his work. Yet at the same time, there are numerous implications of postmodernist thought in Faulkner's art. It is

the aim of this thesis to identify and enlarge upon the postmodern features in those novels by Faulkner that are in this respect most liminal, oscillating on the threshold between modernist and postmodernist representations of the world : Absalom, Absalom! (1936), The Sound and the Fury (1929) and Go Down, Moses (1942).

This thesis considers the above three texts not only because they are counted among Faulkner's masterpieces, but because they constitute a specific logic: a development of a postmodernist ethos that arises in Absalom, Absalom! and culminates in Go Down, Moses. It seems that Faulkner had modified his beliefs about the culture of the American South as he examined it throughout his writing career. Having portrayed a wholly decayed state of nobility in The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner resorted to exploring the roots of that decay seven years later in Absalom, Absalom!. From the 1920s to the 1940s, these three novels trace the transformation of Faulkner's vision of the Southern tradition. Although Absalom, Absalom! was written after The Sound and the Fury, this thesis examines the novels in the chronological order of the time periods that they depict.

The three novels are first and foremost concerned with the ontology of identity. However, in contrast to the familiar modernist struggle to *discover* the nucleus underlying each identity independent of "reality", the main characters in these novels are preoccupied rather with the *creation* and *loss* of their identities. In the ambiguous, nominalist world of (post)modernity they strive frantically to devise meaning for their lives by fabricating histories and myths that their identities may relate to. These myths involve the land, nature, and irrecoverable, chivalric values. The characters' existence, however, can ultimately be defined contextually, by the societies in which they presently exist. Not only is there no provable, tangible foundation to their existence independent of their contextualization, these surroundings are rooted in human relations. These contexts circumscribe the characters'

identities and condition their fates, which Faulkner presents as inevitable for all born subject to the Southern heritage. His characters ultimately fail in their struggle to escape their legacies by forging new ones, but as Faulkner goes on to show, it is the uncertainties and possibilities of life that give humans the impetus and courage to seek truth by trying to shape the world with their own hands.

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren claim in their book Theory of Literature that modern writers tend to “think of modern man as having shallow, inadequate, or perhaps even ‘false’ myths, such as the myth of ‘progress’.” Moreover, there exists an opinion among these writers that “when old, long-felt, self-coherent ways of life (rituals with their accompanying myths) are disrupted by ‘modernism’, most men (or all) are impoverished [. . .] they have to fill their voids by crude, extemporized, fragmentary myths [. . .]” (192). Faulkner, in the three masterpieces under scrutiny, portrays this human impoverishment and its denouement via loss, and the undaunted attempt of courageous characters to prevent this loss, even by means of contriving false myths. In this way, Faulkner as a Southerner articulates the wider sentiments of his contemporary society, which was nostalgic for the vanished Southern tradition and, perhaps equally, for the universal truths it represented.

Since the eighteenth century, the American South celebrated – and in many ways still celebrates – a unique culture, distinct from that of the North. Southern culture was originally drawn from a client-based agricultural model dependent upon slavery and on a social hierarchy delineated by a patriarchal order and white male supremacy. The Southern plantation heritage gave rise to the rather stereotypical key image of Southern gentility, which has since fostered a nostalgia for the “lost” Southern past. The grand narrative of the plantation system had been transformed into a largely fictitious, romantic plantation myth, fabricated by men in power who had discounted the experiences of the oppressed, and

beholden to the “victim” status resulting from the defeat of the Confederacy in the “War of Northern Aggression.” The Southern cultural fiction was eventually exposed and gradually deconstructed. Although the New South is a place governed by nominally modern cultural and social contexts, Southern conservatives and sentimentalists still defer to the values of their past master narrative.

A famous advocate of traditional Southern culture, the scholar and Conservative political philosopher Richard M. Weaver praised the characteristics of the Old South, such as its past feudal system, the code of chivalry, the concept of the gentleman and an older form of religion devoid of modern skepticism.¹ Weaver attacked materialism and modern bourgeois society of the North, and thus concurred with the Southern Agrarians who denounced the destructive effects of industrialism on the environment and who called for a return to nature in the famous 1930 manifesto I'll Take My Stand. The twelve co-signatory Southern poets and writers proclaimed their belief in the necessity of reinstating an agrarian mode of life in the South in opposition to the industrialization and urbanization imposed by modernity. These Southerners felt that the political, social and economic changes of the modern world posed a threat to nature and humanism. The prophetic vision set forth in the manifesto was idyllic and utopian - part of a larger false myth as described by Wellek and Warren - but their belief in moral universalism, human agency and community characterized the era and region in which Faulkner produced his greatest work.

Faulkner portrays the battle of humanity and individualism against the machines of modernity that encroach on the certainties of a past world. Tainted by the guilt of slavery and ruled by noble ancestors, the Southern plantation heritage as portrayed by Faulkner invokes both shame and pride. In each of the three novels, the modernist world-making narrative at a certain moment gives way to a postmodernist critique of such a narrative by way of

1 Weaver discussed these characteristics in his book The Southern Tradition at Bay (1963).

recognition of its own ambivalence to universal ideas. This thesis aims to study the ways in which these three texts exemplify the process of creating history and identity through the invention of narrative and ritual, which, in a postmodern turn, prove to be inconsequential. It is the ambiguity between the wish to forge worlds and the consciousness of the impossibility of doing so that gives rise to the postmodern moment in Faulkner's work. The concrete study of the works will be preceded by a theoretical section that will serve to explain the working terms of this thesis, namely the main premises of postmodern theories on narrativism, historiography, myth, and ritual.

2. Postmodern Theories on Narrativism and Historiography

2.1. Indetermanence

As stated in the introduction, the multiple and ambivalent definitions of postmodernism attest to its contradictory and indeterminate nature. Ihab Hassan, one of the chief theorists of postmodernism, has developed complex but workable definitions of the term. His neologism, “indetermanence,” proposes to name a distinctive feature of postmodernism. The following quotes will be replicated at some length in order to highlight some of the main ideas referred to in this thesis:

I have used [indetermanence] to designate two central, constitutive tendencies in postmodernism: one of indeterminacy, the other of immanence. [. . .] By indeterminacy [. . .] I mean a complex referent which these diverse concepts help to delineate: ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation.

Some other “current terms of unmaking” are as follows: “decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction, disappearance, decomposition, dedefinition, demystification, detotalization, delegitimation.” This unmaking has had a profound effect on literature, in which “our ideas of author, audience, reading, writing, book, genre, critical theory, and of literature itself, have all suddenly become questionable.” By “immanence” Hassan means “the capacity of mind to generalize itself in symbols” - that is, through language. This characteristic derives “from the emergence of human beings as language animals, [. . .] gnostic creatures constituting themselves, and determinedly their universe, by symbols of their own making” (Hassan 269-70).

The latter statement echoes the above mentioned assertion of Wellek and Warren: in the modern world, human beings construct their own symbols and myths to substantiate their existence. In other words, humans are always in the process of creating subjective histories to meet their desires. In current historiography, inquiries concerning the validity and provability of historical “facts” have become ever more pertinent. The writing of history has become highly problematic, as it no longer possesses features distinguishable from those of fiction. Roland Barthes in his essay “Historical Discourse” concludes that “by its structure alone, without recourse to its content, historical discourse is essentially a product of ideology, or rather of imagination” (153).

2.2. Metahistory

History thus becomes literature. The historian Perez Zagorin designates postmodernism as the “philosophy of linguistic idealism [. . .] claiming that [. . .] there is no extralinguistic reality independent of representations of it in language or discourse” (7). Consequently, history and its meaning depend on the method with which people organize events into a narrative. The essential feature of postmodernist historiography is “narrativism”, which

assigns priority in the creation of historical narratives to the imperatives of language and the tropes or figures of speech inherent in linguistic usage; the fictional stories invented by writers and the narrations fashioned by historians do not differ from one another in any essential respect. [. . .] The manner in which historical narratives are emplotted, the connections they posit among events, and the interpretations and explanations they represent, are thus seen as constructions imposed upon the past rather than being founded on,

constrained by, or answerable to facts as disclosed by the evidence.

(Zagorin 14)

Among the main proponents of this view is the historian Hayden White, whose groundbreaking Metahistory deals with the ways in which events come to be incorporated into historical narratives by being placed into various types of emplotment, by utilizing different forms of argument, and through the application of tropes, all of which correspond to the desirable ideologies a given author wishes to represent. The principal modes of emplotment that a historian employs are Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire, and the tropes that can predominate in a narrative are Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche and Irony (White, Preface x). Events lack any meaning without the utilization of the above designs, for “it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning” (White, The Content and the Form 44).

In the postmodern era, the desired picture of history an individual proposes is transformed into a myth that intends to explain the world by establishing a new tradition. Eric Hobsbawm argues in his work The Invention of Tradition, as the title explicitly suggests, that many traditions are invented in order to establish “continuity with a suitable historic past” (1). However, this continuity is by and large fictitious. A seemingly stable tradition aims to arrest the rapid, destabilizing changes of the contemporary world. Peter Heehs calls the inventors of tradition “mythmakers”. Myth, in his definition, is “a set of propositions, often stated in narrative form, that is accepted uncritically by a culture or speech-community and that serves to found or affirm its self-conception. [. . .] More generally it consists of any set of related propositions whose “truth” is not demonstrated by the working of logos,” that is, “the word whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated” (3).

2.3. Mythistory and Master Narratives

Similarly, William McNeill denotes myth as a belief system, a set of assumptions of a particular group that serves as a tool of self-validation in an era that gives rise to the fragmentation and multiplicity of truths. However, “myth” in McNeill’s definition is the term applied to a given belief system by those individuals or groups who are not its followers, and who have their own “true” beliefs. Since “all truths are general,” it is the task of the contemporary historian to attain “a better historiographical balance between Truth, truths, and myth.” Historians discern truths when they manage to create accounts that are credible and acceptable to an audience that shares similar views. McNeill calls these accounts “mythistor[ies], [. . .] for the same words that constitute truth for some are, and always will be, myth for others, who inherit or embrace different assumptions and organizing concepts about the world” (McNeill 9).

"Mythhistories" arise not only from the imaginative work of historians, but as a conception by a group of people or an individual who seeks to establish a connectedness to the surrounding world. Currently, individual "mythhistories" can be seen as subjective counter-myths confronting the “master narratives” or “metanarratives” that Jean Francois Lyotard ascribes to national and social ideologies, and of which postmodernism is highly suspicious. Lyotard defines the postmodern world view as the “incredulity towards metanarratives,” the totalising stories about history and the human race that ground and legitimise ideologies and cultural practises (Lyotard xxiv). In the same vein, Linda Hutcheon, one of the leading critics of postmodernism, claims that “the postmodern’s initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us”

(Hutcheon, Politics 2). Postmodern literature rejects the totalizing impulse of master narratives by “calling attention to the [. . .] ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline – all those things that threaten the (illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture” (Hutcheon, Politics 86). At the same time, many postmodern texts also call attention to these “masterly discourses” themselves, in order to expose their artificiality and deceptiveness.

2.4. Historiographic Metafiction

Hutcheon coins a working term for the paradoxical method of postmodernist narrative representation, which she calls “historiographic metafiction”. The paradox resides in the blending of the self-reflexivity of metafiction with the invention of a surrogate historiography. Postmodernist texts are aware of their contradictory nature; they legitimize representation as they work to subvert it: “postmodern art openly investigates the critical possibilities open to art, without denying that its critique is inevitably in the name of its own contradictory ideology” (Hutcheon, Politics 15). These texts simultaneously comply with and oppose the notion that representation is transparent; they try to fabricate worlds even though they are conscious of the opacity of such creations. Although according to Hutcheon “historiographic metafiction” does not question whether the past took place independently of our knowledge, it does “confront [the past] with an anti-realist [view] that suggests that, however true that independence may be, nevertheless the past exists for us – now – only as traces on and in the present. The absent past can only be inferred from circumstantial evidence” (Hutcheon, Politics 73). The circumstances are what constitute human identity.

3. Postmodern William Faulkner: an Introduction

As modernist texts, William Faulkner's novels and stories advocate the power of art to arrive at universal "truths". Faulkner had transcribed his world of northern Mississippi into an imaginative, autonomous world with its own people and history. What Faulkner writes about Yoknapatawpha County, however, is not a mere account of events reflecting those of his and his ancestors' time and home. The stories are set in the American South, and as such they describe the troubled heritage of the region and its individuals. Yet the lives and deeds of Faulkner's characters transcend time and space as he creates a myth, as universal to all mankind as the Biblical stories he alludes to in many of his works. To a certain extent, this myth is Faulkner's own master narrative. In Faulkner's universe, history repeats itself and fate is inescapable. His characters struggle to decipher truths about their inevitable heritage. From a modernist perspective, these stories of truth about human nature are eternal, they outlast the author and the historical era that produced them and conquer time to abide as art.

The value of Faulkner's art, however, resides in the fact that it has the possibility of being interpreted and understood in light of the shifting contexts of the rapidly changing beliefs of this world; this is where the universality of Faulkner's work ultimately resides. From the contemporary perspective, the novels Absalom, Absalom!, The Sound and the Fury and Go Down, Moses not only deal with issues that prompt a postmodernist critique, but the texts themselves are self-reflexive concerning issues that have become typical objects of postmodernist study. Brian McHale has identified Absalom, Absalom! as a liminal text, for it "dramatizes the shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* – from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*" (10). This thesis argues that this transition is notable in all three novels to be discussed, for they are all explicitly skeptical about the nature of identity and the possibility of any determinate meaning.

In Absalom, Absalom!, Thomas Sutpen's design to create a replica of the antebellum patriarchal dynasty is essentially charged with contradictions: it is a desperate attempt to both defy and to inscribe oneself into the social hierarchies of the American South. Sutpen seeks to evade an unfortunate legacy – that of a poor white's underprivileged and impoverished life in the American South – by aspiring to reach the top of the hierarchy. This design proves to be superhuman and the motivation too ambitious; the main cause of Sutpen's failure and downfall is rooted in his naivety concerning heritage. His attempt to establish a new tradition fails because it bears no grounding, as it is invented. In the end, his “mythistory” is, as Faulkner shows, overpowered by the greater master narrative of Southern hierarchies. Yet, as the text ultimately indicates, neither is this master narrative grounded in firm, universal truth. Sutpen's history becomes the site of multiple “indeterminances”.

The invention of identity underpins both the theme and the project of the novel. Absalom, Absalom! can be seen as a work of historiography, as it reflects on the process of creating history while simultaneously creating that history through the involvement of four distinct narrators. Rosa Coldfield, Quentin Compson, his father, and his best friend Shreve each create their own “metahistories” of Sutpen's story as they strive to understand it. The base material of Sutpen's life consists of fragmentary events, which each narrator feels must be incorporated into a coherent story that might reveal a “truth” - not merely about Sutpen, but about any individual who dares to take history into his/her own hands. History repeats itself here – these narrators follow in Sutpen's footsteps as they shape history with their own narratives. The “mythistory” that Sutpen strove to establish dissipates between the individual mythic visions of each narrator. Thus, Sutpen's history and identity only exist within the contexts of the narrators' imaginations.

The meaning of Sutpen's history has deep implications for his surroundings and society. Quentin Compson, the main narrator, is perhaps most deeply affected by Sutpen's design and ruin, for he sees his own family's fate reflected in that of the Sutpens'. His at times desperate effort to assemble the clues about Sutpen into viable accounts reveal Quentin's anxieties about his own identity. He tries to impose order on the chaos of the modern idiom by means of his own mythistory, which is also founded on the pillars of the Southern master narrative. Yet as one of the last surviving descendants of the Southern patriarchal order, his fate is determined and sealed; it must be a replica of past losses.

Quentin's predicament is more explicitly dealt with in The Sound and the Fury, which portrays the demise of Southern patriarchy in the modern day American South. As in the previous novel, identity here is seen as inscribed within a vanishing structure. The grand stories about Civil War heroes sustain pride in memories as they are handed down through the generations; they do not, however, have any active bearing on the present, as the days of glory are long past. Instead, the Compson family is disintegrating as it strives to uphold the illusion of nobility. Quentin is haunted by his heritage and feels he must fulfill his preordained role of the Southern gentleman to protect his sister's chastity. He cannot come to terms with the uncertainties of modern times and the unbearable changes it brings forth, and his initial defensive strategy to arrest time is to try to re-implement the obsolete tradition of his forefathers. By disregarding the present contexts of his existence and resorting to a vanished order, Quentin ultimately enters a void, as he loses all connection to his surroundings. At last realizing that he cannot arrest the destructive acts of time and that his fate is fully inscribed in loss, he chooses to relinquish life.

As Sutpen tries to establish a patriarchal dynasty according to a model he has no relation to, and Quentin attempts to uphold this vanishing fiction before it is entirely lost, Ike

McCaslin in Go Down, Moses renounces his Southern legacy at a young age. Similarly to Quentin, he tries to reconstruct the history of his ancestors through conversations with his uncle, reference to the family ledgers, and imaginative storytelling. Horrified by the deeds of his grandfather, and crushed by the master narrative of the Southern social order, Ike repudiates his legacy and, mirroring Sutpen and Quentin, attempts to invent a new identity for himself. He creates a “mythistory” about God's design in America, which evolves into a personal myth, initiated by means of a ritual in the wilderness and further developed by his understanding of Southern history. The new mode of existence he sets out for himself cannot be sustained for long, however, as Ike repeats the same mistake: he disregards the community and the world around him, refusing to acknowledge that the changes taking place have a bearing on his identity. As the eradication of the wilderness parallels the disappearance of the Southern social order, Ike loses all of what once seemed to be the certainties of his world. Entering a postmodern condition, he comes to the realization that existence depends solely on chance circumstances and social relations.

As a modernist, Faulkner reflects on the difficulty of securing any meaning and truth in a world that is alienating, unstable, and essentially inscrutable; as a postmodernist, he considers the legitimacy of constructing history and identity. In these three novels, narrating is a defensive measure against the infirmity of life. The urgency of reading Faulkner's work emerges with the realization that narratives and myths provide a grounding for human existence. Each of the three novels examined in this thesis can be considered as a form of “historiographical metafiction”: each text betrays a tendency for postmodern ambiguity of meaning. This occurs at crucial moments when Faulkner appears to be losing his authorial hold of his narrative of Southern heritage, and becomes ambivalent about the nature of his characters' identities. Faulkner indicates that isolated experience bears no meaning, for life

has to be interpreted in social contexts. Each novel thus becomes self-reflexive on the subject of narrative: each story originates in the seemingly supreme narrative of the Southern patriarchal system, but gradually reveals the impermanence of any such overarching discourse.

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4. Absalom, Absalom!

4.1. Glorifying the Past

William Faulkner, as a native of the American South, was born into a line of listeners and storytellers who passed a specific legacy down through the generations. Similarly, Faulkner's prototypical protagonists are young men who are raised within the parameters of the Southern patriarchal consciousness, which glorifies the antebellum past and the deeds of these protagonists' ancestors. Among the various themes Faulkner explores in his works is the difficulty of attaining adulthood for a young man in the twentieth century, by virtue of its incompatibility with the idealistic mid-nineteenth century world revered by the families descended from Southern aristocracy. These adolescent male characters are raised by their elders to respect and adhere to old Southern aristocratic values such as chivalry, family honor, sexual innocence and strict racial distinction. The impossibility of maintaining these values in a modern world that calls for a radically different kind of existence and re-ordered morality causes frustration and loss as the disillusioned young men, refusing to face their new set of possibilities, instead either grope at an irretrievable past or seek refuge in myths of their own making. Quentin Compson and Ike McCaslin are two such young men who, each in his own way, are constrained by their troubled heritage and its irreconcilability to their present circumstances. While Quentin yearns to restore the old world, at least for his own sake, Ike opts for an alternative mode of existence.

The figure of the ancestral pioneer or Civil War hero who looms over the fates of subsequent generations is present in most of Faulkner's novels. Whether it is John Sartoris in the novels Flags in the Dust or The Unvanquished, General Hightower in Light in August, Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin in Go Down, Moses, General Compson or Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom!, each has a profound impact on their family descendants and

the community around them. Faulkner's family patriarchs watch their plantations, homes and wealth dissipate after the defeat of the South in the Civil War. The families compensate for their lost grandeur by keeping the past, or versions – “metahistories” – of the past, alive in memory and stories. Consequently, the ancestors are turned into legends, heroes and idols of the young protagonists, who, however, soon discover the dark secrets underlying their forefathers' success and consequently have to face the painful truth about their legacies.

4.2. Narrative Method

Absalom, Absalom! is an exploration and reconstruction of one such ancestor's past. It has a dual focus: it works to assemble the history of the Sutpen dynasty and it tries to understand the meaning of that history. Many critics have noted the kinship of the novel's method to that of historiography. Among these, Hyatt Waggoner, David Levin and Cleanth Brooks, for example, have discussed the analogies between this novel's and a historian's reconstruction of the past. Central to this debate is whether the ontological status of fictive and historical subjects can be differentiated, or whether history is to be viewed as a product of the imagination. Even if the past occurred, the evidence is limited to contradictory information. Martin Kreiswirth in his essay on the inconsistencies in “facts” in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha world, “Intertextuality, Transference, and Postmodernism,” states that the “existents” (i.e. events) of the past are “empirically insufficient, incapable of becoming as complete as existents in the present actual world, dependent on frequently unavailable or contradictory data from various textual sources for their ‘constitution’” (114). Absalom, Absalom! is dependent upon precisely this collaboration of various sources to create a picture of the past while highlighting the indeterminacy inherent in any kind of reference and representation. In this, it presents the typical pitfalls facing the historian: distortion and

subjectivity in any narrative design, and the questionable validity of projected versions of the past. Absalom, Absalom! is, to use Hutcheon's term, a form of "historiographic metafiction," which puts "into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality" (Hutcheon, Poetics 129).

4.3. Memory and Desire

More than in any of his other works, Faulkner reflects in Absalom, Absalom! on the difficulty of reconciling one's memories to one's subjective understanding of the past. Memorial knowledge is selective and serves to fulfill certain desires. Each of the four narrators of Absalom, Absalom! projects a personal vision – a "metahistory" – of Thomas Sutpen that most fittingly caters to his/her desired interpretation of his identity. Consequently, their preferences reflect something about their own identities as well. In her study Faulkner's Heroic Design, Lynn G. Levins categorizes each of the four narrators' versions of Sutpen's history according to the classical genres: "for Rosa Coldfield, Thomas Sutpen is the Gothic villain 'out of a tale to frighten children with'; to Mr. Compson he is the Greek hero contending against Fate, his environment, and his fellow man; and to Quentin he is simply a minor character in a chivalric drama, whose participants are his children Charles, Judith, and Henry" (3). Shreve envisions Sutpen as the "absurdly exaggerated 'hero' of the tall tale in folk literature" (Levins 31) of the Frontier humorists. Levins sees the heroic ideal as inscribed in the Sutpen saga, endowing it with a mythical dimension.

In Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin Compson listens to and subsequently participates in the telling of the story of the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, who is omnipresent in the consciousness of the town of Jefferson. Sutpen's story triggers Quentin's need to understand

the mentality of the South in general and to relate his own identity to that mentality. Quentin's discussions about Sutpen with his father, Rosa Coldfield and his fellow student, Shreve, instigate an exploration of the events comprising the Sutpen saga. Quentin moves through the Sutpen story to a painful realization about himself and the South. Furthermore, his interest in Sutpen's history is connected to problems with his own family, whose members seem to make the same mistakes Sutpen had made. Even though the parallels between the Sutpen family and his own are not explicit in this novel, one can assume that Quentin is sensitive to the Sutpen family's fate because of its analogies to his own painful relationship to his sister, which becomes central to Quentin's life in The Sound and the Fury.

4.4. Summary of Thomas Sutpen's Life

A brief summary of Thomas Sutpen's life – the most plausible and discernible version that arises from combining the four accounts - should precede the following discussion of the text. As Levins significantly points out, the inclusion of the chronological list of biographical information at the end of the novel purports to affirm some of the founding facts of Sutpen's story (7). The four narrators regard certain data as valid, and upon these they build their conjectures about the motives behind Sutpen's deeds.

Sutpen came from a background completely removed from the Southern world of hierarchies: his family originated in the mountains of western Virginia. In the year that Sutpen's family moves to the Tidewater area of Virginia, Sutpen, at fourteen years of age, experiences the most shocking realization of his his life, which becomes the cornerstone of his identity formation. On an errand from his father to bring a message to the owner of the plantation which his father oversees, young Sutpen is forbidden by a slave to use the front door of the plantation mansion. Being acutely stung by this humiliation and offense, Sutpen

runs to the woods and hides in a cave, where he tries to comprehend what has happened to him. Here, Sutpen conceives his design to retaliate the wrong done to him, and shortly after runs away to the West Indies. There he works as an overseer on a Haitian sugar plantation and anachronistically suppresses a slave revolt in 1827. As a reward, he marries the owner's daughter, but after finding out that she cannot further his design, he divorces her and leaves her and his two year old son, Charles Bon. He appears in Jefferson and begins putting his grand design into effect: he acquires 100 square miles of land and slaves, builds a mansion, marries into a respectable family, and begets two children: Henry and Judith. Before these two children, however, Sutpen has an illegitimate daughter, Clytie, by one of his slaves. Rosa Coldfield, Sutpen's sister-in-law, is born six years after Henry and four years after Judith.

Sutpen's fortune begins descending from its peak after 1850. His son Henry meets Charles Bon at the University of Mississippi in 1959. Henry is enchanted by Bon, who is wealthy and sophisticated, and introduces him to the Sutpens that Christmas. Bon and Judith fall in love, but Thomas Sutpen forbids their marriage the following Christmas, at which Henry repudiates his birthright and leaves his home with Bon. In 1861, Sutpen, Henry and Bon go to war. Two years later Sutpen's wife Ellen dies. After the war, when Henry and Bon return home, Henry kills Bon in front of the gates of Sutpen's Hundred to prevent him from marrying Judith.

Shortly after, Rosa Coldfield moves into Sutpen's Hundred to stay with Judith and Clytie. Sutpen proposes to marry Rosa, but on one condition: that they test Rosa's ability to give Sutpen a son before they marry. Rosa, in utter mortification and hatred, retreats to her old house, where she shuts herself up in the darkness and wears black for the following forty-three years. Having lost this chance to beget another son, Sutpen "seduces" the plantation caretaker's fifteen year old grand-daughter Milly Jones, but because she has a daughter,

Sutpen rejects her. Wash Jones, Milly's grandfather, who up until this moment had always idolized Sutpen, kills Milly, her infant, and Sutpen.

4.5. The Sutpen Saga: Creating the Narrative, History and Myth

The novel's narrative process shapes not only Sutpen's story, but also the identities of the four narrators. What is at the heart of the book is hearing and telling, an exchange between the various narrators that forms the meanings of the Sutpen family history. Objectively observed facts are combined with imaginative hypotheses. The four speakers, separated in varying degrees by time and by immediate proximity to Sutpen's story, are also victims of his history. We learn from Faulkner that history, or the actions of those who came before, is the heritage of each single identity: "It was part of [Quentin's] twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man Sutpen; a part of the town's – Jefferson's – eighty years' heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed..."²

Quentin Compson is the main listener and narrator of the story, and his understanding and own version of what happened reveal the Southern values he had inherited from his elders. As Faulkner writes, there are two separate Quentins narrating the story: the one "preparing for Harvard in the South, the deep South dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous baffled ghosts..." (5), listening to one of these ghosts, Miss Rosa, telling him her story. The other is "the Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she was" (5).

² William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 9. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

4.5.1. Rosa Coldfield

The novel begins with Rosa Coldfield's charged, hateful image of Sutpen as a man of demonic dimensions and motives. If Rosa's account is to be viewed as a Gothic mystery, this genre, according to Levins, befits her emotional involvement (16). She has been outraged for the past four decades at the "fiend blackguard and devil" (14) that is Sutpen. She clings to the memory of the insult she had suffered from him, as if it were the only remnant of her barely lived life that gives her ghostly self any meaning and identity. She has lived as a shade – neither living nor dead – living a kind of nightmare purgatory. To her, Sutpen is larger than life, endowed with supernatural powers. Although she holds him in deep contempt, she also betrays a peculiar awe for his magnificence: "Oh he was brave. [. . .] with valor and strength but without pity or honor" (19). If not physically, Sutpen had at least seduced Rosa's mind, so that for the following forty-three years she is haunted by the imprint he has left in her family. Considering Rosa's frustration and pride, it is significant that she admits to being conscious of the shortcomings of her narrative: "*there is no such thing as memory: no more, no less: and its resultant sum is usually incorrect and false and worthy only of the name of dream*" (178). Rosa comes closest to voicing Faulkner's, and from a contemporary vantage point, a postmodernist inquiry into historical truth when she asks "but is that true wisdom which can comprehend that there is a might-have-been which is more true than truth?" (177-8). She confesses several times to not having been present at the scenes of some of the events she recounts, for example when Sutpen wrestled with his slaves: "Because he now showed us why that triumph had been beneath his notice. He showed Ellen, that is: not I. I was not there; it was six years now, during which I had scarcely seen him" (29).

At first, Quentin is impatient with Miss Rosa's breathless, incoherent narrative, and he wonders why she has chosen him as a listener. Quentin's father offers him the most

obvious reason – Quentin’s grandfather was Thomas Sutpen’s only friend. Yet Quentin delves deeper : “It’s because she wants it told [. . .] so that people whom she will never see [. . .] will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War [. . .]” (8). Quentin listens to Miss Rosa out of a Southern male’s politeness, but he also listens because as a Southerner he must listen to the tales of spirits that come down the generations. This is a birthright, a custom, and also a curse. “Quentin had grown up with that [. . .] His childhood was full of them [. . .] he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth” (9). Like Miss Rosa, who expresses her grief at not having had a childhood, “since what creature in the South since 1861 [. . .] had had time or opportunity not only to have been young, but to have heard what being young was like from those who had” (18), Quentin was also deprived of happiness in a disintegrating home lacking in healthy relationships.

4.5.2. Mr. Compson

The ironic tone of Mr. Compson’s observations is also characteristic of the conversations he has with Quentin in The Sound and the Fury, although by then he will have resigned himself fully to a defeated and cynical attitude toward life. Mr. Compson assigns most of life to fatalism. Because General Compson was Sutpen’s only friend and confidant, Mr. Compson suggests that Miss Rosa might consider Quentin “partly responsible through heredity for what happened to her and her family through him” (11). Quentin’s father is a detached observer, because he is not directly involved with Sutpen’s story. Nonetheless, he shapes the details that his father had told him into a no less subjective account than those of the other narrators. In fact, throughout his narration of Bon’s and Henry’s trip to New Orleans, where Henry met Bon’s octoroon mistress and child, Mr. Compson concedes that the episode is largely molded by his imagination: “I can imagine them as they rode, [. . .] And

I can imagine how Bon told Henry, broke it to him. I can imagine Henry in New Orleans, [. . .] I can imagine him, with his puritan heritage, [. . .] I can imagine how Bon led up to it, to the shock [. . .] I can see him corrupting Henry gradually into the purlieus of elegance” (133-36).

At one desperate moment, when Mr. Compson finds himself at a loss regarding the real reason why Henry killed Bon, Mr. Compson proclaims: “It’s just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that’s it: they don’t explain and we are not supposed to know” (124). This, it seems, is indeed the gist of the matter, especially from a contemporary point of view of historical knowledge. Quentin's father muses how “We have a few mouth-to-mouth tales we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers and letters without salutation or signature [. . .] just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs” (124). Mr. Compson seems to designate everything to ‘mischancing’. There is much about Sutpen’s story that Mr. Compson finds puzzling, and some of his hypotheses about the events turn out to be wrong. To Mr. Compson, expressing his own ironic, pessimistic and misogynist views is more important than grasping the story itself. He wants the story to fit his fatalistic philosophy, and this philosophy he tries to instill in Quentin’s mind.

Out of the numerous ideas Mr. Compson conveys to Quentin, two become deeply embedded in Quentin’s own philosophy. The obsession with these two concepts, incest and time, is what ultimately destroys Quentin’s life. Mr. Compson offers an explanation of his understanding of the relationship between Charles Bon, Henry Sutpen, and their sister Judith. Henry repudiates his father and his birthright when Thomas Sutpen, having discovered Charles’ octoroon mistress and illegitimate son, refuses to allow the marriage between Charles and Judith. Henry cannot accept the fact that his father had rejected his idol. Later

on in the novel, Quentin alters this theory to understand Henry's deed as a consequence of Sutpen's refusal to acknowledge Charles as his son. At this point in the novel, though, Mr. Compson believes otherwise, and claims that Henry has seduced Judith into loving Charles. Mr. Compson suggests that Henry, as a country boy, was inclined towards violent action rather than thinking, but that he "may have been conscious that his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity was a false quantity which must incorporate in itself an inability to endure in order to be precious, to exist, and so must depend upon its loss, absence, to have existed at all" (118-119). Doreen Fowler, in her essay "Revising The Sound and the Fury: Absalom, Absalom!" discusses the emergence of identity in the two novels, and contends that "identity is represented [. . .] as socially constructed in loss," which is "a distinctly postmodern [. . .] notion [. . .] of the fractured self" (98). Thus, Mr. Compson gives voice to this idea: "In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law [. . .]" (119). In The Sound and the Fury, Quentin becomes profoundly affected by the threat of loss, especially the loss of his sister, which he attempts to surmount by considering incest in much the same way: as a form of protection.

4.5.3. Quentin

Quentin finds it disturbing to have to recall certain aspects of the Sutpen story, because he comes to identify himself with Henry. They both have visible, influential fathers and beloved sisters. They are both brought up in the Southern tradition – the catalyst for their strong sense of family honor. Toward the end of the novel, Quentin imagines the doubling of identities: "So that now it was not two but four of them riding the two horses [. . .] four of them and then just two – Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry [. . .]" (417). The identification

of Quentin with Henry is further enforced by Quentin's deep sympathy for Henry, whose agonizing confrontation with the two people he most loved - his brother and his sister - parallels Quentin's obsession with his sister Caddie. Martin Kreiswirth describes the transgression of textual and temporal difference in the novel in terms of the "circuit of love" that is transferred between the "generalized roles of human relationship" - between father and son, siblings and lovers. In this way, Quentin and Shreve are involved emotionally, as they "become bodily doubled and quadrupled in their narrative transactions with the Sutpens and the past" (Kreiswirth 118).

Quentin seeks out a fairytale vision of the Sutpen history, because incest takes on a kind of acceptance in that deep Southern past of romance and chivalry. In Quentin's mind, the aristocracy of that nonexistent age lived in an idyll that forgave them much, and he wants to justify his incestuous desire. The fairytale genre suits Quentin's romanticism, and supports Quentin's and Shreve's collaborative understanding of the story, in which love is the driving force and pinnacle of all actions. The scenes of encounter between Bon and Judith are almost comically sentimental:

Quentin and Shreve - thinking how [. . .] [Henry] had seen through the window beyond his father's head the sister and the lover in the garden, pacing slowly, [. . .] to disappear slowly beyond some bush or shrub starred with white bloom - jasmine, spiraea, honeysuckle, perhaps myriad scentless unpickable Cherokee roses - [. . .] and it would not matter here that the time had been winter in that garden too and hence no bloom nor leaf [. . .]. (365)

Quentin and Shreve disregard some facts that might be verifiable, for example that it was December when this meeting was supposed to take place, and replace them with details that might screen their fervid desire to ascribe the events to love. As Faulkner reveals, the boys

are embarrassed to show any sign of excitement: “It too was just that protective coloring of levity behind which the youthful shame of being moved hid itself [. . .]” (349). Quentin takes the pains to appear to be wholly untouched by the love he imagines existed between Bon, Henry and Judith, but it is Shreve who mocks the romantic setting:

And the girl, the sister, the virgin – Jesus, who to know what she saw that afternoon when they rode up the drive, [. . .] what maiden meditative dream ridden up out of whatever fabulous land, not in harsh stove iron but the silken and tragic Launcelot nearing thirty [. . .]. It would be June now and what would it be in North Mississippi? What was it you said? The magnolias in bloom [. . .] and the mockingbirds in the moonlight. (400-409)

Shreve speculates about Bon’s knowledge that Judith might be his sister, and suggests that Bon might have viewed incest as a way of stopping time and preserving something precious: “maybe if there were sin too maybe you would not be permitted to escape, uncouple, return. - Aint that right?” (404). Quentin, although, as Faulkner states, “could have spoken now”, is silent, and after a while says he doesn’t know. Shreve has hit too close to home with his inquiries, which he soon realizes: “You mean, it don’t matter to you? [. . .] That’s right. Dont say it. Because I would know you are lying” (405-406). In The Sound and the Fury, it clearly does matter to Quentin, whose view of incest is in fact identical to Bon’s as described by Shreve. This theory goes hand in hand with Quentin’s painful realization that the fairytale ideal has no place in the twentieth century world.

As Faulkner tells us, the same events are repeated throughout history, and the same mistakes and crimes are passed down the generations. Quentin is therefore aware of his inherited guilt, of the fact that “*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 [. . .]" (326). This metaphor beautifully illustrates common heritage. Quentin imagines the interconnectedness of subjectivities: "*Yes, we are both father. [. . .] maybe it took Father and me both to make Shreve or Shreve and me both to make Father or maybe Thomas Sutpen to make all of us*" (326-27). Listening to his father's long monologue about Sutpen and his children, Quentin becomes restless and often drifts into meditations in which he contemplates his identification with the stories he hears. He lives in denial of being affected by the decay of Southern society, but his subconscious speaks to him when Mr. Compson's words become unbearable: "*Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much; I have had to listen to too much, too long. [. . .] I didn't need to listen then but I had to hear it and now I am having to hear it all over again because [Shreve] sounds just like Father*" (259-264).

The metaphor of the ripples that are the continuing effect of any event also expresses Quentin's crucial theory of time. To him, the nature of time is not linear, but a kind of suspended continuum in which nothing that had once existed could ever truly die. Time measured in years, days and minutes is a surface illusion. Quentin is separated by many years from Sutpen, but when he thinks about Sutpen's and his children's lives, the past and the present merge. Physically, the human being exists in measured time, but when he thinks, time ceases to exist. In this continuum, there could be no such thing as *was*, only *is*. Miss Rosa exists somewhere in limbo between *is* and *was*, since she is a living ghost - a direct participant in Sutpen's history and a detached observer of it. She can link events separated by many years in one thought, without recourse to chronology. Quentin articulates the mesmerizing effect of Rosa's storytelling thus: "*It [. . .] seemed [. . .] to partake of that logic- and reason-flouting quality of a dream which the sleeper knows must have occurred [. . .] yet the very quality upon which it must depend to move the dreamer [. . .] to credulity*

depends [. . .] upon a formal recognition of and acceptance of elapsed and yet-elapsing time [. . .]" (22). In Quentin's vision, voices tour through time. When Shreve is told, for example, about Sutpen's hunt for the French architect who is forced to build Sutpen's mansion, the story is one that had been passed down from Sutpen to General Compson, to Mr. Compson, to Quentin, who finally tells Shreve.

4.5.4. Shreve

Shreve's story reaches the qualities of an exaggerated farce. He is the alien reflector, and as such he enjoys the shock value of extremities that come in the form of demons, maidens and outlandish events. His desire is to be outraged at the strange practices of the Southerners, and above all he enjoys the suspense of Quentin's storytelling. He wants to know all, but not at once: "Wait then. For God's sake wait" (270). Unlike Quentin, for whom this dwelling on the past is painful, Shreve finds the South an exotic and eccentric place. He tries to maintain a satirical view of the story, and his mockery often forces Quentin to realize what his native place is like. Shreve admits, "I just want to understand it if I can and I don't know how to say it better." He says that there are no such direct relics of family histories in his native land to remind him "to never forget." He asks Quentin to explain his heritage: "[. . .]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 [. . .] so that forevermore [. . .] you won't be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett's charge at Manassas?" The irony of these questions is rendered even more notable for the fact that Shreve is ignorant about the historical details; Pickett's charge took place in Gettysburg. Quentin's simple answer is that Shreve could

never understand it, for, as Quentin puts it bluntly, “You would have to be born there” (450-51).

Quentin and Shreve are the final narrators of Sutpen’s story, absorbing all that they had been told and letting their imaginations loose to create the boldest “metahistory”. At first, Quentin repeats what his father had told him, but then proceeds to fill in the gaps with his own conjectures, especially regarding Bon’s real relationship to Sutpen. Quentin also recreates many scenes of verbal exchange that had occurred between the various characters. The longest of these passages recounts Sutpen’s conversation with Quentin’s grandfather, in which Sutpen tells General Compson his life story. Quentin’s third-person narrative shifts into a first-person revelation:

Yes, sitting there in Grandfather’s office trying to explain with that patient amazed recapitulation, [. . .] trying to explain to circumstance, to fate itself, the logical steps by which he arrived at a result absolutely and forever incredible, repeating the clear and simple synopsis of his history [. . .]. ‘You see, I had a design in my mind. Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it [...].’

(328-29)

Sutpen’s questioning is a cue for Quentin and Shreve to try and unearth the basis of Sutpen’s mistake. However, in their excitement they let their imaginations lead them astray. Their playful history-making becomes a game, as Shreve, like a thrilled child, interrupts Quentin with the words “you wait. Let me play a while now” (349). Their “strained clowning” (349), as Faulkner puts it, is after all no more than “Sutpen’s morality and Miss Coldfield’s demonising” (350) – features distinguishing the individual “metahistory” of each narrator.

4.6. Sutpen's Narrative

Absalom, Absalom! takes a critical stance toward master narratives, in this case that of patriarchal order, by “means of a subtext that investigates and demystifies the cultural structuring of subjectivity and meaning” (Fowler 98). Sutpen is born “into cultural meanings” (Fowler 98), on the one hand established by his surroundings and on the other articulated by the four narrators of the novel. His ‘birth’ is twofold: he recognizes his place in the world on the day he is dismissed from the front door of the mansion, and he decides to play with pre-determined cultural meanings. Sutpen himself is a victim of cultural fictions, as he lets them serve as the backbone for his design. He embraces the narrative of patriarchy. Sutpen’s grand design fails, however, rendering it impossible for others to comprehend the actual meaning of his plan.

It is not clear whether Sutpen wanted to avenge himself for the wrong done to him as a young boy by attaining the means to reciprocate in kind upon whomever might come knocking at his door, or to actually fight the unjust, hierarchical social order of the South by trying to prove that the human will is stronger than a prescribed set of rules. In the former case, Sutpen would be conforming to the rules of society and repeating history; in the latter, he would change the course of history profoundly. In turning his own son Charles Bon away from his house, though, and in dismissing all others who did not fit into his plan, he only managed to inscribe upon himself the cursed fate of the Southerner he sought to avoid. Sutpen’s narrative of individualism and ambition subdues human interaction, and therefore his identity is unidentifiable. What is left to be interpreted is the void of his endeavors.³

3 Dirk Kuyk, Jr. states in his book Sutpen's Design: Interpreting Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! that most critics believe that Sutpen attempted to build a dynasty with the full intention of achieving and replicating patriarchal power within the Tidewater pattern (6).

As some critics have argued⁴, Sutpen is actually guilty of nothing more than innocence, as he naively believes that he can replicate an unfamiliar social order and take his imagined place within it. Furthermore, he is unaware and heedless of the consequences of his actions. As Winifred F. Bevilacqua asserts, for Sutpen “to enter history means taking possession of an historical identity, emerging from nothingness and achieving those things – marriage, family, children, a place in the aristocracy – which create temporal linearity” (258). As a result, Sutpen is “entrapped in his narrative” which misleads him, creating a “false belief that he can shape history without in turn being shaped by it” (Bevilacqua 260). Even Quentin admits that “his trouble was innocence” (274).

Toward the end of the novel, Quentin begins to understand that it is the lack of compassion for and even the brutalization of fellow human beings that is symptomatic of the South and symbolized by Sutpen’s ruthless treatment of his family and acquaintances. Sutpen’s rejection of the members of the family he has created—his son Charles Bon, his wife Ellen, his mistress Millie and her child with him, his bride Rosa—brings Sutpen to a violent end just as the same crime had brought the Old South to a violent end. Like King David in the Biblical story from which Faulkner derived the title of the novel, Sutpen rises through his own power to a high status among men, breaks the moral law and brings suffering upon his children.

The absence of motive in Sutpen’s story can only be balanced out with memories. Lee Anne Fennell claims in her essay “Unquiet Ghosts: Memory and Determinism in Faulkner” that memory has the power “to transcend death and loss,” because “it is largely through memory’s process of selectivity and reconstruction of the past that one’s identity is formed” (30-31). Ultimately, the urgency of factual events loses its hold on the narrative, as

4 For example, Cleanth Brooks in “History and the Sense of Tragic” and Doreen Fowler in “Revising The Sound and the Fury: Absalom, Absalom! and Faulkner’s Postmodern Turn”.

imagination takes over. What few tangible vestiges remain – the letter from Bon to Judith, the tombstones of the Sutpens, Rosa’s presence and finally, the existence of Clytie and Henry – are enough for Quentin to be able to form the contours of the story. Everything in between is an abstraction, but, as Faulkner states, probably “true enough” (419). Quentin and Shreve become increasingly inventive in their telling of the story, “the two of them creating between them, out of the rag-tag and bob-ends of old tales and talking, people who perhaps had never existed at all anywhere, who, shadows, were shadows not of flesh and blood which had lived and died but shadows in turn of what were (to one of them at least, Shreve) shades too” (378-79). Shreve imagines many shadows: Bon’s mother and her lawyer who connive to blackmail Sutpen for money by sending Bon to the University of Mississippi, where he is sure to meet Henry; the scenes at the army camps in South Carolina, where Bon and Henry were stationed during the Civil War; and the events that lead to Henry shooting Bon at the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred. Each narrator, Faulkner affirms, is forgiven for his “faultings both in the creating of this shade whom they discussed [...] and in the hearing and sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived” (395).

Mr. Compson is likewise aware of the obscure nature of history’s subjects: “we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time [. . .]” (124). The evanescence of the world is poignantly articulated by Judith, whose words have been passed down from Quentin’s grandmother to Mr. Compson, and finally to Quentin. Judith had given Quentin’s grandmother a letter from Bon to keep as evidence of their love. The following words reveal her despair at mortality:

Because you make so little impression, you see. [. . .] you are born at the same time with a lot of other people, all mixed up with them, like trying to, having

to, move your arms and legs with strings only the same strings are hitched to all the other arms and legs and the others all trying [. . .] all in one another's way [. . .] and then all of a sudden it's all over and all you have left is a block of stone with scratches on it [. . .] and after a while they don't even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter.

(157-58)

This would be an utterly pessimistic prospect were it not for the trace of hope in the meaning of the letter: "at least it would be something because it would have happened, be remembered from even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another [. . .]" (158).

Rosa, too, deplors the transience of life, especially as hers was mostly informed by losses and absences; she had never actually seen Charles Bon, but his existence was as intensely felt as Henry's disappearance after the murder:

For all I was allowed to know, we had no corpse; we even had no murderer [. . .] who came and crashed a door and cried his crime and vanished, who for the fact that he was still alive was just that much more shadowy than the abstraction which we had nailed into a box. [. . .] Yes, more than that: he was absent, and he was; he returned, and he was not; three women put something into the earth and covered it, and he had never been. (190)

Peter Brooks offers a more hopeful view of the possibility of reclaiming the past. He claims that there is one moment in the novel when the "time of the narrators intersects with the time of the narrated [. . .] offering the promise that the past can be recuperated within the present" (306). This occurs when Quentin visits Sutpen's Hundred with Rosa and encounters Henry, who has returned home to die. For Quentin, this experience borders on the traumatic, not only because he is forced to confront a material reflection of his own identity in Henry's

physical presence, but because at this moment Quentin actually enters the Sutpen history. The past can never rest, and Quentin is left with “Nevermore of peace” (465).

Doreen Fowler points out that the passage recounting Quentin’s discovery of Henry in the mansion is climactic, for it is at this moment that identity is clearly described as breaking down. “Dissolution and disintegration are denoted by yellow, the color of decay. Described as ‘transparent’ and ‘yellow,’ like his yellow sheets and pillow, Henry seems to be dissolving into his surroundings. [. . .] Henry is neither fully dead nor fully alive, but somewhere in between. As well, in a novel replete with vicarious identifications, Quentin merges with Henry” (105-106). The confusion of the pronoun “he” in the passage discussed by Fowler intensifies the ambiguity of the referent. In this climactic scene, Quentin finally recognizes “that existence is one, fluid, and continuous; and identity and meaning are human constructions” (Fowler 106). In Quentin’s own words, “it was all the same, there was no difference” (464).

5. The Sound and the Fury

5.1. The Sense of Loss

For Quentin Compson, the Sutpen narrative is not merely imaginative play, but also constitutive of his reality. Toward the end of Absalom, Absalom!, Mr. Compson's claim that "there was love" between Charles Bon and Judith kindles Quentin's misery and triggers his lament at having had to listen to too much (259). His very last words in the novel, which fervently try to deny Shreve's impression that Quentin hates the South, are telling of his mixed feelings about his homeland. Quentin's predicament comes to the fore in The Sound and the Fury. Even though this novel was written before Absalom, Absalom! (in 1929), it depicts moments in the life of the Compson family after the events that take place in the latter, 1936 novel, although memories reaching back to an earlier period also infiltrate the narrative. Specifically for Quentin, the chapter dedicated to his interior monologue describes the last day of his life, June 2, 1910 – only half a year after his conversation with Shreve in Absalom, Absalom!. Thus, one may suggest that Quentin's perceptions of the Sutpen family greatly impacted his feelings about his own situation, which are painstakingly revealed in The Sound and the Fury.

This novel also describes the deterioration of a family, which symbolizes the fall of the American South and its master narrative of patriarchy. The world of the Compsons is loveless and dying, for it has done away with human compassion, in similarity to Thomas Sutpen. The adults of the family are lost souls – weak, ineffectual relics of a vanished society. Mr. Compson is a defeated, cynical man who only finds relief in his bourbon. Mrs. Compson is a whining hypochondriac, preoccupied with herself, and neglectful of her children. As a result, their children, except for Jason who is a replica of his mother in his selfishness and self-pity, seek comfort in one another. Since Mrs. Compson singles Jason out

as her favorite child, Jason becomes her ally against the rest of the Compsons. As time forces Benjy, Quentin and Caddie toward maturity, however, the security of their love for one another is eventually also lost.

The basic theme of the novel is the tragic sense of loss, and Faulkner develops it by juxtaposing the childhood of the Compson children with their present existence. The dominant mood of the novel is despair and nihilism, pervading the sections of the book devoted to each of the three brothers, who had inherited this attitude from their pessimistic parents and from the intrusion of reality on their innocent, childhood world. Their sister Caddy's sexual maturity is the force that shatters all of the three brothers' happiness. In a dying family she is the only one who is alive, but ironically it is her willingness to live and to love that causes disastrous effects, especially for Quentin. Through the Compson family, Faulkner shows that it is the loss of love that is the central cause of decay in modern society. Relying mainly on the monstrous, hardhearted character of Jason, Faulkner presents modern man as a self-centered being in a society where commercial values have replaced humanistic ones. Jason is the reality that Quentin cannot accept, for his life is only filled with sound and fury – it is empty and meaningless. Faulkner's evocation of the world in which Jason functions justifies Mr. Compson's and Quentin's disillusionment and despair.

5.2. The Dissolution of Meaning: Quentin

Quentin appears in this novel as an even more sensitive and fragile soul than in Absalom, Absalom!. He had been provided with a particular vision of the world, chiefly by his father, but in this novel, Quentin's disappointment with his own life is more prominent than his disenchantment with the South and its lost values. It is Quentin's feelings about the uncertainties of the twentieth century world that lead him to reject the present and seek the

certainties of a past world. Doreen Fowler discusses Quentin's longing for "a world of timeless verities," which stem from the master narrative of white male authority. Fowler points out that Quentin envisions death as a patriarch – one like his own grandfather. Quentin fantasizes about these patriarchs walking in "a high place", which Fowler identifies as the "transcendence of human limitations" (95). Thus, Quentin sees his grandfather as possessing power over life and death, for "Grandfather was always right."⁵ In Quentin's eyes, Grandfather embodies stability and the endurance of meaning. Quentin desires to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, to acquire the same kind of power with which to overcome his limitations and suspend time.

Quentin's powerlessness reflects the demise of Southern male authority. Mr. Compson and his son are not men of action like their ancestors. Quentin's father has surrendered to alcoholism, wasting his days, trying to avoid his wife and philosophizing about the meaninglessness of life. Quentin is deeply influenced by his father's views, and unwittingly attests to the weakness his father ascribes to all men. Quentin, as shall be demonstrated in what follows, loses his battles with his demons: his sister's lovers, time, and the knowledge of his own helplessness. Discussing the decline of the Compsons, Fowler suggests that "what happened between the first Compson and Quentin is the dissolution [. . .] of the received notion that language somehow represents meanings that exist independent of language" (98). Thus, as in Absalom, Absalom!, Mr. Compson here also argues the emptiness of the notion of virginity: "it was men invented virginity" (97). Furthermore, virginity is only one of the infinite human constructs that make no difference in the world: "nothing is even worth the changing of it" (97). Therein lies the "reducto absurdum of all

5 William Faulkner, The Sound and the Fury & As I Lay Dying (New York: Modern Library, 1946), 194. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

human experience” (95). Quentin gradually becomes aware of the discrepancy between his ancestors' ability to represent stable meanings and his own battle with volatile reality.

5.3. Fatalism: Mr. Compson

Quentin's attempt to stop the intrusion of real life is partly inspired by his father's attitude about human existence: “Father was teaching us that all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away [. . .]” (194). The grand legacy has deteriorated and men have become mere shadows that fail to make an imprint in the world. Mr. Compson's disenchantment with life and the society he lives in drives him to cynicism and, ultimately, alcoholism. As Cleanth Brooks notes, Mr. Compson “has ceased finally to believe in the values of the inherited tradition. He is a fatalist and something of an easy cynic” (C. Brooks, “History” 29). Even though he seems to love his children and to offer them a limited form of understanding, his weak personality renders it impossible for him to give them the security and strength they need. Quentin struggles to remain within his childhood world rather than live in the nothingness of reality that his father presents to him. Furthermore, Quentin fights against this cynicism by trying to hold on to the disappearing tradition.

According to Quentin's father, it is useless to try to impose moral convictions upon life, because reality cannot measure up to such values, and the values themselves are meaningless. Mr. Compson tells Quentin that virginity is meaningless, because the concept of virginity had been created by man. “Women are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature is hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity [. . .]” (135). Like all other human values, virginity is subject to the destructive power of time, which wears everything away by the ticking of

clocks. Mr. Compson advises Quentin not to fight time because “no battle is ever won... 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.” A watch recording the passage of time is, in Mr. Compson’s words, “the mausoleum of all hope and desire” (95). Each tick brings man closer to death, and at the same time wears away anguish. Quentin cannot accept the thought that he would ever feel differently about his sister, and that his pain would eventually subside.

5.4. The Absence of a Mother: Mrs. Compson

Quentin's emotional problems also stem from not having had a loving mother. “...if I’d just had a mother so I could say Mother Mother [. . .]” (190). Mrs. Compson is only concerned with retaining an image of herself as a fragile Southern lady, who, moreover, has been wronged by the Compsons and her own children. She has been cursed and victimized by the “bad blood” of the Compsons and by their notions of superiority to the Bascombs – her kind. She only adores her son Jason: “Thank God if he had to be taken too, it is you left me and not Quentin. Thank God you are not a Compson, because all I have left now is you and Maury [. . .]” (214). Mrs. Compson cries incessantly at her woes, and her “frailty” is ironically commented upon by Caddy herself, who orders her mother to “go upstairs and lay down, so you can be sick” (83). In her resolute, independent behavior and her compassion to everyone in her family, Caddy seems to be the only responsible Compson, until she makes choices that her family condemns. Caddie, therefore, becomes for the sensitive Quentin the object of all the love he would have given his mother.

5.5. The Loss of Caddie

On the one hand, Quentin extols the values of the ante-bellum white aristocracy, but on the other, he also wants to retreat to the more immediate past – the world of innocent childhood. During these childhood years, Quentin feels that he shares with Caddy a special kind of isolation from the rest of the world. When he realizes that this bond is threatened as they both begin maturing, Quentin begins to ignore present reality and keeps his mind focused on the past. Memories of the past take over his mind on his last day. Everything that happens to Quentin on this day stimulates his consciousness, and he relives the entire episode of losing Caddie. As in Absalom, Absalom!, he thinks in abstractions and symbols, and he shifts from present to past quite effortlessly until he imagines his whole existence, even his death, as liberated from the grips of time:

A quarter hour yet. And then I'll not be. The peacefulest words [. . .] I was. I am not [. . .] Shreve has a bottle in his trunk [. . .] *Aren't you even going to open it* marriage of their daughter Candace *that liquor teaches you to confuse the means with the end* [. . .] I will be dead in. Was it one year Caddy said [. . .] Sir I will not need Shreve's I have sold Benjy's pasture and I can be dead in Harvard Caddy said in the caverns and the grottoes of the sea tumbling peacefully to the wavering tides [. . .]. (192-3)

Jean-Paul Sartre compares Quentin's experience of time in his essay "On The Sound and the Fury: Time in the Works of Faulkner" to that of a man sitting in a speeding convertible car and looking backward at what he has passed. This way, the man cannot observe where the car is going, and he cannot see what is immediately before his eyes as he looks backward. The only things he sees clearly are those down the road in the receding distance (Sartre 89). This is clearly Quentin's own concept of time: everything dear to him

has already come to pass. Unfortunately, his attempts to keep his painful memories submerged in his consciousness prove to be as futile as his wish to isolate himself from present reality.

The intensity of Quentin's reaction to Caddie's loss of virginity has its roots in deep emotional problems, rather than loyalty to traditional codes. In the creek scene where Quentin and Caddie talk about Dalton Ames after she has lost her virginity to him, Quentin shows no real concern with Compson honor or with the morality of Caddie's act. It is the loss of Caddie herself, more than her loss of honor, that torments him: "[. . .] do you love him [. . .] Caddy you hate him don't you [. . .] then I was crying her hand touched me again [. . .]" (169-171). Quentin is jealous and anguished, and he reacts by proposing alternative versions to the reality of her act. When he cannot make Caddie say that she had been forced by Dalton, Quentin suggests that he had committed incest with Caddie. Because his proposal of a suicide pact with Caddie is not carried out to its end (although they come close to using the knife Quentin is holding), incest in Quentin's mind offers itself as a road to isolation by another form of death: existence in hell. In reality, Quentin does not wish to commit incest, because it would alter his relationship with Caddie. He only wants to say it, because he believes that the words would turn theory into fact, and that their sin would banish them from the rest of the world: "If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame [. . .]" (135). To his father, Quentin openly confesses the reason of his incestuous wish: "it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity [. . .] 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 [. . .]" (195). None of

these solutions help him to deny reality, however, and his real last resort is suicide, the final dissolution of identity.

5.6. Constructing Identity

5.6.1 Social Contexts

Quentin sees himself as the inheritor of a tradition of nobility, in which gentility, chivalry, courage and honesty are practiced virtues. To a certain extent, his natural reaction to his sister's loss of honor is to retrieve and protect it. Quentin's confrontation with Dalton, however, proves to be disastrous. Quentin's conception of himself in the traditional role of protector of women collapses in the recognition of his own weakness. Dalton is actually a reflection of Quentin's vision of himself: he is strong, courageous and self-composed. The real Quentin does not measure up to the ideal Quentin, just as reality does not measure up to Quentin's romantic vision of what life should be.

There are two other situations in which Quentin seeks substantiation of his Southern heritage. One facet of his identity is defined in relation to his feelings about African-Americans. On the last day of his life, he ponders about the relationship between white and black men, and he recalls his uneasiness when he first came to the North to study: there he had to redefine this relationship for himself. Quentin realizes that identity is a social formation when he reflects that "a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among" (105). That is why Quentin feels comfortable when he assumes the role of white patron, throwing a quarter to a black man at the train station, or leaving his clothes to Deacon, the black caretaker at his Harvard dormitory. This familiar relationship between the races is traditional and natural to him, and helps to define both him and "the other" as social constructs.

Quentin also relates his identity to his surroundings in his interactions with the Blands, the “nouveaux riches” from Kentucky, who in Quentin’s eyes represent the deteriorated remnants of Southern society. The Blands are not of Quentin’s tradition, but they nevertheless boast about their noble ancestry. Mrs. Bland’s concept of a gentleman demands birth below the Mason-Dixon line, and she scorns anybody above it, including the Canadian Shreve. All the same, Quentin is drawn into their company, because they at least partially represent the traditional world he feels he belongs to. He considers the Blands with something approaching Mr. Compson’s irony, but the real irony lies in the fact that the Blands are a closer representation of modern-day, aspirant plantation aristocracy than Quentin’s idealized vision of it. Gerald Bland is arrogant, egotistical, and immoral; his mother is superficial, silly, and prejudiced. In fact, she very much resembles Mrs. Compson. Gerald is Dalton’s crude double, beating Quentin – literally - when the latter tries to challenge him for his disrespect toward the women he sees. Another Southerner and acquaintance of Quentin’s, Spoade, teases Quentin’s ideals: “Oh, [. . .] the champion of the dames” (185). The Blands’ ideas about respectability are actually indicative of the dead society to which Quentin attributes the noble virtues he wishes he could sustain.

5.6.2. Ritual and Suicide

Quentin’s suicide plans and preparations are a ritual that fully reveals the importance to Quentin of the order he has lost. He dresses himself carefully: he wants to die dressed as a gentleman. He leaves behind farewell letters and gifts. He muses on religious allusions to Jesus and on concepts of race. When he thinks of the bloodied tie he would be leaving to Deacon, he identifies himself with Christ when he comments that the “tie was spoiled too, but then niggers. Maybe a pattern of blood he could call that the one Christ was wearing”

(190). Yet deep inside, Quentin is aware of the futility of trying to make any marks in the world, as he comes to understand the meaning of temporality. Quentin's final concentrated recollection before he leaves to drown himself is his father's warning that Quentin is mistaken about the nature of suicide: "you are not thinking of finitude you are contemplating an apotheosis in which a temporary state of mind will become symmetrical above the flesh and aware both of itself and of the flesh it will not quite discard you will not even be dead" (195-6). Mr. Compson explains to Quentin that it is delusional for him to think that he can preserve his pain through death. His father foresees that "you will not do that until you come to believe that even [Caddy] was not quite worth despair." Real despair comes with the realization of the meaning of the word 'temporary', "the saddest word of all" (197). Quentin's father proves to be right: his son cannot live with that realization.

5.7. Postmodern Arbitrary Acts

Like Absalom, Absalom!, The Sound and the Fury represents a transition from modernist to postmodernist poetics. Although many critics have argued that the latter novel still typifies a classic modernist project, whereas the former is the novel that marks Faulkner's point of departure, The Sound and the Fury in many respects reaches beyond modernist thought. In one of the most recent publications on Faulkner's art, Faulkner the Storyteller, Blair Labatt argues that The Sound and the Fury is a novel about inexplicable, seemingly arbitrary actions that barely signify any concrete motive. The events that apparently do take place – Caddy's loss of virginity, her wedding, her divorce, Quentin's suicide, and the girl Quentin's elopement – are in the end inconsequential. In a postmodern turn, it is not the lack of motive but the excess of causes that dismantles meaning in the text. Specifically, Quentin's suicide involves "so many causes" that "none is really essential. All together make

up a total malaise, not much more logical than the mechanism of conventional wasteland despair” (21). On the one hand, then, the resistance to telling a coherent story is a modernist move, but evidently there is more at play here: “Both modernist inertia and postmodern narratives of the arbitrary act are paradoxically very like the atavistic form that Forster labels 'only' story, actions without causation [. . .]” (33). Quentin's death, therefore, is not a triumph over a series of agents that forced him to suicide, but a hesitant surrender to the impotency of his actions and to the absence of those very agents – Caddie, his heritage, and time itself.

6. Go Down, Moses

6.1. Renouncing a Legacy: Ike McCaslin

The story that recounts the life of Isaac McCaslin in the novel Go Down, Moses may be seen as the climactic point in Faulkner's representations of escapism from fate, also attempted by Thomas Sutpen and Quentin Compson. The seven interrelated stories that constitute the novel depict events in the lives of the descendants of the legendary pioneer Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, the founder of both a white and a black branch of a great dynasty in Yoknapatawpha County. Faulkner traces the impact of this family's history on the lives of the descendants, mainly his grandson Isaac McCaslin. Isaac represents Faulkner's prototype of the young man struggling with the rapid changes of modernity in the American South, and in this respect, Ike is akin to Quentin Compson's character.

Both Quentin and Ike are disenchanted with the instability of the modern world, but Ike has no illusions about the patriarchal order of the American South. In contrast to Quentin, who is nostalgic for this vanished authority, which in his eyes represents a form of security, Ike rejects his heritage for it is tainted by the sins of his forefathers. As Quentin tries to define his identity within the framework of his ancestors' ideals, Ike seeks the meaning of his existence in relation to the incorrupt power of nature. Attempting to free himself from the constraints of his grandfather's legacy, Ike resorts to a reclusive mode of existence in the wilderness. As he grows old, however, he learns that the "nature myth" he has lived by is ephemeral, for the autonomous, Eden-like world in which he had once found refuge is slipping away. It becomes apparent, however, that the world he has inherited as a descendant of a plantation owner and slave master is just as finite as the one he creates in its place.

The three stories that focus on Ike's life from early childhood to old age may be considered as the thematic center of Go Down, Moses; they sketch the transitory stages of his life from modernist escapism, through myth formation, to postmodern resignation. The first two stories constitute a "bildungsroman" about the initiation of a boy into hunting and adulthood. In "The Old People," Faulkner creates a typically modernist myth rooted in the realm of nature, which he juxtaposes against the artificial myth of the Southern patriarchal order. In the wilderness, Ike transcends both time and space, and gains a profound religious experience, which presents itself as a possible alternative to the life prescribed to him by the master narrative of the South. This story also introduces the essential themes and symbolism of the following story, "The Bear," which elicits not only an intense and symbolic exploration of the relationship between man and nature, but also a more complex view of Ike's position as a Southerner. After Ike has learned how to return to his sources in the wilderness, he discovers a code to live by, in order to escape the inevitability of alienation from the land and fragmentation of personality that await the social man. By accepting the natural conditions of the wilderness with love and pity, and adhering to the virtues of the heart that inform this code, Ike arrives at the conclusion that no man can own the earth. With this conviction, Ike refuses the inheritance of his grandfather's land, as it is not only stained with guilt, but, as he argues, entirely illegitimate. Thus, the ancient myth of nature inspires Ike to construct a narrative that would invalidate the Southern social order.

Part four of "The Bear" is juxtaposed to the rest of the hunting story, for its abstract and theoretical passages complicate the meaning of the hunt and its implications for Ike's subsequent life. As in many of his other works, Faulkner portrays the relativity involved in interpreting the past. He does this by entering the minds of Ike and his older cousin Cass as they discuss the curse of ownership, tracing its origins from Biblical allusions and European

history, through the institution of slavery and the downfall of the South as the consequence of the Civil War. The conclusions Ike draws from these reflections incite him to assemble his own “mythistory” about God's intentions in America. Ike assigns a role for himself within his own narrative, which entails a counter myth of existence. In rejecting the patrimony of Carothers McCaslin, Isaac endorses his acceptance of the patrimony of nature.

Toward the end of his life, however, Ike gradually alters his condemnatory attitude towards human beings, and becomes less immune to social prejudices. As the wilderness is slowly being destroyed in the story “Delta Autumn”, so is Ike’s moral commitment to the code he had learned in the forest. Thus, the "mythistory" he had once created about his calling to redeem the sins of the American people and his invention of a counter myth come to no avail. Furthermore, the heritage that he believes still defines his social self also disintegrates before his eyes. Ike’s failure to perpetuate his myth and the equal impossibility of reconnecting his identity to the vanishing master narrative of the South are emblematic of a larger predicament, characteristic of the postmodern era: that of the volatile nature of all narratives.

6.2. "The Old People"

6.2.1. Sam Fathers

The two main features of the story “The Old People” are its portrayal of the first steps in the development of Isaac’s beliefs about nature and the land, and the history of Sam Fathers, who imparts a momentous influence on Ike's beliefs. Having been born to a seventy year old father, Ike is placed under the guardianship of his older cousin Cass Edmonds, “more his brother than his cousin and more his father than either,”⁶ who trains Ike to assume

6 William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*. (New York: Vintage, 1990), 158. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

the responsibility of the plantation bequeathed to him and to accept his place in white society. Cass serves as a kind of advocate for the master narrative of Southern society, whereas Sam Fathers becomes Ike's spiritual father, guiding Ike to an alternate mode of existence. Fathers can do this because he is of a mixed origin of races that are, in Faulkner's presentation, essentially pure, or devoid of sin. As Cass comments when he tells Ike about Sam's origins, "When he was born, all his blood on all sides, except the little white part, knew things that had been tamed out of our blood so long ago that we have not only forgotten them, we have to live together in herds to protect ourselves from our own sources" (161).

Fathers is descended from three races: his father's Chickasaw Indian blood binds Fathers to the land, while his quadroon mother's background designated him a slave. Cass states that Sam had been betrayed not only by his father, who had sold Sam and his mother into slavery, but mostly by his mother, "who had bequeathed him not only the blood of slaves but even a little of the very blood which had enslaved it; himself his own battleground, the scene of his own vanquishment and the mausoleum of his defeat" (162). Sam considers himself a Chickasaw Indian, but within the white social structure, his one-eighth drop of Negro blood induces him to take on the status of an inferior black man. Thus, Sam's existence is dictated by the power structures of Southern society. Sam, however, finds a way to break free from this constricting and baseless social hierarchy. He avoids contact with blacks and whites alike, and becomes attached only to young Ike and the full-blooded Chickasaw, Joe Baker, whose position as the last living Chickasaw in the area Sam assumes after Baker dies. Cass describes the moment of Sam's epiphany, when he escaped the cage that was the master narrative of the South: "Then the hot sand or the brake blew into his nostrils and blew away, and all he could smell was the cage" (161). Repudiating society and

its hierarchies, Fathers retreats into the isolation of the woods; Ike attempts to follow his example.

6.2.2. Ike's Indoctrination

For Sam, this return to his sources is easier than for Isaac, who through his white heritage is much farther removed from nature than, as Cass explains, part-African, part-Indian Sam. Ike is therefore indoctrinated by Sam in order to be able to discard the layers of inherited social codes and discover “the things that have been tamed out” of his blood. Young Ike, who is still innocent, faces the possibility of choice between learning the social or the natural pattern of existence. He decides to follow Sam’s code of existence after his overwhelming first experience in the woods at the age of ten: “an unforgettable sense of the big woods – not a quality dangerous or particularly inimical, but profound, sentient, gigantic and brooding” (169). This image of an inscrutable wilderness is continuously evoked throughout the hunting story, until Ike sees the industrialized world in the form of a lumber company encroaching on the last remaining virgin soil in “Delta Autumn”. In his uninitiated state, the wilderness causes Ike to feel “dwarfed” and, “until he had drawn honorably blood worthy of being drawn, alien” (169). The magnificent power of the wilderness poses as an antidote to the corrupt social forces of the South.

From the moment of Ike’s first trip to the woods, Sam teaches him the master virtues of hunting, namely honor and humility toward nature. By discarding the artificialities of society and facing the essential being inside himself, Ike accepts a code of living that is founded on “love and pity for all which lived and ran and then ceased to live in a second”. At the same time, Sam has “absolved him from weakness and regret” (175) for the death of

creatures. This wisdom paves the way for his initiation ritual, which he completes when he honorably kills his first buck, and Sam anoints him with its blood:

They were the white boy, marked forever, and the old dark man sired on both sides by savage kings, who had marked him, whose bloody hands had merely formally consecrated him to that which, under the man's tutelage, he had already accepted, humbly and joyfully, with abnegation and with pride too [. . .] the first worthy blood which he had been found at last worthy to draw, joining him and the man forever. (159)

The tradition conferred to him by Sam Fathers and implied by the other "old people" of the story's title represents a patrimony that supplants that of his grandfather. Ike accepts not only the patrimony of Sam's moral tradition, but also of nature, through "the blood with which Sam had marked him forever one with the wilderness which had accepted him since Sam said that he had done all right" (171).

Aside from practical skills, Ike learns from Sam "about the old days and the People whom [Sam] had not had time ever to know and so could not remember" (164). Fathers possesses an innate wisdom of belonging to the land. As in Absalom, Absalom!, the storytelling tradition in this novel is likewise prominent. Sam's stories trigger Ike's speculations about the meaning of American history. While Sam tells his stories, the old days are transferred in Ike's mind into the present, as if the people involved in these stories were still alive, and the events still waiting to happen. Finally, Ike shifts so far back in time as to imagine that none of the races – red, black, or white – have conquered the land yet, because "their hold upon it actually was as trivial and without reality as the now faded and archaic script in the chancery book in Jefferson which allocated it to [the McCaslins]" (165). This is a critical recognition for Ike, for it destabilizes the narrative of ownership that waits in

store for him. This moment of epiphany effectuates his following actions. By returning to his source, the earth, Ike sees himself as transcending his social heritage and the crimes of his ancestors. He also symbolically annihilates chronological time; what he attains from Sam is the innate knowledge of his blood, which connects the past, the present and the future, and thereby undermines transitory cultural constructs.⁷

As Sam provides Ike with first-hand experience of the grandeur of the wilderness, Cass offers theoretical explanations for the things that Ike witnesses but does not entirely understand. After Sam leads Ike to a spot in the woods where he sees a giant, mystical buck, which Sam calls “Grandfather,” Cass explains the event in terms of spirituality.⁸ To placate Ike's misgivings about having to kill without regret, Cass claims that time and death do not exist. Nothing is created to be cast away, because the earth always wants to create life: “Think of all that has happened here, on this earth. All the blood hot and strong for living, pleasuring, that has soaked back into it” (179). Cass proceeds to say that life is always too short, and that the possibilities of living we do not exhaust during our lifetime “must be somewhere; all that could not have been created just to be thrown away. [. . .] And the earth don't want to just keep things, hoard them; it wants to use them again” (179).

It is this cycle of rebirth that rationalizes Sam's rejection of “weakness and regret” for the death of all living creatures. The hunt is a vital part of this cycle, since the concept of the strong killing the weak is a condition of natural existence. Furthermore, the hunt will be the founding stone of Ike's counter myth. The image of the hunt, however, proves to be more problematic. There seems to be a discrepancy between the idea of hunting as a noble and respectful act belonging to the world of nature, and its representation of man's attempt to

7 Similarly to *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and The Fury*, Ike's story in *Go Down, Moses* also deals with the destructive quality of linear time, and the consequent retreat into a suspended form of time.

8 Cass resembles Quentin's father in that they both provide a philosophy for Ike's and Quentin's growing-up experience. Both Cass and Mr. Compson lead long philosophical discussions with Ike and Quentin, respectively, and suggest to them alternative theories on history, life, and the American South.

conquer nature. This thematic ambiguity is further elaborated in the following story, “The Bear.” Another unresolved issue in Ike's life is that, despite his conviction that society is the enemy that distorts man and life, Ike was born and brought up within society, and therefore he cannot fully relinquish the social code. As becomes apparent, Ike is unable to apply the natural code he has attained to his later life in society, and he fails to have any effect on either the land he tries to save or the society he wishes to rectify.

6.3. Symbolism and Myth

The images in the story “The Old People” evolve into an intricate symbolism in “The Bear” that constitutes the "nature myth". In order to examine the components of Faulkner's symbolism and his handling of myth, it is suitable to consider a possible definition for the terms "symbol" and "myth" in the context of modernist literature. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren state in their book Theory of Literature that the term "symbol" is used in literary theory to denote “an object which refers to another object but which demands attention also in its own right, as a presentation.” What distinguishes a ‘symbol’ from an ‘image’ and ‘metaphor’ is its “recurrence and persistence [. . .] An ‘image’ may be invoked once as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, and may even become part of a symbolic (or mythic) system” (Wellek 189). Faulkner employs both symbolism and myth – two forms of device that Wellek and Warren describe as belonging to “the ‘oblique’ discourse which speaks in metonyms and metaphors, partially comparing worlds, precisising its themes by giving them translations into other idioms” (186).

6.4. "The Bear": Nature Myth

The hunting story in Go Down, Moses, centered on Ike's initiation ritual and the ritualistic hunt for Old Ben, is described by some critics as a "nature myth".⁹ This theory is relevant to the argument of this thesis, for the nature myth proposes an alternative narrative of existence, or a counter myth, that can be seen as discrediting the master narrative of the Southern patriarchal system. In light of Wellek's and Warren's assertion that modernity has caused human beings to fabricate myths to fill in the void left by the lost certainties of life, this myth is specifically pertinent to Isaac, who seeks refuge in it and expounds it further according to his subjective vision of New World history. By way of this myth, conducted through proper rituals, Ike seeks to inscribe himself into his own, personal "mythistory". Wellek and Warren explain the dependence of myth on ritual: "The ritual is performed for a society by its priestly representative in order to avert or procure; it is an 'agendum' which is recurrently, permanently necessary [. . .], like the initiation of the young into their society's culture" (191). This description is directly applicable to Faulkner's story, especially for its correspondence with John Lydenberg's theory, which depicts the hunt as a ritual led by the 'priest' Sam Fathers. Lydenberg argues that a ritual rite underlies the routine hunts the men of Jefferson attend each November. He compares the group of hunters to a tribe, the old bear to a tribal god, and Sam Fathers to a priest.

"The Bear" illustrates how the men of society gather in the woods for a ritualistic pilgrimage that thrusts aside the racial and class divisions of their social lives. Major DeSpain's hunters seek the wilderness in order to uncover their primitive instincts there and regain their purity by 'cleansing' themselves in nature. They respect the rules of nature and

9 The two "nature myth" theories referred to in this thesis are to be found in the essays "Nature Myth in Faulkner's The Bear" by John Lydenberg and "Pride and Humility: The Cultural Roots of Ike McCaslin" by Francis Lee Utley.

accept its brutal pattern by severing themselves from the regulations of the civilized world.

Ike, old enough to attend these annual trips, hears stories from the hunters about

the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document
[...] the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and
hardiness to endure and the humility and skill to survive [...] ordered and
compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest
according to the ancient and immitigable rules which avoided all regret [...].

(183-84)

The only division that exists between the hunters is based on their hunting skills. Sam is the ‘priest’ who prepares the hunters to track the bear down by leading them in the woods and training the dog Lion to bay the bear. Sam has become part of nature, therefore he cannot turn against it by doing the act of killing; he can only yield the instruments of hunting. In this respect, from a priestly figure, Sam becomes a godly figure, rendered almost intangible and greater than life, just like Old Ben, Lion and the woods.

Old Ben is not merely a mortal beast, but a phantom, “epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the little puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence...” (185). The bear is a symbol of the power and inscrutability of nature – he is almost immortal and invulnerable, capable of overpowering all creatures. He haunts the minds of men whose social powers carry no meaning in his presence. Without ever having seen it, Ike had already inherited the ancient bear on his first hunting trip: “It ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it [...] not malevolent but just big [...] too big for the very country which was its constricting scope...” (185). Old Ben's legacy appears as more potent and absolute than that of old Carothers McCaslin. Ike is worthy of seeing Old Ben only when he has divested himself of all man-made tools, namely his gun, watch and compass. His spiritual experience as he

approaches the bear for the first time is a repetition of his first encounter with a mystical animal - the giant buck - in "The Old People". Ike learns to love these animals without "pity and regret" as he comes to believe that they are immortal.

Intuitively, Ike is aware of his special relation to the bear, and thus acquires humility. The mere vision of the bear, as of the giant buck, is a sufficient end in itself for Ike. Yet, because of the voraciousness and false pride of the other hunters, the myth is violated. Initially, they dared not touch the bear for many years, only challenged him and their own powers by pursuing him at a distance. Ideally, as long as they acted with dignity and humility, they could maintain an understanding with the forces of nature. Yet these hunters, posing as "gentlemen" who represent the values of the old South, such as honor and courage, are inevitably cursed as Southerners who had exploited the land and possessed slaves. As Ike comes to believe, all Southerners will remain forever alienated from nature, for they are captives of their own fictive social structures. "Thus their conquest of Old Ben becomes a rape. What might in other circumstances have been right, is now a violation of the wilderness and the Southern land," asserts Lydenberg (161).

The apparent ambiguity of the nature of the hunt is partially resolved, however, by the fact that the actual killing of Old Ben is not carried out by these hunters. Within the order of the ritual, Sam trains two beings to do the deed. In the wilderness, he finds a wild dog, which he sets apart from both nature and civilization. The only other creature who is thus estranged is Boon, the part-Indian "plebeian" with the mind of a child. After Sam trains Lion, Boon takes over the job of looking after him, which also involves sharing his bed with the dog. Ike, contemplating Boon's right to do this, arrives at the conclusion that "That was the way it should have been. Sam was the chief, the prince; Boon, the plebeian, was his huntsman. Boon should have nursed the dogs" (213). As Lydenberg argues, the outcome of the hunt

may at first seem unsatisfying and paradoxical. Reading of the story as a myth, therefore, is crucial for understanding why Old Ben, Lion and Sam Fathers must all die, and why Faulkner chose Boon and Lion instead of “pure” Sam and Ike to kill the bear. Ike and Sam might deserve the honor, because they are not tainted by guilt like the other former slave-owners. Nevertheless, their humility and love for “all that lives” prevents them from carrying out such a vicious act. Boon and Lion, however, are outcasts, “creatures set apart, dehumanized, possessing neither virtues nor vices” (Lydenberg 165). Moreover, Old Ben does not merely represent the wilderness, but he is “the totem animal” that cannot be conquered by men, “but only by nonhuman Boon with Lion, the instrument fashioned by the priest” (Lydenberg 165).

The completion of the rituals, however, undermines the meaning of the myth, for the concluding deaths cause a discontinuity in Ike's “mythistory”. Sam's death is another in a series of losses that shake the foundations of Ike's fantasy and shatter his illusions. Sam performs his magic because he knows that his life is approaching its end; after the victory, he accepts death without any regret. Like Old Ben, Sam dies of his own free will, when his time comes. In this case, too, Boon carries out Sam's orders to ease his dying. Indeed, as Ike observes, Sam and the bear are alike in their supremacy and loneliness: “He was old. He had no children, no people, none of his blood anywhere above earth that he would ever meet again. It was almost over now and he was glad” (206). Similarly, Old Bear is “solitary, indomitable, and alone; widowed childless and absolved of mortality – old” (186). Although Sam's death appears as integral to the the nature myth, it epitomizes the losses of life awaiting Ike.

6.5. Loss and Finitude

Ike senses a “fatality” and the threat of loss in the woods months before the yearly ritual is put to an end. He feels that destiny has begun working: “It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn’t know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too” (217). The contradicting words “humble” and “proud” appear numerous throughout the narrative, and form another seeming paradox. Faulkner presents these two concepts as the two essential qualities of the huntsman. As Ike has been taught to do, the huntsman should feel humility toward nature by bringing himself into harmony with it, and concurrently he should be proud of having achieved manhood, or “the self-control which permits him to perform the rituals as he should” (Lydenberg 166). Sam is able to fully possess both of these virtues, since he is almost superhuman in view of the ritual. The case is different with Ike, which becomes apparent in Faulkner’s depiction of his later years, when Ike cannot balance these two qualities within himself.

As they die, the nature god and the priest leave behind the hunters, who in the end have not accomplished any glorious deed as they had hoped to do. They did not conquer Old Ben, and thus have not gained any new powers. They remain too proud, feeling no reverence toward the wilderness that is slowly fading away and to which they will never return. Ike perceives the reality of his world: “It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet: that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it...” (185). With the death of Sam, Old Ben, and Lion, the fate of the wilderness is sealed, and the lumber company is free to hack away the rest of it.

The last chapter of "The Bear" portrays a disturbing picture that entirely subverts the original import of the myth, and thereby commences the postmodern turn in the story. Boon, who has been left behind in the woods, is driven insane by his loneliness, possessiveness, and the gradual annihilation of his environment. Having killed the mightiest of all creatures, he believes that all the remaining creatures of nature are only his to touch. Ike finds Boon furiously trying to fix his broken gun in order to shoot the squirrels hiding in the tree behind him. It is a devastating scene as Boon hysterically exclaims "Don't touch a one of them! They're mine!" (315) The absurdity of his behavior emphasizes how distressing is the tragedy of the story. Furthermore, Boon's strained effort to fix his gun symbolizes his inability to deal with the modern age. The irony of the scene denigrates the meaning of the nature myth.

At the moment when Boon slew the bear, his pride surpassed his humility. When Ike revisits their graves before he encounters Boon by the tree, he realizes that "there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth," (313) where every particle fuses back into one, in the recurring cycle of life and death. This belief seems to partly assuage Ike's grief and doubts about the outcome of the myth. Yet immediately after, the vision of a rattlesnake overturns Ike's peaceful thoughts of acceptance. The image teems with possible meanings that disrupt the course of Ike's myth. The snake symbolizes the evil that encroaches on Ike's ideal world, destroying in the form of a logging train his paradise that he believes to be America. Finally, it is of great import that Ike calls the snake "Grandfather", for he thus draws a direct link between the evil deeds of his ancestor and the repercussions of those sins on the land.

6.6. Ike's "Mythistory"

6.6.1. The Curse of the Land

Ike is left behind, helpless and redemptive, to observe the destruction of his beloved land. He retreats into a humble mode of existence, paralleling that of "the Nazarene," as he becomes a carpenter and exchanges his estate for a hut to live in. Such Biblical images abound in the fourth part of "The Bear", which discusses the theoretical application of Ike's hunting experience to his subsequent life. After he has experienced a form of "truth" in the wilderness, Ike recognizes how sinful the social pattern is by discovering the reality behind black and white relations, mainly in his own family. His most shocking discovery - that of his grandfather having fathered a child with his own illegitimate, half black daughter - drives Ike to relinquish his grandfather's corrupted legacy.

As Ike discusses the history of America with Cass to justify his repudiation, he considers the reasons behind mankind's failure to revere the second chance granted to him by God. Ike compares the McCaslin ledger, symbol of the history of the South, to the Bible and its articulation of the eternal values of the heart. Ike's interpretation of history relies on the Bible and mainly on the belief in the hierarchy and the covenant established between man and God: "He made the earth first and peopled it with dumb creatures, and then He created man to be his overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in his name" (246). In Ike's understanding, it is man's responsibility to recognize his position within the divine order, which is linked to the order of nature. If he fails to do so, he becomes guilty of pride and lust for power, thus ultimately destroying this order and ruining his proper relationship with God and nature. Ike imagines that God had reserved the American continent as a place where mankind could start a new, innocent life. On the new continent, however, man has failed again, since he repeats the same old sins. God is

nevertheless patient and offers the settlers another beginning, to be commenced by the Civil War, which is meant to cleanse the old sins. Yet again, man disappoints God. This time not only the Southerner is guilty, but also the carpetbagger, who comes from the North to terrorize the region as he is followed by the men who will become the Ku Klux Klan.

Ike concludes that evil had appeared in the new world long before the lands fell into ownership, as if in anticipation of the fall to come: “He saw the land already accursed [. . .] already tainted even before any white man owned it [. . .].” The curse was to be implemented there by the first white settlers, brought “as though in the sailfuls of the old world’s tainted wind which drove the ships” (248). God originally intended for the white race to redeem the land, to start anew. Ike claims that God must have foreseen that old Carothers McCaslin would have the proper descendants, specifically Ike himself, who would serve God’s purpose. Having brought the white man to the new world, God waits for the destinies to unfold. Some people – Sam Fathers, Ike, even Uncle Buck and Buddy, who had freed their slaves – had learned pride and humility not through reason, but through irrational courage and love. Ike thus sees himself as appointed by God to advocate virtue.

6.6.2. The Truths of the Heart

Ike states that God had “His Book” written to be read by the heart. Cass responds by reading to Ike Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, through which he explains the meaning of Ike’s experience: “Courage and honor and pride, and pity and love of justice and of liberty. They all touch the heart, and what the heart holds to becomes truth, as far as we know truth” (284). With the discovery that one doesn’t have to rely on reason but on the heart, Ike believes that he is free to reject his inheritance. Cass, however, denies the freedom of choice, and argues that one cannot escape their fate. Replying to Ike’s assertion that he has been

chosen by God to free the oppressed – the black people – Cass declares that the black and the white races will never be set free from each other: “not now nor ever, we from them nor they from us” (286).

In Ike’s view, slavery epitomizes the final destruction of the moral order. The black man, however, can rest assured of his salvation, since he suffers and endures in his chains. Ike claims that the blacks are better than the whites, since their vices are only those that they imitate from the white man. Their virtues, on the other hand, have been passed down from ancestors who had once still been free and righteous. Ike describes how God has finally turned away from the South after gazing at the rich soil and all the plentiful resources he had once granted the people, who have nonetheless dishonored it all. Ultimately, even the black man has sinned, since freedom has been “dumped” upon him without any preparation. He has therefore misused his freedom, like any human being would. In this chaos, Ike envisions himself as Moses, to lead the black race to a more just world. His repudiation, however, proves to be too passive an act to make a difference.

In this fallen world, there are still a few individuals left who try to resist evil, which proves God’s continued presence in the world and gives hope of his final forgiveness. Uncle Buck and Buddy had tried, for instance, to undermine the social order by exchanging their abodes with their slaves, whom they freed and moved into their mansion. Similarly, Ike’s rejection of his inheritance is an honest effort to justify God’s deeds and a refusal to contribute to the making of a sinful history. In rejecting sin, however, Ike also rejects humanity. Even though he tries to imitate “the Nazarene’s” life, he does not share in the lives of other men, like Christ had done. The values he had learned in the wilderness under the tutelage of Sam Fathers, Old Ben and Lion should have been applied to the world of society, but Ike regards them within the context of the hunt only, and thus he lives in an everlasting

dream of escape from civilization. Ike's withdrawal is in reality an attempt to evade not only the guilt of his ancestors, but also his own responsibilities. His later life becomes one of regression, and in the eyes of most people, Ike leads a poor, useless life, which is evident in the way his nephew Roth and his hunting party treat Ike in "Delta Autumn".

6.7. "Delta Autumn": Ike's Failure and Learning

By the time rendered in "Delta Autumn", Ike has lived within society for over fifty years, becoming more reconciled with mankind with each passing year. He continues to make yearly trips to the woods, which are gradually vanishing. Ike apprehends that the diminishing wilderness mirrors the course of his own life: "He seemed to see the two of them – himself and the wilderness – as coevals, his own span as a hunter [. . .] the two spans running out together" (337). This revelation explains the chief reason why Ike never wanted to own land: there had always been just enough untouched land against which to measure his own fate. At the same time it proves how wrong he was, since he could have been able to arrest the industrial progress had he owned at least some of the land. His dream that the land belongs to all, to be used with humility and pride, proved to be greatly naive as nature finally yielded to exploitation.

In its climactic scene, "Delta Autumn" introduces a new, previously barely discussed issue: the role of women in men's lives. It serves to expose the roots of Ike's errors. Ike had once digressed from his design when he decided to marry a woman. It is not clear whether this was an attempt to at least partially live a civilized life, but it proved to be a failure. He learned soon after the wedding that his wife was only interested in his relinquished property, which she tried to regain by seducing him. Her hysterical laughter after Ike rejected her body is reminiscent of Boon's behavior in the woods; it expresses the madness resulting from

having been dispossessed. Woman clearly does not belong in Ike's set of values, and his marriage was simply a failed test. Yet it was not entirely the woman's fault: Ike never had any faith in human relationships, and this experience only deepened his resolution to dismiss the concept of love. Ike would recognize only too late that love represents simple, essential humanity.

He acquires this knowledge on his final hunting trip. His nephew Roth Edmonds and his hunting buddies mouth a great deal of doublespeak about "does and fawns", which becomes symbolic: Roth has been "hunting a doe", that is a girl, for the past couple of years. At the same time, hunting does is illegal. When the girl visits the camp in search of Roth, Ike's failure to live according to his conviction becomes manifest. Not only is he obviously bothered by the fact that she has an illegitimate child with Roth, but his reaction when he finds out that she is part black is thoroughly prejudiced – an instinct not natural, but socially conditioned. The social man within him ultimately overpowers the natural man as Ike tells the girl to move north and marry someone of her own race. Ike had once imagined the various races blending, but this is too soon: "Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America [. . .] But not now!" (344). The conflict is rendered even more potent by the fact that the girl is related to Roth, herself being a descendant of the black branch of old Carothers McCaslin's family. Ike's exclamation is thus also in opposition to the too premature union of the clan's black and white branches. The tragedy is that Ike had seemed to approach the overthrow of the discriminatory rules of Southern society, but in the end he had nonetheless failed to eradicate all of his own prejudices. Moreover, he had erred in thinking that he could live without a woman's love, or for that matter any other close, human relationship. When he tells the girl to forget about Roth, her response dramatizes Ike's mistake: "Old man, have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you don't remember anything you ever knew or felt

or even heard about love?" (346). It is symbolic that Roth, after claiming that there are enough "does and fawns" and "women and children" in the world, kills a doe, even though it is forbidden. Ike in a way had also symbolically killed - the prospect of love.

Patrick O'Donnell discusses in his essay on "Faulkner and Postmodernism" the ways in which Go Down, Moses revises the truths Faulkner had presented in his earlier, modernist novels. This novel is, according to O'Donnell, "arguably Faulkner's most transitional work, as it oscillates between tragic nostalgia for a lost past of certain, integral origins and the parodic embracing of an indeterminate future in which identity is aggregate, mixed" (32). O'Donnell sees the postmodern turn primarily in "Delta Autumn", which questions Ike's moral integrity when he is confronted by Roth's mistress. Ike's shockingly racist exclamation "You're a nigger!" (340) reveals his paranoia about racial assimilation. Furthermore, she appears at Ike's tent dressed in a man's clothes. Thus,

the granddaughter of Tennie's Jim stands a walking rebuke to everything Ike fears and purports to be; she is a figure of transgression and "crossing" - black and white, male and female, disowned and legatee [. . .] As a figure for an alternative identity to that represented by Ike's separatist white male demesne, she seems to know more about love and "manhood" than Ike has ever learned, or ever forgotten. (O'Donnell 44)

Ike, having lost the security of his surrogate world, appears to fall back on the biases produced by the white patriarchal system, but the girl destabilizes this order too. Ike is thus divested of all the certainties of his existence. Moreover, it is as if Ike has forgotten what he had so fervently discussed with Cass: that one has to maintain their position within the divine, natural order. Perhaps, then, Ike has misunderstood what this order means: that it is in fact rooted in human relations. Ultimately, Ike has forgotten about the truths of the heart.

Faulkner's claim regarding the artist's "truths of the heart" in his Nobel Prize speech in 1950 can be considered in light of Ike's project. Without "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice," Faulkner warned, the artist "labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, and victories without hope and worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars" (Faulkner "Address" 120). Ike's is a story of defeat, for it leaves no scars.

The killing of Old Ben was ultimately not destructive, but it was part and parcel of a myth constructed in order to preserve purity. But since this nature god, his priest, and all the servants of the ritual passed away or disappeared, and as the wilderness faded away, Ike's act of renunciation eventually lost its significance. He himself became one of the "old people" who would vanish and be forgotten. Warren I. Susman claims that "the function of myth is largely utopian: it provides a vision of the future without providing in and of itself any essential dynamic element which might produce the means for bringing about any changes in the present order of things" (244). Such an understanding of myth as fantasy, unable to guarantee successful identity formation, is directly applicable to Ike's own counter-myth of existence. The world he turned to was based entirely on symbols – totem animal, priest, the Nazarene – whose meanings proved to be as transient as the untouched land. Disdaining human beings, he chose isolation and solitude, forgetting his own contention that God gave the people "a new world where a nation of people could be founded in humility and pity and sufferance and pride of *one to another*" (247, italics mine). Ike was apparently only proud of black people – for their suffering and endurance. Yet, as the last story demonstrates, Ike was nonetheless unable to fully eradicate his racial prejudices.

With the help of Sam Fathers, Old Ben, Lion, the wilderness and the hunting ritual, Ike as a "mythmaker" came close to triumphing over the master narrative of Southern

society. However, Ike's inability to apply the code he learned in the woods to the world of society illustrates how isolated and insubstantial this spiritual experience was – as short-lived as the lives of Sam Fathers and the bear. The industrial society, symbolized by the encroaching logging train, is the snake in Ike's Eden, subduing not only the forest, but also Ike's profound, divine experience. Through a postmodern view of identity, Faulkner demonstrates that Ike's myth of regeneration could not be effective, as it made no impression on the surroundings that inevitably defined his being. At the same time, the story deconstructs the master narrative of the South, for its underlying values are put into question. To a certain extent, Ike seems to have accepted the idea that man is constricted by the constantly transforming principles of society. As he had once discussed history with his cousin Cass, Ike argues one evening with his nephew Roth about the nature of mankind. While Roth claims that man's behavior is determined and checked by authorities, Ike believes that men act according to their circumstances. Ike has evidently become somewhat reconciled with the idea that identity is the site of conflicting contexts dictated by society.

7. Conclusion

Since Brian McHale's assertion in 1987 that William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! straddles modernist and postmodernist poetics, contemporary interpretations of Faulkner's texts have been undertaken largely in the name of postmodernist critique. There are many aspects of Faulkner's work that can be viewed from this angle, especially as postmodernism posits a multifarious array of approaches toward culture and thereby raises many heretofore ignored questions about Yoknapatawpha County. Many of the recent critiques thus focus on the marginal, previously unheard-from or, rather, ignored voices in Faulkner's texts: subdued voices of the oppressed, the minorities, and women. These articulate the "cultural traumas" and "experiences of disruption and pain so overwhelming that they defy history to assimilate them," as Susan V. Donaldson states in her introductory essay to one of the most recent editions of The Faulkner Journal entitled "Faulkner, Memory, History" (12).

As meaningful as these peripheral elements are, however, the classic object of study in Faulkner's works – white male supremacy in the American Southern patriarchal system – has also been subjected to new critical scrutiny. More specifically, Southern patriarchy has come to be deconstructed in many of the recent studies on Faulkner. The 26th Annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference in 1999, for example, was fully devoted to the subject of "Faulkner and Postmodernism" and proposed numerous innovative ways of viewing Faulkner's work. The presented essays, which were collected and published in a volume of the same title, serve as guiding sources for this thesis. Two in particular – by Martin Kreiswirth and Doreen Fowler – provide significant points of reference throughout this study, for these two critics have re-examined the mechanisms of history and identity formation in Faulkner's masterpieces in compelling ways pertinent to this thesis. More specifically, Kreiswirth contends that Faulkner's texts employ the conventions of postmodern

historiography, while Fowler discusses the subversive subtext that demystifies the meaning of Southern legacy in Absalom, Absalom!.

Patrick O'Donnell in his essay on "Faulkner and Postmodernism" likewise revises Faulkner's modernist stance with regard to the nature of identity. By contrast to McHale, who argues that the postmodern instance in Absalom, Absalom! was wholly unique and momentary, O'Donnell sees a more persistent strain of postmodernism in Faulkner's fiction. In O'Donnell's words, it emerges as a "critical aftermath" of modernism: "discussing Faulkner in postmodernist terms means accepting the assumption that what makes his fiction powerful and timely is its capacity to resist, disrupt, or exceed both Modernism (with a capital "M") and Faulkner's own modernism – his intended response to the perceived literary, cultural, and historical contexts of his writing" (31). This thesis has taken its cue from the above and other comparable postmodern treatments of Faulkner's work to analyze the author's point of divergence from the modernist poetics rooted in the Agrarian romanticism of the South. To this end, the following working terms are utilized in this thesis: Ihab Hassan's "indeterminance", Hayden White's "metahistory", William McNeill's "mythistory", Jean Francois Lyotard's "master narrative" or "metanarrative", and Linda Hutcheon's "historiographic metafiction".

In Absalom, Absalom!, The Sound and the Fury, and Go Down, Moses, authority is deconstructed on multiple levels: not only does the world of Yoknapatawpha slip from Faulkner's hands into new contexts, giving rise to alternative histories and voices, but patriarchal authority has also vanished, to be replaced by a state of "indeterminance," which manifests itself in the incessant questioning about human agency. Peter Brooks in his discussion of Absalom, Absalom! assigns the demise of authority in the construction of identity to the lack of plot, which mainly depends on motive (292). None of the characters

narrating the story – Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, Shreve, and least of all, Sutpen – possess any authority in the narrative. Quentin fails to attain any control even in The Sound and the Fury, and Ike McCaslin also proves to be entirely powerless in sustaining his imaginary world.

Peter Brooks suggests that Absalom, Absalom! is “the story of the haunting force of absences, including formal absences, in the wake of whose passage the novel constructs itself” (287). The sense of loss is integral to all the texts, and the postmodern moment emerges with the final disintegration of all narratives - “master narratives” and “mythhistories” alike – that are constructed throughout the course of each novel. Not only do the characters recognize the incredibility of their individual creations of identity (“mythhistories”) but there also appears to be a paradox between the texts' keen formation of history and their inability to make that history convey anything stable. There is a gradual transition from modernist to postmodern notions of history and identity formation. A postmodern reading of these three texts must therefore first consider the modernist origins of these texts rooted in their overwhelming desire to create worlds, and then recognize the nascent postmodern contradiction of what Hutcheon describes as “the simultaneous inscribing and subverting of the conventions of narrative,” which is so characteristic of “historiographic metafiction” (49). Hutcheon concurs with Peter Brooks' assertion that although the twentieth century has become increasingly suspicious of narratives for their artifice, there has been “no diminishing of our reliance on plotting, however ironized or parodied” (Hutcheon 49). This paradox is the result of the mass-produced, constant narratives of popular culture that dictate social relations, contextualizing the individual within his/her society (Hutcheon 51). This is the double-face of postmodernist narrative that also reveals itself in Faulkner's three novels.

Sutpen, Quentin and Ike come to understand that their identities are social constructs, determined by and dependent on their present surroundings, which are nonetheless also fragmented and unstable. Thus not only is individuality decentered, but the references on which it relies are fluid, "indetermanent". What on the surface appears as a core structure sustaining the characters' world is the Southern legacy of the patriarchal system, a false myth that signifies both Southern privilege and modernist determinism. The first indication of a postmodern feature in the texts is the characters' subjective creations of identity by means of devising counter myths of origin - alternative structures in the form of historical micro-narratives that disrupt the linear narrative. To a certain degree, the modernist desire for individualism and the invention of tradition is still apparent at this stage of the characters' actions. Nevertheless, they become increasingly aware of the impossibility of discovering their inner selves and their primary roles in the world. They eventually come to realize that their identities are a series of different roles that society demands from them; that the self is the site of numerous, often conflicting discourses postulated by society. Stuart Hall states that "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture." Identity is thus "Not an essence but a *positioning*" (54). Through the failures of Thomas Sutpen, Quentin Compson and Ike McCaslin to contrive new selves, Faulkner inscribes upon these characters the postmodern condition.

The second evidence of postmodernism emerges in the three texts at the moment when the grand narrative of patriarchy breaks down. The aftermath of this event persists in the irony of the characters' having been anchored to their dissolving legacy. This heritage is decentered, reflecting the vulnerability of all narratives. Absalom, Absalom!, The Sound and the Fury, and Go Down, Moses culminate in the dissolution of meaning, rendering all

previous acts arbitrary and paradoxical. Something occurs in all the narratives, but the events are ultimately inexplicable. In Absalom, Absalom!, Sutpen's history is, in the end, ungraspable in its totality. Each narrator postulates his or her own imaginative narrative without any pretense of factuality; they are each conscious of the limitations of their "metahistories". In the end, many of the narrative versions are incompatible with one another. The quality of arbitrariness is also intensified by the employment of streams of consciousness and italicized passages throughout the text, stylistic devices that render the different voices almost indeterminate. As the initial stories dissolve among their various alternative explanations, the articulation of meaning is also discarded somewhere along the way. Quentin is perhaps the only narrator that is able to vocalize the real implication of the history - the trauma of loss - when he cries "I don't hate [the South]!" (471).

The Sound and the Fury also employs stream of consciousness, which blurs the distinctions between subjects, agents, and temporality. Each individual narrative – Benjy's, Quentin's, Jason's and Dilsey's – creates a subjective world (in the last case it is more authorial, as it is conducted in the third person) that invokes the character of Caddy. Yet the elusiveness of meaning is not only effectuated by form, but lies at the very center of the loss around which the story revolves. Stephen Baker states that the text only manages to evoke an "ungraspable Caddy" and the "impossible expression of the Compsons' suffering" (2000). Even the existence of Quentin's last thoughts is questionable – Quentin recounts them in the past tense, as if from beyond the grave. Ike's world in Go Down, Moses is similarly comprised of multiple paradoxes: of the conflicting meanings of the hunt, the noble death of Old Ben undermined by Boon's absurd behavior in the woods, the incompatible values of pride and humility Ike cannot resolve, the futility of Ike's ritual, and the irony of his self-contradiction with regards to the real "truths of the heart".

The wish to impose order on the chaos of the world through storytelling, the creation of alternative worlds and individual selves, and the constricting force of fate that impels the escapism of the characters are the key modernist features that, however, transmute into predicaments characteristic of the postmodern era. Mark Poster explains this historical event:

For what has occurred in the advanced industrial societies with increasing rapidity over the course of this century is the dissemination of technologies of symbolization, or language machines, [. . .] and the concomitant transformations of agency, transformations of the constitution of individuals as fixed identities (autonomous, self-regulating, independent) into subjects that are multiple, diffuse, fragmentary. (44)

Sutpen, Quentin and Ike as “mythmakers” fail in their modernist projects and enter the postmodern condition, as all the verities of their worlds give way to other, equally transitory “mythhistories”.

8. Resumé

Tématem této práce jsou postmoderní prvky v románech Williama Faulknera, a to konkrétně v dílech Absolone, Absolone!, Hluk a zuřivost a Sestup, Mojžíši. V těchto textech je patrný postupný přerod modernismu v postmoderní vize vytváření historie a identity. Jako modernista se Faulkner ve svých románech a povídkách věnuje především fragmentární zkušenosti a odcizení člověka v moderním světě dvacátého století. Dále v nich vytváří autonomní, fiktivní svět kraje “Yoknapatawpha” jakožto jednu z možných alternativ k “reálnému” světu. Snaží se odhalit univerzálně platné lidské vlastnosti, a také pátrá po tzv. “věčných pravdách” tohoto světa. Faulkner přeměnil svou rodnou severní Mississippi na imaginární, autonomní svět, který má své ryze soukromé dějiny. Jeho příběhy se odehrávají na jihu Spojených států amerických, a proto hlavním motivem je problémové dědictví této oblasti a jejího obyvatelstva. Životy a činy Faulknerových postav přesahují svou dobu, neboť Faulkner ve svých dílech vytvořil svého druhu mýtus, který je stejným způsobem nadčasový jako biblické motivy protknuté těmito příběhy. Ve Faulknerově světě se dějiny neustále opakují a osudu nelze utéct. Jeho postavy se snaží rozluštit pravdu o svém nevyhnutelném dědictví. Vzato z modernistické perspektivy jsou tyto příběhy o lidských vlastnostech věčné a přežijí mnohdy jak autora, tak i éru, jež je stvořila, aby se samy o sobě staly skutečným uměleckým dílem.

Hodnota Faulknerova díla však spočívá ve skutečnosti, že je možné ho interpretovat a chápat v souvislosti nejen s modernou, ale i s jinými názory tohoto proměnlivého světa – zde přesně tkví univerzálnost Faulknerova díla. Proto další z možných hledisek, kterými můžeme hodnotit Faulknerovu tvorbu, je postmodernismus. Ze současného pohledu romány Absolone, Absolone!, Hluk a zuřivost a Sestup, Mojžíši nejen že se zabývají problémy, které inspirují postmodernistickou kritiku, zároveň však se samy o sobě podobají díky těmto

motivům postmoderní literatuře. Většina novodobých interpretací Faulknerova díla skutečně vychází pod hlavičkou postmodernistického myšlení. Mnoho nedávno publikovaných studií se právě proto zaměřuje na okrajové, dříve přehlížené nebo spíše opomíjené motivy ve Faulknerových textech: němé hlasy utlačovaných jedinců, menšin a žen. Přestože význam těchto periferních témat je neopomenutelný, hlavním předmětem zájmu faulknerovských studií, to jest patriarchální řád americké jižanské společnosti, je v posledních letech také podrobován zcela novému typu zkoumání.

Kritik Brian McHale označil román Absolone, Absolone! jako mezní text, jelikož “dramatizuje přechod převládajícího motivu problému *znalosti* k problému *způsobu bytí* – z roviny epistemologické k rovině *ontologické*” (McHale 10). Tato práce obhazuje tento “přechod” v díle Williama Faulknera, který je patrný ve všech třech zde rozebíraných románech. Každý z nich výslovně zpochybňuje existenci samotné vlastní identity jedince a možnost určení skutečného smyslu života. Ve srovnání s obvyklým modernistickým úsilím *odkryt* jakési základní “jádro” identity nezávislé na vnější realitě se naopak hlavní postavy v těchto románech zabývají spíše *vytvářením* a *ztrátou* svých identit. V mnohoznačném a nevěřícím světě (post)moderní doby se Faulknerovi hrdinové snaží zoufale nalézt smysl svých životů, a to prostřednictvím vytváření vlastních historií a mýtů, které mají za účel definovat jejich skutečnou identitu. Tyto mýty jsou spojené se zemí, s přírodou a navždy ztracenými ctnostmi. Přítomnost těchto hrdinů však může být vymezena pouze takovou společností, ve které sami žijí. Tyto souvislosti vymezují jejich identitu a podmiňují jejich vlastní osudy, které jsou dle Faulknera absolutně nevyhnutelné pro každého zplozence jižanského dědictví. Avšak jejich rozporuplné postavení právě uvnitř tohoto svévolného symbolického řádu jižanské hierarchie je hlavní příčinou jejich zoufalství. Ztráta jistot minulého řádu věcí vyjadřuje toto postmoderní rozčarování nad smysluplností života.

Faulkner jako skutečný Jižan verbalizuje sentimentální vztah a nostalgii novodobé jižanské společnosti po dávno zmizelých tradicích amerického Jihu. Od osmnáctého století Americký Jih oslavoval a do jisté míry dodnes oslavuje unikátní kulturu, která se mnohonásobně odlišuje od té severní. Jižanská kultura byla původně založena na ekonomickém systému závislém na zemědělství, otroctví a na společenské hierarchii určené patriarchálním řádem a bílou nadřazeností. Dědictví jižanských plantáží dalo za vznik stereotypní představě jižanské noblesy, která podporovala nostalgii po jižanské minulosti. Kastovní řád plantážního systému byl přeměněn do značně fiktivního, romantického mýtu plantáže, vykonstruovaného mocnými muži, kteří snižovali zkušenosti utlačovaných. Jižanská kultura však byla postupně demaskovaná a dekonstruovaná. I když nový Jih je místem, kde vládne moderní kultura a sociální kontexty, někteří jižanští konzervativci se stále uchylují k hodnotám své mocné minulosti, jež žije jen v podobě vyprávění.

Jižanští agráři byli hlavními představiteli takového nostalgického přístupu. Dvanáct jižanských básníků a spisovatelů proklamovalo ve svém známém manifestu z roku 1930 Zaujmu postoj svou víru v nutnost obnovení zemědělského způsobu života na Jihu jakožto odpor vůči industrializaci a urbanizaci vnucené moderním světem. Tito Jižané cítili, že politické, sociální a ekonomické změny moderního světa dvacátého století byly hrozbou pro jejich přírodu a humanismus. Prorocké vize vyznané v tomto manifestu byly skutečně idylické a utopické – byly součástí ještě většího falešného mýtu, ale jejich víra v lidskost a společnost jako takovou je charakteristická pro éru a region, ve kterém Faulkner vytvořil svá nejvýznamnější díla.

Modernistické, kreativní vyprávění v románech Williama Faulknera se v určité chvíli přemění na postmoderní kritiku tohoto vyprávění. Neshoda mezi touhou tvořit světy a vědomím o nenaplnitelnosti této touhy vystižně indikuje postmoderní momenty ve

Faulknerově díle. Tato práce se zabývá způsoby, jakými tyto tři texty prostřednictvím vyprávění a mýtu vytvářejí dějiny a jednotlivé identity. Za tímto účelem jsou v této práci použity následující pojmy: “indetermanence” (“neurčitost/imanence”) postmoderního teoretika Ihaba Hassana, “metahistory” (“metahistorie”) historika Haydena Whitea, “mythistory” (“mýtická historie” neboli “mýtický příběh”) historika Williama McNeilla, “master narrative” neboli “metanarrative” (“nad-příběh” neboli “metanarace”) teoretika Jeana Francoise Lyotarda a “historiographic metafiction” (“dějepisná metafikce”) teoretičky postmodernismu Lindy Hutcheonové. V analýze Faulknerova zobrazení mýtu jsou zváženy i četné definice pojmu “mýtus”.

V románu Absolone, Absolone! je velký plán Thomase Sutpena, a to vytvoření vlastní dynastie replikující jižanskou patriarchální dynastii, ve své podstatě zcela rozporný, jelikož je to pokus vzdorovat proti a zároveň se i vepsat do společenské hierarchie amerického Jihu. Sutpen toužil vyhnout se nešťastnému osudu – životu chudého Jižana – tím, že se pokusil dosáhnout vrcholu hierarchie. Tento plán se ukázal být nadlidským, neboť jeho motivace byla příliš ctižádostivá. Hlavním důvodem Sutpenova selhání a zkázy byla jeho naivita ve vztahu k vlastní dědičnosti. Jeho pokus založit novou tradici ztroskotal, protože tato tradice byla jen výmyslem. Nakonec byl jeho “mýtický příběh” přemožen větší “metanarací” jižanského řádu. Přesto, jak sám text nakonec naznačuje, ani tento větší příběh není založen na žádné pevné, univerzální pravdě, a proto je Sutpenův příběh dějištěm mnoha nejistot.

Vytváření nových, vlastních dějin je zároveň základním tématem i cílem tohoto románu. Absalone, Absalone! může být chápáno jako dějepisné dílo nejen z hlediska reflexe románu nad procesem výkladu dějin, ale zároveň i kvůli samotnému vytváření těchto dějin, a to prostřednictvím čtyř různých vypravěčů. Každý z nich - Rosa Coldfieldová, Quentin Compson, Quentinův otec a jeho nejlepší přítel Shreve – vytvořil svou vlastní “metahistorii”

týkající se Sutpenova života. Každá tato verze prezentuje čtenáři osobní představu vypravěče o Thomasi Sutpenovi. Zaujatým zdůrazněním určitých jevů Sutpenova jednání vypravěči však zároveň odhalují i své vlastní povahy. Základní obraz Sutpenova života se skládá z fragmentárních událostí, které vypravěči chtějí spojit v souvislý příběh, jenž by mohl odkrýt určitou “pravdu” - nejen o Sutpenovi, ale o jakémkoliv jiném jedinci, který by se odvážil vzít dějiny do svých vlastních rukou. Tito vypravěči však sami dotvářejí dějiny, a to prostřednictvím svých vypravování. “Mýtická historie”, kterou Sutpen toužil vytvořit, se nakonec rozptýlí mezi jednotlivé mýtické vize každého ze čtyř vypravěčů. Sutpenova historie a identita tudíž existují pouze v souvislosti s jejich představami. Sutpen se narodil do kulturních souvislostí, které jsou na jednu stranu determinovány prostředím, ve kterém žije, a na druhou vyjádřeny vypravěči. Sutpen se sám stane obětí kulturních fikcí, které jsou hlavní oporou jeho velkého plánu. Přivlastnil si velkou vizi jižanského patriarchálního řádu, aby v něm našel pro sebe nové, společensky vyšší místo, avšak jeho plán selhal, což způsobilo, že ostatní postavy nejsou schopny objevit skutečný význam jeho plánu. V závěru nakonec hrají skutečné události mnohem méně důležitou roli než ryzí imaginace.

Význam Sutpenova příběhu má hluboké následky pro okolní společnost. Největší vliv má na Quentina Compsona, hlavního vypravěče celého románu. Sutpenova zkáza se totiž odráží v osudu Quentinovy vlastní rodiny. Quentinova zoufalá snaha poskládat jednotlivé záchytné body ve věrohodný popis Sutpenova života prozrazuje jeho obavy o svou vlastní identitu. Quentin usiluje o zavedení pořádku do chaotického světa moderní doby, s níž bojuje, a to pomocí vlastního “mýtického příběhu”, který je také postaven na pilířích velkého příběhu jižanské kultury. Jako jednomu z posledních potomků jižanského patriarchálního řádu je Quentinův osud již předem určen: je replikou minulých ztrát.

Quentinův osud je hlavním tématem románu Hluk a zuřivost, jenž popisuje zánik jižanského patriarchálního řádu na americkém Jihu. Stejně jako v předešlém románu se identita jedinců stává součástí postupně mizející společenské struktury. Velkolepé příběhy o vznešených jižanských hrdinech občanské války jsou předávány z jedné generace na druhou a jejich památka udržuje jižanskou hrdost. Tyto příběhy však již nemají žádný aktivní vliv na přítomnost, jelikož dny plné slávy jsou dávnou minulostí. Rodina Compsonů se snaží udržet si iluzi o svém ušlechtilém původu, zatímco se pomalu rozpadá. Quentin je neustále pronásledován svým předurčením. Je přesvědčen o tom, že musí splnit svou dědičnou roli jižanského gentlemana, aby uchránil cudnost své sestry. Quentin se nemůže vypořádat s nejistotami a s neúnosnými změnami, které moderní doba s sebou přináší, a proto se jeho prvním pokusem zastavit čas stává snaha o navrácení starých tradic jeho předků. Nakonec ztratí spojení se svým okolím díky své lhostejnosti vůči přítomným kulturním kontextům své existence a také lpěním na hodnotách ztraceného řádu. Quentin postupně pozná rozporuplnost mezi schopností svých předků reprezentovat trvalé hodnoty a svou vlastní bitvou s nepostižitelnou a nestálou realitou. Když si na konci uvědomí, že nemůže zastavit ničivé následky času a že jeho osud je zcela odsouzen k zániku, rozhodne se vzdát života. Jeho smrt proto není vítězstvím nad řadou skutečností, které ho přinutily k sebevraždě, ale naopak podlehnutím své vlastní bezmocnosti a absencí právě těchto skutečností – času, osudu a hlavně své sestry Caddie.

Zatímco se Sutpen pokusí napodobit patriarchální dynastii podle modelu, který je mu cizí, a Quentin se snaží udržet mizící fikci ještě dříve, než se zcela vytratí, Ike McCaslin v románu Sestup, Mojžíši se zřekne svého jižanského dědictví již ve svém mládí. Ike se rovněž pokusí zrekonstruovat dějiny svých předků, a to prostřednictvím rozhovorů se svým strýcem, odkazů na rodinné účetní knihy a hlavně smyšleného vyprávění. Zděšený hrůznými činy

svého dědečka a zdrcen společenskou strukturou jižanského řádu Ike odmítne své dědictví a podobně jako Sutpen a Quentin se pokusí nalézt pro sebe novou vlastní identitu. Ike vytvoří “mýtický příběh” o prapůvodním božím záměru pro Ameriku, jenž se prostřednictvím rituálu v divočině postupně přemění v jeho osobní mýtus. Nový způsob existence, jenž si Ike vybere, však dlouho nevydrží, jelikož Ike zopakuje stejnou chybu: nevěší si svého okolí a komunity, ve které žije, a odmítá uznat skutečnost, že změny, které se odehrávají kolem něj, mají vliv na jeho identitu. Postupné vymýcení přírody však odráží zánik jižanského společenského řádu a Ike ztrácí vše, co se kdysi zdálo být jistotami jeho světa. V momentě, když si uvědomí, že jeho existence záleží jen na náhodných okolnostech a na společenských vztazích, Ike vstoupí do skutečně postmoderního stavu. Jeho neschopnost zvěčnit svůj mýtus a znovu navázat spojení s mizejícím řádem jižanské společnosti naznačuje mnohem větší problém, jenž je typickým pro postmoderní věk - to jest nestálost veškerých vypravování.

Jako modernista Faulkner reflektuje obtížnost určení významu a jakékoliv pravdy v odcizujícím, nestabilním a v podstatě nevyzpytatelném světě. Jako postmoderní autor Faulkner zvažuje legitimitu vytváření dějin a identity. V těchto třech románech představuje vyprávění způsob obrany proti vetčnosti bytí. Význam Faulknerova díla spočívá v poznání, že všechny příběhy a mýty poskytují jakýsi základ pro lidskou existenci. Každý z těchto třech románů může být považován za určitou formu “dějepisné metafikce”: každý text prokazuje tendenci k postmoderní sebe-reflexi. Toto se odehrává v rozhodujících momentech, kdy se zdá, že Faulkner jako autor ztrácí autoritu nad svým vlastním příběhem o jižanské dědičnosti a začíná být ambivalentní vůči povahám identity svých postav. Faulkner naznačuje, že izolovaný život nemá žádný smysl, neboť život musí být chápán v rámci společenských a kulturních souvislostí. Každý román je z hlediska vypravování sebe-reflexivní: každý příběh pramení v jižanském patriarchálním systému, avšak postupně

odkrývá pomíjivost všech jeho projevů. Všichni tři, Sutpen, Quentin i Ike, selžou ve svých modernistických plánech a vstoupí do postmoderního stavu bytí ve chvíli, kdy jistoty jejich bytí se podvolí jiným, stejným způsobem pomíjivým “mýtickým příběhům”.

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