Truth Be Told:

Problematizing Historical Truth Through Narration in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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William Faulkner er kjend for si rike evne til å kaste lys på dei mest skuggefylde sidene av dei amerikanske sørstatane, og gjennom si intrikate skildring og komplekse forteljarevne tek han lesaren med inn i ei myteomspunne verd der sanninga avhenger av kven du er, kvar du er frå, og kva opplevingar du ber med deg. Desse emna er sentrale i novella hans, Absalom, Absalom!, og dei er sentrale i denne oppgåva.

Dei amerikanske sørstatane var, og er framleis, kjend for sine tradisjonar –særskild knytt opp mot tida før borgarkrigen. Slaveriet, rasismen, valden, og den tydelege klasseskilnaden, ikkje berre mellom svart og kvit, men òg mellom kvite var også vitale trekk ved sørstatssamfunnet. Den økonomiske posisjonen til denne regionen var sterk, mykje grunna slaveriet. Alt dette bidrog til ei samkjensle og eining blant menneska som budde i desse områda om at dei var av eit anna kaliber enn nordlege Amerika. Nederlaget vart difor ekstra tungt å bære når tapet av borgarkrigen var eit faktum, slaveriet vart avskaffa, og økonomien svekka. For unge menneske var dette særskild problematisk. Dei mangla førstehands kjennskap til korleis regionen deira vaks til å bli den «stormakta» sørstatingane omtala den som, til å vite kvifor deira kaliber ettersigande var betre enn dei frå nordsida av landet, og til å fatte det negative omfanget av slaveriet. Generasjonen som følgde Borgarkrigen hadde berre kjennskap til dette gjennom historier frå menneske som gjerne berre hadde opplevd enden av denne storheita, og som ofte «erfarte» gjennom historier dei sjølv hadde høyrd utan å kunne relatere til dette. Resultatet var og er usemje om kva som er den sanne historia til sørstatsregionane, og den sanne arva til menneska som er fødd der.

Gjennom denne avhandlinga vil eg hevde at Faulkner sin roman, *Absalom, Absalom!,* kan sjåast som ei kritisk røyst mot dei som talar «den historiske sanninga» om sørstatane, og at dette vert oppnådd gjennom Faulkner sin intrikate forteljarteknikk. Eg vil hevde at Faulkner, gjennom sine ulike narrative metodar, stiller spørjemål til mennesket si evne til å framstille historiske hendingar på ei sannferdig måte – utan å blande inn personlege kjensler og erfaringar. Vidare vil eg hevde at det såast tvil om mogelegheita for å finne fram til éi historisk sanning. Eg vil utforske korleis Faulkner, gjennom eit samansurium av ulike forteljarstemmer, fortel historia om Thomas Sutpen, og argumentere for at dette både er ein allegori for sørstatane sitt dramatiske endelikt. For å støtte desse hypotesane, vil eg nytte teori som inkluderer Henri Bergson sine idear knytt til «pure duration», reiegjering av myter og sørstatshistorie, samt ulike forteljingsformar og metodar. Metoden eg vil nytte for å framheve denne teorien og støtte hypotesane som vert framstilt, er nærlesing. Gjennom å arbeide tett opp mot romanen sin forteljartekst vil eg, i samband med teoretiske og historie fakta, kunne nå ein konklusjon mot slutten av denne avhandlinga som støtter hypotesane eg har presentert. I kapittel 1 vil eg reiegjere for Faulkner sin forteljarteknikk. Vidare vil eg gjennomføre ei analyse av dei forteljande karakterane, og reiegjere for effekten av ulikskapane knytt mot kvar forteljar sin særeigne forteljarmåte. Kapittel 2 vil vise korleis mytisk historieframstilling av dei amerikanske sørstatane er tilstade i romanen. Her vil eg fokusere på korleis Faulkner, gjennom sine forteljande karakterar, dramatiserer populære sosiale myter i sin roman, samt reiegjere for kva effekt dette gir. Dette vil føre meg over til kapittel 3, der eg vil argumentere for måten novella verkar å problematisere historisk «sanne» framstillingar av dei amerikanske sørstatane, og korleis dette påverkar karakterane som famnar om desse framstillingane. Her vil eg argumentere for at Faulkner sin forteljarteknikk også problematiserer mennesket si søken etter universelle sanningar, og korleis myter kan fungere som variantar av historiske sanningar.

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Introduction

"A man's future is inherited in that man" – William Faulkner

How does one verify historical truth? In this study, I will discuss how Faulkner, through the complex and mythical narration of his seminal novel *Absalom, Absalom!* (referred to as *AA*) demonstrates the ways in which the past remains in the present, how a heritage consisting of inequality and ambiguous historical events causes misperception among the novel's characters, and ultimately, how complete dependence on mythical history proves to be fatal for the generations following the historical event of the Civil War. I will argue that Faulkner's narration of *AA*, through its mythical structure, explores and accounts for a region and a people whose legacy is, arguably, mythically constructed in a problematic manner, thus causing confusion regarding identity and historical facts. Furthermore, discussing Faulkner's intricate narration, my claim is that by means of his narrative method the novel demonstrates how every person interprets history and memories individually, and thus differently. Creating a true image of past events is therefore problematic at best, since truth itself is predisposed.

In my thesis, I wish to establish how *AA* illustrates the consequences of mythical history and the way in which it continues to tie the past to the present. I aim to show that through his narration of *AA,* Faulkner addresses the problems linked to how people come to know, as well as the difficulties revolving around what people *can* know and what knowledge we ourselves create in order to find meaning. Through my thesis will argue that *AA* problematizes people's search for historical truth, demonstrating as a complex novel through narrative technique how the inevitable blend of knowledge, memory, beliefs, and emotions shape people's lives and the way they think, interpret, act, and interact. Hence, my problem statement is that Faulkner problematizes truth through his narration of *AA*.

Biographical context

William Faulkner was an American writer born in Mississippi in 1897. Although his earliest works were poetry, he became famous and highly celebrated for his novels set in the American South, frequently in his fabricated Yoknapatawpha County. Such celebrated works include *The Sound and the Fury*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is, arguably, his most celebrated oeuvre and the basis for this study.

As a Southerner, Faulkner was born into a culture which arguably defined itself by its past, and his works in certainly influenced by this notion. Faulkner belongs to the modernist period, a complex literary trend (ca 1890–1940) in European and American literature distinguished by a new focus on human beings' experience of time, a strong interest in the human psyche, and narrative experimentation. In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Michael Levenson emphasizes modernist authors' "use of mythic paradigms, the refusal of norms of beauty, and the willingness to make radical linguistic experiment" (Levenson p. 3). In common with modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Faulkner explores, not least in the three novels mentioned above, fundamental questions regarding the nature of narrative fiction and how it can/cannot be separated from questions concerning the nature of human existence (Minter p. 2). Other central themes in modernist literature heavily related to Faulkner's works are the unsettling problems dealing with "how we know, what we can and cannot know, and how our knowing and believing (and thus our remembering, needing and desiring) are interrelated" (Minter p. 2) These themes, along with personal and moral issues reflecting on social and political concerns such as race, class, failure and success, advantage and disadvantage – are prominent in Faulkner's fiction.

Published in 1936, *Absalom, Absalom!* is Faulkner's seventh novel set in Yoknapatawpha county. Taking place mostly in the city of Jefferson, and set in the time before, during, and after the Civil War, the story focus mostly on the life of character Thomas Sutpen. The novel revolves around three families of the American South: the Sutpens, the Coldfields, and the Compsons. The novel belongs to the genre known as the Southern Gothic – a fairly new genre which came together in the twentieth century when new literary naturalism, Southern humor, and dark romanticism merged into a new and potent form of social critique.[1] Characteristic features of this genre include the use of macabre and ironic elements in order to examine and question the values of the American South, elements which are all present within this novel. In *AA,* Faulkner explores and portrays the American South in, demonstrating its complexity, its values and ideals, but also its "otherness" – its violence and inhumanity. Through a myriad of narrators personified mainly through the characters of Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson, and Shreve, which will be the narrators considered in this study, the reader is reliving the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen and his dynasty – as well as the South itself. These narrating characters, all embodying the mythical

[1] *The Companion to Southern Literature* (2002), pp. 313–16

region of the Deep South at various stages in time with all their flaws and misperception, each attempt to make sense of what is real and what is myth in their re-creation of the Sutpen-story.

Theoretical context

In this study, I focus on narration and the purpose served by Faulkner's way of narrating *AA*. It is therefore essential to establish some common ground in regards to the terms used within this study: narrator, narrating character, and narrative. OED defines the term "narrative" as "any report of connected events, actual or imaginary, presented in a sequence of written or spoken words", meaning that novels and myths belong within the narrative category.

An important part of any narrative is its narration: the way in which the narrative is presented to its audience. In *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, Peter Hühn states that narration encompasses techniques through which the one creating the story choses to present it. These techniques include the narrative point of view, the narrative voice, and narrative time. It is also significant that the narration incorporates not only *who* tells the story, but *how* it is told – which will be one of the main elements subjected to study in this thesis. A narrative tool in the service of Faulkner as author, the narrator is the voice created to deliver the information to the reader, and in *AA* there are several narrators – each putting their personal mark on the presentation of the story. Although there is an omniscient narrator narrating within the course of *AA*, most of the narrators are first-person narrators, which I will refer to as narrating characters since they also perform key functions as main characters of the novel. What I seek to establish within the course of this thesis is that the elements of social critique connected to the genre of the novel are detectable through the narrative form of each narrating character. My aim is to show that the narration in *AA* is presented not only through several narrators, but through different narrative forms.

Through heavily fragmented flashbacks provided by a multitude of narrators, Faulkner presents his narrative employing the narrative technique of stream-of-consciousness, thus allowing the reader to enter the minds of Faulkner's narrating characters – however confusing that may be. Although it is problematic to say that this confusion is caused deliberately, it is my firm belief that the confusion is caused with intent. One essential reason is that the notion of confusion adds a myth-like quality to the narration. By including and intertwining several popular social myths within his own narration, Faulkner applies a sense of mythology to the narrative itself. There are various elements supporting this view. Among these is Faulkner's

engaging in a technique of circumlocution – using phrases with several words and long sentences where fewer and shorter would have sufficed, in order to cause a notion of ambiguity.[2] Engaging in such a technique, Faulkner slowly but surely makes his reader aware of events, motivations and emotions, although it is never clear how much of the information presented that can be considered reliable. Through long sentences filled with rich imagery, the reader seems to be left with the responsibility of identifying important information and separating this from emotional rant, so to speak. David Minter notes that this technique redefines the role of the "solitary reader", inviting us to engage in an interactive "collaborative process" between writer and reader (4), channeling Ralph Waldo Emerson's anticipations in *The American Scholar* where he presents "creative writing" as a creative collaboration requiring an equally "creative reading" where "the mind is braced by labor and invention" and the words and sentences become "luminous with manifold allusion" (51).

However, one of the questions I wish to discuss in this thesis is what the purpose of this mythical narration really is? In order to answer this question an understanding of the importance of social and historical myth within the USA is crucial. Still, to truly grasp the significance of social and historical myth within the USA it is also necessary to explore the myth itself. Reflecting the time in which it appeared, a myth can provide an image of said period quite uniquely when seen in the light of its importance within society at a given time. Nevertheless, to properly do so, it is important to establish what is meant by the term "myth".

Mythic framework is marked by great complexity, as the word myth does not have a unified meaning. As noted by William Marderness, in accordance with Oxford English Dictionary (referred to as OED); popular culture defines myth as a widely held conception that is inherently false, while an academic definition would be a socially constructed narrative used to explain origins and natural events, as well as enforce social rules (15). Marderness also mentions "living myth"; the set of values that define culture and "represent the mythic horizons that define reality for us" (15). It is interesting to note that Marderness states that reality is something that can be individually defined – a point that will be further addressed later on. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary's (referred to as Merriam-Webster) full definitions of myth are as "a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon", "a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; especially: one

[2] *Gail Ramshaw, Liturgical Language: Keeping it Metaphoric, Making it Inclusive.*

embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society", or "a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence". Interestingly, Merriam-Webster does not accentuate that mythic historical events are *not true* or that such people or things are *not real*. Surely, the use of words like "ostensibly" and "unverifiable" emphasizes the fact that authenticity is highly questionable. Nevertheless – as this thesis aims to show, a *possibility* is kept alive.

OED defines "myth" as "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events", "a widely held but false belief or idea", "a fictitious or imaginary person or thing", or "an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person". As we can, the wording is somewhat different from that of Merriam-Webster. Within these definitions, the possibility of a myth carrying some sort of truth is absent. Phrases such as "widely held *but false* belief" (my italics), "fictitious or imaginary", "exaggerated or idealized conception" leave little or no room for interpretations of myths being anything else that constructed or invented. OED further defines the word "false" as "not according with truth or fact", and the definition of "true" is "consistent with fact; agreeing with reality". Consequently, in their nature of being historically unfounded and unverifiable in "truth", myth might be termed fictional by its connection to narrative structure. Paul Valéry defines myth as "the term for everything which exists and subsists only in the basis of language" (199). However, all different conceptions of myth are merely variants on the same subject – that it is creation and validation of a cultural or social belief, verified only by vast cultural acceptance and belief. Irving Howe argues that the creation of myth in the American South is antagonistic to the idea of a universal, or "true", history – a conception meaning that Southern myth is voicing an ideal past, or deliberately rejecting accepted history. In other words, if history is an attempt at a linear, objective narrative, myth would be its antithesis – operating counter to time, free of any constrains (28-29). Patricia Tobin writes in *The Time of Myth and History* that "Although myth refers to events alleged to have taken place in the past; its operational value is that the specific model which it describes is timeless. Time cannot affect it; it can only affect time" (255). When saying that myth affects time, Tobin suggests that myth can alter the way in which history is viewed – not only regarding *how* and *why*, but *when* as well. In reality, this means that historical events considered to be true or verifiable are, or could be, rejected or substantially altered through myth.

Essentially, true history becomes secondary due to lack of flexibility, because truth is ultimately in the eye of the beholder. Furthermore, history is in need of a past and a present, whereas Faulkner states that “Past is never dead. It’s not even past” – meaning that “there is no *was*, only *is*”. Establishing that myth and time are correlated, it is interesting to refer to the ideas of Henri Bergson, a philosopher who arguably influenced Faulkner. Bergson emphasizes “pure duration” (Coppleston, 186), investigating human freedom as it relates to time. Bergson’s philosophy is linked to the idea of patterned-cyclical consciousness, namely, a fusion of the three tenses. Referring to this patterned-cyclical consciousness, Warren TenHouten states that the future is a part of the present. He continues by stating that “by viewing the future as part of the present, inner reality, there exist an ontological principle of order in which humankind, nature, and society, along with the past, present, and future, are seen as an enduring totality or gestalt.” (58-59) Bergson believed in the fluidity of fusing the three tenses. His view of “pure duration” is an attempt to understand how our personality is created from a series of subjective impressions and changes.

Ultimately, pure duration completely rejects units of outer, linear time – focusing only on what is happening inside our minds as we live, and thus rejecting the way linear time atomizes our experiences. More importantly, however, pure duration seeks to provide a very concrete reality to our memories because memories, as they affect our present, are not really memories, but part of the present due to its constant effect on how a person behaves or acts in the present. It is “the form taken by the succession of our states of consciousness when our ego lets itself live, when it abstains from making a separation between its present and preceding states” (Bergson, 73). However, the problem occurs due to the general opinion of time – linear time, which is the complete opposite of the Bergsonian fluidity, “as it articulates classificatory distinctions between the tenses of time, past, present, and future…this linear conceptualization of time is socially institutionalized on a global scale…and widely considered self-evident” (TenHouten, 59). Jean-Paul Sartre, who analyzes the “metaphysics of time” (77), argues that the Faulknerian man “views time as his greatest misfortune” (76) because his creator has tampered with time – overwhelming the present with a past that is constantly “superpresent” (77). Thus, Sartre implies that the typical Faulknerian character is overwhelmed by memories of the past, which he or she ultimately over-identifies with.

Hence, an important question arises: If the past continues to affect our existence, if it never ends – how can one say that it something is, in fact, past? As the OED definition of “past” is “gone by in time and no longer existing”, per definition, the term falls flat if one

agrees with Faulkner – that the past itself does not exist. This thesis will examine how Faulkner, through his narration of *AA,* accounts for the deep impact put upon man by his legacy – or past, in relation to mythical narration – which brings me to my epigraph. William Faulkner states that a man's future is, in fact, inherited; he suggests that any future is, in a sense, determined by the past. This is a statement and a mindset Faulkner brought with him into the world of Yoknapatawpha County, and it is particularly visible in *AA* through his narrating characters. Through Faulkner's narrative, the reader can identify the burden of each character's past, acquiring a sense of how it ultimately shapes the outcome of their stories. That the character's found in *AA* are obsessed with their past has been established by several scholars. However, what I will argue as significant, which is not stated by Sartre, is that this obsession is directly correlated to the embracing of myth.

Historical context

It is problematic to discuss Faulkner's works without addressing the complex system of ideology, narrative and history from which he arose. In order to comprehend the following discussion, it is important to address some undeniable, and some dubious, historical facts about US history, including the decades leading up to the Civil War and its aftermath. I believe this brief account to be significant and necessary due to the direct correlation between historical events and the myths deriving from them. US history is relatively new and manifested through polarizing views and experiences, which established the foundation for the myths surrounding both the northern and southern regions. Therefore, I believe that an outline of the historical backdrop of the very novel in question is in order.

Clearly, stories of the Antebellum South are filled with contradictions. On the one hand, a romantic vision unfolds, baring the sight of white, flourishing plantations with an elegantly clad gentleman promenading the premises accompanied by a lady – graceful in both attire and demeanor; the whispers of virtuous Victorian England, alive and prosperous within America. In the background colored people are working gratefully in lavish cotton fields: thankful for having become part of his or her master's "extended family". Through fiction, several authors embraced this view as well as the most enduring myth in Southern fiction: the image of the Antebellum South as a pastoral Eden, and ultimately a place of benevolence and prosperity. One such author was John P. Kennedy, the writer of southern classic *Swallow Barn*. Here the reader is introduced to the character of Virginian planter Frank Meriwether and his cozy plantation realm. Throughout, Swallow Barn is presented as a "very agreeable place", due to

Meriwether's nature as "a kind master" who is "considerate toward his dependents, for which reason, although he owns many slaves, they hold him in profound reverence, and are very happy under his dominion". James Cobb states that although there is a mild satire in this work which generally was detected, Swallow Barn was nevertheless "treated as an essentially accurate "still life" of Southern plantation life (Cobb, 24). Susan J. Tracy notes that the planter-hero is richly represented in antebellum Southern literature, whose main genre was the historical romance. Southern writers adapted this form from Samuel Richardson's sentimental novel and Sir Walter Scott's historical novel. In her own words, "Southern writers borrowed from and modified each of these forms to create in the Southern novel a hybrid form of the new genre, one that envisioned the men of the planter class engaging during the American War of Independence in a heroic world-historical struggle for their race, class, section and country" (p.9). This vision was of immense importance due to the fact that the differences between North and South had led to a polarization of the two regions. As the conflict between North and South became increasingly potent, the question of slavery was at the root of the struggle. Despite multiple fictitious narratives embracing the image of a well-functioning slave system where the masters were kind and the slaves were happy, the horror of slavery was constantly present. Consequently, justifying slavery as a "natural institution" was of immense importance. Equally important was the portrayal of the planter: He was not a power-hungry brute, but a gentleman whose grandeur and grace was undeniable – a hero of diligence, courage and moral. The keeping of slaves was simply preserving natural hierarchy.

However, the purpose of the antebellum historical romance is not merely to provide a conservative and idealized vision of Southern society, but to offer an excessive Southern nationalist interpretation of the American War of Independence – glorifying the Southern role in its victorious outcome in 1783. Tracy continues by stating that this glorification "argues for a post-war society in which the "naturally superior" leaders of that heroic victory – the members of the planter class – will govern". (9) However dissatisfied with the governing by the British Empire, Walter R. Mead states that the Americans never believed the British civilization to be one of evil: it was recognized as their own civilization, hence "obviously good", but the revolution was "the last round of the eternal struggle between the good and evil forces within British society" (35). This can be compared to the similar struggle unfolding within the US, where the same conflicting forces divided the country. Even though the US had won its independence from Britain, Americans continued to be influenced by European (British and French) lifestyle, particularly revolving around social framework heavily marked

by Victorianism. Anne C. Rose elaborates on “Victorianism centering on its commitment to self-control, social order, and absolute values” (Rose p. 7), and Daniel Singal characterizes Victorianism by referring to “a distinctive set of bedrock assumptions…a belief in a predictable universe presided over by a benevolent God and governed by immutable natural laws, a corresponding conviction that humankind was capable of arriving at a unified and fixed set of truths about all aspects of life, and as insistence on preserving absolute standards based on a radical dichotomy between that which was deemed “human” or “civilized” and that regarded as “animal” (“Towards a Definition”, 9). In these “fixed set of truths” and “natural laws” one could find the “truth” founding slavery. It is also significant that southerners identified themselves with the nobles of England, using this as a fundamental framework for their own aristocracy.

But what aristocracy? The thought of an established aristocracy within the South helped founding the notion of inequality not only between black and white, but amongst whites as well – especially between northerners and southerners, something which furthered the growing conflict between the regions in the newly independent nation. Post-Independence it was significant to form a united union with a shared national identity. The problem was, however, that the two regions of North and South had established quite opposing national identities reflecting their economic and social structure. Paul Boyer notes that the United States had become a nation of two distinct regions: The North had a booming economy based on trade, family farms, industry, mining, and transportation, with an increasing urban population, massively supported by European immigration. Conversely, the South was dominated by an established plantation system founded on slavery. The national image of the two regions mirrored these differences. In many regards, the South was a backwards region: lagging behind in regards to industrialization, urbanization and even education. Boyer notes that “as long as southerners believed that an economy founded by cash crops would remain profitable, they had little reason for leaping into the uncertainties of industrialization.” (342). Due to white southerner’s rejection of compulsory education, illiteracy remained high in the South, even as it declined in the North. Being self-sufficient, agricultural and independent, the middle-class and poor whites did not see the need for education or the value of the written word since they did not frequently deal with urban areas. As for the planter elite, they had no use for educated white work force since “they already had a black one that they were determined to keep illiterate lest it acquire ideas of freedom” (342).

Associating the growth of urban areas and factories with progress, northerners concluded that since few of these traits were to be found in the South, southerners were strangers to the very notion of progress. Hence southern stasis was measured up to northern, dynamism, and ultimately the common perception of the Cavalier-planter was that, however noble in manner, he could not quite meet the demands of a rapidly changing society. There was a growing perception that the South was holding on to a world that was no longer relevant – that essentially: chivalry was dead.

As stated by James McPherson in the foreword to *The American Civil War*, "the centrality of the Civil War to American history is indisputable" (7). Several hundred thousand soldiers lost their lives within the four years the war lasted, including 30% of the male population of the South between ages 20-40. Furthermore, McPherson notes how the war "wreaked havoc and destruction in the South" – wiping out "two-thirds of the assessed values in the South (including slaves)". The agriculture, upon which the southern economy was utterly dependent, suffered severely as well. Over half of the region's farm-machinery was left destroyed, and the livestock were consumed in great numbers. Needless to say, the losses were devastating. Ultimately, the North grew rich while the once-rich South became temporarily poor as the national political power of the slave owners and rich southerners ended. These historical facts are indisputable, and it was apparent that the southern loss of the Civil War caused complications within the previously proud region. However, it seems as though the overall consequences for the country as a whole were positive. Because victory belonged to the liberty-loving liberals of the North, the issue of slavery would now come to an end. Abolition was a fact, and thus the country got its new beginning and a "new birth of freedom", as Lincoln stated in his speech at Gettysburg.

Mythical framework

As the US history is severely affected by myth, it is necessary to account for the central myths employed in *AA*; the myth of the Cavalier, the myth of the American Dream, and the myth of the Lost Cause. This is significant not only because these myths affect both the narration as well as the plot of the story presented, but also because these social myths are crucial parts of the history of the United States in general and the South in particular. Closest to the founding history of the United States, and the growing polarization of the northern and southern regions, is the myth of the Cavalier. This is perhaps the most prominent Southern

myth, as it explains much of the Southern mindset of honor, pride, and respectability – which also is heavily represented in *AA*. Furthermore, this myth was significant when separating the North from the South within the US, and was frequently used as a way of explaining how it was possible that one country had come to be so polarized in temperament and values. Ultimately, when forming a national identity – the myth of the Cavalier was central.

The foundation of the Cavalier myth was the belief that the Virginian planter elite consisted of descendants from the English cavaliers – royalist supporters of King Charles 1; referring back to Virginia's beginning as a royal colony in the seventeenth century, which further contained the notion that said elite were, in fact, the Virginia dynasty, [3] hence "holding exceptional ranks and privileges". Marshall Fishwick talks about the FFV – the First Families of Virginia, referring to the families in Virginia who were wealthy and socially prominent, not necessarily the *first families* to settle within the colony. Another factor was that primogeniture favored the first born child, or son, to inherit land and titles back in England, which resulted in the sons coming in second or third in line going out to the colonies to make their fortune and establish themselves as landowning nobles. As a consequence, Virginia evolved as a society descending from second or third sons of English gentry who inherited land grants or land in Virginia, who in return formed partially what became the American southern elite. The empathy of many of these early, supposedly aristocratic, Virginia settlers for the Crown led to the term "distressed Cavaliers" being applied to the Virginia oligarchy. The myth claims that Cavaliers who served under King Charles I fled to Virginia, which is the reason why Virginia commonly could be referred to as "Cavalier Country". British historian John Keegan notes that "As early as 1660 every seat on the ruling Council of Virginia was held by members of five interrelated families, and as late as 1775 every council member was descended from one of the 1660 councilors"(334). This interrelation was made possible through marriage, and ties between equally prominent families secured the ownership of valuable pieces of land and social status.

Of course, such aristocratic ties were hard to verify, but the myth was still being kept alive within the southern regions. Nevertheless, its popularity did not explode until the 1800s. As the conflict between North and South grew to become more potent, Virginia suffered from economic decline – in contrast to the northern states. Cobb notes that the Ratification of the Constitution was excessively positive for the northern regions, which expansion of

[3] «VIRGINIA DYNASTY»: a term applied to the succession of Virginia presidents in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. (*Dictionary of American History*)

manufacturing and commerce led to an economic growth surpassing that of the southern regions. In return, the severe economic decline produced a Virginia migration that lasted roughly from 1780 to 1830 (22). As stated in *The Companion*, "Residents fled the Old Dominion for more promising economic prospects in the newly developing states in the south and west – carrying with them their cavalier heritage and their reverence for their state's glorious past" (131-132). As this occurred, people moved away from Virginia to pursue a desire of being embedded in the self-pronounced American aristocracy, despite not having the "necessary" family ties linking back to the cavaliers. It was not of importance, though, *whether* the myth was verifiable. The significance was in it being *believed*, hence the Cavalier myth, which supported the natural superiority of southerners, was viewed as extremely valuable: "By the early decades of the nineteenth century the myth of the cavalier had spread all over the South" (*The Companion* 131-132). As this short outline suggests, the English nobleman was alive and prospering within America through manner and memory.

However, if you ask people today what notion they consider typically American, many would accentuate the American Dream. When attempting to form a national identity Post-Independence, the problem was that the two regions of North and South had established quite opposing national identities reflecting their economic and social structure. Ultimately, then, the image broadcast by northern regions when attempting to establish a national identity post-Independence was that the American man was in charge of his own fortunes: every man could make of himself whatever he saw fit, despite his legacy or lack thereof. Arguably, the element founding the myth of the American Dream was the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was rarely referred to after serving its purpose following the announcing of independence. However, Stephen Lucas notes that after being the centerpiece of Abraham Lincoln's rhetoric and policies in the 1860s, its second sentence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness", has been called "one of the best-known sentences in the English language" (p. 85), and these "unalienable rights" led to people going out in "pursuit of Happiness" and wealth. Since "all men are created equal", notions of class were disregarded, thus causing people to liberate themselves from the orders of social structure. Stories to exemplify and validate this trend were numerous, several deriving out of old colonial Virginia. A vast number of people migrated from this area to pursue a desire of being embedded in the southern aristocracy originating from the Cavalier, despite lacking the necessary family ties linking back to such

“heritage” – ultimately pursuing the American Dream. Through forceful ambition many succeeded in their quest, and wealth was no longer reserved for those born into it, as noted by David Singal: “Men on the make with sharp wit, few scruples, and no pedigree flocked to the booming cotton lands of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia in search of instant fortunes; with a few years of hard work and a little luck…they could soon elevate themselves to the stature of “gentlemen” (13).

The notion of the American Dream was founded. Interestingly, Singal puts “gentlemen” in quotation marks to accentuate that those of newfound wealth were not, in fact, true gentlemen – only sharing some of the qualities of gentlemen: wealth. As Singal points out, “pedigree” was no longer a central issue on the path to wealth, and “gentlemen” emerged out of the soil like the cotton itself: fiercely ambitious, with “no scruples” standing in the way of their success. These newcomers were determined to create a new existence, including power and respectability whatever the cost or consequence. Thus, wealth and position became accessible to every man in America not shy of “hard work” and favored by “a little luck” and essentially, ambition out-weighed heritage. Promoting that every man was equal to one another, the myth of the American Dream disputed everything considered characteristically southern, and Post-Civil war, the northern ideals ultimately became the national ideals.

From the ruins of the destroyed South arose the myth of the Lost Cause, which Gary Gallagher explains as a set of beliefs endorsing the virtues of the antebellum South, expressing a view of the Civil War as an honorable struggle to preserve those virtues so widely advocated in popular culture, especially within southern societies (1). This notion is further explained by Alan Nolan, who looks to historian Gaines Foster in his account: “…it is fair to say that there are two independent versions of the war. On one hand there is the history of the war, the account of what in fact happened. On the other there is what Gaines Foster calls the “Southern interpretation” of the event. This account, “codified”, according to Foster, is generally referred to as “the Lost Cause”…originated in Southern rationalizations of the war.”(12). The “cause” had been to ensure the act of secession from the Union and to secure the southern states’ rights, or, to preserve the system of slavery. However, when this cause was, in fact, lost after the Civil War, the new “cause” became focused on “softening the blow” so to speak. Essentially, the beliefs of the Lost Cause were now founded upon several historically debatable (if not inaccurate) elements, including a claim stating that the Confederacy initiated the Civil War to defend states' rights rather than to preserve slavery, and the correlated assertion that slavery was benevolent rather than cruel (12-14).

While most agree that slavery and abolition was the main cause of the Civil War, some voices will claim preservation of states' rights. There has even been questioning regarding whether or not the South had any real chance at victory. Within his own work, Battle Cry of Freedom, McPherson reflects a renowned view when he argues that Confederate victory was at least possible (855). On the contrary, Civil War historian Shelby Foote represents a different view altogether, which is noted in Ward, Geoffrey Ward's *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*: "I think that the North fought that war with one hand behind its back ... If there had been more Southern victories, and a lot more, the North simply would have brought that other hand out from behind its back. I don't think the South ever had a chance to win that War." (272) Furthermore, the question of patriotism was highlighted. Did the southerners *want* victory strongly enough? One claim is that there was a distinct difference between slave owners and non-slave owner when it came to dedication in combat. However, most historians agree that patriotism prevailed on the southern side of the battlefield. Within *The Confederate War*, Gallagher cites General Sherman who in early 1864 commented: "The devils seem to have a determination that cannot but be admired." Despite their massive losses of both wealth and slaves, with the pending prospect of starvation, Sherman continued, "yet I see no sign of let up – some few deserters – plenty tired of war, but the masses determined to fight it out." (57). Likewise, McPherson, in his work *For Cause and Comrades*, found signs of vigorous, lasting patriotism after reading thousands of letters written by Confederate soldiers, and notes that these letters show that the soldiers truly believed they were fighting for their own type freedom and liberty, even as the Confederacy was visibly collapsing by the end of the war (169-72). Whether or not such letters can be counted as an accurate source of facts is a different matter entirely; which will be elaborated on further later on.

Consequently, besides playing up the "national/cultural differences" between North and South, emphasizing the chivalrous cavaliers of the South, the notions founded the beliefs in the Lost Cause included typically apologist views of slaves and slavery (as the previously mentioned faithful slave and gentle master). Furthermore, the belief that the South was not defeated as much as "overwhelmed by massive Northern manpower and materiel" (17) was significant. This belief was accentuated to an extent that Southern schools provided an alternative curriculum in schools, where their version of the events connected to the Civil War were portrayed. This kind of biased history writing ultimately caused great misconception among the subsequent generation Southerners; who did not know what was real and what was correlated to the myth of the Lost Cause.

Method

In order to support my problem statement that Faulkner problematizes the notion of truth through his narration of *Absalom, Absalom!,* it will be useful and necessary to approach the novel directly. Through close reading I will interpret and discuss this relationship between myth and narration in order to establish how Faulkner's immersion of popular myths into the narration of *AA* is problematizing an idea of a collective truth. By engaging in the method of close reading, my goal is to argue that Faulkner accounts for the overall process of mythmaking, as it manifests numerous aspects of human existence, through his narration. This notion is supported by this statement made by Montserrat Ginés: "While showing understanding for those of his characters who have inherited the burden of the past, at the same time Faulkner regards with skepticism their retreat from the real world" (9). Due to Faulkner's personal experiences with the "immoderate worship of the past so deeply rooted in the Southern mind," he has the ability to write compassionately, with an "acute awareness of the propensity of human beings to mythmaking" (122-23). By close reading the novel in question while seeing it in relation to the theory revolving myth, time and memory, my aim is to prove and exemplify that Faulkner's narration is effected by this "skepticism" noted by Ginés; thus problematizing notion of historical truth.

Within the course of this introduction I have theoretically established Faulkner's employment of three social myths which dominate American popular culture, within his narration of *AA*. However, my main focus is, and will be throughout the thesis, how the theories revolving around myth and time fit into Faulkner's narration of *AA*. Referring to my main text, I will argue that William Faulkner's mythical narrative highlights the magnitudes of Southern, and American, mythical history. I will discuss how confusion and uncertainty revolving around heritage lead to desperate attempts to either hold on to an ambiguous past or to make sense of it. Faulkner witnessed the consequences of this confusion during his own upbringing in his own time, and in my thesis I will discuss how Faulkner' narration of *AA* can be viewed as a critical voice against the many attempts to portray the "truth" about the South. This study is not a full analysis of *AA,* and it will not engage in an analysis of plot and characters in a general manner, hence, there will be important aspects that may seem forgotten or ignored. However, this is due to the main focus of my study, and the limitations to my analysis will be reflecting that focus. Furthermore, I do not seek to out the flaws in Southern social structure, nor do I claim to explain and condemn the ways of Southern social structure past and present.

Rather, I will focus on William Faulkner's use of mythical narration as a means to illustrate and problematize any notion of historical truth about that social structure. I consider *AA* to problematize "true stories" about the South (or anywhere else, for that matter). Consequently, my aim is to explain *how* the mythical narrative employed in *AA* mirrors the significance of mythic historical truth experienced in real life. Through his mythical narrative technique and form, Faulkner explores and problematizes people's ability to form historical truth based on personal experiences, feelings and hearsay, rejecting both time and actual events, thus questioning whether an absolute truth is possible to obtain. I will argue that Faulkner's narrative style strengthens the experience of *AA* as a critical account of the way in which the heritage of the southern Confederacy continues to influence American society, proving that the past is not, in fact, past. The question which I will attempt to answer is *how*, through his myriad of narrators, Faulkner's myth-like narrative technique serves to problematize a notion of any existing, definite historical truth, and how Faulkner's complex and diverse narration of *AA* accentuates a notion that an absolute truth is non-existing or predisposed at best.

Outline of following chapters

In chapter 1, I will account for Faulkner's narrative form and how the various narrators contribute to very different versions of the story presented based on the character's personal experiences. In order to do so, I will analyze the narrating characters in order to highlight coherence between the way in which Faulkner narrates through each narrating character and the way the characters are affected by personal experience. This will not be an attempt of a full in-depth analysis of each narrating character, but an analysis of *how* the consequence of personal experience are visible through the different narrating characters and their distinct way of narrating. Chapter 2 will discuss the way in which the selected historical myths are represented throughout the novel. Chapter 3 will serve as an exemplification on *how* the narration of *AA* can be viewed as a means of problematizing historical truths in relation to time and memory. Here I will use the analysis of the narrative technique and the narrating characters to exemplify how they are affected by the immersion of historical myths within the narration. Finally, I will present my concluding points.

Chapter I

Worlds Apart:

The Narrative Nature of *Absalom, Absalom!*

As stated in my introduction, this chapter will provide an account for Faulkner's narrative form, discussing how the various narrators contribute to, and actually present, very different versions of the story presented based on the character's memory. Due to the importance of each narrating character, I will analyze them in order to highlight coherence between historical myths and the personal crises experienced by each narrator. Although I do not provide an in-depth analysis of each narrating character, in order to eventually analyze *how* historical myths are visible through the different narrating characters (chapter two) and their distinct way of narrating, it is difficult not to touch upon each narrating character's character, so to speak – which is what I will aim to do over the course of this chapter.

In his narration of *AA,* Faulkner is juxtaposing ostensible fact, conscious guesswork, and downright speculation, with the implication that reconstructions of the past remain irretrievable and therefore imaginative. Faulkner presents his narrative through heavily fragmented flashbacks provided by a multitude of narrators, employing the narrative technique of stream-of-consciousness; thus allowing the reader to enter the minds of Faulkner's narrating characters – however confusing that may be. However, I will seek to explore if Faulkner's narration of *AA* can be treated on the level of myth; as a fable that enables the reader to preview the deepest levels of the unconscious and thus better understand the alleged basis for the narrating characters; the people of the South. By Faulkner's employment of various narrators, each expressing their interpretations of the narrative, *AA* alludes to the historical and cultural spirit of Faulkner's South, where the past is always present and constantly in a state of alteration by the people who tell and retell the story as time progresses; thus exploring the process of myth-making into his narration, as well as problematizing conceptions of truth.

Faulkner is engaging in a technique of circumlocution – using phrases with several words and long sentences where fewer and shorter would have sufficed, in order to cause a notion of

ambiguity.[4] Engaging in such a narrative technique, Faulkner slowly but surely makes his reader aware of events, motivations and emotions, although it is never clear how much of the information presented that can be considered reliable. Through lengthy sentences filled with rich imagery, the reader seems to be left with the responsibility of separating important information from emotional torment. Minter notes that this technique redefines the role of the "solitary reader", inviting us to engage in an interactive "collaborative process" between writer and reader (Minter, 4), channeling Emerson's anticipations of a creative collaboration requiring an equally "creative reading" where the words and sentences become "luminous with manifold allusion" (Minter, 51). Through different methods and techniques, the narrators of *AA* exemplify the post-bellum Southerners who are left to pick up the pieces of their dream of an Eden; a paradisiacal South is ruined by the Civil War. It appears that the narrators attempt to create a myth revolving around, and prompted by, the Southern fall from grace, in order to either understand it or to escape to a time that, for them, made more sense. Within the next sections, I will analyze each narrating character and explore how their narrations differ from one another.

1.1 Faulkner's Mythical Narration

Rosa Coldfield refers to Judith as a "widow before she is a bride". General Compson informs his grandchild that Sutpen had a "design". Charles Bon is supposed to marry Henry Sutpen's sister, Judith. Charles Bon is Henry and Judith Sutpen's half-brother. Henry Sutpen kills Charles Bon. Years and years after, Rosa tells Quentin her story who tells it to his college roommate, Shreve, who is Canadian. The other characters hail from the American South. Through his complex narration of *AA*, Faulkner keeps his reader on her toes throughout the novel, inviting the reader to partake in collecting the loose threads of the story. Faulkner initiates seemingly explanatory sequences – then quits them only to return to the same sequence later in the story, usually at the same time as presenting a quite different event. Essentially, then, through Faulkner's intricate narration, the context is experienced and the readers gain "knowledge" and insight as significance is gathered from the narrative formation, while simultaneously adding their own perceptions to the construction. David Minter notes that Faulkner's fiction can be "seen as engaging problems that initially might appear to have limited potential for compelling fiction – that is, problems having to do with how we come to

[4] *Gail Ramshaw, Liturgical Language: Keeping it Metaphoric, Making it Inclusive.*

know, what we can know, how and what we create, and how our knowing, remembering, believing, and desiring enter into and shape our lives as well as our thinking, writing, and reading" (Minter, 4). This, I believe, correlates with the way in which Faulkner narrates *AA*, and especially the way the novel begins. The very beginning of the novel is, in fact, not the beginning – but a memory of past events. By the end of the first chapter Faulkner has already revealed the basic "facts"[5] of the story.

The myths accounted for in my introduction, however different they may be, are ultimately linked together through history. Also, they are all represented within *AA* in regards of emphasizing changing of time and the non-changing of time. Clearly, time is essential. Faulkner's characters in *AA* are obsessed with the past, one way or the other. In order to make sense of their present and future, the characters struggle to create a series of "true" events to explain their past – which again could partly explain their current state. This is not an easy task. Truth is not easily attained, much due to the mythical nature of the characters heritage – mainly concerning history.

1.1.2. CHRONOLOGY

Faulkner's works are often characterized by a deliberate working across time and space; seemingly ignoring the restrictions of chronology by incessantly referring to and commenting upon past events. As Faulkner's narration jumps back and forth between the past and the present, history itself becomes fragmented. Faulkner's relentless repetition and constant dismissal of chronology stress the notion of an ever-existing past, and a rejection of time itself. A substantial example is the fact that one of *AA*'s most prominent narrating characters, Quentin Compson, committed suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), casting a shadow upon his entire existence in *AA* (1936).

When discussing history and myth's correlation to narration in *AA* it is impossible not to mention the significance of time and memory, and how these elements correlate to the significance of chronology (or the lack thereof) in the novel. Paying attention to the narration of *AA,* it becomes clear that the role of memory is both central and significant, but time and memory is not presented in a chronological manner. In my introduction, I commented upon the nature of the novel's beginning; noting that the beginning is not the beginning – but a memory of past events. The narration shifts from Rosa's office in a "long still not weary dead

[5] My clams around the word "fact" is to emphasize the uncertainty connected to these actualities.

September afternoon", sitting in that "dim hot airless room" (7) to a "summer of wistaria" filled with the smell of Mr. Compson's cigar as he and Quentin "sat on the gallery…until it would be time for Quentin to start" (31) getting ready for his journey to Harvard. The transition from chapter five to chapter six, mark yet another chronological narrative shift. Leading up to that point, Rosa bitterly tells Quentin about her experiences after Wash Jones has told her that "Henry has done shot that durn French feller. Kilt him dead as beef" (133). By the end of that following chapter, Rosa and Quentin are back at Sutpen's Hundred, run-down and decayed after the destructive Civil War, where Rosa tells Quentin that "There's something living in that house…Something living in it. Hidden in it. It has been out there for years, living hidden in that house" (172). The next page, the next chapter begins with describing the "snow on Shreve's overcoat sleeve" and Quentin receiving a letter from Mr. Compson in his "strange room, across this strange iron New England snow" (173).

This dismissal of chronology is central throughout the novel, and it is important to state how significant this ambivalence towards chronology really is. Almost, ironically, Faulkner provides a Chronology and Genealogy appended to the end of *AA*, as if to verify the Sutpen story. However, by its placement at the end of the novel, the diligent reader would have already formed her of his idea of the chronology before reaching this "blueprint". After an attempt of untangling a complex set of narratives, this reader has become too involved in the narrating collaboration to concede full authority, even to the author whose name appears on the cover. The pages of the novel are afflicted with examples of failed authors; characters whose narrative contributions fall flat. It is thus problematic for the reader to assume at Faulkner has a greater authority, or that the facts presented towards the end are actually real.

Thus, *AA* is founded upon failure; Sutpen's failure to establish a dynasty and the South's failure to win the Civil War. As will be elaborated further, each narrating character's narrative fails as well; from the outraged fantasies of Rosa to Shreve's geographically caused incomprehension, culminating in Quentin's hopeless misconception. As these characters attempt to re-create the story, I will argue that they engage in a myth-making process which can never be resolved or completed, thus none of the narrating characters can be permitted a total success. If, as claimed in my introduction, myth is working against time, the narrative dismissal of chronology is a function of its dependence on myth. Hence, the disrupted chronology can be viewed as a symptom of the mythic focus and structure that characterizes *AA*. Through this dismissal of chronology, and the way chaotic way in which the information is passed on to the reader, Faulkner reveals the basic story of *AA* with such secrecy and

ambiguity that the reader (at least this was true in my case) is left with the previous mentioned questions pushing human nature forward: the "hows" and "whys", thus leaving the basis of the story as unverifiable and myth-like. Hence, it is not significant *when* the story is revealed – because the "hows" and "whys" are left open due to the ambiguity linked to the narrator's memories and experiences, or lack thereof.

1.1.3. REPETITION

The first chapter of *AA* is an excellent example of Faulkner's narrating style throughout the novel: Engaging in the earlier mentioned technique of circumlocution, Faulkner's narration is demanding and relentlessly repetitive, immersed with rich imagery, and fragmented passages. Within the course of the first chapter, Faulkner mentions Sutpen's arrival in the city of Jefferson six different times, all in different ways; each time serving a different purpose – which will be further discussed when analyzing the narrating characters in the following chapter. Common for all six versions, however, is that they are based on memories and experiences, or attempts to make sense of other people's memories and experiences. As mentioned, Faulkner reveals the basic facts of the novel's plot within the first chapter, and when establishing these rudimentary "facts" of his narrative, he engages in an almost excessive use of repetition, as in this passage:

> *It seems that this demon – his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which – (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only (Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died) – and died. Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says – (Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson.* (9, Faulkner's italics)

Faulkner employs an omniscient narrator, essentially revealing the entire story. What is interesting, however, is the way he goes about doing it. When paying attention to the language, it is strikingly repetitive and hesitant; "his name was Sutpen – (Colonel Sutpen) – Colonel Sutpen", "and built a plantation – (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says) – tore violently". In phrases like this there is a distinct notion of uncertainty and of reassurance. Furthermore, it is as though the narrator is correcting himself through repetition, modifying the words slightly before repeating them, as if to confirm that *this time* the

information is correct. However, phrases such as “It seems” and the repetitive sentence “Miss Rosa Coldfield says” suggest that the narrator is not the primary source of the information provided, and that in fact he does not seem to fully trust the source from which he received the information. It appears as though the narrator is trying to make sense of the story – “only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something” – which establishes an uncertainty as to whether or not the information is correct. This raises an important question: If the narrator does not know, how can the reader know? The mentioned quotation does not only reveal the outline for the basic story, it functions as a repetition of the first mention of Sutpen’s arrival in Jefferson, which is narrated by the character of Miss Rosa:

> Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran... (8)

Here, the mythical element is apparent as the narrator depicts Sutpen’s arrival in Jefferson. He does not simply come into town, he abruptly appears “out of quiet thunderclap”, disturbing his “peaceful and decorous” surroundings with his “band of wild niggers” flocked behind him. Not only does this narration seek to portray Sutpen as non-human, its intention is to portray him as a Satanic figure – “man-horse-demon”, beast and man intertwined. In their “wild and reposed” attitudes, the demonic Sutpen and his wild niggers reject the noble composure expected among the Cavaliers of the South. Through this dramatic and theatrical narration of Sutpen’s arrival, it is logical to assume that Faulkner attempts to accentuate a notion of trauma and astonishment. Clearly, Miss Rosa’s narration of this event highlights her emotional connection to it, which again leads the reader to ponder whether her version is authentic. As a contrast, Faulkner’s omniscient narrator mentions Sutpen’s arrival in a slightly less theatrical manner, building on information Quentin received from Mr. Compson: “…that Sunday morning in June in 1833 when he first rode into town out of no discernible past and acquired his land no one knew how and built his house, his mansion, apparently out of nothing and married Ellen Coldfield and begot his two children…and so accomplished his allotted course to its violent (Miss Coldfield at least would have said, just) end” (11). This somewhat more stoic repetition of this significant event makes the reader aware of the contrasting emotions connected to Sutpen’s arrival. It becomes clear that “no one knew” much about the character of Sutpen. Words and phrases such as “no discernible past” and “apparently out of nothing” further accentuate the conspicuous lack of historical facts

connected to the episode. However, because of the numerous repetitions the reader is made aware of the significance of Sutpen's arrival, just not *how* and *why* it is significant. Thus the reader can experience the narrators' frustration by the scarcity of historical details to which they must ascribe temporal certainty before they can link the past with the present to enable the establishment of continuity and a sense of order.

The most apparent repetition is the fact that the four different narrators provide several versions of the same narrative, meaning that each element and each event is repeated numerous times. Quentin's narration in particular is obsessively repetitive, filled with dirges at having to tell and hear the Sutpen story over and over again: "thinking Yes. I have heard too much, I have been told too much, too long" (207), a notion repeated on pages 174 and 261. For Quentin, it appears that the reality of his existence and the link to the past of which he tries to escape, never end – an impression which is established through his telling and re-telling the Sutpen story. Within the narration provided by Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve, Faulkner's language is noticeably repetitive, something which accentuates the uncertainty and unreliable nature of these narrators. It is not only the story plot that is repeated; words and phrases are repeated as well. This phrase notes the townspeople's reaction to Sutpen's arrival: "the stranger's name went back and forth among the places of business and of idleness and among the residences in steady strophe and antistrophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen."* (32), adding a sense of theatrical mysticism to the narration, accentuating the uncertainty connected to the character of Sutpen. The same notion can be detected through Rosa's excessive repetition of her claiming to hold "no brief" for herself (15,17,18, 162-65), and Mr. Compson's imaginative re-creation of "perhaps" and "I can imagine", are also repeated excessively. These repetitions are the narrating character's attempts of establishing certainties. However, the persistent repetition only serves to accentuate the utter uncertainty driving the narrating character's relentless re-creation. The novel even ends in repetition, when Quentin tries to make sense of his own feelings towards the South: "I dont hate it," Quentin said, quickly, at once, immediately; "I dont hate it," he said. *I dont hate it* he thought, panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark*; I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (378). Quentin's quick and immediate response is meant to show certainty, however, the repetitious "panting" accentuates the confusion he is experiencing when faced with Shreve's question.

1.2. Analysis of Narrating Characters

In my introduction I accentuate the importance of narration – how the narrative is presented. Within Faulkner's novel I find it significant that several of the main characters are responsible for narrating the story. However, as stated in my introduction, it is important to discuss not only *who* tells the story, but *how* it is told. Throughout *AA* thee numerous and diverse narrators are putting their personal mark on the presentation of the story. The way in which these narrating characters are executing their narration cumulatively reveals how the novel problematizes historical truth. What I seek to establish within the course of this chapter is that the narration of *AA* is presented not only through several narrators, but through different narrative forms, each narrator providing their narration with a piece of their persona. Employing his own version of a stream-of-consciousness technique, Faulkner is allowing the reader to enter the minds and imagination of his narrating characters – however confusing that may be. The four main narrators in this novel are three generations of southerners: Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Quentin Compson, and young Canadian Shreve McCannon. As I will show, these narrators differ in ways of detachment to the story in which they are narrating. Each narrator allows his or her narration to be marked by personal experience, emotions, or lack thereof. What they have in common, however, is that they seek to establish their version of the Sutpen-story as the correct one. Nevertheless, their intentions for doing so are quite individual. Following, I will provide an analysis of the narrators most closely linked to the central theme of their narrative, namely Rosa and Mr. Compson, before analyzing the narrative provided by Quentin and Shreve. I will then discuss the effect caused by Faulkner's intricate narration.

1.2.1. Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson

Faulkner opens *AA* by introducing the reader to the character of Rosa Coldfield, who gives her interpretation of the Sutpen saga in chapters one and five. Being one of the four main narrators in the novel, Rosa is the narrator who most noticeably allows her personal thoughts and feelings to color her interpretation of the historical events. It also is significant that this narrator is the only one who has been in direct contact with the object of their narrative; thus this narrator is an active participant in the events narrated.

Rosa is portrayed as an unfulfilled spinster, marked by "impotent yet indomitable frustration…long embattled in virginity" (7-8), who desperately clings to the past because that is all she knows. Everything about this character radiates the splendor of the antebellum South, which only serves to emphasize its losses. Rosa meets Quentin in what she "still called the office because her father had called it that – a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler" (7). Clearly, Rosa is holding on to values and traditions as they were before the loss of the Civil War (43 years ago) simply because that is how it used to be – how it was supposed to be. Even if the room was no longer an office, it remained so to Rosa – because that was how she remembered it from her childhood, and because "her father had called it that". Even though the room is "dim hot airless", she does not open the blinds or the windows, because "when she was a girl someone had believed" that it was not the proper thing to do. She is wearing her "eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now", continuing to mourn the loss of something bearing undeniable significance to her – however, no one really knows *what* – "whether for sister, father, nor not husband none knew" (7).

Even the way in which she calls forth Quentin carries dated qualities, and emphasizes an unwillingness to let go of the past and move forward: "the quaint, stiffly formal request which was actually a summons, out of another world almost – the queer archaic sheet of ancient good notepaper written over with the neat faded cramped script" (10). It is clear that Rosa belongs to the nobles of the antebellum South, to whom the myths of Cavaliers and aristocracy and honor were not just a myth but a way of life, which is "out of another world": not complimentary to the world she finds herself in. Using a suggestive simile, Faulkner compares Rosa to the house she lives in: "It too was smaller than its actual size…as though like her it had been created to fit into and complement a world in all ways a little smaller than the one in which it found itself" (10). The phrasing "smaller than its actual size" is interesting: Since the word "actual" denotes accuracy; we would expect the phrase "actual size" to refer to the accurate size of the object described. Here, however, the object is "smaller than its actual size", pointing to a firmly believed size or scale that did not fit after all. Thus, it can be argued that Rosa is narrow-minded; that she imagines herself larger and more important through her conceptions of aristocracy, but in reality she is smaller than her "actual size".

What strikes me as the most intriguing aspect of the narrative provided by this character is how much its form draws from Gothic fiction. This narrator is set apart from the

others by the language being excessively dramatic and exaggerated – giving it an almost theatrical sensation, as well as engaging in vast amounts of gloom and ghastliness, which clearly combine fiction with romance, death and horror – the emphasis being on the latter two. The setting in which Rosa is presented is a part of the stifling aura surrounding this narrator: "a grim mausoleum of Puritan righteousness and outraged female vindictiveness" (60). Hence, the character of Rosa is just as much a ghost as the shadowy figures being evoked from the past. Supporting this point is the repetitive referral to Rosa as a ghost, both through Mr. Compson, "Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made the ladies into ghosts" (12), and by the character's own acknowledging: "my life was destined to end on an afternoon in April forty-three years ago" (18) – establishing that Rosa is not living, but merely existing in the surrounding "coffin-smelling gloom" (8).

In correlation with the generic traits of Gothic fiction, Rosa's narrative is centered on a condemned castle, imagining Sutpen's Hundred as an earthly Purgatory, which is intertwined with its creator: "*the waiting grim decaying presence, spirit, of the house itself, talking that which sounded like the bombast of a madman who creates within his very coffin walls his fabulous immeasurable Camelots and Carcassonnes. Not absent from the place, the arbitrary square of earth which he had named Sutpen's Hundred*" (Faulkner's italics, 160). The reference to medieval castles like Camelot and Carcassonne in the portrayal of Sutpen's Hundred strengthens the Gothic elements of Rosa's narration, and partakes in emphasizing the gloom and horror of this "grim ogre-bourne" (167).

Castle of Camelot, illustrated by Gustave Doré in Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 1868

Rosa's characterization of Sutpen's Hundred provides the house with a ghost-like quality, including inexplicable noises and voices, as in this phrase: "I could hear the Sabbath afternoon quiet of that house louder than thunder, louder than laughing even with triumph" (27), and when Rosa claims to hear "the house speaking again, though in reality it was Judith's voice" (142). The voices and noises known for haunting the castles of Gothic fiction also seem to be haunting Sutpen's Hundred within the imagination of Rosa's narrative. Furthermore, Rosa pictures Sutpen's Hundred as this "indomitable skeleton" (136) with "no window or door or bedstead" (16), as left untouched by the destruction of the Civil War, "not ravaged, not invaded, marked by no bullet nor soldier's iron heel" (136) as if the very flames of war were afraid to assault it. In Rosa's imagination, the house is "reserved for something more: some desolation more profound than ruin" (136). Consequently, through Rosa's narration, Faulkner provides Sutpen's Hundred with a "spirit" reflecting the horrors and gloom of its maker – ruthless and horrific – as if "the house which he had built, which some suppuration of himself had created about him as the sweat of his body might have produced some (even if invisible) cocoon-like and complementary shell" (138). Not only does this strengthen the Gothic tradition of Rosa's narration, it furthers the view of Sutpen's Hundred as more than a house: it is a fortress, a prison "in which Ellen had had to live and die a stranger" and "in which Henry and Judith would have to be victims and prisoners, or die" (138-139). Furthermore, the suspense caused by this "inexplicable unseen" (138) reaches a climax at the end of Rosa's narration with the eerie proclamation that there is something "living hidden in that house" (172).

Another trace of the Gothic tradition is found in Rosa's portrayal of Thomas Sutpen, who, in accordance with the traditions of this literary genre, is presented as an ethereal and gloomy tyrant – a perpetrator of horrendous misdeeds against innocent victims. Essentially, to Rosa, Sutpen is "some beast out of a tale to frighten children" (158), "a demon, a villain" (169). Through Rosa's portrayal of Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson, this narrator pictures this character as a "man-horse-demon" (8), indicating horrendous misconducts on his behalf, "too dark to talk about" (32), as the sole cause of the disasters following. Several times, Rosa refers to Sutpen as an "ogre or djinn", which further emphasizes the character's inhumanity. When mentioning Sutpen's relationship to Ellen, Rosa find that her sister "had vanished into the stronghold of an ogre or djinn" (23) – that Sutpen exists in her memory as "the ogre of her childhood" who "removed" Ellen "into its ogre-bourne and produced two half phantom children" (167). For Rosa this was not, could not be, a happy marriage filled with love and

romance – but a sort of hostage-taking: The monster, Sutpen, capturing a beautiful virgin (as virtuous Southern belles would have been), Ellen, and how she then "conceived to the demon in a kind of nightmare" (13). Narration does not get more Gothic than that. Henry and Judith, the "two half-phantom children", the "two accursed children on whom the first blow of their devil's heritage had but that moment fallen" (135), were doomed, either to face an early death or to be captured within the walls of Sutpen's Hundred forever. This sense of doom further strengthens the view of Sutpen's Hundred as a fortress or prison.

Thus I would argue that Rosa is both unable and unwilling to acknowledge the object of her retribution as a normal human being, driven and motivated by the same hopes and fears shared by all humanity. The only way she can live with her memories is by granting Sutpen's actions these unnatural proportions, seemingly interpreting each action as being influenced by Sutpen's strange, demonic powers: "Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them over-run the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing…creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime Be Light" (8-9). By doing so, Rosa reduces both the humanity of Sutpen's actions and the action itself. For her, Sutpen's Hundred is not a product by an ambitious newcomer and hard-working Negroes, but a demonic construction "conjured into being by three Satanic words" (Levins, 12). However, this also provides Rosa with an explanation for the Southern loss of the Civil War. Rosa interprets the war to be a benevolent act of God, since "men with valor and strength but without pity or honor" were the ones fighting the battles in behalf of the South, Rosa reasons "is it any wonder that Heaven saw fit to let us lose?" (20). For Rosa, the explanation seems perfectly clear: God himself allowed the South to lose the War because "only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth" (11). Ultimately, through Rosa's portrayal, Sutpen is being identified with the devil itself. As this creature, this "light-blinded bat-like image" cannot be earthly, Sutpen cannot be human "Because he was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow…cast by the fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath the earth's crust and hence in retrograde, reverse; from abysmal and chaotic dark to eternal and abysmal dark completing his descending" (171).

The way in which the character of Rosa Coldfield presents Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson, his construction of Sutpen's Hundred, as well as his relations to Ellen and his children, is proportionally distorted because the events are narrated by a character who fabricates the events through an imagination based on what she *wants to believe* happened – not what

actually happened. Thus, the character Rosa immerses the created events, without logic or reason, in an unrealistic dream-vision. Sutpen's actions are presented without explanation, thus lacking the credibility provided by a cause-and-effect sequence. When Rosa summons Quentin, the character is venting upon the image of Thomas Sutpen an accumulated tension of a lifetime of delusional isolation. The language is exaggerated and theatrical, designed to embody the frustration and agony of a woman overwhelmed by the power of Thomas Sutpen, who clearly possesses a strong hold over her entire existence. Combined with the gloomy horrors of Rosa's narrative, Faulkner presents the skeletal outline of the Sutpen-story – mesmerizing the reader by the emotional compelling quality of his language, which plays on the Gothic tradition of combining fear with suspenseful anticipation. Rosa's narration appears almost hallucinatory, caught in a dream or nightmare, while at the same time being heavily marked by the narrator's outrage and anguish. By withholding information through Rosa's distorted narration, the reader is left to figure out what is fantasy and what is real in the fictional universe created by Faulkner.

In sharp contrast to the distorted and hallucinatory narration of Rosa Coldfield, the narrative provided by narrating character Mr. Compson is somewhat more reposed. Guiding the reader through chapters two, three, four and six, this narrator appears to be enlightened and comprehensive in his judgements. This kind of narrative contrast serves as a welcome counterbalance to the subjectivity marking the narration of Miss Rosa. Use of irony, a seemingly rational approach to the untangling of events, and the fact that he has not himself encountered Sutpen, provide Mr. Compson's narrative with a detachment conspicuously lacking from the preceding narrative. Through his supposed detachment, Mr. Compson is able to provide a perspective which humanizes Rosa's phantom from Hell. While Rosa describes Sutpen as a "man-horse-demon", a creature arriving "out of thin air" (32), Mr. Compson provides a detailed description of Sutpen's physical appearance: "A man with a big frame but gaunt now…with a short reddish beard…and above which his pale eyes had a quality at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed" (32-33), which shows the "shadowy ogre" of Rosa's narrative as a man of flesh and blood. Similarly, Sutpen's behavior is explained and rationalized as being a part of human nature, "the woods-man's instinct which he had acquired from the environment where he grew up" (226) – where Rosa ascribed it to an infernal nature. Ultimately, Mr. Compson's narrative links Sutpen to the regional atmosphere of the South, which creates a new dimension of understanding by linking Sutpen and his design to the particular cultures and traditions related of this area. This significant connection

is also verified by the mistake causing Sutpen's downfall, namely the character's inability to accept a Negro heir to its dynasty because it clashes with the "Southern" design.

Faulkner depicts Mr. Compson as a skeptic in religion, something which is slightly atypical for a southern gentleman. This view is particularly visible in Mr. Compson's description of marriage as "all that ritual" (49) – "A formula, a shibboleth meaningless as a child's game, performed by someone created by the situation whose need it answered" (117). Through use of irony, this narrator is portrayed as someone who generally approaches life with rationality. Thus, Mr. Compson's elaboration provides sustainable "facts" to the Sutpen legend. However, it becomes clear that this narrator too is biased in his portrayal of the Sutpen saga. If Mr. Compson's voice holds great authority and distinction, his narrative is greatly disrupted. Although it appears as if Mr. Compson possesses privileged information, Faulkner makes sure that the reader becomes aware of his inadequacies: "Doubtless something more than this transpired at the time, though none of the vigilance committee ever told it that I know of" (45). The word "doubtless" denotes certainty and authority on behalf of the narrator. However, the last piece of the sentence suggests that there is plenty of doubt surrounding the events described, thus revealing that Mr. Compson's authority and distinction is flawed and disrupted. It is significant that this narrator serves as the generation which is once removed from the events that have taken place. Thus Mr. Compson is not close enough to be affected, but not sufficiently removed from the event to view it as an integral part of his heritage and past. The language used in Mr. Compson's narration, like that of Rosa, is marked by repetition and theatricality. There is a level of uncertainty and interpretation which is noticeable through words like "perhaps", "surely", "apparently", "doubtless", and the well-used phrases "I can imagine"; especially employed in narrating the actions of Henry and Bon when visiting New Orleans:

> I can imagine how Bon told Henry…I can imagine Henry in New Orleans…whose entire worldly experience consisted of sojourns at other houses, plantations, almost interchangeable with his own…I can imagine him, with his Puritan heritage…of fierce proud mysticism…in that city foreign and paradoxical…So I can imagine him (Bon – my parenthesis), the way in which he took the innocent and negative plate of Henry's provincial soul…I can see him corrupting Henry…I can imagine how he did it – the calculation, the surgeon's alertness and cold detachment, the exposures brief, so brief as to be cryptic. (108-111)

Through these pages, Mr. Compson's narration is perfectly exemplified. Faulkner's dramatic and repetitive style marks the personal agenda of this narrator, emphasizing how the character *imagines* and projects his own thoughts and ideas upon the events presented.

Interestingly, Mr. Compson portrays Bon as a villain "corrupting" Henry – cold and calculating, with a "surgeon's alertness". It seems like Mr. Compson can relate to Henry's naïveté, only exposed to people and settings "almost interchangeable to himself", hence his ability to "imagine" the course of events – imagining how it must have been Bon corrupting and taking advantage of Henry. Faulkner's focus on the narrator's imagination suggests that the information provided by this narrator is also dubious and speculative, despite the somewhat reposed style.

The narrative provided by Mr. Compson appears strikingly dramatic – dramatizing, as opposed to narrating, the events: "the calculation, the surgeon's cold detachment, the exposures brief, so brief". While Rosa's narration appears heavily influenced by the Gothic tradition, Mr. Compson's narration is more of a dramatization than a narration – keeping the story moving through apparently logical and sensational sequences of events. In the perspective provided through Mr. Compson, the characters are viewed as actors "entering upon the stage" to dramatize the "the pageant, the scene, the act" (193). The very setting which surrounds these "actors" is like the tombstones described on the very same page. They are envisioned like props:; "the three pieces of marble…looking as though they had been cleaned and polished and arranged by scene shifters who…would return and…carry them back to the warehouse until they should be needed" (193). Through the imagination of Mr. Compson, the actors wear the "mask of Greek tragedy, interchangeable not only from scene to scene, but from actor to actor and behind which the events and occasions took place *without chronology or sequence*" (62, my italics).

Supporting this notion of drama-like narration is the way in which Mr. Compson portrays Thomas Sutpen. Despite not having any personal contact with Sutpen, Mr. Compson clearly holds the stereotypical Southerner's admiration for the long-dead heroes who became almost saint-like by fighting for their region in the Civil War. To Mr. Compson, not only is Sutpen such a heroic figure, but his design is interpreted as a small-scale version of the history and heritage of the South. Thus, Mr. Compson is, in common with Rosa, compelled to exaggerate the figure that is at once the motivating force for his narration and its lasting focus. Unlike Rosa's Gothic, nightmare-like view, the vision of Sutpen as imagined by Mr. Compson is lacking the demonic characteristic of a satanic nature. As the protagonist of Mr. Compson's narrative, Thomas Sutpen is envisioned similar to the man of heroic stature who is

celebrated in Southern myth, and this view of Sutpen as a tragic hero[6] is only detected through Mr. Compson's perspective. Appropriating the grand ideat of the tragic hero, Mr. Compson imagines Thomas Sutpen as a man "who is virtuous but not pre-eminently good", as stated by Charles Reeves in *The Aristotelian Concept of The Tragic Hero.* This suggests a noble or important person who is morally inclined, but nevertheless subject to human error. Reeves continues by noting that the tragic heroes of Aristotle are flawed individuals who commit, without evil intent, great misdeeds that ultimately cause their downfall. These traits of the tragic hero are projected upon the character of Sutpen through Mr. Compson's narration. The first sign of this kind of narrative projection is observable in Mr. Compson's talking about how Clytie was named: "He named Clytie as he named them all…with that same robust and sardonic temerity…Only I have always liked to believe that he intended to name Clytie, Cassandra…and that he just got the name wrong through a mistake natural in a man who must have almost taught himself to read" (62). This quote forcibly suggests that Mr. Compson imagines Sutpen's intentions to be noble, but that he just gets it wrong, through no fault of his own. This view is elaborately emphasized through the narrator's dramatizing of Sutpen's flawed goal – that he

> set out into a world which even in theory he knew nothing about, and with a fixed goal in his mind…Even then he had that same alertness…in a country and among people whose very language he had to learn – that unsleeping care which must have known that it could permit itself but one mistake;…weighing event against eventuality, circumstance against human nature, his own fallible judgement and mortal clay against not only human but natural forces…compromising with his dream and his ambition. (53)

Not only does Faulkner, through the narration of Mr. Compson, link Sutpen's goal to the already fixed design of the South "whose very language he had to learn", but he is channeling Sutpen as a tragic hero – caught in circumstances of which he cannot control, contemplating "event against eventuality" by means of his "fallible judgment", knowing that he cannot afford to make "but one mistake". Through Mr. Compson, the narration suggests that Sutpen does not commit his misdeeds intentionally, something which is marked by how Sutpen repeatedly asks himself: "Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate?" (263). Thus the character's tragic humanity is emphasized by its "fallible judgment and mortal clay". This emphasis on Sutpen's *judgement* (as opposed to his demonic nature, or lack of moral) as the

[6] Aristotle presents his view of what makes a tragic hero in his *Poetics*, where he suggests that a hero of a tragedy must evoke a sense of pity or fear in his audience.

element causing his failure correlates to the genre of dramatic tragedy. Significantly, this perspective occurs only within the narration of Mr. Compson. Sutpen's ultimate mistake is the "miscalculation" made in his first marriage; Charles Bon. Sutpen's moral imperfection causes his inability to repudiate the sinful traditions of the South. By his rejection of Bon, Sutpen – the tragic hero, being "not pre-eminently virtuous and just" – "sacrificed pity and gentleness and love and all the soft virtues" (154) to his immoral ambition. Furthermore, Mr. Compson is the only narrating character who ennobles Sutpen after his failure due to the sheer magnitude of his attempt: "weighing event against eventuality, circumstance against human nature, his own fallible judgement and mortal clay against not only human but natural forces". Imagined by Mr. Compson as a tragic hero, Sutpen is contending against his fellowmen and his surroundings – even fate itself.

Similar to any tragedy, the element of fate is central also in Mr. Compson's narration and re-creation of the Sutpenstory. OED defines the term "fate" as "the development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power", whereas "fatality" (as a mass noun) is defined as "helplessness in the face of fate". That this focus on lack of control facing one's destiny and the following "helplessness" is emphasized in the narration provided by Mr. Compson serves to accentuate the tragic and heroic elements of his narration. It appears as though Sutpen's attempt to pursue his goals despite defying established tradition as well as norms of humanity elevates him to heroic stature in the eyes of Mr. Compson. However, this defiance is ultimately the element causing his downfall, as fate sets out to avenge the very Gods defied by Sutpen's actions. In classic tragedy, fate serves as the ultimate avenger, which is also the case in Mr. Compson's narration. Serving as a sort of scene manager, Fate requires the catastrophe of the Civil War to defeat Sutpen. Mr. Compson stresses how at the height of his "role of arrogant ease and leisure", "Fate, destiny, retribution, irony…was already striking the set" (72-73) by the "fateful mischance" which laid waste the "black foundation" serving the as the foundation for the rising and establishing of Sutpen's Hundred, "removing its two male mainstays" (78). Consequently, the Sutpen clan is doomed by fate, singled out in "preference to any other in the county or the land" (102) because of their "ancient curse" (204). Yet Sutpen refuses to give up. The heroic attempt to pursue his "fixed goal", his design, defying both society and eternity against overwhelming odds, fully establishes Sutpen as the tragic hero of Mr. Compson's dramatization, and serves an extreme contrast to the Hell-bound figure evoked from Rosa's narration.

1.2.2. Quentin and Shreve

The narrating characters of Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon are simultaneously intertwined and distinct, and their perspective is quite different than the one which can be detected in the narratives provided by characters Rosa and Mr. Compson. Where the latter two have been obsessed with the character of Thomas Sutpen, Quentin and Shreve, however puzzled by Sutpen's character, are more interested in constructing a narrative revolving around his descendants. Thereby, the final re-creation of the Sutpen saga can be viewed as a composite product of these two narrators. It is interesting how the different backgrounds of these narrating characters provide for them equally different emotional involvement in reconstructing the saga – which ultimately shapes their narration.

Being "born and bred in the Deep South" (9), the character of Quentin is able to absorb the story revolving around Sutpen "without the medium of speech somehow from having been born and living beside it" (212). He is the tormented Southerner, moving away to Harvard in an attempt to escape "the deep South dead since 1865" and its population of "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts", because he is "too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one" (9). Because the story of Sutpen, and arguably the story of the South, is a part of "his twenty years' heritage" (11), Quentin imagines that this heritage is shared by every person born in the South by "breathing the same air" (11). This unity of common heritage compels its descendants to continue "looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward" (12) into their shared past. The notion is supported by Mr. Compson's suggestion that Rosa blames Quentin for being "partly responsible through hereditary for what happened to her and her family through him" (13). On the other hand, Shreve, being Canadian, is completely detached from the alleged events. When this disconnected character asks Quentin to "*Tell about the South. What's it like there…Why do they live there. Why do they live at all*)" (Faulkner's italics, 174), his reactions to Quentin's narrative serves to raise the novel to a new level of enlightenment. Genuinely puzzled by the concept of the complex history and tradition of the American South, "Because it's something my people haven't got…We don't live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves…and bullets in the dining room table and such" (361), Shreve serves as a curious and eager participant in the reconstruction of the Sutpen saga, and contributes by projecting his knowledge of historical facts as critical and inquiring comments on Quentin's narrative.

Quentin's narration is constructed by his combination of the words collected from Rosa and Mr. Compson's narratives mixed with his own feelings towards the Sutpen and the American South. Marked by his obsession with the past, the narrating character of Quentin Compson is portrayed as a troubled man, "an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names". This character is not "a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth…a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts" (12), meaning that he does not know how to separate himself from the heritage shared by all southerners – thus he too is a ghost by association. This obsession with the past and his heritage troubles him to the extent that he imagines that "It's going to turn and destroy us all someday" (12) – a notion that haunts him throughout. Consequently, this narrator is conflicted by his own sentiments towards the story he attempts to reconstruct. On the one hand, Quentin is trying to reconstruct the story of Sutpen. Simultaneously, however, he attempts to reconstruct the events surrounding Henry, Judith and Bon – seemingly in order to make sense of his own emotional and historical situation.

Shreve, on the other hand, is completely detached from the story he partakes in re-creating. His language is therefore unmarked by the thoughts and feelings of others, which becomes apparent in his vivid use of metaphors – marked by references to mythical and fictional creations, but also historically verified events and personas. His exaggerated language, embellished with sarcastically attained metaphors, accentuates his detachment because it appears that he employs the metaphors in order to provide some basis for his assumptions. In his recapitulation of Quentin's narration, as if to ensure that he has understood the "plot", he uses metaphors in order to make sense of "Aunt Rosa" (176) and her outrage directed at Sutpen, saying that "if he hadn't been a demon…she wouldn't have had to go out there and be betrayed by the old meat and find instead of a widowed Agamemnon to her Cassandra an ancient stiff-jointed Pyramus to her eager though untried Thisbe" (177). Shreve goes on to mention the appearance of Sutpen through his question-like recapitulation: "That this Faustus, the demon, the Beelzebub…set out and got himself engaged again in order to replace that progeny the hopes of which he had himself destroyed?" (178-79). Moreover, Shreve is able to challenge Quentin's narration through his knowledge about American history by interrupting Quentin's narration in order to correct it: When Quentin talks about Sutpen's origin in West Virginia, Shreve points out; "Not in West Virginia…because if he was twenty-five years old in Mississippi in 1833, he was born in 1808. And there wasn't any West Virginia in 1808" (220).

The narration of Quentin and Shreve as a collaboration-narrative carries with it elements that are reminiscent of, and can be drawn from, the genre of romance,[7] focusing on traditional themes emphasizing the elements of love. Although not agreeing on what love is, the topic is thoroughly discussed through Shreve's vivid and outspoken imagination, followed by Quentin's sober and less enthusiastic responses; "Shreve said…"Jesus, some day you are bound to fall in love. They just wouldn't beat you that way. It would be like if God had got Jesus born and saw that he had the carpenter tools and then never gave him anything to build with them. Don't you believe that?"…"I don't know," Quentin said" (324). By adding marvelous events and the frequent use of a web of interwoven stories, rather than a simple plot unfolding about a main character, we can see clear resemblance to the narrative structure and form employed by both Quentin and Shreve through their focus on the relationships and triangular drama they imagine as unfolding between Charles Bon, and Henry and Judith Sutpen. This kind of affinity is especially apparent in this section, where Shreve tries to make sense of the incestuous relationship between Bon and Judith (and Henry): "The Pope excommunicated him but it didn't hurt! It didn't hurt! They were still husband and wife. They were still alive. They still loved!" (342).

Simultaneously, Shreve's narration adds an element of the tall-tale through his employment of sarcasm and humor. True to the genre, the narrator of tall-tales is usually humorous and good spirited, which relates to Shreve – constantly immersing his sense of irony and sarcasm to the narration, even when referring to serious matters, such as the flawed information deriving from Quentin's father, Mr. Compson: "Your father", Shreve said. "He seems to have got an awful lot of delayed information awful quick, after having waited forty-three years" (266). Carolyn Brown notes that the tall-tale is a narrative with unbelievable elements (which also correlates to the marvelous events drawn from the genre of romance), related as if it were true and factual. Compare Shreve's countless outbursts of "Wait. Wait. Wait. You mean that…" (176), "Wait then…for God's sake wait." (216), and the sarcastic and humorous; "Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn't it." (217), expressing *how* unbelievable and marvelous the tale (and the South) truly is.

Quentin, however, does not seem to share Shreve's sense of enthusiasm. To him the re-telling of the story appears to be exhausting at first, as shown through this passage: "I am

[7] Chris Baldick "Chivalric romance", *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (p.6)

telling" *Am I going to have to hear it all again* he thought *I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever so apparently not only a man never outlives his father but not even his friends and acquaintances do*" (277). The narration provided by Quentin is colored by the incomplete narrative he received from Mr. Compson, and his grandfather, which is noted by his frequent referral to his grandfather in particular; since he was the only man he knew who had been in direct contact with Sutpen. It is through Quentin's narration that the pieces of the narrative are puzzled together, but, interestingly, this too is through second-hand information. Through Quentin's re-telling of his grandfather's narrative, we learn something crucial about the character of Thomas Sutpen. This new knowledge changes the way in which this character is viewed altogether: "…he told Grandfather something about himself. "Sutpen's trouble was innocence…Because where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say 'This is mine' was crazy…Because he was still innocent. He knew it without being aware that he did" (227-229). This is significant information; however, it is only how his Grandfather remembers it, and through Quentin's recollection of his Grandfather's memory, the reader suspects that there might be pieces of information missing or tampered with.

When Shreve begins to contribute to the re-construction, Quentin's immediate response is that "*He sounds just like father…Just exactly like father if father had known as much about it the night before I went out there as he did the day after I came back*" (181), emphasizing the fact that Mr. Compson (father) received information from Quentin after he visited Sutpen's Hundred and met Henry himself, thus highlighting the shortcomings of his father's narrative, which again reflects on the narration initially provided through Shreve. After a while, however, the two narrating characters appear to join together in a sort of narrative symbiosis Noted by Quentin, "*Maybe we are both Father…Yes, we are both Father. Or maybe Father and I are both Shreve, 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*" (262), this symbiosis serves to show Quentin's emphasis on heritage and how different events and different people come into being, providing for him the ultimate link to the Sutpen clan.

The two narrators find each other through their shared interest in the descendants of Thomas Sutpen, namely Charles, Henry and Judith. Although intrigued by Sutpen himself, Quentin and Shreve become more involved in re-constructing the narrative to make sense of

his children; “It was Shreve speaking…it might have been either of them and was in a sense both: both thinking as one” (303). Together they attempt to figure out which part of the narrative known to them is verifiable – and thus probably, or at least potentially, true. Essentially, the characters of Quentin and Shreve merge into the characters of Henry and Bon; “four of them and then just two – Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry, the two of them both believing that Henry was thinking *He* (meaning his father) *has destroyed us all*, not for one moment thinking *He* (meaning Bon) *must have known or at least suspected this all the time*” (334).

Nevertheless, despite their collaborative attempt to re-create the Sutpen-saga into something verifiable, it becomes clear that they cannot understand the chain of events, or the South itself: “What is it? Something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happenings that occurred and ceased fifty years ago?...Quentin said. “You can’t understand it. You would have to be born there”. “Would I then?” Quentin did not answer. “Do you understand it?” “I don’t know,” Quentin said. “Yes, of course I understand it”….”I don’t know” (361-62). Ultimately, the story of Sutpen and his family is (to both Quentin and Shreve) a story about the South in all its complexity and horrible splendor – and despite their best efforts, it appears that neither the Southerner nor the Outsider can make sense of what is true and what is fiction.

1.3. Connected and Detached

In this chapter, I have discussed Faulkner’s narrative form, showing how the various narrating characters give very different versions of the story presented. I have found that the foundation for their differences is correlated to the character’s personal experiences. My analysis of the narrating characters suggests that their narrative form, and hence their narration, is influenced by their detachment from the story which they are attempting to re-create. Rosa’s gothic tendencies accentuate her direct, personal involvement with the Sutpen story and the characters in it. Her narration is colored by her personal feelings toward Sutpen, but also by her general state of unhappiness and outrage over her inability to change her own situation. Thus she projects her outrage onto Sutpen, portraying him as a demonic figure without human compassion. Elements of the Gothic tradition, the macabre gloominess,

enhances her outrage, and through her narration, the reader comes to view her as a biased and thus unreliable narrator.

Mr. Compson is equally biased; however, it takes some time before the reader comes to that realization. His narration is more reposed and composed, which makes him a sharp contrast to the narration provided by Rosa. Nevertheless, through his elevation of Sutpen to heroic stature it becomes visible that he too is colored by his personal feelings and experiences. Although Mr. Compson never encountered Sutpen himself, he views his actions not as demonic, but as a valiant attempt of defiance towards established traditions and human norms. His narrative form resembles that of a dramatic tragedy, which further emphasizes the narrator's heroic vision of Sutpen. Through his repetition and theatricality the reader can detect a level of uncertainty and elements of interpretation which establish Mr. Compson, like Rosa, as an un-reliable narrator.

Tall-tales can be exaggerations of actual events, or completely fictional tales set in a familiar setting, such as the American South. Seeing the tall-tale is a fundamental element of American folk literature, it seems only natural that it is one of the narrative forms employed by Faulkner – especially if one essential aim of his narrative strategy is to emphasize a mythical structure, and problematize the search for historical truth. Surely this appears to be the goal of the narrative quest embarked upon by Quentin and Shreve. Through the combination of Quentin and Shreve's narration Faulkner accentuates the relationship between author/creator, /narrator, and receiver/reader. Maneuvering through long sentences filled with rich imagery in Faulkner's act of circumlocution mentioned in my introduction, the reader, like Shreve, seems to be left with the responsibility of identifying important information and separating this from Quentin's emotional re-creation. As noted, Minter states that this technique engages the reader in an interactive "collaborative process" between writer and reader (4), which is arguably what happens in the narrative relationship between Quentin and Shreve. Shreve's colorful and embellished commentary narration channels Emerson's anticipations of "creative writing" as a creative collaboration requiring an equally "creative reading" – meaning that Shreve's role as a narrator resembles the role of the reader. The narrating relationship between Quentin and Shreve is significant, because the added outsider (Shreve) serves as an anchor – a reality-check, if you will, preventing the story to escalate completely out of hand. Clearly, the movement from Rosa – Mr. Compson – Quentin – Shreve is one of decreasing involvement and increasing detachment.

Essentially, the four different ways of narrating emphasize the different worlds to which the narrator belong – something which further serves to show that “truth” is not objective, but subjective, based on individual experience and emotion. To Rosa, Sutpen is, and always will be, a demon – just as he will continue to be a heroic figure in the eyes of Mr. Compson. However, the narrative collaboration of Quentin and Shreve exemplifies how reality and truth can come together if viewed by an outsider – a notion which will be further elaborated in chapter three.

Chapter II

Myths within Narration

This chapter will discuss the ways in which the myths accounted for in my introduction are represented throughout the novel. The allure of the splendorous antebellum South causes the narrating characters to valorize and further mythologize the past in a way that emphasizes their attachment to or detachment from the South. Historical and social myths have played a key role in shaping the national identity of the United States. However, before there was such a national identity, the US was separated in two distinct regions, each embracing different sets of traditions and manners: Southern slave states, and the industry friendly Northern states. Consequently, the Northern and Southern regions eagerly explained the considerable differences of the regions in historical facts and events, attempting to justify and preserve the basis for their uniqueness. Not all of these historical facts and events were employed in a direct manner, but interpreted in a way which best served the region in question. These interpretations became historical and social myths, which have played a significant role in the history and heritage of the US.

The interpretive nature of the myth lies in its unverifiable "truth". Hence, myth might be termed fictional by its connection to narrative structure and perhaps vice versa. In my introduction I mention how Paul Valéry defines myth as "the term for everything which exists and subsists only in the basis of language" (199), and throughout the narration of *AA* the issue of myth existing only in the basis of language is the very issue that shapes the narrating characters in *AA*. However, different conceptions of myth are merely variants on the same subject – that it is a creation and validation of a cultural or social belief, verified only by vast cultural acceptance and belief – not historical facts; thus the creation will always be open for interpretation.

In my introduction, I establish that mythic framework is marked by great complexity, as the word myth does not have a unified meaning. Marderness considers popular culture's definition of myth as a widely held conception that is inherently false, while the academic definition would be a socially constructed narrative used to explain origins and natural events,

as well as enforce social rules (15). However, Marderness observations regarding "living myth", namely the set of values that define culture and "represent the mythic horizons that define reality for us" (15), is particularly interesting because through these observations Marderness states that *reality itself* is something that can be individually defined. This holds particular significance when discussing *AA*. As noted in the preceding chapter, the narrating characters of *AA* are distinctive through their declining detachment to the central element of their narrative. Separated by age and their personal involvement in the narrative, the narrators seem to reflect the social myths. In the following sections, I will account for the employment of these myths within the narration of *AA* and the effect caused by this mythical immersion. The myths subjected to discussion will be the Cavalier myth, the American Dream, and the Lost Cause, as these myths are the most apparent throughout and because they have shaped the lives and identities of Americans over the years.

No one could be more aware of this than Faulkner himself. Born and raised in rural Mississippi, where, as Michel Gresset puts it "the spirit of the nineteenth century ran well into the twentieth", it is natural to assume that he was, in the words of Daniel Singal, "thoroughly immersed in the Victorian ethos" (4). Influenced by his mother and by Southern society in general, Victorian moralism ultimately became a basic part of his being, and in the following sections I will show that this influence is particularly visible through his narration of *AA*.

2.1. The Cavalier Myth

AA is littered with references to traditions and values that appear unfounded in the new world of the United States and, in a sense, anti-American when considering it being "the land of the free". Consequently, my focus on the Cavalier myth stems from a belief that it deeply affected southern society: embedding the very essence of being southern, because ultimately, the thoughts and notion of gentlemanliness – honor, respectability, virtue, and bravery – stem from this idea of a link to aristocracy. It is logical to assume that, combined with the economic advance the southern states enjoyed in their heydays, this made southerners cling to this myth because it left them unified by something stronger than shared thoughts and opinions: shared heritage.

Although Faulkner seldom uses the term "cavalier" in the course of *AA*, his references to aristocracy and nobility suggest that the connection to the popular myth would not be lost

to anyone with knowledge of southern history. Within *AA*, Faulkner makes several references to knights, kings, and nobles, which arguably highlights southern focus on inherited class relations and superiority. Whether intentional or not, this pattern emphasizes the characters' desperate attempts to validate their own actions, discredit "outsiders" and create a southern heritage by linking it to the convenient ideas and legacies of the British Empire – even though such heritage might be founded on wishful thinking rather than historical facts. When referring to a conversation between the character of Thomas Sutpen and his grandfather, Quentin describes Sutpen's eradication of his first marriage like this: "…he told Grandfather – told him, mind; not excusing, asking for no pity; not explaining…just told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside like eleventh- and twelfth century kings did" (240). The reference to kingship signals that Quentin establishes a belief that kings could rightfully do so, while simultaneously plotting out the obvious fact that Sutpen's character is *not* royalty – hence the preposterous nature of his action.

Within this notion lies the accompanying notion that this action could have been easier to swallow if the character possessed the right stature, thus emphasizing the hypocrisy of class-division and highlighting its existence. Strikingly, the character of Charles Bon is referred to as a "tragic Lancelot" (320) through the relentless recapitulating and examination of narrating character Shreve. Being the only narrator who is not a southerner himself, the character of Shreve is able to view Bon and the surrounding events from a different perspective, which ultimately leads him to link the figure of Bon to the sympathetic and legendary figure of Lancelot. Lancelot[14] was the First Knight of the Round Table, who normally appears as King Arthur's greatest champion until his alleged romance and adultery with Queen Guinevere is discovered, which caused a civil war bringing about the end of Arthur's kingdom. Through the character of Shreve, the figure of Bon is recognized as the rightful heir to the Sutpen dynasty – although Shreve understands the problematic nature of that circumstance. Hence, Bon is depicted as an advocate of love – thus justifying his desperate actions. Through Shreve's narration, Bon appears vulnerable and broken by the abandonment of his father, especially when Faulkner portrays Shreve as narrating his own thought regarding Bon's thoughts on his reason for seeking out Sutpen: "…thinking "*So at last I shall see him, whom it seems I was bred up never to expect to see, whom I had even*

[14] The legends of Lancelot are accounted for on the website referred to below. Interestingly, and a suggesting further affinity with the character of Charles Bon, the legend says that Lancelot was left by the shore of the lake as a child, where he was found by Vivien, the Lady of the Lake, who fostered and raised him. http://arthurianadventure.com/sir_lancelot.htm

learned how to live without, thinking maybe how he would walk into the house and see the one who made him and then he would know; there would be that flash, that instant of indisputable recognition…" *(*319) However, unlike Lancelot, it is more complicated to argue for Bon as an agent of romance and love. It is never clear whether or not he loves Judith or desires to be accepted into his father's embrace as his first born. Simultaneously, it can be argued that, like Sutpen, he is driven by desire and ambition as he determined to be recognized by his father, potentially in order to create an identity and a foundation for his baseless existence. The noble link to Lancelot thus explains Bon's heritage and identity, and justifies his following actions as well as tragic outcome. Additionally, Faulkner's narration through Shreve refers to monarchy and aristocracy when picturing Henry's attempt to come to terms with Bon's incestuous relation to their sister: "But kings have done it! Even dukes! There was that Lorraine duke named John something who married his sister…they were still husband and wife. They were still alive. They still loved!" (342) Referring back to the way social prominence was kept intact by interrelations through marriage among royalty and nobles, calls for justification of incest. Nevertheless, the problem is still the fact that love is not the power that drives Bon. The incestuous communion is created by Faulkner as a means for his character to succeed on its quest for recognition, acceptance and, ultimately, legacy. Thus the noble manner (both romantically and hereditary) becomes ironic and grotesque given the circumstances created by Faulkner. Conceivably, such narrative twists, immersed in and prompted by underlying mythical narratives, highlight the immense significance of heritage within the South, arguably constructed and maintained through the Cavalier myth.

Even in the name "Sutpen's Hundred" Faulkner hints at ties to the mother country. Being a traditional English name for an administrative division of a shire or county to define an area which would support one hundred heads of a household, the term "hundred" points to the southern linkage to England. Sean Miller notes that the term was first recorded in the laws constructed under the reign of King Edmund I, referred to as the area and measure of land served by a hundred court, which in return were ran by knights – directly connected to the Crown. Over time the principal functions of the hundred became the administration of law and the keeping of the peace. The term was adapted into American division of counties, and in colonial Virginia "hundreds" were frequently used in plantation names. Through the frustrated cries noted by the character of Miss Rosa (but reflected through that of Quentin) one can argue that this link is exposed:

> He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before, knew for certain was his own any more than the horse was his own or even the pistols, seeking some place to hide himself, and Yoknapatawpha County supplied him with it…and still called it Sutpen's Hundred as if it had been a king's grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather …"No: not even a gentleman. (14-16)

Faulkner's somewhat careless, though undoubtedly intentional, use of speech marks still leaves me somewhat in the dark regarding which characters are doing the narrating in this section. Clearly, it is intertwined between Miss Rosa's retelling her history and Quentin's attempt to unscramble it all. Arguably, this confusion reflects the confusion felt by the characters – and through Faulkner inconsistent use of speech marks, the reader feels the confusion too. All in all, this narrative technique contributes to the mythical qualities of Faulkner's narration – as the reader participates in an oral reshaping of events, essentially, like Quentin, attempting to unscramble the chain of events. Nevertheless, through this quote Faulkner incorporates the reader into – in one sense, makes the reader complicit in – a conviction displaying the obvious divide between those southerners regarding themselves as heirs of an aristocracy and the "others". The recurrent use of the term "gentleman" establishes this view, as Sutpen clearly is not considered being such a man. OED defines the term in the following ways: "1A chivalrous, courteous, or honorable man. 1.1 A man of good social position, especially one of wealth and leisure. 1.2A man of noble birth attached to a royal household." Judging by the bitterness detected in the quote, it is fair to assume that definitions 1A and 1.2A are the standards appointed to a man of southern principles. Though the character of Sutpen clearly grows to possess both "wealth and leisure", he is never considered a gentleman. Thus we are led to believe that social position is linked to the heritage of "noble birth".

Sutpen carries "a name which nobody ever heard before", which ruins his chance of ever being considered a true gentleman. Names of noble heritage were common names, hence known to the common man and woman. Sutpen's name and character are unknown, not verifiable; thus he is not one of them. Furthermore, this resentment towards newcomers attempting to climb the social ladder mirrors the Victorian disapproval of "new money" as well as the upper class' refuge in their inherited status – accentuating the disproportion between men, and contrasting the ideals of the norther region. Despite not having the known noble heritage, Sutpen "still called it Sutpen's Hundred" – verifying that the term "hundred" was a term to be used only if it "had been a king's grant in unbroken perpetuity". Ultimately, "hundred" represented a link to aristocracy and the only acceptable usage was if one had the

required noble heritage linking back to royalty and aristocracy – which the character of Sutpen did not. Furthermore, the phrase “unbroken perpetuity” accentuates the nature of this aristocratic succession: you have to *be* a gentleman, not simply *become* one. This notion is further stated on page 46, in the narration of Mr. Compson:

> (yes, he was underbred. It showed like this always, your grandfather said, in all his formal contacts with people. He was like John L. Sullivan having taught himself painfully and tediously to do the schottische, having drilled himself and drilled himself in secret until he now believed it no longer necessary to count the music’s beat, say”. (46)

The fact that the character of Sutpen is described as “underbred” needs no further explanation. However, the comparison to boxer John Sullivan[15] doing Victorian ballroom dancing (“schottische”) elaborately shows how out of “character” Sutpen was, attempting to integrate the planter elite. Although Sutpen seemingly thinks he blends in, his lack of noble heritage “showed in all his formal contacts with people”.

Interestingly, Faulkner’s creation of Sutpen’s extravagant plantation mansion could very well be founded by the Rosewell Plantation[16] in Gloucester County, Virginia. Built by Mann Page I (completed by Mann Page II), the mansion housed the Page-family for over a hundred years. Not only was the Page-family linked to the First Families of Virginia, but the mansion itself carries many similarities to that of the Sutpen estate. Larger than any home built in colonial Virginia, the plantation is described by architectural historian Thomas Waterman as "the largest and finest of American houses of the colonial period." Further, Waterman notes that through much of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as during the Civil War, Rosewell plantation hosted extravagant formal balls and celebrations. Additionally, Marc Matrana notes that it was Page's intention to build a home that would rival or exceed the newly completed Governor's Palace in Williamsburg in size and luxury. The completion of the plantation took several years, through which the founders struggled financially to piece it together. Its construction was mainly brick, marble, and mahogany, much which had to be imported. Finally, it deteriorated in the years following the Civil War before it ended up being

[15] John L. Sullivan: American born boxer from immigrant Irish parents, 1858-1918. At this time, boxing did not have an official title; however, he is considered to be the first modern heavyweight champion.

[16] The building of Rosewell was begun in 1725 by Mann Page I (1691–1730), who married in 1718 Judith Carter, the daughter of Robert "King" Carter. Educated at Eton College and Oxford University in England, Mann Page was appointed to the Governor's Council of the Virginia Colony shortly after his return to Virginia. He embarked on construction of Rosewell in 1725, but died five years later before construction was completed. Their son Mann Page II saw the unfinished mansion through to completion. Kornwolf, James D.; Wallis, Georgiana (2002). Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial America, Vol. 2.

destroyed by fire in 1909. Clearly, similarities in size and structure are apparent. Sutpen wished to build a plantation that would prove him better than his surrounding planters.

(Photograph of Rosewell Plantation, ca. 1900)

Completed, Sutpen's Hundred is constructed of "plank and brick", furnished with "mahogany and chandeliers" (39, 43). Sutpen spent several years completing his plantation, which decayed following the Civil War and ultimately destroyed by fire. In common with Rosewell, Faulkner describes great balls and parties being thrown at the Sutpen estate to further establish the prominence of Sutpen, who by this time (1859) has become the "biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the country" (72). By relating this fictional estate to one of historical validity, Faulkner strengthens the mythical nature of his narration. Though fictional, the idea of Sutpen's Hundred becomes credible within the fictional universe of *AA*. Obviously, it is problematic to argue that this is done intentionally, but I would still emphasize the plausibility that Faulkner realized the effect of linking his fictional elements to the "real deal". Furthermore, connecting Sutpen's Hundred to an estate of such prominence and heritage as Rosewell is significant, because only through an estate of this scale could the character of Thomas Sutpen be able to infiltrate southern aristocracy – a society which prides itself on hereditary splendor based solely on myth and vague historical "truths". By linking Sutpen's Hundred to a plantation mansion of verifiable aristocratic heritage through his narration, Faulkner mirrors the English cultural influence and the great significance of class relations. By his method of narration Faulkner establishes a sense of "reality" to his fiction, accentuating the plausible nature of the events presented – thus adding to the mythical qualities of his narrative.

In the Victorian spirit, it was important to preserve order. Accordingly, it was considered essential that people remained in their "natural", birth-given class to ensure the continuing superiority of true gentlemanliness: a quality only *truly* accessible through heritage. Despite his status as "the biggest landowner and cotton-planter in the country", Sutpen still could not pass as a gentleman – although he "acted his role too – a role of arrogant ease and leisure which, as the leisure and ease put flesh on him, became a little pompous." (72). This point applies equally to Henry, who was "lighter in the bone than Sutpen, as if his bones were capable of bearing the swagger but were still too light and quick to support the pomposity" (72). Descriptions like these strongly suggest that the surroundings do not consider this lifestyle to be authentic for the Sutpens; whose behavior is downplayed as an acting a role "of arrogant ease and leisure". However, due to the fact that this is not their birth-given class, the Sutpen characters are never fully embraced in the aristocratic southern social scene. Hence, references to gentlemanliness and respectability, the heritage deriving from the cavaliers, are ways of preserving the division between newcomer and established order. Nevertheless, the character of Thomas Sutpen has grown too successful to be ignored: "He was not liked (which he evidently did not want anyway) but feared, which seemed to amuse, if not actually please, him. But he was accepted; he obviously had too much money now to be rejected" (72). Against all odds, the character of Thomas Sutpen had managed to become even more successful than the original aristocrats, thus validating the southern planter elite's fear of losing their social superiority handed to them like "a king's grant in unbroken perpetuity". Through their diverse narrations revolving around and focused on Thomas Sutpen, the narrating characters accentuate the ultimate American myth: the myth of The American Dream – a myth which is, arguably, essentially non-southern.

2.2. The American Dream

When introducing the myth of the American Dream in my introduction, I stress the importance of the Declaration of Independence. The significance of its second sentence is indisputable, and the words in this sentence has shaped the way in which the US is viewed around the world: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life,

Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." These "self-evident truths" and "unalienable rights" led to vast migration due to "pursuit of Happiness" and wealth. Since it was a self-evident truth that "all men are created equal", notions of class were disregarded, thus causing people to liberate themselves from the orders of social structure in their pursuit of the American Dream under the belief that "everyone can make it". Through forceful ambition and hard work many succeeded in their quest, and wealth was no longer reserved for those born into it. As observed by David Singal, these fortune hunters "could soon elevate themselves to the stature of "gentlemen" (13). Hence, the concept of the American Dream was founded. Further, Singal notes that "Men on the make with sharp wits, few scruples, and no pedigree flocked to the booming cotton lands of Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia in search of instant fortunes" (13). It was no longer a myth or mere notion; it had become a reality. Or had it? Interestingly, Singal puts "gentlemen" in quotation marks to accentuate that those of newfound wealth were not, in fact, true gentlemen – only sharing some of the qualities of gentlemen – namely wealth. As Singal points out, "pedigree" was no longer a central issue on the path to wealth, and "gentlemen" emerged out of the soil like the cotton itself: fiercely ambitious, with "no scruples" standing in the way of their success. As it was, these newcomers were determined to create a new existence including power and respectability whatever the cost or consequence. Thus, wealth and status became accessible to every man in America not shy of "hard work" and favored by "a little luck", and ultimately, ambition out-weighed heritage. However, was it really a self-evident *truth* that all men were equal? That heritage no longer mattered?

In *AA*, the clearest reference to the myth of The American Dream is the character of Thomas Sutpen himself. As I have established in the previous chapter, the four narrating characters account for this character in four different ways. Seemingly, the narrators do not fully know what to make of Sutpen. However, there is particularly one trait of the character's persona that seems unanimous: ruthlessness. Additionally, there is no question about the nature of Sutpen's work. On pages 37-38 Faulkner, through the narrating voice an omniscient author, describes the way in which the character of Sutpen had its plantation built: "…so he and the twenty negroes worked together…and, as Miss Coldfield told Quentin, distinguishable one from another only by his beard and eyes alone…working in the sun and heat of summer and the mud and ice of winter, with quiet and unflagging fury…they worked from sunup to sundown…only an artist could have borne Sutpen's ruthlessness and hurry".

Obviously, the character of Sutpen is no stranger to hard work. He did not leave the labor to his slaves, but "worked together" with the "twenty negroes" under his command.

Through Rosa's descriptions, Sutpen was not afraid of getting dirty. Her reference to him as "distinguishable…only by his beard and eyes" suggests that Sutpen's clothes and skin have been darkened by dust and mud, thus making him blend in with his workers. The fierce nature of Sutpen's determined work is imagined as being similar to a "quiet and unflagging fury", composed and tenacious, as he worked "from sunup to sundown". As the narration blends into the voice of Mr. Compson, Sutpen's is characterized as a man who practically oozes power: "…it was in his face; that was where his power lay, your grandfather said: that anyone could look at him and say, *Given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything* (46). This forceful ambition is quintessential for the myth of the American Dream, because it is through ambition success is made – the willingness to "do anything" – whatever it takes to reach that goal. Simultaneously, this ferocious dynamism set towards change is in sharp contrast to the virtually lazy stasis of the southern plantation elite, which is detectable through Rosa being appalled and surprised by the fact that Sutpen actually works to erect his planation, and not leaving that work to his slaves – as was the common thing do to.

Like the North itself, the character of Thomas Sutpen does not understand the southern planation elite. Through Quentin's narration the reader learns of Sutpen's early life which reflects his initial thoughts and values before arriving in Yoknapatawpha. Sutpen was born in the mountains and grew up in simple surroundings;

> …so he didn't even know there was a country all divided and fixed and neat with a people living on it all divided and fixed and neat because of what color their skins happened to be and what they happened to own, and where a certain few men not only had the power of life and death and barter and sale over others, but they had living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices, such as pouring the very whiskey from the jug and putting the glass into a man's hand or pulling off his boots for him to go to bed, that all men have had to do for themselves since time began and would have to do until they died and which no man ever has or ever will like to do, but which no man that he knew had ever thought of evading anymore that he had thought of evading the effort of chewing and swallowing and breathing…That's the way he got it. He had learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men, not to be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out the room. (221-26)

In this passage, Faulkner accentuates the naïve nature of Sutpen before he got caught in his ambitions. "He didn't know" anything about the world around him, except his immediate surroundings. Sutpen was unaware of the fixed classes, ranking people based on something he did not understand. Furthermore, the passage highlights the preposterous nature of inequality and slavery, but also points towards the flaws in the self-evident truths portrayed

in the Declaration of Independence; “that all men are created equal”. Through the narration of Quentin, the reader learns that Sutpen discovers “the difference not only between white man and black ones, but…between white men and white men”. He learns that some people have “power over life and death”, powers preserved for God himself. Having “living human men to perform the endless repetitive personal offices” is something that, for Sutpen, apparently makes no sense, because it was as meaningless as making someone else doing your “chewing and swallowing and breathing”. Quentin’s narration imagines that Sutpen was baffled by this discovery, since he believed that “no man had thought of evading” these mundane examples of “personal offices”. For the character of Sutpen, this “evading”, or dodging, of efforts regarding “personal offices” is pure laziness, which simply makes no sense: How can one man contain such power over another? Inequality in itself is one issue, but here the problem is obviously the *foundation* of inequality. It was not about personal qualities that all men possessed, which could “be measured by lifting anvils or gouging eyes or how much whiskey you could drink then get up and walk out the room”, which would be a just foundation. It was based on something completely different, which made it more incomprehensible altogether.

After this realization the incident by the mansion follows, where the younger version of the Sutpen character learns how inequality *feels*. Furthermore, in the spirit of the American Dream he learns how to avoid it in the future: “to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what that man did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You see?” and he said Yes again. He left that night” (238). Within this passage, Faulkner arguably puts the character of Thomas Sutpen in charge of his own fortunes, refusing to remain in his current social class. Progress is the only way, and “to combat them” – “them” being the planter elite, he has got to “have what they have”. Consequently, the myth of the American Dream emphasizes freedom and equality, including the prospect of prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility, achievable through hard work in a society with few barriers. Clearly, the barriers in Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha society are numerous – first and foremost the planter elite. However, as a free man, the character of Thomas Sutpen succeeds in his quest “to combat them”, thus, arguably embodying the essence of the American Dream.

Sutpen does indeed “combat” the planter elite and becomes the “biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county” (72). This rise from rags to riches further establishes Sutpen as an embodiment of the American Dream. He achieved this unbelievable success without any heritage, but through a “singleminded unflagging effort and utter

disregard of how his actions…might look" (72). This "utter disregard" for established traditions elevates Sutpen to a figure of heroic stature in the eyes of Mr. Compson, something which is reflected through his narration. This accomplishment (72) is viewed as nothing less than incredible, and while Rosa demonizes the fierce and ruthless nature of Sutpen's ambition, the other narrators, though somewhat reluctantly, credit him on his ability to elevate himself from his original state. Also, in correlation to the American Dream, Sutpen possesses a great deal of self-confidence which, in combination with his naïve nature and lack of knowledge and experience, helps him reach his goal. He "learned…that there was a place called the West Indies to which poor men went in ships and became rich, it didn't matter how, so long as that man was clever and courageous: the latter of which I believed that I possessed, for former of which I believed that, if it were to be learned by energy and will in the school of energy and experience, I should learn" (242). Sutpen discovered that "poor men…became rich" in the West Indies, and that it "didn't matter how" as long as that man was "clever and courageous". Even though Sutpen did not necessary believe himself to be clever, he believed that this could be learned through vigorous determination in the "school of endeavor and experience" – possibly meaning the school of life, as long as he was industrious enough and possessed of the required stamina.

However, through his narration, Faulkner also problematizes the myth of the American Dream. Surely, Sutpen is able to rise from rags to riches. However, the way in which he goes about it problematizes the notion that "fierce ambition" is what drives Sutpen in the first place. The reality and circumstances founding Sutpen's American Dream will be further discussed in chapter 3.

2.3. The Lost Cause

Much like the narration in *AA,* the history of the South was narrated to Faulkner though multiple narrators. His grandparents belonged to the last pre-war generation, and his parents to the first generation born after the conflict. In addition, "maiden aunts", a term that I will elaborate on in chapter three, were narrators which favored the ultimate Southern myth of the Lost Cause – a myth which influenced generations of southerners deeply in the years and decades following the Civil War. In the words of Charles Aiken, "As a boy during the first half of the twentieth century, Faulkner knew the Lost Cause at its crescendo, and witnessed its decline as a young adult. However, he did not know first-hand what conditions in the South

had led to the idea of the Lost Cause" (124). As stated in my introduction, the myth of the Lost Cause arose from the ruins of the destroyed South, furthering a set of beliefs which endorsed the virtues of the antebellum South, and conveying an imagined view of the Civil War as an honorable struggle to preserve their virtues. Consequently, the Lost Cause embodies the Southern interpretation of the Civil War and the events directly connected to it, originating in a Southern attempt to rationalize the war. Within *AA,* the myth of the Lost Cause is of great importance and the notions mentioned above are all reflected within the narration of the novel; the need to justify and rationalize, the attempts to project the "true" story of the South. The myth of the Lost Cause is not only visible through Southern-friendly propaganda, it is detectable through the misconception felt through the narration of Quentin Compson, who is obsessed with his past and the stories connected to it. He is unable to make sense of his feelings towards the South, because he does not know what is real and what can be viewed as projections of the myth.

Another important advocate is the character of Rosa, who embodies the very essence of the myth. Through the description of Miss Rosa as "Miss Coldfield in the eternal black which she had worn for forty-three years now, whether for sister, father, or nothusband none knew" (7), the connection to the myth is established by linking Miss Rosa to the United Daughters of the Confederacy[17] (UDC). Charles Aiken notes that this organization's members were particularly striking in their "black silk dresses", one for every formal and social occasion. Further, Aiken states that "one good black silk dress…was an inexpensive means of continuous mourning and a pretense of the status and symbol of wealth, even if lost" (Aiken, 121). In Europe and America the color black is traditionally connected with death and mourning, and in the Victorian spirit of proper order, colors and fabrics of mourning were specified in an unofficial dress-code, as stated by Pat Jalland: "non-reflective black paramatta and crape for the first year of deepest mourning, followed by nine months of dullish black silk, heavily trimmed with crape, and then three months when crape was discarded" (Jalland, 300). Furthermore, within some traditional societies, Greece for example – whose culture had immense impact on European culture, some widows wore black for the rest of their lives, leaving them in an "eternal black", forever mourning their loss. This is reminiscent of the way in which the character of Miss Rosa and the UDC mourned the loss of their families, as well as the basis of their social sphere.

[17] An association of female descendants of Confederate veterans, founded on September 10, 1894. Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: The United Daughters of the Confederacy and Preservation of Southern Culture* (University Press of Florida, 2003) p. 1

In the spirit of the UDC, the character of Miss Rosa eagerly narrates *her* story about Thomas Sutpen as a way of explaining how the South came to lose the war: “Oh, he was brave. I have never gainsaid that. But that our cause, our very life and future hopes and past pride, should have been thrown into the balance with men like that to buttress it – men with valor and strength but without pity or honor. Is it any wonder that Heaven saw fit to let us lose?” (20) Through this phrase it is clear that the character of Miss Rosa is placing the blame for the defeat of the South on men like the one portrayed in the character of Thomas Sutpen, who did not know how to properly handle the “past pride” nor the “very life and future hopes” of the South. Most significantly; within this phrase, there is no sign of blame directed towards the system of slavery itself. However, Miss Rosa refers to the tragedy of the “cause”, arguably the South’s desire to preserve slavery, being left in the hands of “men with valor and strength, but without pity or honor”. As these men – brave men like Sutpen – did not possess the necessary southern compassion and moral to “buttress” the cause (slave system), thus ending up corrupting it. Furthermore, as argued in the spirit of the Lost Cause, the corruption of the benevolent slave system (although many might argue that the system of slavery corrupted the men buttressing it) ultimately caused that “Heaven saw fit” to “let” the South lose the war: arguably as a punishment for allowing such degeneration of the southern moral. As it was, within the myth of the Lost Cause elements of justification were crucial, although, as stated in the beginning of this section, the foundation of these beliefs is highly questionable. This emphasis on Rosa’s eagerness to explain, rationalize and justify *her* version of how the South lost the War is in direct correlation to the myth. Quentin comments thus upon Rosa’s intention behind summoning him: “*It’s because she wants it told*” (11). Because she wants everyone, even *“people whom she will never and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face”* (11) to know and accept her version of the story. Quentin believes that Rosa wants him to write the story down to make the story verifiable, so that these people that she does not know “*will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War”*(11). Through directing her blame towards Sutpen, she provides a reason, a justification for the fatal loss of the South. But furthermore, she justifies the War itself – that it was a necessary evil: *“that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth*” (11).

Further examples of the Lost Cause’s presence within the novel are observable in the narration’s emphasis on letters. One such letter is written and narrated by the character of

Charles Bon from the Civil War, which arguably exemplifies the overwhelming power of the North mentioned in my introduction:

> *- a sheet of notepaper with, as you can see, the best of French watermarks dated seventy years ago, salvaged (stolen if you will) from the gutted mansion of a ruined aristocrat; and written upon in the best of stove polish manufactured not twelve months ago in a New England factory. Yes. Stove polish…Yes, we laughed, because I have learned this at least during these four years, that it really requires an empty stomach to laugh with, that only when you are hungry or frightened do you extract some ultimate essence out of laughing just as the empty stomach extracts the ultimate essence out of alcohol. But at least we have stove polish. We have plenty of stove polish.* (129-30)

Within this letter, Bon marks the difference between North and South by pairing the "sheet of notepaper" with "the best French watermarks dated seventy years ago" and "the best of stove polish manufactured not twelve months ago". He notes the way in which the South has clung to the past and become outdated, while the North and its materiel has progressed, leaving the army and its soldiers without any hope of victory. The nostalgia weighs heavily as Bon states that the archaic notepaper has been attained from the "gutted mansion of a ruined aristocrat", clearly portraying the destruction of the southern landscape as well as the old social structure: if property has been destroyed, so has the noble southerner: the old times are gone. Furthermore, the letter narrates both the despair of the southern soldier – who must endure an "empty stomach" while being "hungry or frightened", and the courage to laugh and find humor in such desperate times, because "only when you are hungry or frightened do you extract some ultimate essence out of laughing".

In the course of *AA,* there are two actual letters circulating the narrations of the narrating characters, written by Mr. Compson and Charles Bon. In addition, Shreve invents several letters which probably never existed – emphasizing within his narration how they might have been read and received. One such example is Shreve's imagined letters from Henry to Judith regarding Charles Bon, and how these letters left Judith "sated with what experiences and pleasures, which Henry's letters must have created for her" (320). Mr. Compson's letter to Quentin reporting the death and burial of Rosa is scattered across several chapters, ultimately culminating in a seemingly frantic re-reading where Quentin is described by the omniscient narrator as struggling to make sense of its content; "It was becoming quite distinct; he would be able to decipher the words soon, in a moment; even almost now, now, now" (377). However, the most curious letter is the one Bon allegedly wrote for Judith, which is mentioned above. This letter, "without date or salutation or signature" (129), is apparently

handed over from Mr. Compson's mother, who appears to have received the letter from Judith "a week after she buried" Bon (126). Obviously, in the narration of this letter, the problem lies in its ambiguity. The letter is clearly significant because it relates to something familiar, but as it is without "date or salutation or signature" how can the reader know for *certain* that the letter is written by Bon to Judith? As Mr. Compson states; "It's just incredible. It just does not explain" (100).

Consequently, the uncertainty constructed through the combination of narration and the letters makes the letters directly correlated to the myth of the Lost Cause. As mentioned in my introduction, letters have been of great importance when establishing that the Confederate soldiers "truly" believed in their cause. As mentioned, in *For Cause and Comrades*, McPherson documents signs of vigorous, lasting patriotism after reading thousands of letters written by Confederate soldiers, and he notes that these letters show that the soldiers *truly believed* they were fighting for their own type freedom and liberty, even as the Confederacy was visibly collapsing by the end of the war (McPherson, 169-72, my italics). However, it is problematic to consider such letters as accurate sources of facts. It is difficult to ascertain whether they mirror what soldiers "truly" believed or were a part on an attempt to ease the hearts and minds of their loved ones waiting for them at home. Through Mr. Compson's narration, Faulkner discusses what I find to be essential regarding both the emphasis on letters and the presence of the Lost Cause in southern society:

> they don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers *letters without salutation or signature*, in which men and women…are now merely initials…out of some incomprehensible affection…in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable…almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense…you bring them together in the proportions called for…you re-read, tedious and intent…you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols…shadowy inscrutable and serene, against the turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (101, my italics)

The confusion detected through Mr. Compson's narration is directed at the letter from Bon. However, it is arguably more to it than that. I believe that the letters are interchangeable with information. That the letters (or information) are "without salutation or signature" means that they are unverifiable. Through the "attenuation of time" the significance of this unreliable information, this ambiguous letter, grows into "heroic proportions", while one can re-live the information provided; the "act of simple passion and simple violence" is through its ability to resist time (by means of its uncertain origins). Furthermore, Mr. Compson suggests that the

letters (information) are brought together, collected and re-collected, in "the proportions called for". Mr. Compson's mentioning of the letters as "almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense" refers to the personal interpretations of the information given. By decrypting the words (information) through relating them to familiar "shapes and senses", the deciphering becomes dubious because the information is not interpreted in light of the information itself, but in the light of the strong personal sentiments attached to it. However, no matter how much the receiver tries to alter the information given, "nothing happens". The words and symbols are just that: words and symbols – "shadowy inscrutable and serene", incapable of making sense in comparison to the "turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs". The horrific and violent misdeeds "of human affairs" can relate either to the actions of Sutpen and Henry, but it may very well be a direct link to the Civil War and its ultimate cause: the "mischancing of human affairs".

Conclusion

Through this chapter, I hope to have established that the employment of historical and social myths exerts a considerable influence on the narration of *AA*. The discussed myths of the Cavalier, the American Dream, and the Lost Cause are all visible and important elements of the narration of this novel, as well as other classical myths of Greek, Christian and Hebrew origin. It is clear that the narration of *AA* both employ these myths as well as drawing resemblance to them structurally, but does that mean that the plot is given due to the reader's recognizing of myth? Are the characters already established and accounted for my mythical similarity? These are questions I aim to answer in my following chapter.

Chapter III

Absalom, Absalom! – Reality & Myth

By the midpoint of his career Faulkner had become "a true twentieth century modernist" (Singal, p. 4). As most modernists, Faulkner was particularly concerned with the foundation of knowledge, what humans *could* know and *how* we come to know. Furthermore, Faulkner was intrigued by the way in which human beings create knowledge in order to find meaning in their tumultuous existence. Faulkner belonged to the grouping of twentieth century modernists who were known as "the Lost Generation" – marked by their coming of age during World War One. In broad terms, it can be argued that the period was initiated by abrupt and unforeseen breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world; set in motion through a series of cultural shocks – the first being World War One (referred to as WW1). During the time, the "War to End All Wars" was looked upon with such horror and fright that most people could not imagine what direction the world seemed to be taking. Consequently, the writers who adopted the Modern point of view often did so deliberately with a strong sense of self-consciousness, and a central obsession of modernist writers is the inner self and consciousness. Furthermore, instead of progress and growth, the Modernists saw decay and a growing alienation of the individual.

As a southerner of his particular generation, Faulkner had double the trouble. Belonging to a region which was heavily marked by its past, having experienced previously the abrupt breaks with tradition through the Civil War, the decay and alienation experienced in the time of WW1 was already a familiar notion. Faulkner did not experience the Civil War himself, nor did he experience the splendor and noble tradition of the Antebellum South. He was instead surrounded by a past that was kept vigorously present through the telling and re-telling of the events surrounding it. Like the narrating character of Quentin Compson, Faulkner is detached from the core-shocking events in the South. His grandparents, also like Quentin, were the last generation of Old South Generation and his parents belonged to the generation following the Civil War – like Quentin (Aiken, 123). Therefore, Faulkner's main

sense of history and southern identity came from maiden aunts[18], who, in accordance with the UDC of the Lost Cause, were the main "collectors, recorders, interpreters, and embellishers of local history" (Aiken, 124). Although preserving substantial amounts of historical material, the endeavors of these maiden aunts contributed to the creation of myths revolving the Old South, ultimately emerging into a tragic and glorious Lost Cause. However, although experiencing the emerging myth of the Lost Cause, Faulkner had no knowledge about the conditions leading to this grand notion.

It is reasonable to assume that this lack of knowledge regarding his own legacy influenced Faulkner's authorship immensely. As a modernist, re-creating and exploring the past was crucial in order to understanding the present. However, without real experience comes no real truth. With no true history come confusion and a sense of loss of self. But what, then, is true history? As detected, the similarities between Faulkner's personal life and the narration of *AA* are difficult to reject. Such focus on the concept of memory further establishes an emphasis on time, as memories revolves around past events. In my introduction, I mention the way Sartre implies that the typical Faulknerian character is overwhelmed by memories of the past, which he or she ultimately over-identifies with. Sartre and Bergson both views human expectation for future change as a significant part of any person's inner consciousness. It appears as Faulkner's narrating characters (maybe with the exception of Shreve) in *AA* are compromised by their inability to find meaning in their present. Instead, these characters are stuck in the past – attempting to find some meaning in their world in the wake of chaos. By detecting a sense of meaning from their pasts, the characters ultimately try to convey vitality into a stagnant present. Seemingly, the shock caused by the Civil War has left the South deprived. Seeing no hope in a future stripped of the noble traditions that carried their society, the future seems bleak; hence, the past is the only thing dynamic and rich enough to capture their consciousness.

Through the narration of *AA*, the past blends into the present, and myth blends into the reality experienced by the narrating characters. Lost in their obsessions of past events, their narration embraces the modernist elements of alienation and despair; not knowing how to exist in the world they are living in. By his employment of four different narrators, separable by time, experience, and geography, Faulkner tells and re-tells – creates and re-creates the

[18] According to Charles Aiken, Faulkner employs the term «maiden aunt» as a generic term. Included in this group, were older women; married, spinsters, and widows. According to a fading custom in the planation South, younger people referred to an older woman as "aunt" although only distantly related (120).

narrative revolving the Sutpen dynasty and the American South. Through focusing of the narrating character's narrative interpretation, Faulkner marks them all as unreliable – unable to provide an objective re-creating of the actual events. However, what is the purpose of such a narration? In this chapter I will demonstrate how Faulkner, through his narration – which has been accounted for in my previous chapters, problematizes any notion of historical truth. By emphasizing the nature of Faulkner's narration in combination with historical myths and historical facts, I will highlight how his narration expresses a sense of rejection towards time- and memory's role in interpreting and founding knowledge. Furthermore, through the mythical elements immersed into the narration, as well as the narrative itself, there is a sense of problematizing what we *can* know about our pasts. This is a notion on which I will elaborate further in the following section.

3.1. *Absalom, Absalom!* and The Meaning of Myth

Although the myths accounted for in my preceding analysis are central to the narration of *AA*, it is important to not overemphasize the roles of the already established mythologies. Lennart Björk, in "Ancient Myths and the Moral Framework of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*", imposes a rather classical framework of such established myths, arguing that "Faulkner invites the reader to see nearly all protagonists of the story in roles that are applicable to both the Greek and the Hebrew cultures", calling forth these antique mythical archetypes as a means to "enlarge the moral framework of the novel" (Björk, 203). Hence, Björk implies that Faulkner depend on mythic structures as a shortcut or blueprint; a readymade moral framework embedded in recognizable archetypes, like "familiar in shape and sense" (*AA*, 101). While I understand Björk's reasoning, I find myself disagreeing. My analysis of the narrating characters show that the myths immersed in Faulkner's narration does not provide any blueprint in how to understand the novel's characters and plot. On the contrary, it might be a case of the other-way-around. Joseph Reed states that "Myth is less important here than failures to realize myth: The distance between the intention and the realization of myth…the distance between the substance of myth and the process of making it" (Reed, 146-47). The numerous myths represented in the narration of the novel makes it problematic to prove the dominance of one. Therefore, the myths are subordinated into the process of mythmaking – essentially creating the possibility of failed myths. It is possible for an individual to create a private myth, so to speak, but it will hold no value until it is verified;

narrated, read, understood and perpetuated by others. Thus, *AA* can be viewed as consisting of a continuous process of individual creating and group acceptance or rejection of myths, fully emphasizing the complicated process of narrative creation – which is reflected through the narration of *AA* itself. Hence, it can be argued that through immersing established myths into his narration, Faulkner establishes the narrative in *AA* as myth-like – problematizing the influence of the myths already established as far was how much they can be trusted as a sufficient foundation for the reader's interpretation of the story.

By simply stating that Rosa represents the myth of the Cavalier, that Sutpen embodies the myth of the American Dream, and that all the narrating characters are mirroring the myth of the Lost Cause, the reader is missing out on what I believe to the central in Faulkner's employment of these myths into his narration: that they serve to problematize the notion of historical truth. Through my analysis in the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated the narrator's difference in sense form, and established their immersion of myths into their narration. Clearly, the myths accounted for influences the characters and the way in which they narrate the story. Although the narrators in *AA* deal with the creation of myth as a meaning-making device, they do not achieve that meaning. The reader quickly establishes the unreliable nature of the narrators most closely link to the narrated events; this is prevalent in the narration performed by Rosa and Mr. Compson as they seek to assign to the character of Sutpen those deep, eternal and mythic qualities that will help explain the frustration they experience in "real life". This is evident in the classical and biblical references in relation to the Sutpen family, Rosa's demonizing, as well as their imagining Sutpen's story as a parallel of Southern downfall and general history, as an archetype of the Creator. Hence expect Quentin and Shreve's narration to provide some sort of clarity. Although their re-construction of the Sutpen-story have some plausibility, these narrators get caught up in their narrating collaboration as "a happy marriage of speaking and hearing wherein each…forgave condoned and forgot the faulting of the others faultings both in the creating of the shade whom they discussed (rather, existed in)" (316).

Even if the narration created by the narrating characters provide mythical qualities, the narrators obsession with myth stems from the fact that it gives them emotional satisfaction. The narrators within *AA* are attempting to mend their internal worlds by attaining some fundamental concern, manifested through the figure of Sutpen, with what happened to the former glorious South. As detected through my analysis, Rosa, Mr. Compson, Quentin and Shreve essentially *know* that *something* significant and extraordinarily tragic happened;

however, its meaning is lost to them. The narrating southerners are all pursuing a justification; reasons for the loss of the Civil War and the loss of a way of life. Most importantly, however, they are looking for a reason as to why they cannot understand their own feelings towards this region – why they cannot seem to understand themselves and their own reactions towards it. It appears that the meaning of myth immersed into the narration of *AA* is a way of denying pure knowledge, which further corrupts the narrating characters.

Rosa's desperate and frustrated attachment to a chivalric past of ancient, noble cavaliers reduces her to a mere ghost, unable to free herself from "the long dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration" (7). Colored by her own as well as others interpretation of her surroundings, she is unable to free herself from the shock causing her old world to collapse – as to find meaning in her chaotic world. Myth becomes her haven, but, as detected, it also imprisons her. Mr. Compson notes that when attempting to "reconstruct the causes which lead up to the actions of men and women, how with a sort of astonishment we find ourselves now and then reduces to the belief, the only possible belief, that they stemmed from some of the old virtues? the thief who steals not for greed but for love, the murderer who kills not out of lust but pity?" (121). Also somehow trapped by "old virtues", he fails to recognize them as significant. Thus, Mr. Compson elevates Sutpen to heroic stature, simply for his attempt to defy Fate and tradition. Ultimately, Mr. Compson believes that no man in able control his own destiny, and that the Fate of all men has been determined by an "ancient curse" (204). Mr. Compson's attempts to explain Sutpen (and the South) through classical tragic myths combined with elements of the American Dream, thus creating and imagined view of Sutpen as an heroic figure traditionally celebrated in the South. However, despite of the narrator's effort to make meaning out of myths, "it just does not explain" (100), thus leaving the narrator to his "apparentlies" and "imaginings", which only leads him further away from the truth – detected through Shreve's comment to Quentin as they attempt to re-create the original narration; "Your old man was wrong here, too!" (344).

The meaning of myth in the narration of *AA* is also visible through the character of Thomas Sutpen. Being the central object of the narrating character's obsession (and arguably an allegory of the South itself), Sutpen is the character in *AA* who most fully embraces Southern mythology, working hard to merge himself into it. As detected through the narrating characters, the myths surrounding southern society become a reality for Sutpen. This character is throughout the novel imagined as an outsider, someone who never quite fits into the world in which he "out of quiet thunderclap would abrupt" (8). His simple background,

separated from society in the mountains, leads him to be blissfully unaware of the corruption of Southern society. Once he enters society, he is baffled by Southern tradition and ideology, however, the narrative aptly describes his acceptance of those ideologies;

> When he was a child he didn't listen to the vague and cloudy tales of Tidewater splendor that penetrated even his mountains because then he could not understand what the people who told about it meant, and when he became a boy he didn't listen to them because there was nothing in sight to compare an gauge the tales by and so give the words life and meaning, and no chance that he ever would understand what they meant because he was too busy doing the things that boys do: and when he got to be a youth and curiosity itself exhumed the tales which he did not know he had heard and speculated on, he was interested and would have like to see the places once, but without envy or regret. (222)

The myths begin as "vague and cloudy tales". To Sutpen these tales are lacking reality; without "life and meaning". Then these tales were left in the back of his mind long enough to permit being "exhumed" by his sheer youthful "curiosity", however, these unrealistic tales possess a strange, unsettling hold on Sutpen. He does not realize that "he had heard and speculated on" the tales – yet they seem to bury themselves deep into his unconsciousness. Essentially, the passage concludes that Sutpen had "hardly heard of such a world until he fell into it" (222), yet it seems as the ways of this "vague and cloudy" world have already been rooted in his mind. Hence, it appears that the character of Sutpen is not creating a myth, but buying into it.

Lacking the noble ties to the cavaliers, Sutpen more closely embodies the myth of the American Dream. However, Sutpen seeks to become a part of the aristocracy and to elevate himself to the stature of a gentleman, fitting the traditional Southern recipe and design: "Whether it was a good or a bad design is beside the point…I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family – incidentally of course, a wife" (263). Noted through the narration, Sutpen's ruthless and fierce acquiring of the elements necessary for his design leaves him insensitive to the world surrounding him. His lifelong mission to insert himself into the Southern society, embracing all its established myths and traditions, ultimately corrupts him. Through fully swallowing Southern mythology, Sutpen dooms himself to failure because he failed to recognize myth as myth – not truth.

Thus, the meaning of myth within the narration of *AA* is to provide elements of reality; familiar stories and notions that the reader can identify and relate to, thus establishing the narrative as plausible. It is logical to assume that Faulkner, being an American author, anticipates his audience to be familiar with the most crucial elements of US history. His

references to historically verifiable events, such as the Civil War and the correlated events are thus familiar to the reader. Significantly, *AA* was published after WW1, providing yet another relatable framework since his audience could relate to the shock causing traditional ways of life to cease – not necessarily vanish. Furthermore, this emphasizes how interpreting the past through other interpretations of even more distant pasts may result in a distancing from truth itself; that the failure of separating myths from reality causes corruption of the self.

3.2 Preserving the Past – Time, Myth and Memory

As mentioned in my introduction, mythical narratives are ultimately defying time, working across the boundaries provided by our linear perception of time. Hence, it can be argued that the immersion of myths into Faulkner's narration of *AA* stresses the character's problematic relationship with their own pasts. It is reasonable to claim that Faulkner, through his mythical and disrupted narration, pays particular attention to such characters, and as I established through my analysis of the narrating characters in chapter one, through his narration Faulkner portrays them as unable to fully engage in reality or even themselves. As a child of the South himself, it is natural to assume that Faulkner found it equally difficult to escape the pervading power of the myths surrounding his region; a notion which is also relatable to his membership of the Lost Generation. Despite his alleged strained sentiments towards the myths surrounding his upbringing, Irving Howe argues against the idea of Faulkner as "a traditional moralist drawing his creative strength from the Southern myth. The truth is that we writes in opposition to this myth as well as in acceptance of it, that he struggles with it even as he continues to acknowledge its power" (26). I agree with Howe's argumentation due to the fact that Faulkner does not demonize the morality of myth through his narration, but rather explores and showcases the multiple aspects of mythic creation and negotiation. As Howe continues, this ambivalence, which is central to *AA,* is further elaborated: "Faulkner has set his pride in the past against his despair over the present, and from this counterpoint has come much of the tension in his work. He has investigated the myth itself; wondered about the relation between the Southern tradition he admires and that memory of Southern slavery to which he is compelled to return; tested not only the present by the past, but also the past by the myth, and finally the myth by that morality which has slowly emerged from this entire process of exploration." (29)

Hence, the South Faulkner knew is not simply good or bad: it contains elements of both. The South is both the splendid, nostalgic "Southern tradition" *and* the severely flawed "memory of Southern slavery". However, is must be equally natural that Faulkner was not blind to the fact that the myths shaping the "Southern tradition" were purposely used as a means of erasing memories of the horrors in the past. For Bergson, memories are not really memories, but an inseparable part of the present because they effect a person's action within that present. It is this notion that provides the notion of fluidity to Bergson's idea of pure duration; "the form taken by the succession of our states…when it abstains from making a separation between its present and preceding states", (Bergson, 73). However, despite allegedly influenced by Bergson, based on my analysis of Faulkner's narrating characters, Faulkner does not seem to embrace Bergson's philosophies through his narration of *AA*. In fact, as detected through my analysis, the narrating characters of *AA* do not experience pure duration. Instead, they are trapped by their obsession of the past, and Thomas Sutpen represents the dynamic, ominous figure of the past that captures these narrating characters. Through the narration provided by the characters accounted for, Sutpen is merged into numerous symbolic forms which represent different things for the different narrators. Sutpen is the former glory of the South, the loss of a dream, the inability to oppose fate, the inability to create pure genealogical lineage (the failure of southern tradition), and the tragic loss of love.

The dominating presence of references to the past and of various pasts as Faulkner's narrating characters talk about the people and events present in this constructed yet plausible world suggest that these characters serve repeatedly as referents for what appears to be missing. These ghost-like narrating characters are all trapped in chasing "*that dream which, as the globy and complete instant of its freedom mirrors and repeats (repeats? Creates, reduces to a fragile evanescent iridescent sphere) all of space and time and massy earth*" (143). In this narration provided by Rosa, the "dream" is the past which holds the dreamlike quality of freedom – mirroring and repeating "all of space and time and massy earth". This freedom does not only repeat, making it everlasting, but it "creates" and reduces the time of which humans have to endure, to a "fragile evanescent iridescent sphere". This sphere, apparently, is able to hold more plentitude than the present – a "*might-have-been which is more true than truth*" (143). Mr. Compson also seem to be obsessed with this re-creation of memories and the things that "might-have-been"; "you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure you have forgotten

nothing…you bring them together again and again nothing happens" (101). In this case, Mr. Compson is referring to the significance of the letter from Bon to Judith, and how the significance is read and re-read with monotonous determinism in order to "make sure you have forgotten nothing". However, as both Rosa and Mr. Compson are aware, "nothing happens". For these narrating characters, there is no duration or change through time, only the repetition of a mysterious past. This impersonal agency is enabled due to the fact that these narrating characters mythologize the past as a means of attempting some participating with it. Further, this can be seen as them attempting a sense of duration – bringing the past into the present.

These futile attempts of finding duration differ from Quentin's attempt at achieving some kind of understanding of the past and present. Through his collaboration with Shreve, these narrating characters provide a healthier attempt at merging with the past. In their narrative collaboration, these narrators do not make use of the ghostly, intangible ideas of ancient times when to engage with history. Instead, there is an added vitality to their interpretation of the Sutpen-story because the intimacy of their friendship and collaboration is allowing them the opportunity to be "sifting and discarding the false and conserving what seemed true, or fit the preconceived…where there might be paradox and inconsistency but nothing fault or false" (316). The awareness of these narrating characters, that there "might be paradox and inconsistency" gives them an advantage: They are sufficiently detached from the events to realize that such things exist when interpreting events which have not been experienced. When the narrating characters of Quentin and Shreve engage in collaborative narration, the focus on memory and remembrance accentuated through their narration is more optimistic. Although "burdened with youth's immemorial obsession", their obsession is "not with time's dragging weight which the old live with but with its fluidity: the bright heels of all the lost moments" (299). Here, the omniscient narrator capture the essence of the narrating relationship between Quentin and Shreve, while simultaneously accentuating the difference between their youthful obsession with the fluidity of time compared to "time's dragging weight that the old live with" – the old being Rosa and Mr. Compson.

Hannah Arendt comments on an important aspect of memory in her work *On Revolution*:

> For if it is true that all thought begins with remembrance, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of

> conceptual notions within which it can further exercise itself. Experiences and even the stories that grew out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events, sink back into the futility inherent in the living word and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again. What saves the affairs of mortal men from their inherent futility is nothing but this incessant talk about them, which in return remains futile unless certain concepts, certain guideposts for future remembrance, and even sheer reference, arise out of them…How such guideposts for future reference and remembrance arise out of this incessant talk…may best be seen in the novels of William Faulkner. Faulkner's literary procedure, rather than the content of his work, is highly "political" (Arendt, 220).

If, as suggested by Arendt, it is true that "thought begins with remembrance", as clearly is the case for *AA,* and if these remembrances remain insecure until they find expression in language and are "talked about over and over again", this idea frames the central issue of the narrating characters within *AA* – thus making sense of the "incessant talk" about Thomas Sutpen and the story surrounding him. Arendt further suggests that such "incessant talk" is constitutive of culture and, in a sense, political. Now, if this is the case, one could consider the "nature of narrative to the nature of culture and the nature of humanity itself" as a process of "no discernible beginning and no clear ending and that is always, at one and the same time, political and cultural, communal and individual" (Minter, 4). Essentially, this too seems to embody the essence of the narrative framework of *AA*, seeing that it has no "discernable beginning and no clear end", and, ultimately, touches upon an issue that affects both politically and culturally, communally and individually: the way mythical narration of history affects society and the individual trying to make sense of it. Furthermore, the narrating characters of *AA* are all attempting to secure memories by expressing them through language and "incessant talk". Miss Rosa is eager to tell her story to Quentin, hoping that maybe he "will want to enter the literary profession as so many young Southern gentlemen and gentlewomen too are doing now and maybe some day you will remember this and write about it" (*AA*, 9-10).

Essentially, the narrating characters are obsessed with memories of the past because they provide emotional satisfaction. The "incessant talk" which Arendt suggests is the path to verifying such thoughts, which ultimately begins with remembrance or memories of the past, mythologize their narration because myth provides meaning and coherence to a fragmented, linear time. Because of this obsessive, incessant repetition of their own subjective

interpretations of their past and present, the narrators miss out of the possibilities that reality, the present and the future in particular, may provide. Both Rosa and Mr. Compson attempts to bring the past into the present, and Quentin and Shreve's attempt to merge the past with the present draws on the Bergsonian concept of a fusion between the three tenses, even if Faulkner's narrating characters fail to realize such fluid temporal fusion.

3.3 Problematizing Truth

Ernest Becker argues that modern man is "a neurotic myth-maker" (p. 199) because it allows him to diminish his chaotic life into controllable and manageable experiences. However, the cost seems to be a continuous state of denial. It can be argued that Faulkner emphasizes the difficulties of universal truths. As detected through my analysis, the narrators of *AA*'s narrate the story through disrupted chronology and relentless repetition which establishes a level uncertainty. *AA* brings the reader into a world where the narrators are searching for truth, not finding the foundation for the story they keep experiencing "all over again" (277). Through the description of the narrators as either being indomitably frustrated by "outraged recapitulation" (8), or being sullenly bemused by "thoughtful curiosity…resembling…a baroque effigy created…by someone with a faintly nightmarish affinity for the perverse" (218), it becomes clear that the narrators are not reliable. Hence, the reader is hesitant to trust the information given. By employing four different narrators, all narrating their version of the story in different ways, Faulkner might suggests that each individual has different ways to look at reality – thus, resulting in their inability to gain a common ground, or a universal truth, which corresponds to Tobin's suggestion that myth can alter the way in which history is viewed – not only regarding *how* and *why*, but *when* as well. This means that historical events considered to be true or verifiable are, or could be, rejected or substantially altered through myth.

Through the myths inserted into his narration, it appears that Faulkner focus on the uncertainty of old established truths. Thus, *AA* explores how myths can prevent growth and undermine moving on into the future, merged with a focus on memories and remembrance through narrators who are stuck in the past; unable to make sense of their present – scared of what the future holds. The problem is, however, that the narrators are unable to make sense of their pasts as well, due to miscommunication and dubious information, based on sentiment rather than fact. Thus, the personal perceptions or misconceptions colored by emotions

connected to individual experience (or lack thereof) become real, whereas verifiable events and circumstances are downgraded to secondary sources of actuality, planting seeds of doubt concerning the actual facts of history.

By looking analytically at Faulkner's narration of *AA*, I suggest that the narration depicts the human fall as epistemological. The incommensurable relationship between human knowledge and truth is the basis for the defective communication and misinformation through failed discourse. One of the traits of American modernism, and especially for members of the Lost Generation, was the rejection of the idea that anything was truly knowable, which is detected through Faulkner's narration of *AA*; where truth has become relative, restrictive, and flux. The narrating characters of the novel have different reasons for their re-creation of the Sutpen story, but they all face the same problem: they are missing important information which prevents them from achieving any true foundation for their version. They gain "delayed information" (266) of questionable origin, which are assembled in "the proportions called for" (101) in order to fit into their subjective interpretation of the information provided. Even if Rosa has personal involvement in the story, she still does not have first-hand knowledge of the events fueling her outrage and frustration. If anything, her personal involvement makes her too predisposed to be able to see any real truth because to Rosa, there are "some things that just have to be whether they are or not" (322) in order to verify her version and interpretation of the story, which in return will give her peace and freedom from her "indomitable frustration". This personal involvement, however attached or detached, seems to be the element problematizing historical truth. What is true for Rosa, is not true for Mr. Compson. The truth imagined by Mr. Compson is equally untrue for Rosa. Due to their difference in attachment, their truths differ as well. Sutpen is not a demon *or* a hero; he is both – depending on whose interpretation is weighted.

Faulkner's merging of myths into his narration demonstrates, hyperbolically, a world in unrest; where the narrating characters are lost in a maze of fragmented myths, in a chaotic state of constant mythical intervention. Through its narrating characters, *AA* examines individual processes of trying to make meaning out of myths; or coming to terms with the myth. As the narrators shift from attached to detached, an understanding of subjective progression and the necessity of cooperation toward an acknowledgement of foundational truths is developed, yet left unfinished. Quentin appears to gain some insight on the true nature of myths perpetual presence when he states that;

> Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on the water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflected in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm. (261)

The "old ineradicable rhythm" refers to myths and truths, or the nature of life itself; moving endlessly forward through time and space. This moving is propelled by people's actions; the ripples of a pebble "whose fall it did not even see", noting a beginning no longer remembered yet still exceptionally present; like Sutpen's exhuming of "tales which he did not know he had heard and speculated on" (222). Through this, the past echoes into the future; brought forward repeatedly through the incessantly talked about and re-created ripples of myth and history. This means that there might not be an objective order to the universe, no collective truths, but a kind of underlying truth which rises above the individual. Still, the narrators remain lost and unable to make sense of the mythical world in which they reside due to their inability to let go of the past and move on; like the ripples in the water.

William Marderness states that reality is something that can be individually defined, which is seen through the incessant interpreting of myth in the narration off *AA*. As Marderness states that myth is essentially a way of explaining origin or natural or historical events, or enforcing social rules or traditions; that myths, in a way, define reality, it is difficult not to draw parallels to the narrating characters in *AA*; all trying to define reality for *themselves*. Different conceptions of myth are variations of the same theme: that myths are creations and substantiations of cultural beliefs which are verified only by mass cultural acceptance and belief – hence Rosa's eagerness for Quentin to spread the words of her narration through writing and publishing (9-10). If her story is true or not is not important, the importance lies in achieving that "mass acceptance" – which ultimately will come to verify her version; whether it be true or not.

In this light, the narration of *AA* emphasizes the difficulties of what human beings can know and verify, and that the human need of collective truths is difficult to satisfy. We can see that the circumstances repeated and retold through *AA* are tragic and dramatic because the backdrop for the story; the Civil War, was tragic and dramatic. The diligent reader will thus know that the abrupt changes to Southern society caused from the loss of the Civil War must have felt equally tragic and dramatic, just like the horrors and destructions caused by the war

itself. Irving Howe argues that the creation of myth in the American South is antagonistic to the idea of a universal, or “true”, history – a conception meaning that Southern myth is voicing an ideal past, or deliberately rejecting accepted history – a notion arguably detected through *AA*.

4. CONCLUSION

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is viewed as one of the most significant modernist novels, as Faulkner himself is recognized as one of the most significant modernist authors. One of the traits of American Modernism is its affirmation of the power possessed by human beings to re-create and reshape their environment aided by knowledge, and a common notion was that individuals can define themselves through their own inner resources and create their own vision of existence. Faulkner is known for his exploration of fundamental questions regarding the nature of narrative fiction and how it can/cannot be separated from questions concerning the nature of human existence (Minter p. 2). Other central themes in modernist literature heavily related to Faulkner's works are the unsettling problems dealing with "how we know, what we can and cannot know, and how our knowing and believing (and thus our remembering, needing and desiring) are interrelated" (Minter p. 2), which might problematize the power possessed by human beings to shape their existence aided by knowledge.

American modernism mirrors American life in the 20th century, as the world was quickly becoming industrialized, thus hastening the pace of life. It became easy for individuals to be absorbed and lost in the vastness of this new world, and many young people were left wandering, in lack of purpose. The war also challenged social boundaries concerning race, class, sex, wealth, and religion, and as the social structure was challenged by new understandings the restrictions of traditional standards and social structure dissolved. While simultaneously celebrating this newfound freedom, a loss of identity was experienced by many; eventually translating into alienation and an overall feeling of separation from any kind of "unity". The unity that followed the war rallied country was coming to an end, and the world was left violent and empty. Young, American citizens were overwhelmed with their own futility, and as their dreams were shattered with failure the disappointment in recognition of limit and loss absorbed many. The America experiences by the modernists attempted to find common ground in a world no longer unified in any belief, which lead self-consciousness – mourning the loss of traditional structures to protect the self against shocking realities and a fluid nature to truth and knowledge.

The world envisioned by Faulkner in *AA* is quite similar: the growing conflict between North and South lead to a polarization of tradition and moral ultimately culminated in the Civil War. Two distinct regions, which identities reflected their economic and social structure

were now merged – favoring the ideals of *one* region; the North. Less progressive and not yet industrialized, the Southern values and traditions were founded on ancient class structures. Its eagerness to preserve slavery manifested the ultimate difference between North and South, were the South embraced inequality and the North emphasized the "self-evident truth that all men were created equal". McPherson quotes Mark Twain statement from 1873 saying that the Civil War "uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations" (7). Herein lies the notion that even though abrupt changes were being made that seemingly solved all major problems, it did not make the problem go away because the influences deriving from the forced changes caused by the defeat of the Civil War were rooted in the original issues founding the war itself: slavery and inequality. The problem ceased, but did not vanish.

The question which I aimed to answer through this thesis was how Faulkner's narrative technique serves to problematize a notion of a definite and unifying historical truth, and how Faulkner's complex and diverse narration of *AA* accentuates a notion that an absolute truth is actually non-existing or predisposed at best. Through the chapters presented in my thesis I have accounted for Faulkner's narrative form and techniques and analyzed the narrating characters. I found that Faulkner, by employing multiple diverse narrating characters which were also a significant part of the story itself, emphasized how diversely history can be interpreted. By disrupting chronology and engaging in incessant repetition, a notion of uncertainty establishes, further accentuating the narrating character's failure to interpret the information provided – but also the fallacy of the information given. This emphasizes the nature of knowledge in correlation to modernist characteristics; namely what *can* we know, and *how* do we *come to know*?

When exploring and accounting for the various myths employed by Faulkner throughout *AA*, I found that the immersion of these myths challenge the reader in discovering what information is real or significant. The myths provide elements of real society which the reader ultimately can relate to and identify. This further correlates to the modernist view that human beings could re-create their environment through knowledge, and define themselves through their own inner resources; thus creating their own vision of existence – which is what the narrating characters in *AA* are struggling to achieve. However, the narration of *AA* complicates this process due to the uncertainties connected to their interpretations.

By further exploration of the character's narrative quest for truth and attempts to re-create their existence through myths, I found that the process became further complicated by the elements of time and memory. Essentially, true to modernist characteristics, the narrating characters are obsessed with memories of the past because they provide familiar security and emotional satisfaction. However, for the narrating character unable to make sense of the past, the obsession does not lie in preserving the past – but understanding it, and thus understanding itself. The "incessant talk" suggested being the path to verifying such thoughts ultimately mythologize the character's narration because myth provides meaning and coherence to a fragmented, undeviating time. Because of this obsessive, incessant repetition of their own subjective interpretations of their past and present, the narrators miss out of the possibilities that reality, the present and the future in particular, may provide. As mentioned, both Rosa and Mr. Compson attempt to bring the past into the present, while Quentin and Shreve attempt to merge the past with the present. However, the narrating characters fail in their quest and are left unsatisfied. Through this, Faulkner establishes how stagnation essentially stifles the characters, since time and knowledge is dependent on fluidity.

In *AA*, the reader is introduced to characters who are all mourning a loss; not only of loved ones, but like 20th century America – the characters in this novel, set in the 17th century, are also grieving the loss of traditional structures to shelter them from the shocking realities of a new world, and struggling to make sense of the fluid nature of truth and knowledge. As suggested by Howe, the characters in *AA* are using myths either to voice an ideal past or to justify or explain it. Faulkner's narrating characters obsession with time and human mythmaking accentuate conflicts of the symbolic versus the factual. *AA* illustrates that time's relentless march of factual representation takes a powerful hold on the character's consciousness, but that it is ultimately trumped by the world created – internally and symbolically, by the characters. Hence, the acceptance of myths like the Cavalier myth, the American Dream, and the Lost Cause – despite being unfounded in concrete realm of fact nor historically corroborated, elevates the myths from fiction to truths through mass acceptance and belief. The ladies and gentlemen of the South *are* ladies and gentlemen, because that is the belief and reality which is socially accepted. Through interpretation, ties linking to English nobility are accentuated and re-created to fit the need of the people living in that society. Although the US is littered with examples of men not being equal (slavery followed by Jim Crow), the American Dream's emphasis on the "self-evident" truths; "that all men are created equal" was a powerful driving force for many Americans as well as European

immigrants, who came to a land of fortunes to act out their “unalienable rights” to pursue wealth and happiness. Were all men equal in the US? No. But the cultural masses accepted and bought into that myth, resulting in reality becoming secondary. Hence, my conclusion is that Faulkner’s narration of *Absalom, Absalom!*, through its disrupted chronology, relentless repetition, immersion of myths, and numerous narrators; diverse in degree of attachment and form, emphasize the problematic nature of collective truths.

In a world where history keeps repeating itself, we are all essentially carrying our pasts into the present. Those with tumultuous pasts might find it harder to let go off than those carrying less baggage, so to speak. It is thus difficult to attain collective truths, because every person interprets history according to personal experience and emotions connected to that experience. Legacy and heritage is essential to people’s identity, whether they are personally involved or detached. It appears as the more detached a person gets, the harder it becomes to make sense of the reality. This is true for descendants of plantation owners who owned slaves, it is true for descendants of slaves, and it is true for descendants marked by war, either by heritage or personal experience. The descendant of the slave owner will, most likely, have a different interpretation of US history concerning slavery and the time after the abolition than the descendant of a slave. Depending on our heritage, we form our own set of truths which correlates to the reality we experience – in order for it to make sense. Hence, there is no real truth; at least not one single truth.

Ultimately, Faulkner himself said it best: “no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact”[19].

[19] Classes in American Literature. Session: 8, MAY 1958. University of Virginia. URL: http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/absalom/aaaudiohp.html

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