“Maybe Happen Is Never Once” – Temporalities of Guilt in William Faulkner

Dissertation
zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie (Dr. phil.)
vorgelegt an der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Potsdam

von Schallau, Juliane

Potsdam, 2023

Unless otherwise indicated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International.
This does not apply to quoted content and works based on other permissions.
To view a copy of this licence visit:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0

Erstbetreuer: Prof. em. Dr. Rüdiger Kunow
Zweibetreuer: Prof. Dr. Holger Kersten

Disputation: 30.11.2023

Published online on the
Publication Server of the University of Potsdam:
https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-62885
https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-opus4-628858

Selbständigkeitserklärung

Ich versichere, dass die von mir vorgelegte Arbeit selbständig verfasst wurde und bei der Abfassung nur die in der Dissertation angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt sowie alle wörtlich oder inhaltlich übernommenen Stellen als solche gekennzeichnet wurden.

Potsdam, den 11.04.2023

Juliane Schallau

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION 3
2 GUILT AS A KEYWORD IN FAULKNER CRITICISM – A SURVEY 13
3 “WHAT SOUTHERN GUILT?” 19
4 “ANXIETIES OF INHERITANCE” – SOUTHERN GUILT AND THE CURSE OF YOKNAPATAWPHA 27
4.1 “A COSMOS OF MY OWN” – YOKNAPATAWPHA AS A REFERENTIAL SCHEMA 31
4.2 WEAVING AN “ARISTOCRATIC IDEAL” – FAULKNER’S ADAPTATION OF THE CAVALIER LEGEND 44
4.3 THOMAS SUTPEN’S DESIGN – A SOUTHERN TALE? 61
5 MYTHS OF ENDURANCE 77
5.1 ‘VIRGIN LAND’ AND THE WILDERNESS 80
5.2 MORAL VICTORS DESTINED TO PERISH 104
6 SOLUTIONS OF GUILT 118
6.1 FAULKNER’S RE-NARRATION OF QUENTIN’S INDIVIDUAL GUILT 120
6.2 ALTRUISM OR EGOISM? – AN INVESTIGATION OF ISAAC’S MOTIVES 134
6.3 TEMPORALITIES OF GUILT 142
7 CONCLUSION 148
8 WORKS CITED 156
9 GERMAN SUMMARY 165
10 ENGLISH ABSTRACT 170
11 GERMAN ABSTRACT 171

1 INTRODUCTION

This is a study of guilt: Guilt of a slaveholding society and how it is narratively represented in William Faulkner's works. The latter are historical fiction, dealing with the aftermath of the American Civil War in the U.S. American South. Guilt, on the other hand, is not a historical category, especially in the context of the South and its relation to slavery. Considering Southern guilt as historical, one would have to assume that the former Confederate states have been or are being held responsible as a political entity for the violent transportation and enslavement of millions of people from Africa. But in legal terms, the South has never *plead* guilty, nor has it ever been *found* guilty. Legal guilt is one of two main forms of the idea of guilt H. D. Lewis distinguishes in his article for the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: It "means that one has merited some punishment. This may be understood in a retributive, reformative, or deterrent sense" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 395). In the period after the Civil War, commonly referred to as Reconstruction era, the states that had seceded the union were re-integrated, slavery was abolished, and the so-called *Reconstruction Amendments* were passed by the United States Congress, granting civil rights to the freed slaves, at least in theory. Eric Foner argues that there is a "traditional view of Reconstruction" according to which "the expansion of rights of African Americans" is often seen "as a *punishment* to whites rather than as an expansion of democracy" (xxix, my emphasis). Contrary to what such misconceptions would have us believe, actual legal punishment, like reparations for slavery, was no part of Reconstruction, whose central aim was sectional reunion.[1]

The remarks above draw attention to the fact that any discussion of the guilt of slavery is inevitably located along the color line, with white perpetrators on the one side and black victims on the other. Such clear allocations of blame may explain white peoples' hostile stance, as described by Foner. As Frederick Douglass argues in his article "The Color Line" (1881),

> we may easily forgive those who injure us, but it is hard to forgive those whom we injure. The greatest injury this side of death, which one human being can

---

[1] In *Race and Reunion. The Civil War in American Memory*, David W. Blight explains that "[f]or many whites, especially veterans and their family members, healing from the war was simply not the same proposition as doing justice to the four million emancipated slaves and their descendants" (3). He further argues that the failure of entire emancipation and justice towards black people was caused by other historical developments, because "sometimes reconciliations have terrible costs, both intentional and unseen. The sectional reunion after so horrible a civil war was a political triumph by the late nineteenth century, but it could not have been achieved without the resubjugation of many of those people whom the war had freed from centuries of bondage." Harvard UP, 2001, p. 3.

> inflict on another, is to enslave him, to blot out his personality, degrade his manhood, and sink him to the condition of a beast of burden; and this has been done here during more than two centuries. No other people under heaven, of whatever type or endowments, could have been so enslaved without falling into contempt and scorn on the part of those enslaving them (572).

Douglass further explains that slaveholders had a monetary interest in maintaining the institution of slavery, which is why they had to justify not only the system as such, but also their individual treatment of those they enslaved: “Having made him [the black man] the companion of horses and mules, he [the slave master] naturally sought to justify himself by assuming that the negro was not much better than a mule” (573). This assumption remained even after the abolition of slavery, whose “shadow still lingers over the country and poisons more or less the moral atmosphere of all sections of the republic” (573), and thus serves as an explanation of the ongoing racism and the Jim Crow laws.

Guilt can be assigned to perpetrators by the victims, but any serious, balanced discussion of the topic of the guilt of slavery implies that the injuries Douglass describes have to be at least acknowledged by white Southerners, otherwise it comes to nothing. In the course of this study, I am going to investigate the literary treatment of a white society burdened with guilt in the works of William Faulkner, and I will show that the absence of such an acknowledgement of guilt lays the foundation for the retrogressivity of Faulkner’s fictional South, or, as an array of Faulkner critics have termed it, the curse of Yoknapatawpha (but more on this momentarily). I am writing this study on an established white writer as a white, non-American academic, and my topic inevitably involves an analysis of narrative portrayals of both black and white characters. Thus, a project as this one is of course located in the heated discussion which encompasses critical race theory.

The latter began as a legal movement during the 1970s, but soon grew into an interdisciplinary field. It emerged as a result of an almost standstill of the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of subtler forms of racism. Its main proponents were, among others, legal scholars Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, who

> engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory,

> legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic 3).

While the movement has splintered into Asian American, Latino-critical, LGBT, and Muslim and Arab interest groups, its proponents agree on several basic tenets, like the proposition that “racism is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged,” or the idea of “interest convergence,” which means that “[b]ecause racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (Delgado & Stefancic 8f.). Another theme is the “social construction” thesis, which “holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations” (Delgado & Stefancic 9). Other themes are “differential racialization—the idea that each race has its own origins and ever-evolving history,” as well as intersectionality and antiessentialism, which are closely related to the former (Delgado & Stefancic 10).

Faulkner’s works and my analysis of his narrative negotiation of guilt relate to this theory, as well as the derivative field of critical whiteness studies, because, although the main focus is on white characters, a work like this one cannot avoid investigating by which means Faulkner racializes his characters. Thus, chapter 5.2., for example, is concerned not only with the symbolic meaning of Faulkner’s black characters, but, perhaps more importantly, with the ways in which Faulkner uses these characters to demarcate his white characters. This means that the process of racialization in Faulkner’s works does not only apply to racial Others, but also to whites, whose whiteness is usually “never specified yet is indisputable—all the more indisputable, in fact, because never specified,” as Jay Watson explains (“Situating Whiteness” viii). Toni Morrison convincingly demonstrates this by using Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* as an example, whose character Eddy “is white, and we know he is *because nobody says so*” (*Playing in the Dark* 72, my emphasis). With reference to Morrison, Thadious M. Davis explains Faulkner’s significance for critical whiteness studies: “With more insight, clarity, and artistry than any other white writer of his generation, specifically Hemingway and Fitzgerald, Faulkner represented issues of race, racialization, racial construction, and racial division. Most impressive about his achievement is not that he created black characters and positioned them within his fictional Yoknapatawpha, but rather that he envisioned what Melville represented as ‘the whiteness of whiteness.’ Faulkner constructed characters who are consciously white, racialized as white, and depicted the construction of whiteness

within southern and American society" (*Games of Property* 254). Faulkner's Isaac McCaslin of *Go Down, Moses* is one of the most consciously white characters in the writer's works, and his perceptions of race and his own practice of racialization are crucial for my argument, because he uses the racial categories which he constructs in order to negotiate the matter of guilt.

The second main form of the idea of guilt according to H. D. Lewis is moral guilt, which "is a more basic notion than punishability" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 396). Moral guilt is incurred whenever there is a discrepancy between "duty and interest:" between "what we most want to do and what we think we ought to do," or, in other words, "[i]f we fail to make the effort of will—an absolute free one in this case—to overcome some weakness of character, and if we thus follow the line of least resistance rather than the call of duty" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 396). While it is easy to oppose crimes and misdeeds, Lewis cautions us against "passing strictly moral judgements on other persons" (396), and I would like to add that such moral judgements seem even more complicated when passed in hindsight. Moreover, if we declare the South morally guilty for its commitment to slavery, is that verdict supposed to be directed against the respective states, their governments, and their laws, or against individual slaveholders? Drawing upon Lewis's definitions, one would lean toward the latter, because committing to or opposing slavery is a matter of conscience, and "the more outwardly vicious an act may be, the less is the effort needed to resist a temptation to do it, for one can normally presuppose much natural resistance to the act in one's own character. The less the effort required, the more we are to blame for not making it" (396). My work is written from a twenty-first century perspective, and I consider slavery a crime against humanity. With the historical data and research about the South's atrocious acts that we have at hand today, it is impossible to not find the individuals who committed those crimes morally at fault. It is not the purpose of this work, however, to pass an external moral judgement, neither on the literary characters that I will be dealing with, nor on their author. I am less concerned with the proof of guilt but with Faulkner's literary approach to its ramifications.

I will argue that guilt is manifested as a *consequence* of the violent past in the set of Faulkner's novels that this study focuses on, which is why it is titled *Temporalities of Guilt*. Faulkner depicts a society with a distinct perception of the Southern past which varies significantly from the U.S. American North: Slavery and the so-called 'race-question' do exist as historical facts also in Faulkner's fiction, which is why his

characters must relate to or deliberately avoid to relate to these issues. Faulkner's fictional version of the South appears as haunted by this legacy, and I will demonstrate in how far he utilizes the temporal aspects of guilt to corroborate this idea.

Lewis argues that there is a form of guilt which is distinct from "the strict moral meaning" of guilt, because it is rather about the sense or feeling of guilt: "the feeling that accompanies the consciousness of being guilty" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 396). From this perspective, guilt appears as a rather psychological phenomenon. In contrast to moral guilt, judgement is passed from within: Feeling guilty is not necessarily tied to an imputation of blame or a conviction by a court or another person, it is rather a self-recrimination. Moreover, a person can feel guilty without having violated any legal or moral code. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud ascribes such a sense of guilt to an unconscious conflict between the ego and the super-ego. The latter is said to act as a kind of *conscience*, a set of moral codes that the individual has internalized to such an extent that they can cause a sense of guilt regardless of whether there has been a transgression or not. Freud also describes guilt without an apparent reason as neurotic, as in his *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*. Here, he argues that the "known ideational content" – the issue we feel guilty about – "has only got into its actual position owing to a mistaken association. We are not used to feeling strong affects without their having any ideational content, and therefore, if the content is missing, we seize as a substitute upon another content which is in some way or other suitable" (20). The original cause of an individual's guilt, which Freud usually traces back to early childhood, is repressed and 'returns' in the form of a substitute. In this sense, neurotic guilt also seems linked to trauma, but Freud notes that in case of the former, "[r]epression makes use of another, and in reality a simpler, mechanism. The trauma, instead of being forgotten, is deprived of its affective cathexis; so that what remains in consciousness is nothing but its ideational content, which is perfectly colourless and is judged to be unimportant" (38).

For Lewis, psychological accounts of guilt, although offering helpful insights into certain states of the mind, seem "to be mainly concerned with aberrations and an unhealthy assumption of guilt, or perverse ways of dealing with it. The core of guilt is an ethical one, which psychology does not explain away" (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 396). Psychoanalytical approaches to literature, however, can contribute greatly to profound understandings of literary texts, as well as the mental processes that are at work when writing, reading, and interpreting these texts. Due to the great number of

characters in Faulkner's works that seem to suffer from several forms of psychological distress, it is not surprising that many Faulkner critics have approached, and continue to do so, his texts from a psychological perspective. The collection of papers that followed the 1991 Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, "Faulkner and Psychology," give an idea of the variety of psychological issues to be found and interpreted in Faulkner's works. In his introduction to the collection, Donald M. Kartiganer summarizes the essays, and argues that "such theoretical narrative transitions as preoedipal and oedipal, Repetition and Revision, Imaginary and Symbolic, become the basis of analytic readings of fictional case histories: abnormality coded in, then fleshed out as full-blown neurosis, with outcomes that are distinctive in each novel" (viii).[2]

Faulkner's characters certainly suffer from guilt in a way that would lend itself to a psychoanalytical approach. One of them is the omnipotence of father and ancestor characters and the contradictory feelings of reverence and repugnance they cause in their sons, which I will discuss in more detail in chapter 4. Nevertheless, my approach to Faulkner's treatment of guilt is not a psychoanalytical one: I will not focus on guilt as a manifestation of the unconscious, but investigate the *temporal* aspects of guilt that Faulkner narrates. Although set in the postbellum South, Faulkner's fiction is mainly concerned with the legacy of the antebellum and Confederate years, and is thus an exploration of the impact that the past has on the present. As indicated above, the past is usually represented by an ancestor character, whose actions – military as well as economical – are glorified and leave his descendants with a sense of imperfection. In earlier novels, like *Flags in the Dust* or *The Sound and the Fury*, the ancestor's legacy is mostly discussed from a domestic perspective. In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down,*

---

[2] It would seem that several of Freud's ideas had a great impact on Faulkner and his fiction, and yet, the latter always denied having even read him: "What little of psychology I know the characters I have invented and playing poker have taught me. Freud I'm not familiar with" (*Faulkner in the University* 268). As a kind of counterargument, John T. Irwin, whose *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading on Faulkner* is perhaps one of the most influential psychoanalytic studies of Faulkner's work, points out a discussion between two characters about psychological issues, Freud, and Henry Havelock Ellis, in Faulkner's second novel *Mosquitoes*. For Irwin, this conversation proves that "if the author of the novel was not familiar with Freud, his characters certainly were" (5). He further suggests that Faulkner might have been (unknowingly) exposed to Freudian ideas when he was in New Orleans, where, as Faulkner himself has stated, "[e]verybody talked about Freud" (qtd. in Irwin 5). André Bleikasten refers to the "borrowings from Freudian symbology" that are evident in Faulkner's unfinished novel *Elmer*, but he notes that "Faulkner was not interested in ideas. Theoretical speculation and the abstractions of philosophy left him cold … What he learned from psychoanalysis and anthropology probably came spontaneously, from random conversations rather than methodical reading. This didn't stop him from using these ideas to his advantage" (80).

Moses, on the other hand, Faulkner also takes into consideration the social aspects of this legacy by stressing the symbolic power of the ancestor character instead of narrating them as an individual: Here, the planter becomes a signifier for the planter class.

In the course of this work, I will demonstrate how Faulkner re-narrates this legacy as a guilt narrative, and I will argue that he uses the latter to reinforce his overall understanding of time. The writer's concept of time is already fully developed with the publication of his first Yoknapatawpha novel *Flags in the Dust*, published in 1929 in a highly abridged form under the title *Sartoris*.[3] As Bleikasten points out, it "is the first of Faulkner's novels to portray the paradoxical nature of Faulknerian *temporality*, the first to suggest that past and present do not occur consecutively but coexist and are contemporaneous" (131). This kind of *temporality* runs through all of Faulkner's major fiction, and it is ultimately encapsulated in a concise passage in *Requiem for a Nun*, which was only published in 1951: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (535).[4] Faulkner's version of guilt emphasizes the continuity of the past that is suggested in the *Requiem* passage, a past which is considered to be never over and can therefore never be overcome. Guilt in Faulkner functions as a bridge between the past and the present, and the way he narrates it ensures that this passage is never blocked. Thus, his concept of time always remains intact.

In this light, my study is rather narratological, investigating methods and strategies of narrative representation. While I understand that it is impossible to deal with the issue of the guilt of slavery without taking into account its moral as well as social purport, this study is not supposed to be a social history, and most certainly not a moral philosophy. But I want to emphasize already that it is my particular point that Faulkner's version of guilt is not to be understood as a moral matter, but a narrative device. I will use narratological categories, like action, character, time, and space, to

---

[3] The novel was published in its original form and under its original title in 1973. Whenever I quote from or refer to that novel, I do so on the basis of the original text, *Flags in the Dust*, as reprinted in the *Library of America* collection.

[4] Although I will not include *Requiem for a Nun* into my analysis, I have quoted it here in order to emphasize the significance of the past for the present in Faulkner's works, and because it echoes – or rather anticipates – several passages from the novels that I am going to interpret, and that were published earlier. The *Requiem* passage has come to be understood as a kind of *motto* of Faulkner's concept of time, which is why many Faulkner critics refer to it when analyzing different novels, like Bleikasten, who uses it to undergird his reading of *Flags in the Dust*. Faulkner usually worked on different novels at a time, which is why they are all interrelated and share a similar concept of time. He began working on *Requiem for a Nun* as early as 1933, when he also started writing *Absalom, Absalom!*. In this light, it seems appropriate to consider the *Requiem* passage as generally valid for my argument.

illustrate Faulkner's narrative design of guilt, but I will also include socio-historical approaches into my considerations, because this is where the overall idea of a specifically Southern guilt has its basis. While guilt was no concern in the immediate historiography after the Civil War, which explained slavery as a benign system, the idea of guilt became more widely distributed among historians in the second half of the twentieth century. This development is sketched out and summarized under the term *guilt thesis* by Gaines M. Foster, who notes that the "initial formulation of the guilt thesis came from outside the profession, from the writers of the Southern Renaissance" (667). I will discuss Foster's systematic examination in more detail in chapter 3, but I already want to point out one of the thesis's main intentions, which is the rebuttal of the so-called Cavalier myth with its suggestion of a Southern aristocracy of planters. Ironically, the proponents of the guilt thesis dismantled this myth by means of a counter-myth, revealing the Southern planter as conscience-smitten and burdened with the guilt of slavery. Foster describes the tradition of the Southern Renaissance as wanting to lay

> bare the dark complexities of the slaveholders' psyche. Their slaveholders seemed peculiarly modern, living in existential tension, frustrated by guilt but with not a therapist in sight and only a punishing war to free them. Such an interpretation, like much of the work of the Southern Renaissance, rendered southerners a special people, scarred but somehow ennobled by their battle with guilt (679).

Faulkner did not penetrate the slaveholders' minds, but Foster's description applies to the slaveholders' *descendants* that inhabit Yoknapatawpha. They also live "in existential tension," but the guilt that is bothering them is not their own, it is inherited: The guilt that Faulkner narrates has skipped a generation or two, thus enabling the writer to stress, as indicated above, his concept of time, in which guilt becomes the tool of the past to ensure its own survival.

My study of guilt in Faulkner's works is restricted to his novels *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*, although I will sporadically refer to passages from *Flags in the Dust* and *Light in August* where it reinforces my argument. The characters central to my discussion are Quentin Compson, a protagonist in *The Sound and the Fury* and one of the main narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as well as Isaac McCaslin, the protagonist of *Go Down, Moses*. I consider these novels as a narrative triad eminently suitable for my topic of the temporalities of

guilt. On its own, each of these novels shows a character overwhelmed by the deep wrongs and crimes of the past, be it his own, that of his family, or that of the community. Thus, Faulkner is able to explore guilt from both a domestic, as well as a social perspective. Read in tandem with one another, however, these novels reveal a specifically Southern form of guilt at the heart of Yoknapatawpha that haunts the descendants of slaveholders.

Throughout the three novels, this guilt is represented with varying methods and motifs that Faulkner borrowed from different fields and genres. These borrowings also exemplify the complexity of the term guilt, and I will take them into account in order to stress my overall argument of the temporal nature of Faulkner's version of guilt, which merges past and present. From religion, for example, Faulkner adopts the idea of an *original sin* that is visited upon the subsequent generations, which I will discuss as part of my analysis of the symbolic legend of Thomas Sutpen in chapter 4.[5] In the same chapter, I will examine Faulkner's use of the curse theme, which has its origin in Gothic fiction. Chapter 5 is concerned with mythical aspects in *Go Down, Moses*: I will demonstrate how Isaac tries to delay restorative justice by determining black people not as victims of slavery but as *moral victors*, who will see a better future once white people have vanished from the earth. Here, Faulkner provides further insight into his concept of time: While guilt is solely entangled with the past, redemption is a task for the future that will resolve itself. Another borrowing is the psychological concept of trauma, which could be applied to Quentin's experience in *The Sound and the Fury*. As indicated above, my approach to Faulkner's fiction is not psychoanalytical. Therefore, I will not refer to trauma theory in a Freudian sense, but I will point to Cathy

---

[5] The impact religion had on Faulkner's works is extensively discussed in the collection of papers in *Faulkner and Religion*. In her introduction to the volume, Doreen Fowler argues that "the key to religious meaning in Faulkner" might be "that his texts focus not so much on God, but on a human aspiration to the divine" (ix). For more information about Faulkner's relation to the religious culture of the South, see, for example, Kazin, Alfred. "William Faulkner and Religion: Determinism, Compassion, and the God of Defeat." *Faulkner and Religion*. UP of Mississippi, 1991, pp. 3–20; and Wilson, Charles Reagan. "William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture." *Faulkner and Religion*. UP of Mississippi, 1991, pp. 21–43. Both essays stress the religious significance of the Civil War in Faulkner's works, and Kazin argues that "the South never quite got over a sense of guilt—this not about the justice of slavery but about the uncertain personal transgressions—whatever these could have been—that alone explained why the devout and God-fearing Confederacy could have gone down in defeat" (7). In his definition of the term "Guilt" for *The Companion to Southern Literature*, Colin Messer also argues that the Southern *individual* was "predisposed to a strong sense of guilt, but any self-conscious expression thereof was limited almost exclusively to matters of personal, as opposed to social, morality. … while the southern conscience could easily be burdened by sins like adultery, drunkenness, and gambling, it is likely that this sensitivity of conscience 'stemmed from the backlog of unrecognized guilt resulting from the unjust treatment of the Negro'" (324, citing James McBride, *Who Speaks for the South?*).

Caruth's study of the *language* of trauma in order to emphasize the repetitive characteristics of Faulkner's version of guilt in chapter 6. I will also briefly discuss the rather recent idea of perpetrator trauma and how it applies, or does not, to Faulkner's characters.

The analysis of each of these ideas – original sin; curse; myth; trauma – is relevant to my overall argument, because it allows me to show that guilt in Faulkner's works is primarily to be understood as a *problem of temporality*, and not necessarily as a *problem of morality*. Therefore, Faulkner does not offer any solution other than evasion to the kind of guilt he narrates, which I will demonstrate in chapter 6, by analyzing Quentin's suicide and Isaac's repudiation of heritage as deficient responses to guilt. The characters' intention behind these actions is to numb the feeling of guilt, rather than fighting its deep-set causes: What bothers Quentin and Isaac is the overwhelming effect guilt has on them, not the harm that has been done to the victims of the crime which now causes this guilt. But in order to overcome guilt, it has to be discussed as a moral question, because we need to understand the harm that our actions, or lack of action, cause other human beings. Only then can we account for the past and think of ways to rectify past wrongs. Faulkner ignores this moral perspective of guilt by having his characters respond only to its temporal complications: the constant repetition of the past.

2 GUILT AS A KEYWORD IN FAULKNER CRITICISM – A SURVEY

Malcolm Cowley's introduction to *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) – the collection of several of Faulkner's works which brought about the writer's comeback after World War II – is probably one of the best-known texts of Faulkner criticism. In it, Cowley sketches out what he considers the "legend" of Yoknapatawpha, and states that Faulkner's Southerners "had the virtue of living single-mindedly by a fixed code; but there was also *an inherent guilt* in their 'design', their way of life; it was slavery that put a curse on the land and brought about the Civil War" (39, my emphasis). Clearly, Cowley's essay is intended as a summary, which is why it does not comprise a more in-depth analysis of how exactly this "inherent guilt" is manifested in Faulkner's works. Instead, it offers the readers of the *Portable* a glimpse at what to expect as they dive into Faulkner's 'mythical saga.' For that is exactly the impression one gets from Cowley's description of Faulkner's fictional world: A place haunted, very much like its inhabitants, by the specters of the region's violent past.[6]

Several critics – and reviewers – before and after Cowley have defined guilt as a dominant subject matter in Faulkner's works, like Bernard De Voto, who describes "guilt, expiation, and revenge" as Faulkner's "usual themes" in his 1936 review of *Absalom, Absalom!*, "Witchcraft in Mississippi" (198). In "Cowley's Faulkner" (1946), an essay-review of *The Portable* Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren dispels some "gross misconception[s]" of Faulkner's works. He argues, for example, that some critics insinuate that "Faulkner 'hates' Negroes," because in one of his books, "it is said that every white child is born crucified on a black cross" (324). Warren corrects: "It is slavery, not the Negro, which is defined, quite flatly, as the curse, over and over again, and the Negro is the black cross in so far as he is the embodiment of the curse, *the reminder of the guilt*, the incarnation of the problem. That is the basic point" (324, my emphasis). Although Warren does not go into detail about the manifestation of guilt in specific works either, his statement is indicative of his own understanding of the

---

[6] Cowley had written about Faulkner before publishing *The Portable Faulkner*. In a 1936 review of *Absalom, Absalom!*, he describes the novel's atmosphere in a similar manner and links it to Gothic fiction (without explicitly saying so): "[Faulkner] belongs with the other writers who try to produce this single and somber effect—that is, with the 'satanic' poets from Byron to Baudelaire, and with the 'black' or 'terrifying' novelists from Monk Lewis and the Hoffman of the 'Tales' to Edgar Allen Poe. The daemon that haunts him is the ghost of the haunted castle—though it is also Poe's raven and Manfred's evil spirit" (206). In chapter 4, I will go into more detail about the links between Faulkner's fiction and (American / Southern) Gothic literature.

workings of guilt in Faulkner's fiction: Warren makes clear that instead of demonizing black people, Faulkner emphasizes the malefactions of white people, and that these malefactions make up the legacy which haunts whites and their descendants. While Warren's line of interpretation cites Faulkner's whites as perpetrators, it does not necessarily recognize his black characters as victims, but rather as a "reminder of the guilt." Their suffering, the impact that slavery and its legacy had and have on their lives, is not taken into account in Faulkner's works. Instead, as a "reminder," they fulfill a narrative function for the portrayal of the suffering of whites from guilt. I will pick up that point again in chapter 5, in which the role that black characters play in Faulkner's design of Southern guilt will be more thoroughly investigated.

Cowley's and Warren's interpretation of guilt as the curse of Yoknapatawpha also already reveals the *temporal* nature of guilt that forms an essential part of my own argument. By describing guilt as a curse, they suggest the ability of guilt to connect, if not merge, the past and the present, because a curse, in simple terms, keeps the past alive as time moves on. Or, as Robert Mighall puts it in his study of the curse theme in Gothic fiction: "Curse narratives show how crimes belonging to the ancestral past can blight both the present and the future" (80). The curse theme and how it is narratively negotiated by Faulkner as a medium that carries the guilt of the past into the present (or future), will be analyzed in more detail in the fourth chapter of this work.

While Cowley and Warren describe guilt in terms of Faulkner's oeuvre in general, it is striking that the majority of criticism dealing with guilt in Faulkner refers either to *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Go Down, Moses*, which are also central to my study. In "The World of William Faulkner" (1949), Charles Glicksberg, for example, states that

> [i]t is the mark of Faulkner's genius that he has seized upon this theme—the race problem and all that it involves—as the central problem of his novel [*Absalom, Absalom!*] and the dominant problem of the South, and handled it with scrupulous honesty and objectivity. If Faulkner is the Dostoyevski of the South, this land and its people, haunted by ghosts of the past, *tormented by a crushing sense of guilt*, burdened with an antiquated and iniquitous caste system, present a handicap and a complication (369, my emphasis).

Horace Gregory, on the other hand, reviews *Go Down, Moses* for the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* (1950), and finds that "[i]t is by this kind of penetration into the psyche of the South and of America that Faulkner retains his kinship to Melville, for like the elder writer, Faulkner looks downward and inward to *the causes of guilt* …

before the sense of sin can start its long journey toward expiation" (374f., my emphasis).

Like Glicksberg and Gregory, Faulkner critic Fred Hobson classes Faulkner among a tradition of established writers. In his introduction to *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!*. A Casebook* (2003), he notes that "[l]ike Hawthorne, Faulkner deals with the sins of the fathers (his own antebellum white southern ancestors filling the role of Hawthorne's seventeenth-century Puritan ancestors) and the burdens of the regional past, and he views that past with a mixture of love and hate, pride, shame, and guilt" (6). And, referring to Shreve's meditation about a specifically Southern birthright that might result from being the descendant of Confederate soldiers, Cleanth Brooks, in "History and the Sense of the Tragic" (1963) declares: "What is it that Quentin as a southerner has that Shreve does not have? It is a sense of the presence of the past and with it an access to a tragic vision. For the South has experienced defeat and guilt and has an ingrained sense of the stubbornness of human error and of the complexity of history" (36). André Bleikasten provides a similarly summarizing list of themes Faulkner deals with in *Go Down, Moses* and also draws upon the idea of a curse. In his comprehensive study *William Faulkner. A Life through Novels* (2017), he finds that "Faulkner resumes his questioning of the 'curse' of the South" in *Go Down, Moses*, and that the "constitutive illegitimacy of Southern order;, [sic.] the perpetuation of violence and injustice; the transmission of shame, guilt, and resentment within families; the burden of legacy (for whites) and the bitterness of dispossession (for Native Americans, blacks, and mixed-race people) are the major themes" (309).

Although all these critics treat guilt as a central theme in Faulkner's works, the way in which they discuss it remains rather sketchy. As most of the texts are reviews or overviews, or simply focus on other issues, this does not come as a surprise. And yet, the question arises why this supposedly "major theme" of Faulkner's fictional world has not been investigated in terms of its narrative representation. What kind of guilt is it that Faulkner's Southerners suffer from: Does it bother only one or few individuals, or the whole community? Does it affect only Faulkner's antebellum, or his postbellum characters, or both? What is it about: Slavery, or racism? Are there other issues Faulkner's characters feel guilty about? Is guilt ever expressed, either by the narrator or a character in Faulkner's texts? And if so, which narrative techniques does Faulkner use in order to convey guilt? How is guilt reflected in the language Faulkner uses? And finally, what is Faulkner's intention when narrating guilt: Is his version of guilt based on

any empirically observable form of guilt in Southern society? Or does he utilize it in order to make a point?

These are some of the questions which have motivated me to provide a more extensive study of the theme of guilt in Faulkner's works, to define in more detail where and by which means Faulkner narratively negotiates it. After all, there are a few studies treating guilt in Faulkner in greater detail, and I will take up most of them in the course of this work. Biljana Oklopcic, for example, dedicates a whole chapter of her work *Faulkner and the Native Keystone. Reading (Beyond) the American South* (2014), to the analysis of "Guilt and Redemption in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Fiction." She argues that

> the idea of different kinds of guilt—personal, collective, shared, implied, and public—constitutes the backbone of William Faulkner's oeuvre. His Yoknapatawpha novels and short stories thus mirror their creator's constant struggling with what he felt to be both the personal and collective idea of guilt in the South. Faulkner's view of *the collective—public, implied, or shared—guilt in the South* centers in paternalistic notions of whiteness and blackness and underdeveloped Southern economy which he considered responsible for discrimination and inferior living conditions of Southern blacks (96, my emphasis).

Unfortunately, Oklopcic does not elaborate on her observation of certain racialized Southern codes. After that statement, her focus shifts immediately to "the notion of personal guilt in [Faulkner's] oeuvre" (96), and she goes on to investigate Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury*, Eula and Flem Snopes from the *Snopes* trilogy, and, most extensively, Temple Drake from *Sanctuary*.

Margaret D. Bauer's article "'I Have Sinned in That I Have Betrayed the Innocent Blood': Quentin's Recognition of His Guilt" (2000), also focuses on an individual character and his individual guilt. Bauer demonstrates in how far Quentin Compson has suppressed his involvement in the destruction of his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, and she argues that the ultimate recognition of his share of the blame is the main reason for his suicide. While both Oklopcic and Bauer concentrate on individual characters, their analyses are undergirded by historical and sociological aspects of the specifically Southern circumstances of those characters. Oklopcic, for example, emphasizes the strict hierarchy of Southern society in terms of gender, race, and class (cf. 101). Bauer also refers to specifically Southern social codes and explains, for example, the socio-historical background of incest in Southern society,

which, feeling threatened by "any influx of outside blood," considers incest as the lesser of two evils (87, citing Bleikasten). I will take up Bauer's analysis of Quentin's individual guilt again in chapter 6, where I argue that Faulkner dynamizes sociological problems – class in *The Sound and the Fury*; race in *Absalom, Absalom!* – by means of guilt, and analyze the central function of Quentin Compson in that process.

With the publication of Michael Gorra's book *The Saddest Words. William Faulkner's Civil War* in 2020 – selected by *The New York Times Book Review* as on of the *100 Notable Books 2020* – Faulkner and his works seem to have been propelled to the center of public attention. On the blurb, the book is described as a "sobering reevaluation" of Faulkner's fiction from a twenty-first century view, and although Gorra does not specifically mention the term *guilt*, it seems to be a central issue to him: Explaining the title of his book, which he has borrowed from *The Sound and the Fury*, he states that "[s]omething that *was* is fixed and unchangeable, forever in the past, and event—a mistake—that can be neither altered nor redressed" (11). Elsewhere in the book, Gorra refers to the Sutpen story that Quentin Compson tells in *Absalom, Absalom!* as "a tale of pride and ambition, greed and folly, of *those who have to live with the consequences of what can never be undone*" (262, my emphasis). To me, that is an adequate description of the feeling of guilt. Gorra leaves no doubt that he considers slavery as the defining issue of the Civil War – he also claims that Faulkner does so, too (cf. 290) – and in his concluding chapter, he stresses the "centrality of slavery itself—in our nation's history" (353). He argues that

> Faulkner writes of failure and loss, of the inheritance that defines his region, and tries to be both adequate and just to *the trauma felt by the different peoples*, who are the same people, of his native South. … The legacy—the final meaning—of the Civil War lives on in *the things undone, the work unfinished and the wounds unbound*" (353, my emphasis).[7]

What Gorra describes here as *trauma* bears resemblance to Cowley's and Warren's interpretation of guilt as a *curse*, which I have mentioned above. Both trauma and curse

---

[7] Gorra's book might be exemplary for the fact that, as Duvall notes, "the Faulkner one reads today is very different than the one read forty years ago. Far from the champion of the cohesive (white) Southern community that Southern critics in the Agrarian tradition construed, we read a Faulkner today whose fiction maps and critiques the complex coordinates of race, gender, and class in his fictional northern Mississippi Yoknapatawpha County … What Faulkner is acutely aware of is that, in a white community that wishes both to make absolute the distinctions between the races and to demonize black male sexuality, the races have already been mixed, almost exclusively by white men's abuse of black women" ("Regionalism" 255).

share the capacity to carry the past into the present, they are consequences of the (mis)deeds of one's ancestors. As this work is concerned with the temporalities of guilt, I will investigate both assumptions and examine in how far Faulkner narratively represents guilt as a curse (chapter 4), as well as trauma (chapter 6). For the latter, Gorra's analysis of the interplay of Faulkner's two saddest words, *was* and *again*, will be of central importance. But before I can begin my analysis, I will outline the historiographical context of Faulkner's rendering of Southern guilt.

3 "WHAT SOUTHERN GUILT?"[8]

According to Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson encouraged him to write about Mississippi, to make his place of origin the center of his works. Anderson told him that "one place to start from is just as important as any other. You're a country boy; all you know is that little patch up there in Mississippi where you started from. But that's all right too" ("A Note on Sherwood Anderson" 8). Faulkner took this advice to heart and created a South in miniature with Yoknapatawpha County, where most of his novels and stories are set and most of his characters 'live'. His South is a piece of fiction, and yet, his literary accounts had a great impact on the way in which the 'real' South, the region Faulkner's works are based on, was and still is perceived by the rest of the U.S., by the rest of the world.[9]

In white Southern literary fiction, the so-called "plantation myth" was an established tradition both before and after the Civil War. In her article about the term "Plantation" for *The Companion to Southern Literature*, Lucinda H. MacKethan

---

[8] The title of this chapter is borrowed from an opinion piece by Diane McWhorter in *The New York Times* from September 15, 1983. Marking the twentieth anniversary of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, the article contextualizes pretensions of guilt and innocence by the civilian society of Alabama after the bombings with the broader idea of Southern guilt. McWhorter argues, for example, that most Birminghamians refused to be considered jointly liable for the racist crime and did not see a link between their own discriminatory acts, like maintaining segregation or telling racist jokes, and the church bombings. According to McWhorter, "they never acted in bad faith. As segregationists, they abided not only by community morality but by decades of national law as well." For McWhorter, as her title suggests, there seems to be no evidence for the existence of Southern guilt beyond the Southern literary scene and the imaginations of the rest of the nation: "What better theater for grand, cathartic gestures of national atonement than the South, where guilt is as indigenous as Scarlett O'Hara and pecan pie? Southerners have been on intimate terms with evil since slavery. And as every high school student of Faulkner knows, sin is but the handmaiden to expiation. Yet, does Southern guilt exist out side [sic.] of literature and the Yankee imagination? Certainly, Southern change is real and dramatic. But in their testimonials of progress, do Southerners every [sic.] say mea culpa?" [https://www.nytimes.com/1983/09/15/opinion/what-southern-guilt.html]. Last access: Jan. 31, 2023.

[9] Some historians argue that there is no such thing as a 'real' South and consider the *South* as an imagined space: In "Mississippi as Metaphor: Civil Rights, the South, and the Nation in the Historical Imagination," Joseph Crespino states that "[t]he American South has existed never so much as a literal place than as a figurative one" (99). He argues that the South, despite being a location on the map, is hard to define in terms of its regional edges – "Is Texas really southern? It was part of the Confederacy. What about Florida? The panhandle, yes; Miami, no. Oklahoma? It depends" (99) – and that it is rather an iconic space for Americans trying to make sense of their nation. As such, Crespino continues, it is comprehensively represented by using the state of Mississippi as a metaphor: "There are numerous ways to discuss this imagined South, but no place has seemed more distinctive than Mississippi, the state, at least a portion of which, historian James Cobb has called the 'most southern place on earth.' The poorest, least industrialized southern state with the highest percentage of African-American residents in the nation, Mississippi has long been imagined as the South on steroids, the South in all of its gothic horror and campy, absurdist charm, the center of what the journalist Robert Sherill called the 'super South'" (100). Thus, the state of Mississippi becomes both the surface onto which non-Southerners project their preconceptions, as well as the source from which they get their vague ideas. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism.* Oxford UP, 2010, pp. 99–120.

describes it as "the South's most potent myth," which uses Southern plantations as a setting and is based on "stereotypes of cavalier and belle, kindly master and mistress, and faithful 'servants'" (649). MacKethen cites John Pendleton Kennedy as an antebellum, and authors such as Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris as postbellum examples of such fiction. She further argues that Faulkner, along with other writers such as Eudora Welty or Tennessee Williams, "created compelling critiques of the plantation myth … However, for the modern popular imagination, Scarlett O'Hara's Tara, fashioned by producer David O. Selznick for his 1939 film version of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), remains the most enduring model of what a plantation ought to be" (650).[10] Jennifer W. Dickey argues that Mitchell, "an upper-class white woman writing in the 1920, reflected the prevailing trends in southern historiography. These trends reinforced the 'lost cause' mythology that had developed during the Reconstruction period of the nineteenth century and continued to dominate the discourse throughout the first half of the twentieth century" (13). Published only a few months before *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936, *Gone with the Wind* was far more successful at the time, because "what the public wanted was a romantic South, the South of dreams. Faulkner's dark novels could not compete with Margaret Mitchell's magnolias and crinolines" (Bleikasten 270).

Among the Southern writers opposed to Mitchell's romantic version of the South was W. J. Cash. He sketched out his own idea of the region in *The Mind of the* South, first published in 1941, which was considered a path-breaking study of the South and its inhabitants, both before and after the Civil War. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, in a new introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of the book, states that "Cash's main objective is to convince the reader that his vision of the South cut through the myths, hypocrisies, reticences, and other denials by which its people had insulated themselves from their innermost consciousness" (viii). One of Cash's main concerns is the "Cavalier thesis," the idea that

[10] For a concise overview of the literary accounts drawing on the plantation myth, see also MacKethen's definition of the term "Plantation Fiction" in the same volume, which "can be said to have had its genesis as the South's answer to the abolitionist writing that proliferated in the North beginning in 1830" (650). According to MacKethen, such literature dates back to William Byrd of Westover's *Secret Diary, 1709–1712*, but she also notes that literary historians tend to "limit the designation to fiction produced in active defense of the plantation regime for some three decades before and three decades after the Civil War" (650). "Plantation Fiction." *The Companion to Southern Literature. Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. 2002.

> the great South of the first half of the nineteenth century – the South which fought the Civil War – was home of a genuine and fully realized aristocracy, coextensive and identical with the ruling class, the planters; and sharply set apart from the common people, still pretty often lumped indiscriminately together as poor whites, not only by economic condition but also by the vaster gulf of a different blood and a different (and long and solidly established) heritage (4).

Cash sets out to refute and demystify this idea by emphasizing the planters' emergence "in slow stages from a primitive backwoods community, made up primarily of farmers and laborers" (5f.). I will get back to Cash in the fourth chapter of this work, in which I demonstrate in how far the Sutpen legend in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* is also designed as a rebuttal of the Cavalier legend. At this point, however, I want to point out another central argument of Cash's study that had a great impact on Southern historiography in the second half if the twentieth century. As he illustrates the Cavalier as the Old South's ideal conception, Cash also draws attention to an allegedly inevitable conflict, arguing that "in its secret heart [the South] always carried a powerful and uneasy sense of the essential rightness of the nineteenth century's position on slavery" (60f.), and comes to the conclusion: "This old South, in short, was a society beset by the specters of defeat, of shame, of guilt – a society driven by the need to bolster its morale, to nerve its arm against waxing odds, to justify itself in its own eyes and in those of the world" (61).

Lillian Smith wrote a comparable, yet more autobiographical account of the 'psyche of the South.' In *Killers of the Dream* (1949), she illustrates a South stuck in and haunted by the past, with a sense of burden that seems almost mythical:

> Even its children knew that the South was in trouble. No one had to tell them; no words said aloud … But all knew that under quiet words and warmth and laughter, under the slow ease and tender concern about small matters, there was a heavy burden on all of us and as heavy a refusal to confess it … We identified with the South's trouble as if we, individually, were responsible for all of it … We knew guilt without understanding it, and there is no tie that binds men closer to the past and each other than that" (25f.).

Published towards the end of the first half of the twentieth century, both Cash's and Smith's works seem to mark a watershed of the then common perception of Southern history, compared to the prevalent proslavery apologia that could be found not only in romantic novels like Mitchell's, but also in the historiography of that time. Both works attempted to explain their region by means of a new approach, one that debunked ideas of pride, glory, and (social) order with a sense of shame, guilt, and chaos.

The idea of Faulkner's South seems to stem from a similar tendency to explain one's origin. Interestingly, as Roland Végsö argues, "the creation of the imaginary South coincides here with the creation of Yoknapatawpha County, an imaginary piece of the South itself, which only goes to show that Faulkner himself, while engaged in a summoning of his historical heritage, is also caught in the act of creating a fictitious version of that heritage" (627). Very much like the South Cash and Smith sketched out later, Faulkner's South is portrayed as obsessed with the past, as the numerous ghosts of ancestors prove. In the course of this study, I will demonstrate in how far Faulkner's portray of the South draws on similar explanatory patterns like Cash and Smith after him, like the refutation of the Cavalier myth, and most notably the postulate of the South's inherent guilt about slavery. In this chapter, however, I will illustrate the historiographical and intellectual context of Faulkner's works. I will point out, based on an elaborate historiographical analysis by Gaines M. Foster, that the idea of guilt in the South has been initially formulated by writers of the Southern Renaissance rather than historians, and that the question of the existence of this particularly Southern form of guilt is highly controversial. The illustration of this context will then serve as basis for my investigation of Faulkner's narrative design of Southern guilt.

The main concern of Foster's study is the so-called *guilt thesis*: "The contention that white Southerners felt guilty about slavery, that in their heart of hearts they found it impossible to reconcile their peculiar institution with their democratic sentiments and evangelical faith" (665). Broadly speaking, the thesis proposes that due to this feeling of guilt, Southerners wanted to be punished, which is why they incited a war over the issue that troubled them and were ultimately defeated. In other words, Southerners are considered as tragic figures who brought about their own demise in order to abolish a system they knew, deep down, was wrong.

Given the prevalent proslavery apologia before and during the Civil War, this line of argument strikes one as rather odd. Foster notes that

> [b]efore the Civil War some abolitionists suspected that white southerners did not fully believe in slavery, that they doubted its legitimacy and morality, and after Appomattox a few southerners admitted as much. But by the end of the nineteenth century, most white southerners looked back on slavery as a benign if not a beneficial institution. Few early, white academics in the South criticized it, and those who did never questioned the region's commitment to it (666).

Therefore, it is not surprising that historiography in the early twentieth century was proslavery, with Ulrich B. Phillips's work *American Negro Slavery* (1918), at its center.

Phillips "described paternalistic slaveholders who conducted a school for civilization for savage but childlike Africans" and also mentioned the "'permanent stigma'" of the slave trade, "but he apparently never wrote about southerners feeling guilty. After all, if planters did blacks a favor, why should they feel guilty?" (Foster 666). Another influential history of slavery was provided by Phillips's contemporary William E. Dodd, whose book, *The Cotton Kingdom: A Chronicle of the Old South*, was published in 1918. Although Dodd admitted that many Southerners questioned the morality of slavery due to their democratic and evangelical values before 1850, both his and Phillips's works "portrayed antebellum white southerners as thoroughly committed to the institution of slavery" (Foster 667). According to Foster, their works are "typical of their times," and "few if any [professional historians] wrote of southern guilt over slavey" (667).

The literary equivalent of this proslavery interpretation was, as Foster notes, the so-called "Cavalier myth," which, in short, suggests that the plantocracy of the Old South was an aristocracy. This myth was featured, as has been indicated above, in novels like Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.[11] The guilt thesis can be seen as a kind of counterargument to this myth and was initially formulated not by historians, but the writers of the Southern Renaissance. In *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* (1982), Daniel Joseph Singal analyzes how Southern intellectuals have been influenced by modernist thought and its psychological perspective. According to Singal, especially Cash's *The Mind of the South* demonstrated "the triumph of southern Modernism" (373). Along with Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, it contained "the first full, twentieth-century expositions of the guilt thesis" (Foster 668). It seems that the guilt thesis Cash and Smith proposed does not meet scientific standards, because, as Foster argues, both "wrote not as dispassionate historians …, they wrote of their perceptions of southern distinctiveness—what made the South the South. That goal meant they spent little effort in providing evidence to support their historical arguments" (669). This is problematic, because although the

---

[11] Charles Reagan Wilson notes that "[t]he Cavalier began to emerge as a mythic character in plantation novels such as William Alexander Carruther's *The Cavalier of Virginia* (1834); he became stock in the plantation domestic novels and polemic writing of the immediate prewar decades; and this ideal reached a stereotypical apex in reminiscences and novels in the first half century after the Civil War, including such works as Thomas Nelson Page's 'Marse Chan' (1887) and Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman* (1905). By the 1930s the Cavalier myth was becoming fragmented, as indicated by the Rhett Butler-Ashley Wilkes split in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936)." "Cavalier Myth." *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*. 2006, p. 206.

thesis did not find its way into Southern historiography right away, its impact on the profession grew gradually.

With the publication of Kenneth M. Stampp's book, *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), Phillips's account of slavery was replaced as the standard text. Although Stampp did not refer to guilt, he stated that the "slaveholders' 'conscience was *not* clear'" (qtd. in Foster 671). His study signifies the beginning of a new line of argument among historians, of whom Foster mentions Bell I. Wiley's published lecture series *The Road to Appomattox* (1954) and C. Vann Woodward's article "The Search for Southern Identity" (1958). The latter

> appeared to make explicit what was implicit in the accounts of Cash and Smith—*the idea that guilt helped make the South distinctive*. Guilt, along with defeat and poverty, Woodward seemed to say, shaped the very nature of the South. Certainly many of his readers reached that conclusion, and as a result, Woodward did much to popularize the idea of southern guilt (Foster 671, my emphasis).

Although historians did not admit the impact that modernist thought had on their own writing, the guilt thesis began to attract more interest and was discussed more frequently among professional historians after the late 1950s.[12] However, none of their studies – regardless of the disparities in their argumentation, regardless of whether they cited religious or political origins for Southern guilt – offers hard evidence for or against the thesis: As Foster notes, "[t]he best support for the guilt thesis … would be explicit acknowledgement of guilt by southerners. Almost all historians concede that a few southerners felt guilty and said so. No one, not even defenders of the thesis, claim to have found very many of them" (687). This point of criticism was also already raised

---

[12] Cash's influence, however, was acknowledged, and as Foster argues, professional historians were more open to his arguments because of a clear change in intellectual climate. As another reason for the greater receptivity of the guilt thesis, Foster cites the civil rights movement (675). However, "no black historian contributed to the early development of the thesis. … From the black side of America's historic racial divide, the slaveholders' moral qualms apparently appeared less evident than they did from the white side. Among white historians, though, spreading acceptance of black equality contributed to increasing criticism of slavery: when white historians themselves condemned slavery, they found it more believable that white slaveholders would also have been troubled by the institution (675).
Historians also debated about the alleged origins of the sense of guilt that the guilt thesis proposed, one of which was, in addition to democratic liberalism, the South's Evangelicalism. Foster points out that "historians cast doubt on the idea that Christianity, even evangelical Christianioty, naturally led to the conclusion that slaveholding was a sin. David Brion Davis's work reminded historians that for centuries Christianity and the institution of slavery had coexisted in at least tenuous peace. Forrest G. Wood went much further, attacking Christianity as 'fundamentally racist in its ideology, organization, and practice' and calling it 'a cornerstone of modern slavery'" (685).

when Cash's *The Mind of the South* was reviewed. One of his earliest critics, Rollin G. Osterweis, complained that Cash did not provide evidence of guilt: "But the absence of such evidence, Osterweis added sarcastically, meant 'little in this realm of Freudian psychology'" (Foster 687). In fact, some historians even seemed to suggest that the lack of evidence is rather inherent in the guilt complex: James Oakes, one of the thesis's proponents, "argued that in the case of so deep a psychological problem, historians should not expect to find open acknowledgement of guilt" (Foster 687).[13]

Foster comes to the conclusion that "as with the entire matter of guilt, the argument almost assumes the absence of evidence" (691). For historians as well as sociologists, concerned with society rather than a fictional portrayal of it, it is rather dubious to cite an absence as an indicator for the existence of that which is absent, as if to say that the lack of confession makes it even more likely that a person feels guilty.[14] For modernist literature, on the other hand, it can be an effective gateway to the subconscious, to the hidden motivators of human behavior. Or, as Singal points out, "Faulkner as a novelist was working in a medium obviously better suited to impressionism than sociology, one in which ambivalence could be turned to aesthetic advantage" (156). For Faulkner, the idea of a specifically Southern variant of guilt over slavery, one that was so suppressed that it led to the incitement of a war which was ultimately lost, enabled him to reconcile his regional interests with his modernist ambitions. Singal notes that "[a]lthough in retrospect, it seems inevitable that Faulkner would turn to the South …, this was not immediately apparent to him …. He was, he insisted, seeking general, not provincial truths, and a beauty that, like Keats's Grecian urn, would remain absolute and unimpaired forever" (160). The insinuation of Southern guilt allowed Faulkner to create a literary version of the South and its inhabitants that defied the romanticized and apologetic narratives which portrayed slavery as a benevolent system. His ancestor characters, although often painted in the tradition of

---

[13] Foster further argues that "[m]inimizing the importance of the admitted absence of open confession has important implications for how proponents of the guilt thesis define the term guilt. They have rarely explained whether they employ it in primarily a religious or a psychological sense. By not taking seriously the absence of open confession one would expect in a religious conception of guilt, however, they clearly indicate that they write of a psychological phenomenon … Indeed, Oakes has put the matter most forthrightly: guilt started as a religious feeling but was so suppressed that it became a psychological problem" (688).

[14] Foster cites Vietnam veterans as "[a]nother group of people caught in a moral dilemma," and argues that they "offer a very rough standard of comparison. Of those who, in counselling, eventually evince guilt over their actions in the war, psychologists have found that about a third easily and openly admit their guilt feelings. Such a rate of open expression, if applied to antebellum southerners, would suggest that far more confession should be found, if indeed widespread guilt existed" (688).

the Cavalier legend, are questionable characters, and his postbellum characters are beset by their legacy, haunted by guilt, shame, and defeat. The psychological interpretations that Cash and Smith offer in their studies of the South turn out to be near relations of the fictional South Faulkner had drawn before them – a South, as Singal puts it,

> tormented and paralyzed, trapped in an intricate web, largely of its own making, which tied together sexuality, avarice, and aggression with the 'higher' facets of southern life until they were all hopelessly tangled. Instead of a repository of glory and innocence, the past was now seen as a fatalistic curse upon the present that no southerner could wholly escape. The existence of a barbaric past *did* matter (154).

Faulkner's version of Southern guilt has its roots not in empirically observable feelings of guilt in Southern society, but in the intellectual climate of the Southern Renaissance, which Cash and Smith were also part of, and its emphasis on the distinctiveness of Southern people. In the following chapters, I will analyze how Faulkner utilized his concept of Southern guilt over the course of his writing career, from the publication of *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 to *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936 to *Go Down, Moses* in 1942. I will argue that he overwrote the prevalent Cavalier myth with a biblically charged legend of original guilt, and that he staged guilt as both a curse and a trauma for his postbellum characters. The latter, of whom I will focus on Quentin Compson and Isaac McCaslin, suffer from a psychological turmoil which is rendered as uniquely Southern, and thus regional, but which Faulkner realizes with Modernist aesthetic devices.

4 “ANXIETIES OF INHERITANCE” – SOUTHERN GUILT AND THE CURSE OF YOKNAPATAWPHA

In an interview with Jean Stein in the *Paris Review*, Faulkner said that writing about the South “opened up a gold mine of other people, I created a cosmos of my own. I can move these people around like God” (qtd. in Lee 7). With this statement, Faulkner positions himself in relation to the fictional universe he has invented in his works, and he declares that rather than an author of literary works, he deems himself as a creator, godlike having created a world, and godlike tending to it. This attitude is also displayed in terms of his famous map of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, which he drew for the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. In addition to the (geo)graphical representation of the area in which almost all of his novels and the greater part of his short stories are set, the map also comprises a claim of ownership: “William Faulkner, sole owner and proprietor.” By ascribing the right of ownership to himself, Faulkner gives himself and his fictional world the significance he deems appropriate. As Elizabeth Hardwick points out, he

> is authentically, romantically possessed by his genius; he can lose himself not only in the act of writing but in the world his imagination has created and populated. He believes all of it, concretely, amazingly: the map of Yoknapatawpha County is not a joke (226).

Instead, it can be considered as Faulkner’s fictional version of the South’s historical heritage, a literary correlate of the area commonly referred to as the Deep South, whose symbolic character I have already outlined in chapter 3. Rather than a joke or a ‘gimmick’ for the publication of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner’s map of Yoknapatawpha is an expression of his life’s work: an elaborate fictional universe.

With the interview statement, Faulkner takes up a quasi-religious position, arguing that he *created* a cosmos and that he *moves people around*. As a writer-in-residence at the University of Virginia, he made a similar remark, arguing that “any writer worth his salt is convinced that he can create much better people than God can” (*Faulkner in the University* 118). Most of the “people” Faulkner made up inhabit Yoknapatwapha, and they often reappear, as major or minor characters, in the great number of novels and stories that are set there. It is a conscious narrative choice to use the same setting again and again, and it certainly bore the risk to be written off as a regional writer. This is probably why Faulkner’s first two novels, *Soldier’s Pay* and

Mosquitoes, do not concern the South so much and instead could be set anywhere, but I will go into more detail about this in chapter 6. Yoknapatawpha, on the other hand, is "an invented landscape in which [Faulkner] could confront Southern history and society" (Campbell and Kean 149). Thus, while writing and re-writing, he tried to get to the bottom of his fictional South, that South "dead since 1865 and peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 6).[15]

This quote from *Absalom, Absalom!* marks a turning point in Southern history, the loss of the Civil War, and conveys the impression of a dark site at which time stands still and where people are only shadows of something or someone past. This is the kind of scene which Faulkner sets for most of his Yoknapatwapha fiction: The action always takes place in the South, and always unfolds at some point in the first half of the twentieth century. It is crucial to note, however, that the narrated time of the novels, the time that Faulkner's postbellum characters experience as the present, is mostly a vessel for the antebellum years to constantly repeat themselves, or, as André Bleikasten puts it, where "the past is enacted indefinitely on the stage of the present." As it turns out, "the time of memory is as important, if not more so, than the time of the action" (132). Thus, the (portrayed) South is divided into two periods of time: an antebellum blossom, and a postbellum freeze-up. The tension between these antebellum and postbellum conditions mainly determines Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha stories, for his characters are always backward-looking to their ancestors and the social system they are no longer part of because of the loss of the Civil War. Faulkner's works shed light upon the means by which the postbellum characters try to make sense of their case, upon the stories they tell themselves in order to understand their world. Apparently, they consider themselves as haunted by a curse.

Faulkner's narrative design of this curse will be investigated in this chapter. As I have already mentioned in chapter 2, several Faulkner critics have determined a curse at the heart of Yoknapatawpha, and they have interpreted it as a metaphor for guilt, like Cowley and Warren. In my argument, a curse will primarily be considered as a means of guilt to evolve *over time*. I will argue that Faulkner based his fictional world upon a mythically and biblically charged foundational narrative of a Southern 'original sin' which he narrates *by means of its consequences*. In other words, the temporal structure of the curse helps Faulkner to illustrate the temporal structure of guilt. The

---

[15] Hereafter cited as *AA*.

curse is a recurring theme in Gothic fiction, in which it is often used, as Mighall points out, in the form of an "ancestral legacy" that carries "the crimes and guilts of earlier generations into the most respectable households and the most ordinary families" (80).[16] The curse is here defined as a means of transportation *through time*, and the baggage it carries is an unresolved or unatoned guilt of the past. Mighall further argues that it is "often the great-grandfather or a more distant ancestor still who torments his innocent descendants, 'haunting' the present with the consequences of his crimes" (80), and, as will be shown in the course of this work, Faulkner's version of guilt is also traceable to several 'proto-ancestors' and the way they are entangled in the violent system of slavery, whose ramifications still prevail in the postbellum era.

It seems to be in the nature of the curse of Yoknapatawpha that it haunts the place where the sin has been committed, as well as the people who live and settle there. This means that the narrative categories space ("cosmos") and character ("people"), which Faulkner evokes in the interview statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter, play a significant role for the analysis of the temporalities of guilt in the title of my work: The persistence of the curse, which manifests itself in its haunting of places and people, represents the enduring torment which guilt is able to inflict on

---

[16] This idea of a curse which Faulkner uses throughout his work is actually a premodern concept often referred to as ancestral curse. As Roger Luckhurst states in his article on the topic, "[c]urses are associated with premodern thought, the kind of superstitious belief that Enlightenment thinkers believed a rational and scientific worldview would eradicate. To Victorian anthropologists, belief in curses was a sign of 'primitive' thought. Yet just as Gothic literature emerged in the eighteenth century, so did a revamped idea of the family or ancestral curse" (187). Luckhurst proceeds by citing Gothic romances and curse stories from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), to Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of Baskervilles* (1902), which deal with the concept of an ancestral curse. He explains that "[a] curse can crawl out of a museum relic, or rest with a mummy, or rise up out of the floors of a house imbued with a hidden, traumatic history" (188), and emphasizes the importance of the cursed house for American Gothic fiction as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), in which Matthew Maule is accused of witchcraft and curses his persecutor Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon: "God will give him blood to drink!" Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. 1851. Penguin Classics, 1986, p. 8. Hawthorne's novel can be considered a paradigm for that kind of curse which "accompanies a family and causes misfortune across multiple generations" (Luckhurst 186), and which continues to haunt the house on the property, which 'witnessed' the ancestral crime of dispossession, and every descendant who dares to live in it. "Ancestral Curse." *Horror Literature through History. An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to our Deepest Fears*, vol. 1, ABC-CLIO, 2017. The resemblance between Faulkner and Hawthorne has been suggested by Faulkner critics as George Marion O'Donnell, Malcolm Cowley, or Richard Chase and investigated in more detail by Randall Stewart, who argues that both writers share "a common view of the human condition" "Hawthorne and Faulkner." *College English,* vol. 17, no. 5, 1956, pp. 258–262, p. 258. A common theme of American Gothic fiction that Faulkner also drew upon, as will be discussed in chapter 6, was the fear of miscegenation. Allan Lloyd-Smith points out that "[i]n American Gothic, [the reality of the oppression of women, or children, in a patriarchy that denied them rights] … remained a major theme, [but] the trauma and guilt of race and slavery, or fear of what was then called miscegenation, also emerges." *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. Continuum, 2005, p. 8.

perpetrators and their descendants. Faulkner's characters always remain in the same locality, which makes them recall the always same memories of their ancestors which they then repeatedly ponder on and narrate. And even Faulkner himself seems to fall prey to the same obsession as his characters, for he also 'keeps coming back' to Yoknapatawpha and its people with almost every new story.

The current chapter will investigate how Faulkner narrates the temporal repercussions of a guilt-ridden past, and it is structured as follows: In chapter 4.1, I will argue that narrative space in Faulkner is mythically and biblically charged, and that it represents a guilty conscience. Afterwards, I will focus on the 'original sin' which caused the curse of Yoknapatawpha, as well as its narrative composition. Therefore, I will analyze Faulkner's dealing with the alleged 'origins' of the Deep South in terms of the so-called Cavalier legend in his genealogically motivated works *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and those parts of *Light in August* which focus on Gail Hightower, in chapter 4.2. Ultimately, in chapter 4.3, I will demonstrate how Faulkner re-wrote this legend of the noble ancestor in his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* by means of Thomas Sutpen: In its design, this character resembles the representation of the antebellum ancestors in the earlier works, but upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Sutpen embodies a perversion of their value system. In this last subchapter, I will argue that Faulkner implemented Sutpen's story as a foundational narrative which reveals the 'rotten' origin of the Southern societal system based on the exploitation of slaves who were forcibly removed from Africa, and the land which the native inhabitants were disseized of. Thus, the Cavalier legend seems to become a legend of guilt.

4.1 “A COSMOS OF MY OWN” – YOKNAPATAWPHA AS A REFERENTIAL SCHEMA

Faulkner called the South his “own little postage stamp of native soil” and discovered that it “was worth writing about and that [he] would never live long enough to exhaust it” (qtd. in Lee 7). His novel *Flags in the Dust* and its publication are often regarded as the ‘hour of birth’ of Faulkner’s fictional universe.[17] André Bleikasten connects it with the “[i]nvention of Yoknapatawpha” (127), and according to A. Robert Lee, it “offers an inaugurating account of Yoknapatawpha as foremost a place of dynasty” (11). Although both Bleikasten and Lee state that the coherent oeuvre Faulkner was about to create is not yet fully developed – the former notes that Faulkner’s “writing still has some way to go, but it is now within reach” (135), the latter that “*Sartoris* cannot in itself be thought other than an uncertain achievement, its characters over-determined and its plot too formulaic” (11) – they acknowledge that the novel provides the basis for what was later to become an elaborate fictional universe. Or, as Faulkner himself said: “I found out after that not only each book had to have a design but the whole output or sum of an artist’s work had to have a design” (qtd. in Bleikasten 129). This novel already introduces and mentions the main families by name, and as Lee convincingly demonstrates, it contains

> an authentic sense of rootedness and terrain—in all, Faulkner’s mythical kingdom as a place literally geographic and yet carried also in the inward and anything but peaceable minds and blood of its people (11f.).

Lee’s analysis seems to put special emphasis on how Faulkner designed space in his works, not as a merely geographical entity, but as a concept of a region which exists because of the people who move within it. In fact, the following analysis will show that Faulkner’s characters serve as ‘containers’ for their region or, in other words, that narrative space also becomes an aspect of character design in Faulkner’s works.

As a concept that exceeds geographical aspects, space has been researched since the early 1970s, especially in fields like human geography and sociology. French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, for example, proposes that, first, “([s]ocial) space is a (social) product” (26), and, second, that “[i]n reality, social space ‘incorporates’ social

---

[17] Initially, the novel had to be heavily edited and was published as *Sartoris* in 1929, until it appeared in its original form and under its original title *Flags in the Dust* in 1973. For a detailed description of the publication process, see Bleikasten 127–29.

actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act" (33). These statements clarify that space as perceived by human beings is an anthropogenic construct. In order to analyze and define it, Lefebvre uses the three aspects *spatial practice*, *representation of space* and *representational space* (cf. 245). In the French original, *La production de l'espace* (1974), *representational space* is termed "espace vécu," a term which has been revisited in 1976 by French geographer Armand Frémont. According to Susanne Rau, who investigates the research of space from a historical perspective, Frémont

> was not interested in determining a region through its landscape (its flora, fauna, or objective, measurable values) or in situating people as neutral objects therein. That is why he conceived of the region, conversely, in terms of those interactions between human beings within the extension of space that they could theoretically reach every day … and further in terms of their emotional and psychological attachment to this area (ch. 1).

Frémont did not analyze space as an independent entity of our environment, but always in its interdependence with the people who populate it.[18] He calls this concept an "espace vécu," a 'lived space.' In *La region, espace vécu* (1976), he describes this as follows:

> 'Lived space,' in all its thickness and its complexity, thus appears as the revealing agent of regional realities. These certainly have many components–administrative, historical, ecological, economic, but also, and more fundamentally, psychological. The region is therefore not an object having any reality in itself, any more than the geographer or other specialists are only objective analysts of a universe as it might exist outside of the observer itself. … The region, if it exists, is a lived space. Viewed, perceived, felt, loved, or rejected, modeled by human beings and projecting back onto them images that model them. It is a reflection. Rediscovering the region thus means seeking to seize where it exists as seen by human beings (qtd. in Rau ch. 1).

---

[18] In the chapter "Why Write?" in his well-known work *What Is Literature?* (*Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, 1948), Jean-Paul Sartre expresses a similar thought: "When I am enchanted with a landscape, I know very well that it is not I who create it, but I also know that without me the relations which are established before my eyes among the trees, the foliage, the earth, and the grass would not exist at all" (1206). For Sartre, this insight leads to art, as he argues that "because I have deeply regretted that this arrangement which was momentarily perceived was not offered to me by somebody and consequently is not *real*, the result is that I fix my dream, that I transpose it to canvas or in writing" (1207). Following this logic, Faulkner "transposed" the view which was offered to him in and of the South into his fictional universe Yoknapatawpha, thus making it "*real*." "What Is Literature?" *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Norton, 2010, pp. 1199–1213.

For Frémont, space has an agency, as it illustrates the characteristics of a certain region. Because of the way it is organized and designed, it is possible to construe historical events and developments, administrative decisions, the way economics are practiced as well as interventions into ecology. These configurations are performed by human beings. Frémont's statement shows that their psychological condition affects how the region and its components are shaped and perceived.

The research on space in geography and sociology has influenced several other disciplines, among them literary criticism. However, the aspect of narratological space has long been neglected in narrative theory. One reason for this neglect, according to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*'s entry on "Space in Narrative," is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's assertion that narrative literature was a 'temporal' art, unlike painting or sculpture which he considered 'spatial' arts (cf. 551). Another reason is

> that space in narratives – especially pre-nineteenth-century ones – often seemed to have no other function than to supply a general background setting, something to be taken for granted rather than requiring attention (551).

For Faulkner, however, space is crucial to illustrate the temporalities of guilt by means of a curse, because the latter needs a place to haunt (but more on this momentarily). The repercussions of both the antebellum and Confederate past as conveyed in Faulkner's works are inconceivable without his accurate descriptions of the places in which they unfold. Here, space is not merely a random background setting for a plot, but a key prerequisite for developing any plot at all. Without it, Faulkner's characters would have no home which they could try and fail to mentally or physically escape from, and his ghosts would have no place to haunt.

As in human geography and sociology, space is far from a self-sufficient aspect in narrative theory, but always correlates with other aspects. What makes Yoknapatawpha so special is exactly that it is haunted by ghosts and inhabited by trapped people. Therefore, Lee is right in using the two terms *rootedness* and *terrain* in the passage quoted above, for it is both the soil and that which strikes roots in it which make space a productive category for the analysis of literature in general, and of Faulkner's prose in particular. In narrative theory, such an approach to space is also referred to as 'lived space.' Here, 'lived space' is defined as

> the humanly embodied counterpart of the three-dimensional, empty, and basically unoriented spaces of physics and geometry. Lived space is deictically oriented space as perceived and talked about in everyday life. The term itself indicates that human (or 'natural') conceptions of space always include a subject who is affected by (and in turn affects) space, a subject who experiences and reacts to space in a bodily way, a subject who 'feels' space through existential living conditions, mood, and atmosphere (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* 553).

In Faulkner, this interaction of subject and space manifests itself not only by means of narrative descriptions, but already in his famous map of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, which he initially drew for the first edition of *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936 and a second time for Malcolm Cowley's *Portable Faulkner* in 1946. As Jay Watson explains in his introduction to *Faulkner's Geographies*, these maps "didn't just provide a referential schema for an area somehow prior and complete in his imagination but more actively shaped the ways in which he subsequently *understood and used* that space" (x, my emphasis). Faulkner's attempt at 'cartography' is not just aiming at 'geographical' representation, it also provides notes on *which actions* have been performed *by whom* at the respective places. The map of Yoknapatawpha does not refer to a vacuum, it is rather a documentation of the region's history: By means of the map, we can see that narrative space functions as a form of memory for Faulkner, because instead of writing down locations, like "Reverend Hightower's" or "Compson's," Faulkner adds short descriptions of certain events that happened there. As the "sole owner and proprietor," however, Faulkner is able to select which of these events to include and which to leave out. The map, therefore, indicates the spot "where Christmas was killed" (Reverend Hightower's), but says nothing about the history of racial violence and the rituals of lynching that helped preserve white supremacy, which are implied in Joe Christmas's story. Nor does it say anything about the slaves who generated the wealth which later enabled the Compsons to sell their "pasture to the Golf Club so that Quentin could go to Harvard."

In Faulkner's literary texts, narrative space is also not just a geographical reference point, but a temporal one, as it is a constant reminder of the past. This gets most clear, perhaps, in a passage from *Go Down, Moses* in which Isaac McCaslin searches for the daughter of one of his grandfather's slaves. She is married to a black Northerner with a farm in Arkansas, and Ike wants to give her a legacy of one thousand dollars. But when he finally finds her, he realizes that she will probably starve to death

regardless of how much money he gives her, because the farm is a failure. Consequently, Ike approaches the husband and cries out:

> Dont you see? This whole land, the whole South, is cursed, and all of us who derive from it, whom it ever suckled, white and black both, lie under the same curse? Granted that my people brought the curse onto the land: maybe for that reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted. Then your people's turn will come because we have forfeited ours. But not now. Not yet. Dont you see? (*Go Down, Moses* 206).[19]

In its entirety, this passage describes guilt by means of its consequences. It precisely defines perpetrators: "my people," as well as a wrongful act: they "brought the curse onto the land." However, Faulkner, or at least his character, is evasive here, because it remains unclear by which means the curse has been provoked, which act precisely has caused it. In fact, the curse is a result of a however named crime, and it substitutes for the narration of guilt which resonates in the subtext of the whole novel. Thus, where Ike could say "Granted that my people have transgressed by arrogating the land, by disseizing the natives and by enslaving blacks," he speaks of a curse. He paraphrases the transgressions or conflates them into the action of incurring a curse. Faulkner uses the curse theme as a surrogate for guilt, because a curse is a way for guilt to evolve over time. As a phenomenon which subsists long after the triggering incident, a curse represents the persistence of guilt, the never-ending sense of having done something wrong. Faulkner takes this into account by defining those who have to bear ("their descendants") the consequences ("not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it"). These temporal effects, as well as the aspect of *belatedness* that are reminiscent of *traumatic experiences*, will be discussed in more detail in the sixth chapter of this work. For now, the focus is on Faulkner's dealing with what has been described as 'lived space' above.

'Lived space' means that there is a subject who is affected by and in turn affects space. In the novel passage, "this whole land, the whole South" is the spatial unit which affects the subjects ("all of us […], white and black both") who inhabit it in so far as they "lie under the same curse" because they "derived from" it. In turn, the subjects also affect the space by having "brought the curse *onto* the land". The land witnessed

---

[19] Hereafter cited as *GDM*.

one of the biggest crimes against humanity by which it could not remain unaffected. In literature, such circumstances give rise to haunted places, especially in Gothic fiction. Thereby, space becomes a hotbed of ever new horrors which lead the inhabitants into a vicious circle, committing similar crimes and undergoing similar punishment.

Faulkner's design of narrative space as haunted space is an apt metaphor for a guilty conscience, which, understood as a part of the mind, is itself a figurative kind of space. As such, it *contains* the memory of a past event, which one is forced to relive without being able to act upon it. This kind of second-hand experience is comparable to the idea of the ancestral curse discussed at the beginning of this chapter, which haunts innocent descendants "with the consequences of [the ancestor's] crime." This is the kind of burden Ike seems to refer to in the passage quoted above, as he claims that the perpetrators' descendants "alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted." The land, like a guilty conscience, remembers and it does not need more than a cue in order to recall guilt-ridden memories from the past into the present.

In Faulkner's works, space always suggests the continuity of the past. His late novel *Go Down, Moses* is a comparatively critical reflection on the Southern past which also takes into account the crimes against native inhabitants and black people. Faulkner relates these issues to the broader concept of the land, whereas in his earlier works, he often confines himself to the dimension of an old house. In *Flags in the Dust*, for example, Bayard Sartoris wanders around the house his grandfather has built and enters a seemingly mysterious room which is described as "a fitting place for dead Sartorises to gather and speak among themselves of glamourous and old disastrous days" (*Flags in the Dust* 613).[20] This is another passage that displays the concept of 'lived space,' because it treats ghosts or (un)dead characters as if they were alive and able to act. Again, there is a subject ("dead Sartorises"), who affect and are affected by space: on the one hand, the dead ancestors haunt this room, on the other hand, the latter seems to possess all necessary qualifications in order to conjure up spirits. Thus, the room is experienced and reacted to "in a bodily way," because it meets the requirements (the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* lists "existential living conditions, mood, and atmosphere") for a ghost to take shape ("fitting place"). By lingering and haunting the house and its rooms, these ghosts represent a never-ending

---

[20] Hereafter cited as *FD*.

past which is acted out again and again in this place. This means that while the old ancestors are denied their rest in death, their descendants are burdened with the ghosts' omnipresence.

For the living characters, the old houses and places form the "existential living conditions, mood, and atmosphere" through which space is "felt" by subjects. Thus, space constantly reminds them of the guilt-ridden past of their forefathers. This persistence resembles, to adhere to the previous metaphor, a guilty conscience, holding the transgressions of the past, always ready to emit a sense of guilt. Faulkner refined this perception of space as storage and embedded smaller units of it into his work. Thus, after entering the room discussed above, Bayard finds an old chest which is difficult to open at first. At the opening, "there rose a thin exhilarating odor of cedar, and something else: a scent drily and muskily nostalgic, as of old ashes" (*FD* 613). Here, it is Bayard who releases nostalgia, and he in turn gets afflicted by it. The scene of the opening of the chest shows that Faulkner endows space with an agency, as it seems to work autonomously: Whereas an 'ordinary' chest is most likely assumed to emit odors rather passively, the one Bayard attends to almost seems to use them specifically in order to stimulate his mind. The first of Bayard's impressions is the scent of wood, which is then followed by a duskier breeze. Whereas the former is described as "exhilarating" and thus alludes to life, the latter is compared to "old ashes" which represent deterioration, decay, and ultimately death. Faulkner's postbellum characters are unable to take their environment for just what it is, whether it is an old chest smelling of cedar, or soil to be tilled. This is due to the fact that they are fictional characters whose narrative environment was *designed* to cause exactly this reaction. After all, with Faulkner, narrative space is more than just a background. Instead, the fictional area which sprawls over 2.400 square miles is a reminder of the guilt-ridden past lurking around every corner, within every dusky room, inside every ancient, dusty chest.

With Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner even turns a character into a storage unit for the past. Thus, it is said in the latter that Quentin's "very body was an empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names; he was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth. He was a barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts" (*AA* 9). In *Flags in the Dust*, it is Bayard's fate to wander the secluded corridors of his grandfather's house, the halls at the end of which "a stair mounted into the darkness" (*FD* 612). Quentin, however, does not merely

move within such obscure spatial constructs. The stair he walks down seems to lead him deeper into the darkness of his mind. Faulkner uses a language which describes Quentin as a kind of space himself. His “very body” becomes a site by means of which the past is narrated, a past which dates back to before he was even born. The terms Faulkner uses in order to describe him – “an empty hall,” “a commonwealth,” and “a barracks” – refer to spatial units which are able to comprise something: furniture, states, or soldiers in garrison.

Especially the metaphor of an “empty hall” works as a cross-reference to Faulkner’s fictional version of the South. It is like a code for something which is still around, but no longer in use. Perhaps the hall was well-frequented and beautiful to look at once, but it has faded into obscurity ever since. It is now rundown and deserted, empty because the people who once helped provide its ‘glory’ are absent. It reveals its characteristics by means of an absence, it signifies nothing but the past. The empty hall is a perfect metaphor for the South as a space caught between the antebellum past and the postbellum present, as well as an associative characterization of a character as devoid of *actual relatives* worth their name as Quentin Compson.[21]

Quentin is never himself, never an individual. Thus, he becomes an embodiment of space in Faulkner’s narrative, and he carries the South with him wherever he goes. What might seem as him leaving Jefferson is not really an escape. Rosa Coldfield says that he is “going away to attend the college at Harvard” (*AA* 7), but in Southern terms, increasing the distance is not the same as departure. For him, space is not stationary, for his body does not function conventionally: He does not move within space, but carries a whole universe inside himself. This is why thoughts of his past in Mississippi constantly catch up with him, which Faulkner realizes by means of an elaborate stream of consciousness in *The Sound and the Fury*. When Quentin is in a car with his fellow students, the mother of one of them, and two girls he does not know, the reader shares in Quentin’s thoughts. Initially, these thoughts address the dialogue of the occupants

---

[21] Faulkner’s design of space, whether it is his depiction of Yoknapatawpha as a haunted place reminiscent of the past or his idea of an “empty hall,” suggests a literary ‘affinity’ to Gothic fiction, as “a Gothic tale usually takes place … in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue … Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past … that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story.” Hogle, Jerrold E. “Introduction: the Gothic in western culture.” *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 2002, p. 2.

as well as occasional trains of thought by Quentin. He muses about the concept of virginity and the state of innocence which determine most of his chapter in *The Sound and the Fury*. Eventually, both the narration of the dialogue as well as the thoughts mingle:

> But still I couldn't stop [laughing] and then I knew that if I tried too hard to stop it I'd be crying and I thought about how I'd thought about I could not be a virgin, with so many of them walking along in the shadows and whispering with their soft girlvoices lingering in the shadowy places and the words coming out and perfume and eyes you could feel not see, but if it was that simple to do it wouldn't be anything and if it wasn't anything, what was I and then Mrs Bland said, 'Quentin? Is he sick, Mr MacKenzie' and then Shreve's fat hand touched my knee and Spoade began talking and I quit trying to stop it (*The Sound and the Fury* 989f.).[22]

Here, Quentin's musing alternates with the dialogue, with Quentin sometimes delving into the former, sometimes noticing the latter. In terms of tense, the passage gives an account of Quentin's present experiences. In the subsequent paragraph, however, Quentin's thoughts begin to drift off to his Mississippi past. But instead of thinking about it, Quentin *re-experiences* it, thus moving between past and present experience, moving between places. These transitions are distinguished by a font change:

> 'If that hamper is in his way, Mr MacKenzie, move it over on your side. I brought a hamper and wine because I think young gentlemen should drink wine, although my father, Gerald's grandfather' *ever do that Have you ever done that In the gray darkness a little light her hands locked about*
>
> 'They do, when they can get it,' Spoade said. 'Hey, Shreve?' *her knees her face looking at the sky the smell of honeysuckle upon her face and throat*
>
> 'Beer, too,' Shreve said. His hand touched my knee again. I moved my knee again. *like a thin wash of lilac colored paint talking about him bringing* (*SF* 990).

Whereas the actual, that means present, events are obviously interrupted by Quentin's 'flashbacks,' the latter are displayed consistently, as the italics always run on. The passage visualizes that the past does not creep into Quentin's present experience, but, on the contrary, the present events are a parasitic noise which mixes into Quentin's re-experience of an encounter with his sister. He experiences it as if it actually happened at this moment. In the further course of the chapter, the accounts of the

[22] Hereafter cited as *SF*.

present cease and the italics are changed to standard font again, thus marking how Quentin's past becomes his present. Ultimately, Quentin hits his fellow student Gerald Bland in the mistaken belief that he was Dalton Ames, the man who took his sister's virginity.

Quentin is unable to leave his past behind. Moreover, as the later work *Absalom, Absalom!* makes evident, his fellow students make sure he will not forget his origin as they keep asking him about the South: "and that not Shreve's first time, nobody's first time in Cambridge since September" (*AA* 145). They react to him as if he was an ambassador – or, considering him as a spatial unit, an embassy – someone/something representing a different place than the one they/it are/is located in. To his fellows, he is just as little an individual as he is to himself: He is a Southerner and thus an embodiment of the South itself.

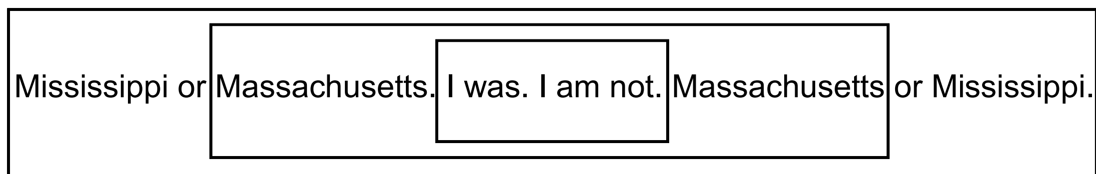
Faulkner criticism has often, and justifiably so, dealt with Quentin's internal struggle in terms of time.[23] Especially his thoughts "*Non fui. Sum. Fui. Non sum*" (*SF* 1010f.), translating as "I was not. I am. I was. I am not" caused such temporal interpretations as offered by Bleikasten, who states that these words "summarize [Quentin's] failure to reconcile being, nonbeing, and having been" (145). Thought at "the moment of the great internal breakdown preceding his suicide" (145), they reflect Quentin's inability to define an identity for himself, which Bleikasten considers as a motive for his suicide. This is conclusively substantiated in all respects and will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

But Quentin's last thoughts also allow conclusions about an identity crisis which is not only temporal, but *spatio-temporal*. The Latin words quoted above are followed by Quentin thinking: "Somewhere I heard bells once. Mississippi or Massachusetts. I was. I am not. Massachusetts or Mississippi" (*SF* 1011). Here, Quentin tries to fathom the omnipresence of a place he thought he had left. Although located in Massachusetts, he constantly finds himself either talking about Mississippi or, as has been discussed above, even experiencing moments as if he was (back) in Mississippi. Both places overlap, most strongly perhaps when Quentin thinks he gets into a fight with Dalton Ames, but actually hits his fellow student, Gerald Bland. This incident

---

[23] For a discussion of Quentin in terms of time, see, for example: Sartre, Jean-Paul. "On *The Sound and the Fury*: Time in the Works of Faulkner." *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays.* Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 87–93; Pouillon, Jean. "Time and Destiny in Faulkner." *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays.* Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 79–86; Irwin, John T. "Repetition and Revenge." *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!*: A Casebook*, edited by Fred Hobson, Oxford UP, pp. 47–67.

makes clear that he is unable to act appropriately in the present, because his past always outruns him. He cannot *be* because he *was*: "I was. I am not." In the passage quoted above, this insight is framed by the two places which he confuses the same as he mixes up his tenses. Bleikasten notes that "Quentin talks about himself in the first and third persons and does not know what tense to conjugate" (145). Considering the passage, it gets clear that Quentin does also not know where to locate himself. Faulkner illustrates this *spatio-temporal* 'limbo' by arranging Quentin's thoughts as nested:



Here, Mississippi is represented as an all-embracive entity like a matryoshka doll. It constitutes the largest doll, the main one which comprises all the other, smaller ones. Therefore, it does not matter where Quentin goes, because his home will always outweigh his localities. The illustrative nesting visualizes Quentin's entrapment just before his suicide. He left Mississippi, but the South is not just a statement of place, it is a state of mind which always prevails. In case of Quentin, his Southern mind tinges Massachusetts in its own colors, like a main matryoshka doll which defines the appearance of the smaller ones. Therefore, he experiences situations in Massachusetts as if he was still in Mississippi, for example when he mistakes a little Italian girl for his sister Caddy or his fellow student for his sister's lover. Actually, fleeing Mississippi brought him closer to himself as a Southerner than ever, for he not only constantly talks about the South but also re-experiences it. Before his suicide, he is trapped on three different levels: First, within Mississippi, which tricks itself into his mind. Second, within Massachusetts, where he is surrounded by people reminding him of where he comes from. Third, within himself, where he finds nothing but the internal walls of the empty hall that he is, reflecting a past he cannot participate in. Ultimately, he tries to escape the South by escaping himself.

Seven years after *The Sound and the Fury* was published, Faulkner again turned to Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* and had him tell the story of a man

named Thomas Sutpen to his fellow student Shreve McCannon.[24] It is also with this novel that Faulkner released his map of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi for the first time, and appointed himself its "sole owner and proprietor." Thus, Faulkner seems to claim that he has performed an act of creation. According to Heide Ziegler,

> Faulkner's map is a piece of equipment, useful in that it directs the reader to the central images of his works of art, reliable in that Faulkner, as the sole owner and proprietor of his fictional universe, can be seen as *the authentic informant* (638, my emphasis).

This argument suggests that Faulkner wanted to keep interpretational sovereignty over his world, that he wanted to be the only reliable source for the explanation of the events and characters of his works. After all, as the interview statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter made clear, Faulkner considered himself a godlike creator of a cosmos and its inhabitants. Thus, Ziegler concludes that with the map, Faulkner offered "resistance to the seeming self-sufficiency of the art work" (638), and, more importantly, that "Faulkner not only *produces* art works, he also *knows* what he is doing" (639, emphasis in the original). He considered Yoknapatawpha and the works which unfold within its realms as his property, and himself as a creator very much like god. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the drawing of the map coincides with the writing of a novel that tells a story about yet another creation. In fact, the building process of Thomas Sutpen's plantation is imagined by Quentin already on the second page of the book:

> Then in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the *Be Sutpen's Hundred* like the oldentime *Be Light* (*AA* 6, emphasis in the original).

The reference to the bible passage is significant here. The bible begins by describing how god created heaven and earth, which was shrouded in darkness. Then, "God said, Let there be light: and there was light" (*King James Bible*, Genesis 1:3). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the narrative situation is concisely established, which is immediately

---

[24] This is the same Shreve as in *The Sound and the* Fury, Faulkner only renamed him from MacKenzie to McCannon.

followed by the biblically charged narration of the building process of Sutpen's Hundred. Both these creations are creations ex nihilo, and by way of literal analogy, Faulkner more than suggests such an interpretation of the Sutpen story. According to Ziegler, "[t]he analogy between [Sutpen] and God is explicit. It consists in their *willing* a universe into existence" (640, emphasis in the original). Noel Polk also points out the biblical connection, arguing that "Thomas Sutpen abrupts into the north Mississippi wildnerness as a savage *creator*" (52, my emphasis). Faulkner considered himself as a maker of space, someone who was able, like Sutpen, to drag inhabited land out of a "soundless Nothing." He himself accomplished a creationary act, his very own *Be Yoknapatawpha*.

4.2 WEAVING AN "ARISTOCRATIC IDEAL" – FAULKNER'S ADAPTATION OF THE CAVALIER LEGEND

Just as Faulkner chose the same setting, his "cosmos" Yoknapatawpha, for almost all of his works, so he created a consistent set of characters, (re-)appearing either as main or minor characters in all of his Yoknapatawpha stories. These (postbellum) characters are characterized by their deep admiration for and, in many cases, obsession with their ancestors, who lived by the standards of antebellum society and, in the majority of the cases, fought in the Civil War. This admiration alludes to the legend of the Southern Cavalier, which William R. Taylor describes as an "aristocratic ideal" (341) of Southern thinking.[25] In what follows, I will discuss Faulkner's narrative treatment of the so-called *Southern Cavalier*, as well as the Southern legend that he himself weaves in his earlier Yoknapatawpha novels. This is the prerequisite for the next and final subchapter, in which I will investigate in how far Faulkner re-wrote the legend of the noble and heroic ancestor into a legend of guilt in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Faulkner's dealing with character as a category is noteworthy for two reasons: First, as a writer, he often turns to the same set of characters. Second, within his works, these characters are part of a relational structure which is defined cross-generational. Both these cases can be summarized under the temporal term *repetition*. In "Faulkner's Art of Repetition," Kartiganer pinpoints as the essence of Faulkner's fiction that, "[i]n a word, Faulkner's craft of fiction is to tell stories, and then tell them *again*" (21, my emphasis). Kartiganer describes this procedure as a strategy in three respects: First, as one "that animates each of the novels, and is implicit to the stories," second, as one "of life—of what it meant to be Faulkner the eldest son of the fourth generation leading away from and back to his formidable great grandfather," and third, as one "of the writer's historical position, of what it meant to be Faulkner the American postwar modernist leading away from and back to Joyce, Conrad, and James, Melville and Hawthorne" (21). All three descriptions detect either Faulkner or a certain work of his as one in a row of several others to whom or which they bear an iterative relation. The first strategy suggests that Faulkner had one major story – that of the South – which

---

[25] Taylor also notes that the concept of the Southern Cavalier was popular in the North, too: "After the war, as everyone knows, the legend, far from dying away, was given a new lease on life and, in the North, probably enjoyed greater popularity and evoked more interest than at any other time […]. The nostalgia felt by Americans for the antebellum South and for the drama of the Civil War is a phenomenon which continues to startle those unfamiliar with our culture, with our collective anxieties about the kind of civilization we have created, and with our reservations concerning the kind of social conformity which, it appears, it has been our destiny to exemplify before the world" (341).

he told from different perspectives and in several ways with every new novel, but which always remains the same at heart. In case of the second strategy, Faulkner himself is considered as ‘caught’ in a familial circle of influential ancestors. And in case of the third strategy, it is argued that Faulkner took up a profession which many had took up before him, which made him one in a long line of writers as eager to exhaust the possibilities of (modern) writing. Thus, Kartiganer describes Faulkner’s fiction and his craft of fiction as an obsession with repetition, as it seems to be repetition which defines his attempts both as a writer and as a private person, and which is also the driving force of his works.

In the essay, Kartiganer concentrates on the first of these strategies, considering how “[w]ithin each of the novels [Faulkner] creates a series of voices that report, interpret, or perform a single event, circling it, like ripples in a pool surrounding the no longer visible stone of their occasion” (22). It is also true that with each of his novels, Faulkner himself incessantly reported and interpreted certain events, circling them until he got to the bottom of what they might have meant for him. However, Kartiganer’s remarks about the other strategies, Faulkner’s “biographical and literary anxieties of inheritance” (21), make clear that Faulkner, as a private individual as well as a writer, was bound to a complex relational network which determined and re-determined his actions again both as a private individual as well as a writer. Especially his biographical background – being the oldest son of the fourth generation after his great grandfather – resembles the pattern of his works: The attempt to locate oneself within a repetitious sequence of family relations.

These notes on repetition clarify that Faulkner specifically *returned* to several of his characters. He probably did so not because he wanted to understand them as individual characters, but precisely because he was interested in the relational structure which they are part of. This is why Kartiganer, in another essay, notes that “more perhaps than the chronicler of a mythic corner of Mississippi, Faulkner is the premier American novelist of family” (qtd. in Kinney, “The Family-Centered Nature of Faulkner’s World” 84). In fact, as he is concerned with famil<u>ies</u> and also deals with the community which these families form, Faulkner might even be considered as one of the few American *collective* writers.[26] Thus, he contrasts strongly with Ernest Hemingway, for example, who seems always concerned with existential individual

[26] As is often the case in American literature, this collective excludes black people and people of color.

cases and ‘makes a fresh start’ with every new novel. Faulkner, however, dedicated almost his whole career as a writer to his fictional community of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County. Whereas a key term for Hemingway’s works might be *isolation*, the circumstances which Faulkner is interested in may best be described as *relation*, or relationality. In this regard, C. Vann Woodward is said to have noted, quite trenchantly, that “a Hemingway hero with a grandfather is inconceivable” (Watson, *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity* 173).[27]

The families which Faulkner portrays all follow a similar pattern in terms of relation. According to Kartiganer, the respective family influences the identity formation of the individual:

> [Faulkner’s] people, however uniquely and memorably portrayed, invariably trail behind them clouds of familial qualifiers: the grandparents, parents, and siblings whose cumulative identity is the indispensable context of individual character. The bulk of Faulkner’s people are not so much single, separate persons as *collective enterprises*” (qtd. in Kinney, “Family-Centered Nature” 84, my emphasis).

In how far this collectivity affects the individual has been explained in the previous subchapter by reference to Quentin Compson, who is described as a “commonwealth” in *Absalom, Absalom!* (8). In case of Quentin, it also gets clear that the collective impacts which Faulkner’s works depict are highly diachronic. In the majority of cases, the generation of the grandfathers has the most significant impact on the

---

[27] Faulkner’s and Hemingway’s relationship is often described as a rivalry and has been studied with an emphasis both on their public exchanges as well as on their narrative styles. Donald M. Kartiganer’s essay “’Getting Good at Doing Nothing’: Faulkner, Hemingway, and the Fiction of Gesture,” for example, considers Faulkner’s and Hemingway’s works as “the two most distinctive and influential forms of prose fiction in America in the first half of the twentieth century,” with Hemingway having “perfected an art of exclusion … stripping away … all the words that would not work,” and Faulkner’s being “the art of inclusion. Since words could never be rid of their inherent lack, their stage as refugees from exact reference, all a writer could do is marshal them together, clause upon clause, adjective upon adjective, through sheer mass and motion not so much to corner the Real as to surround it, not to name flatly its essence but to infer the complete range of its possibilities” (54). *Faulkner and his Contemporaries*. Mississippi UP, 2004, pp. 54–73. This edited volume also features an essay by George Monteiro, who provides an interesting insight into “some of the incidents and episodes … of that ongoing rivalry” (74), and comes to the conclusion that “[i]t is apparent that what Faulkner did and said … cut more deeply into Hemingway’s sense of himself than anything Hemingway ever said or did affected Faulkner. … As a result, the Hemingway-Faulkner rivalry features a great deal less in Faulkner’s biography than it does in Hemingway’s” (86). “The Faulkner-Hemingway Rivalry.” *Faulkner and his Contemporaries*. Mississippi UP, 2004, pp. 74–92. For a more extensive study of the relationship between the two writers, as well as cross-textual references between their works, see Fruscione, Joseph. *Faulkner and Hemingway: Biography of a Literary Rivalry*. Ohio State UP, 2012.

descendants.[28] In addition to Quentin Compson, Bayard Sartoris of *Flags in the Dust*, Isaac McCaslin of *Go Down, Moses*, and also Gail Hightower of *Light in August* serve as examples. This retrogressivity indicates an interest or even, due to its intensity, an obsession with ancestry and genealogy which the characters share with their author.

Faulkner truly is a genealogist, constantly searching for roots of families like the Sartorises, the Compsons, the McCaslins, or the Snopeses. According to Kinney, "his method is, quite literally, to anatomize his world into 'complex and contorted genealogies'" ("Family-Centered Nature" 84, citing Susanne Gallagher). These genealogies are provided by his respective novels, either as part of the narration, as in *Flags in the Dust*, or by means of a supplement, like the (later composed) "Compson Appendix" of *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner even seems to combine these two forms in *Go Down, Moses*, in which the brief entries Isaac McCaslin discovers in the family records very much resemble the genealogical entries in the "Compson Appendix" (cf. Dickerson 327). Here, Isaac himself becomes a genealogist who traces back the entire family tree of the McCaslins right up to his grandfather. Beyond that, Faulkner criticism has also provided detailed genealogies of the Yoknapatawpha families.[29]

Genealogy is a temporal way of narrating character: It explains the story world participants by means of cross-generational character constellation and the impact that these (family) relations have on the identity formation of the respective character. As such, genealogy seems to be one central access point of approaching Faulkner's work, or, as Kinney phrases it: "Family is thus the most immediate and the most permanent way of making Faulkner accessible to readers" ("Family-Centered Nature" 87). It is what makes his world comprehensible, as the reference to sometimes long-gone family members demonstrates the retrogressivity of the whole place. Thus, Yoknapatawpha appears as a community lost in the past, a "cosmos" out of time.

But what is the epistemological interest of such 'genealogical studies' as performed by Faulkner on the level of narrative design, and by his characters on the level of story? In the original sense of the word, "genealogy" refers to an "account of the descent of a person, family, or group from an ancestor or from older forms"

---

[28] In Faulkner's private life, as Sylvia Lange explains, it was the great-grandfather who represented a glorious past. *Die Figurenzeichnung bei William Faulkner: Dargestellt an ausgewählten Yoknapatawpha-Romanen*. Würzburg: Könighausen & Neumann, 2009, p. 169.

[29] See for example "Appendix 2: The Genealogies." *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Penn Warren, Prentice Hall 1966, pp. 296–302.

(*Merriam Webster*). However, as Faulkner's novels are historical novels, his characters are deeply entangled in the historical contexts of the South. Yet another passage referring to Quentin Compson might serve as an explanation for this. At the beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is said that Quentin "was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the Deep South the same as [Rosa Coldfield] was" (5). Faulkner's Southerners feel a deep affinity with their region and thus also with that region's history. This historical concern suggests taking into account another meaning of "genealogy:" "an account of the origin and historical development of something" (*Merriam Webster*). In his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Michel Foucault pursues the question, amongst others, why Nietzsche does "challenge the pursuit of the origin (*Ursprung*) at least on those occasions when he is truly a genealogist" (142). He reflects on the attempt to get down to the fundamentals of things and circumstances, the search for "that which was already there" (142). Both endeavors can, if one does not revert to metaphysics, only lead to the recognition that "[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity" (142). This insight is opposed to the common "belief" in what could be called a *dignity of beginnings*: "We tend to think that this is the moment of their [the things'] greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning" (143).

Faulkner's early works *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury* and parts of *Light in August* seem to spring from an assumption of a pure origin of Southern history which is approached by means of the family narrative. The former two novels tell the stories of several generations of Southern families, the Sartorises and the Compsons, whose family trees date back to the seventeenth century (in *The Sound and the Fury*, the oldest Compson is said to have been born in 1699). In *Light in August*, Reverend Gail Hightower refers back to his grandfather who fought in the Civil War. The respective references to the oldest member of these families share commonalities with the Cavalier legend. This legend suggests what Foucault describes as the common "belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth" (143), as it assumes, "that every planter was in the most rigid sense of the word a gentleman" (Cash 61).

The story of such gentlemen seems to be one of the most decisive aspects of Southern (commemorative) culture after the Civil War. As Bleikasten points out,

Southerners created “a collective mirage in which the old Cavalier legend is blended into the Confederate myth” (qtd. in Végsö 627). After the Civil War, the South had to face defeat and loss, and was thus at risk of having history written for it not only by the victorious North, but also by black people and their allies. Such a version of history cites slavery as an ideological, yet main cause of the war. Therefore, the South needed another explanatory model. As Anne Sarah Rubin notes in “Seventy-six and Sixty-one: Confederates Remember the American Revolution,” it could be found in “a ready-made myth of national *origin*, rejecting the recent American history of sectionalism and centralization and instead seizing on the American Revolution as the defining moment of their past” (85, my emphasis). Confederates had to claim national legitimacy. Thus,

> [i]n essays, speeches, newspapers, poems, and popular songs, Confederates told the story of a virtuous nation led astray by fanatical, greedy, and power-hungry Yankees. Rather than representing a challenge to the Founding Fathers’ ideals, the Confederacy would be the perfection of their vision (86).

By presenting themselves as Cavaliers, they could dissociate from northern Puritans and immigrants (cf. 86). Cash argues that displaying planters as gentlemen enabled

> the South to wrap itself in contemptuous superiority, to sneer down the Yankee as low-bred, crass, and money-grubbing, and even to beget in his bourgeois soul a kind of secret and envious awe, it was a nearly perfect defense-mechanism (61).

In this context, the South was able to circumvent debating actual causes of the war and the process of coming to terms with the past of its ‘peculiar institution.’ According to Rubin, a “war to re-create the glory of the Founders’ nation was more honorable and less divisive than a war to protect the slaveholding prerogatives of a small percentage of the Confederate population” (86). Thus, despite being the loser of the battle, the South could at least claim to have fought for the right cause. According to this logic, the Southern soldiers who fought or fell for such a cause deserved an honoring commemoration. The most famous example of this is probably Robert E. Lee, who, as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, was “the preeminent Lost Cause hero … and by the second decade of the twentieth century … had joined Abraham Lincoln as one of the two most popular Civil War figures” (Gallagher 2). The enthusiasm about Lee is reflected in a speech at the dedication of a Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1924. The speaker states:

> Long since has the impartial verdict of the slow-moving years crowned as the real victor of Appomattox not Ulysses S. Grant and his swarming armies, but the undefeated spirit of Robert E. Lee […]. Long since have his enemies and detractors surrendered in their turn to this hero of defeat (qtd. in Gallagher 2).

The shifts in meaning become apparent: losers become victors in spirit, perpetrators become heroes. The constant repetition of such 'perspectives' seems to have turned Southern history into a legend.

As stated above, Faulkner traces the 'origin' of supposedly noble antebellum gentlemen obsessively by means of genealogical research, which means that he tries to penetrate into the origin of Southern history by narrating family histories. Therefore, the aspect of kinship is significant for any characterization of Faulkner's single characters. In his works, it manifests itself in the relationship with the ancestors, but also by dissociating from others who fall short of the "aristocratic ideal." The Snopeses can be considered as the embodiment of these others. In *The Town*, the second novel of the trilogy regarding this family of formerly poor whites, they are described as unrelated vermin: "they none of them seemed to bear any specific kinship to one another; they were just Snopeses, like colonies of rats or termites are just rats and termites" (*The Town* 36). Whereas the traditional families are considered as of noble Southern descent, the Snopeses are seen as an infestation of the South. The described lack of "any *specific* kinship" indicates that in Southern terms, lineage does not mean much if it is not retraceable to a forebear who once was a venerable, quasi-aristocratic member of antebellum society.

In *Flags in the Dust*, one gets an idea of what might constitute this "specific kinship" which the Snopeses lack, as its significance becomes apparent by the mere names of the characters: The novel revolves around two pairs of brothers each named John or Bayard, the first of which fought in the Civil War, the second in World War I. The male relatives of the two generations in between are also respectively named Bayard and John. At the beginning of the first chapter, one of these Bayards experiences the ghost-like presence of his long-gone father John, one of the first pair of brothers:

> As usual old man Falls had brought John Sartoris into the room with him, … fetching … the spirit of the dead man into that room where the dead man's son sat and where the two of them, pauper and banker, would sit for a half an hour

> in the company of him who had passed beyond death and then returned (*FD* 543).

Thus, John Sartoris hovers over the story from the beginning. He determines most of the opening scene, for the reader sees two men meeting each other, but they do not do anything except sitting in the company of someone who is not really there. According to John T. Matthews, "[t]he openings of Faulkner's novels frequently demarcate sites of loss" (59). They hint, as Végsö argues, at "the loss no Southerner is able to overlook since they all necessarily exist in it: the lost Southern cause" (626). It is what defines them, and they seem caught in a perpetual meditation of their ancestors' loss of the Civil War, which not only denies them the 'amenities' of the antebellum era but also prevents them from autonomously shaping their postbellum future. Thus, they live in the shadow of their antebellum ancestors, sharing the same values but at the same time lacking the social conditions that would enable them to live by these standards. The inherited loss represents the absence of these conditions, the anxiety of being unable to live up to their ancestors, and the subtle sense of decay. As they fall prey to the belief of the pure origin, they persuade themselves that the decay they sense is the result of a wrong turn on *their* part, for "[t]he origin precedes the Fall" (Foucault 143).

The noble ancestors represent the 'pure origin' of the South. The postbellum descendants, in contrast, rather parallel the whole of humanity which the catholic exegesis of Genesis 3 considers as burdened with a guilt inherited from Adam after the Original Sin. But who corresponds to Adam in this equation? Who was the first to deviate from the divine path of the noble ancestors? *Flags in the Dust* does not determine an 'original sinner.' However, some passages indicate that the idea of a pure origin is veiling something by means of a repetitious, fabled narration. This applies to the commemoration of John's younger brother Bayard, who has not only fought in the Civil War, as did John, but has died for the cause. In actual fact, Bayard got killed after a 'Yankee' stung him to ride after some anchovies – a trifle, a misfortune at most. But his story gradually changes in meaning. As Bleikasten notes, it is "not only constantly repeated by [his sister Virginia Du Pre] over the years but also transfigured through her repetition into pure legend" (134). This sister

> had told the story many times since (at eighty she still told it, on occasions usually inopportune) and as she grew older the tale itself grew richer and richer, taking on a mellow splendor like wine; until what had been a hair-brained prank

> of two heedless and reckless boys wild with their own youth, was become a gallant and finely tragical focal-point to which the history of the race had been raised from out the old miasmic swamps of spiritual sloth by two angels valiantly fallen and strayed, altering the course of human events and purging the souls of men (*FD* 549).

This passage, besides illustrating the mechanics of unreliable memory, vividly describes how Southerners sacralized their fallen soldiers and thus wove the legend of a cavalier who fought for the right cause. Like a wine attaining full maturity, their stories appreciate in value, as reckless overconfidence is reinterpreted as an act of heroism which leads to a glorious death. But the passage does also, if only indicatively, debunk the myth of the pure origin, as it traces back the process of transformation from "heedless and reckless boys" into apparent heroes. Thus, even the first Yoknapatawpha novel already contains a hint at the veil covering an apparently noble ancestor, though it is far from lifting that veil.

In the story world of *Flags in the Dust*, however, the successful weaving of legend and re-weaving of history leads to an omnipresence of the ancestors. According to Bleikasten, they

> do not want to die. Instead of moving away and falling little by little into oblivion, they return unceasingly, reminding the living that they are still there. This means that the living do not take over from the dead and that their time is doomed to repetition: nobody escapes from the inevitability of recurrence; the past is enacted indefinitely on the stage of the present (131f.).

In this sense, the quoted novel passage about Virginia Du Pre's storytelling also shows that the haunting is homemade, that it is through this "fine heroic tale that they themselves have created from their rememberings and forgettings" (Bleikasten 134) that the ancestors refuse to die, imposing their superiority on their descendants. When Bayard opens an old chest in search of the family bible, he feels that

> each opening was in a way ceremonial, commemorating the violent finis to some phase of his family's history, and while he struggled with the stiff lock it seemed to him that a legion of ghosts breathed quietly at his shoulder, and he pictured a double line of them with their arrogant identical faces waiting just beyond a portal and stretching away toward the invisible dais where Something sat waiting the latest arrival among them (*FD* 613).

Every thought of the past, every time someone stumbles over an old relic, results in an invocation and exaltation of the ancestors. It is crucial, though, that Faulkner draws on

a language of the apparent: it *seemed* as if the ghosts were there, "John Sartoris *seemed* to loom still in the room" (*FD* 543, my emphasis). Thus, it is clear that although the lines between reality and delusion might be blurred within the world of the novel, the narrator is well aware of the distinction.

As the passage continues, the ancestors are further imagined as remaining in "that Sartoris heaven in which they could spend eternity dying deaths of needless and magnificent violence while spectators doomed to immortality looked eternally on" (*FD* 613). The dead are transfigured into a homogeneous image of the past – note that their arrogant faces are all identical – whose reverence leaves the descendants with a feeling of inferiority for lack of an opportunity to die. Herein lies, according to Bleikasten, the "deadly magic" of the family narrative: "'Sartoris' eventually becomes just the password to a hereditary will to die" (134). As has been elaborated above, the family narrative is a way for Faulkner to 'unearth' the core of the 'Deep South.' For his characters, who are not as farsighted as their author, the delusion of a noble descent which they can never live up to causes a renunciation of living altogether.[30]

In *The Sound and the Fury*, also "a dark family story" (Bleikasten 140), the ancestor is similarly present, although the novel and the way it is written vary widely from *Flags in the Dust*. At heart, however, it tells the story of four siblings overwhelmed, each in their own way, by their (family's) past. In this regard, one might say, the novel is even more critically concerned with an inevitable legacy, and the death wish seems even more intense. In fact, Quentin Compson finally succumbs to it. Moreover, the Compson family occupies a special position in the set of Faulkner's recurring characters, because he had a special focus on them ever since he finished *The Sound and the Fury*. They not only reappeared in some of his short stories or in part in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Faulkner also wrote a supplementary section for the reprint of *The Sound and the Fury* in *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946. This appendix, containing a genealogy of the Compsons and other (related) characters very much like the one he added to *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936, was for Faulkner "the key to the whole book" ("Note to the Appendix" 315). Critics argue about the importance of the appendix, either

---

[30] For his characterization of Bayard, Singal refers to Freud, arguing that this character is a "classic case of secondary narcissism," in which "the individual suffers from feelings of utter emptiness, and regards his own body as worthless. To overcome these feelings, which usually arise when the person compares himself to a powerful parent or legendary ancestor, he adopts the expedient of 'introjecting' their supposed omnipotence into his own personality, borrowing, as it were, their magical powers for his own self-esteem and protection" (164f.).

treating it as an equal part of the novel or as separate and distinct (cf. ibid.). Faulkner, however, wanted it to be the first section of the book, which might imply the significance he gave to it.

The appendix, titled “Compson: 1699–1945,” emphasizes the ancestry of the Compsons which might have been drowned, as Faulkner feared, by the many-faceted narrative experiments in the novel. In this regard, Michael Millgate notes that

> [i]t seems possible that Faulkner felt that he had created the social context of the action [of *The Sound and the Fury*] in insufficient detail, that the book did not clearly evoke the patterns of manners and customs within which his characters moved: the Compson ‘Appendix’ he wrote for *The Portable Faulkner* is devoted … primarily to the elaboration of the Compsons’ family history and to the further definition of their place in the social and economic life of Jefferson (qtd. in Dickerson 321).

Considering the appendix as an equal part of *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson genealogy seems even more elaborate than in case of the Sartorises. Concerning the relation between the two novels, Mary Jane Dickerson notes that

> *Sartoris* [as a condensed version of *Flags in the Dust*] represents that earlier groping and struggling for form in its use of genealogy to fuse the past and the present, but the very experience of tackling *Sartoris* no doubt also helped to clarify the possibilities inherent in genealogy that resulted finally in the Compson Appendix (321).

In fact, in the “Compson Appendix,” genealogy becomes *the* most decisive aspect of demonstrating a family in decay. As Dickerson further argues, “Faulkner makes a distinctive use of the controlling genealogical structure as his major narrative device and extended symbol in the Compson Appendix” (326).

The first Compson recorded in the genealogy is Quentin MacLachan, a fugitive from Scotland, born in 1699. After the Battle of Culloden, he fled his home to Carolina where he, eighty years old, “having fought once against an English king and lost … would not make that mistake twice and so fled again one night in 1779 … into Kentucky” (“Appendix. Compson: 1699–1945” 1128). This passage is crucial because it emphasizes the historical heritage of the Compson family in particular and of the South in general: Faulkner uses the Battle of Culloden as an historic example which runs parallel to his imagined history of the South.

The Battle of Culloden occurred on April 16, 1746 and was the last battle of the so-called Jacobite rising of 1745, during which Charles Edward Stuart, also known as Bonnie Prince Charlie, tried to regain the British throne from the House of Hanover for his father James Francis Edward Stuart. It is thus the last rebellion of the Scots to re-establish and secure their social system. After the battle was lost, Prince William, Duke of Cumberland, mercilessly proceeded against the surviving Jacobite soldiers by executing the wounded and burning all of the Jacobite banners he could find. Thus, the traditional clan system was destroyed.

In the collective memory of the Scots, the Battle of Culloden is still present. It caused the fall of a pre-industrial society and has been reflected about in Robert Burns' poem *The Lovely Lass o' Inverness*, for example.[31] Its second stanza depicts the outset of a collective consciousness of the losses of ancestors which continues from generation to generation:

> 'Drumossie moor—Drumossie day—
> A waefu' day it was to me!
> For there I lost my father dear—
> My father dear, and brethren three (418).

Here, a lyrical I invokes Drumossie Moor, the site of the Battle of Culloden, whose occurrence is described as a woeful day in the second verse. This is an obsession with a place and a turning point in the history of a society as well as a family. With the loss of the father, the past has been distinguished, whereas the loss of the three brothers, who are genealogically located on the same level as the lyrical I, also erased the present.

Among those Scottish clans that fought for the Jacobite forces in the Battle of Culloden was the Clan MacLachlan. With Quentin MacLachan Compson, whom Faulkner criticism sometimes misspells as Quentin MacLachlan, Faulkner created an

[31] The Battle of Culloden and its aftermath have also been dealt with in Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *Redgauntlet*, assigned to the *Waverly Novels*. Scott's coming to terms with the legacy of Culloden is discussed by Douglas S. Mack, who also shortly examines how Culloden has been approached by other Scottish writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson. "Culloden and After: Scottish Jacobite Novels." *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 20 no. 3, 1996, pp. 92-106. Faulkner has also commented on Scott's significance in the South, suggesting that "there was a kinship perhaps between the life of Scott's Highland and the life the Southerner led after Reconstruction. They too were in the aftermath of a land which had been conquered and devastated by people speaking its own language, which hasn't happened too many times" (*Faulkner in the University* 135).

ancestral character for the Compson line which participated in the Battle of Culloden.[32] Thus, the Compson tragedy is redoubled. As mentioned previously, the Battle of Culloden marks the fall of a pre-industrial society and its social system. In Faulkner's story world, the Compsons, now rooted in the South, experience this kind of development *twice*, as the loss of the Civil War induces the decay of the pre-industrial South. Both times, the Compsons stood on the wrong, that means losing, side of history. Both times, they fought for a lost cause.

By entangling these lost causes, Faulkner also seems to compare the aftermaths of each defeat. Hence, the bloody extinction of the Jacobite soldiers as well as the violent destruction of the Scottish clan system are put on one level with the Reconstruction era. According to this logic, the Confederate states, their societal system and their 'peculiar institution' are equated with Scottish clans, and the so-called 'Carpetbagging Yankees' – Northerners moving South and seeking private gain from the sociopolitical changes after the Civil War – are equated with the Duke of Cumberland. Furthermore, in each case, there was a winner of the conflict who afterwards decided on and affected the lives of those who lost. For Faulkner's Southerners, the 'Yankees' represent the winning and thus ruling side. The postbellum members of the Compson family are portrayed as suffering from being controlled by a foreign power, as Rosa Coldfield points out regarding Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!*: "So I dont imagine you will ever come back here and settle down as a country lawyer in a little town like Jefferson since Northern people have already seen to it that there is little left in the South for a young man" (*AA* 7). To her mind, the victorious North destroyed the noble system of old Southern families in the same manner as the Duke of Cumberland eradicated the Scottish clan system. Therefore, she thinks that a young man like Quentin has been deprived of the ties which ensured the persistence of Southern society until the war. She thinks that this is the reason he leaves, not knowing that he is not heading for a future elsewhere, but *nowhere*.

Faulkner continues alluding to the Scottish history concerning the Battle of Culloden, as the son of Quentin MacLachan is named Charles Stuart and thus, in a somewhat winking manner, a namesake of Bonnie Prince Charlie, who tried to regain

---

[32] Regardless of whether the missing 'l' is overlooked by the critics or not, they all seem to agree on the assumption that Faulkner referred to the actual Scottish Clan MacLachlan.

the throne for his father during the Jacobite rising of 1745.[33] It is his son, Jason Lycurgus, or Jason I, who contributes to the Compson family by winning the land which would become the Compson domain. Here, the family history is integrated into the American Frontier myth, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5. Jason Lycyrgus's son in turn, another Quentin MacLachan, is said to have been "the last Compson who would not fail at everything he touched save longevity or suicide" ("Appendix. Compson: 1699–1945" 1130). This statement points to a watershed in the family history of the Compsons, for it detects the shift into decay at the end of which the Compson domain will no longer exist in its original form, and only the label "Old Compson place" ("Appendix. Compson: 1699–1945" 1131) will be reminiscent of those who no longer live there.

This is how Faulkner has established the antebellum scene for the Compsons and the Sartorises, both constituting an always *present absence* for the postbellum family members or, in Matthews terms again, "sites of loss." The assumed perfection of what is absent here can never be achieved by the descendants. The present absence of the ancestor is, however, not limited to Faulkner's recurring characters. In *Light in August*, the writer has a minor character experience the same sense of loss. Primarily concerned with the story of Joe Christmas, who lacks a family of his own but therefore has "a driving need for one" (Kinney, "Family-Centered Nature" 92) all the more, the novel is rather about the lack of family. For a society whose key element is kinship, it is no wonder that Christmas is an outsider. Faulkner critic Alfred Kazin even considers him "the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme phase conceivable of American loneliness" (152). Reverend Gail Hightower, no less lonely than Christmas but aware of his family tree, in contrast, shows the "specific kinship" which has been discussed above. He is named after his grandfather, whom he admires instead of his father – a narrative device to display kinship already on the level of names as in *Flags in the Dust*. And as in *Flags in the Dust* and *The Sound and the*

[33] In the appendix, it is said that Charles Stuart "[s]ucceded at last in risking not only his neck but the security of his family and the very integrity of the name he would leave behind him, by joining the confederation headed by an acquaintance named Wilkinson (a man of considerable talent and influence and power) in a plot to secede the whole Mississippi Valley from the United States and join it to Spain" (319). Thus, Faulkner invented another Compson character to be involved in an actual historical conflict – this time the Spanish Conspiracy, aiming for a separation of Kentucky from Virginia and the United States – which resulted in this character's failure. However, this historical incident is far from marking a decisive turning point for a society as the Battle of Culloden or the Civil War, which is why its allusive meaning for the Compson family's sense of loss should not be overestimated.

Fury, this long-gone grandfather is omnipresent. In the third chapter, it is described how Hightower first came to Jefferson as a church minister precisely because his grandfather was shot there during the Civil War. It is further said that from then on, reminiscences of the grandfather crept into Hightower's sermons:

> And they told Byron how the young minister was still excited after six months, still talking about the Civil War and his grandfather, a cavalryman, who was killed, […] until it did not make sense at all. They told Byron how he seemed to talk that way in the pulpit too, wild too in the pulpit, using religion as though it were a dream (*Light in August* 443).[34]

To the town as well as to the reader, who learns about all this at third hand from an omniscient narrator who tells how Byron Bunch learned about it at second hand, it seems as if Hightower did not come to Jefferson for the church or the people of the church, but rather in search of a place where he could pursue the commemoration of his grandfather. Even in his function as a minister, the grandfather's past and Hightower's present seem to blend into each other, "with his religion and his grandfather being shot from the galloping horse all mixed up" (*LA* 445). Like Quentin Compson, Gail Hightower seems unable to tell the past from the present, and like Quentin, this defrauds him of individuality, if not of an actual life:

> as though the seed which his grandfather had transmitted to him had been on the horse too that night and had been killed too and time had stopped there and then for the seed and nothing had happened in time since, *not even him* (*LA* 445, my emphasis).

Hightower feels robbed of his life because he was born too late to experience what his grandfather had experienced, what every Southerner should have experienced in his opinion. He falls victim to the same postbellum 'tragedy' as Bayard and Quentin, suffering the absence of antebellum conditions, lacking an opportunity to fight for the cause and caught in an endless circle of commemoration to the detriment of the self.

By means of Gail Hightower, Faulkner spells out the downside of passing on the Cavalier legend and cherishing the ancestors: The "hereditary will to die" (Bleikasten 134) of the descendants stems from the feeling that they are born without any future perspective. Thus, Hightower thinks:

---

[34] Hereafter cited as *LA*.

> So it's no wonder … that I skipped a generation. It's no wonder that I had no father and that I had already died one night twenty years before I saw light. And that my only salvation must be to return to the place to die where my life had already ceased before it began (*LA* 752).

He identifies with the grandfather, who did not live to see his future. Hightower, always hidebound, feels that he has also been robbed of his future. But unlike his grandfather, he was left with his life. Lacking any inspiration as to what he is supposed to do with this life, he shapes the plan to die where his grandfather died. Hightower wastes his life by denying having anything worth being called a life, since he is under the delusion that it "had already ceased before it began."

Thus, Faulkner's early works such as *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August* document, mostly uncritically, the South's dealing with the Cavalier legend. And in fact, Faulkner himself also erected a memorial in the honor of the South by romanticizing the Deep South as a mythical kingdom of mostly white men. However, already these early works contain at least a hint at the legend-weaving practices of the South. As has been discussed by reference to Virginia Du Pre and her repetitious telling of her brother's death, the process of transformation from trifles into heroic deaths is at least indicated in *Flags in the Dust*. In *Light in August*, one can detect a similar narrative strategy. Here, Hightower weaves the story of his grandfather, about which he hears from the black servant Cinthy, into a legend just as Virginia Du Pre did in *Flags in the Dust*. In both cases, the actual death of the Confederate soldier is a trifle, but it is inflated to the extent of a heroic legend. Hightower's grandfather, in fact, died while trying to steal some chickens. Cinthy expresses her indignation, as Hightower recounts, as follows: "Stealin chickens. A man growed, wid a married son, gone to war whar his business was killin Yankees, killed in somebody else's henhouse wid a han'full of feathers" (*LA* 757f.). But Hightower does not seem to mind. In fact, the circumstances under which his grandfather died make him elevate his story even more: "It's fine so. Any soldier can be killed by the enemy in the heat of battle, by a weapon approved by the arbiters and rulemakers of warfare. Or by a woman in a bedroom. But not with a shotgun, a fowling piece, in a henhouse" (*LA* 758). Again, the foolish acts of a young man serve as basis for a family legend which will have a great impact on the succeeding generations. But at this point of the story, it does not matter so much what Hightower thinks about this incident, because the narrator, referring to Cinthy's words, has already made the reader aware of the possibility to interpret it differently. Thus,

Hightower's remarks appear for what they are: the frantic efforts of a man who sees endangered the memory of his grandfather, to retroactively create an antebellum legend of pride and honor.

The reverence of the ancestor gives rise to nothing but death and distress in Faulkner's works. In fact, Singal argues that even Faulkner's early novel *Flags in the Dust* can be seen as the writer's

> initial skirmish against the Cavalier myth—with the myth still far from vanquished. … The element of compulsion that had entered into the Cavalier tradition is graphically illustrated by means of Bayard's crippling neurosis. At the same time, in John Sartoris [the great-grandfather] Faulkner was trying to keep the romantic tradition alive. … Faulkner, in short, was trying to have it both ways, to assail the myth and keep it too (166).

In the following subchapter, I will demonstrate how Faulkner finally renounced the Cavalier legend and used the Sutpen story in *Absalom, Absalom!* to overwrite it with a legend of guilt.

4.3 THOMAS SUTPEN'S DESIGN – A SOUTHERN TALE?

With his earlier novels *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*, Faulkner invents and narrates families who worship their antebellum ancestors. This kind of worship is more or less in accord with the Cavalier legend. Thus, he arguably offers a literary explanation for the Deep South and its inhabitants' customs to make sense of their past.[35]

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner 'hands over' the task to explain the South to his characters. This does not mean that he forfeits some of his interpretational sovereignty over his "cosmos," but rather that he shows – and, for that matter, has his readers watch – his characters telling stories. In this novel, Faulkner revisits Quentin Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* before the latter commits suicide, and has him engage in conversations with several renowned and some unknown characters: Jefferson's "poetess laureate" (*AA* 8) Rosa Coldfield, Quentin's father Mr. Compson (who in turn recalls conversations with Quentin's grandfather General Compson), his Harvard roommate Shreve McCannon, and a character named Henry Sutpen. In the course of these conversations, all characters are allowed to voice their opinion on the central subject under discussion: Thomas Sutpen and his so-called "design." Thus, Faulkner arranges several narrative situations, using what Roland Végsö refers to as a "constantly repeated pattern …, namely, the dialogue" (634). Instead of narrating one Southern story, Faulkner depicts the processes and settings of its telling in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In other words, the novel is a story about stories being told. In fact, as Lee points out in his work *Gothic to Multicultural*, "no [other] Faulkner novel … makes story-telling itself more so evident, or reflexive, a motif" (312). This is reflected in the great "number of dialogues" which Végsö summarizes as follows:

> the Sutpen story is told by Sutpen to Quentin's grandfather, who tells it to Mr. Compson, who tells it to Quentin; there is a dialogue between Miss Rosa and Quentin, between Shreve and Quentin, between Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen; and we should not forget the conversation between Henry Sutpen and Quentin Compson, and so on (634).

This narrative composition enables Faulkner not only to tell another story of a Southern ancestor, but also to demonstrate the conditions under which such stories are 'thought

---

[35] For a discussion of the Southern "rage to explain," see Hobson, Fred. *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain*. LSU Press, 1983. It might be a coincidence that the first part of Hobson's title is an exact quotation from Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (see p. 3 of the novel), but the "rage to explain" also mentioned seems all-pervasive in Faulkner's novels.

up' and passed on. The oral tradition of the South often seems to oscillate between fact and conjecture.[36] This is illustrated in Faulkner's earlier works, for example when he has his narrator in *Flags in the Dust* explain how Virginia Du Pre "had told the story [of her brother] many times … and as she grew older the tale itself grew richer and richer" (*FD* 549), or when he has the black servant Cinthy of *Light in August* explain to Hightower that his grandfather has not been killed in action but while stealing chickens from someone else's henhouse. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner makes the weaving of such legends the structural principle of the whole novel, and is thus able to deconstruct these processes which are also at work regarding the Cavalier legend. As a result, this legend of noble descent and benevolence is substituted with a legend of guilt.

This subchapter will investigate the narrative strategies Faulkner uses in order to challenge the Cavalier legend. In this regard, the central character of *Absalom, Absalom!* who is discussed throughout the whole novel by its several narrators, Thomas Sutpen, is the key factor. It shall be argued that Faulkner designed Sutpen, though apparently an outsider to the community of Jefferson, in much the same manner as the 'aristocratic' ancestor(s) in his earlier works, and that he orchestrates Sutpen's story as a foundational narrative which the whole community could relate to. By means of this narrative design, Faulkner challenges the purport of the Cavalier legend and reveals the 'rotten core' of his South, the 'original sin' of its creation, and he provides the foundational narrative which perpetuates a guilt which can never be balanced.

Thomas Sutpen occupies a special position among the ancestors in Faulkner's works: Having moved to Jefferson "*out of nowhere*" (*AA* 6), he is at once a part of the community as well as an outsider. Due to this ambivalence, Faulkner criticism has always been divided in terms of the appropriate interpretative approach to this character. Cleanth Brooks, one of the earliest Faulkner critics, might be considered as heading those who claim that Thomas Sutpen is outside or even opposed to Southern society. For Brooks, Sutpen might strike one as specifically Southern because he owns slaves or emphasizes the importance of family, but he only does so calculatingly. In "*Absalom, Absalom!*: The Definition of Innocence," Brooks even goes so far as to say

---

[36] For a general overview of the influence of the Southern oral tradition in Faulkner's works, see for example Brown, Calvin S. "Faulkner's Use of the Oral Tradition." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1968, pp. 160–169.

that "Sutpen turns out to be a Yankee, not a Southerner at all. At any rate, as the whole novel shows, Sutpen is a 'planner' who works by blue-print and on a schedule. He is rationalistic and scientific, not traditional, not religious, not even superstitious" (555). In "On *Absalom, Absalom!*," an essay published more than twenty years later, Brooks revisits that topic and suggests that Sutpen "reflect[s] (in his vices as well as his virtues) a conception of reality that is essentially 'American' rather than its 'Southern' sub-variety," and he reads the story of Sutpen's downfall not "primarily [as] a story of the downfall of the Old South (though, of course, it is inextricably involved with the culture of the Old South)" but as a potential "commentary on the character of the national culture as well" (173). Thus, for Brooks, the Sutpen story is in its nature rather an American instead of a Southern one.[37]

According to Richard Godden, Brooks misreads Sutpen as a "capitalist entrepreneur" (268). His counterargument is that

> [s]ince Sutpen's design is to become a planter, he is perhaps best understood through his status as a distinctive labor lord. Had he been a northern capitalist he would have paid wages, thereby declaring himself independent of his free employees, since, in the bourgeois marketplace, those who contract together … do so under the assumption that each of them is a free and independent unit … Manifestly, under slavery, the bound laborer is not free, and any suggestion that he might possess rights or will, independent of the will of his lord, strikes at the working of the entire system because it threatens the grounds upon which one owner owns and uses the slave (273f.).

Kartiganer also stresses Sutpen's dependence on the system of slavery, arguing that "[i]f Sutpen horrifies the community, it is largely because he is a pure, naked version of its own deepest principles, the incarnation of those values and attitudes that enable a slave system to survive" ("The Discovery of Values" 291). Sutpen's exaggeration of the South's principles lays bare that the Southern system, as well as Sutpen's design,

[37] Given Brooks's background, it is not surprising that he denies Sutpen's correspondence to the ideal of the Southern planter. Duvall notes that Brooks was a student of Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, themselves part of the movement of the Southern Agrarians. The latter "posited a golden age in the Southern past that they sought to preserve. Their solution to the problem of modernization was to return to an organic community in which most people earned their living through agriculture. The Agrarian's idealized community in which leisure allows for the flourishing of the arts was predicated on the exploited labor of African-Americans, who were already migrating to other areas of the US" (Duvall, "Regionalism" 254). Brooks, as Duvall further notes, did not only shape New Criticism, but also "helped shape both Faulkner studies and Southern literature," which is probably why his reading of Sutpen was revisited by several other Faulkner scholars, like Dirk Kuyk or Caroline Porter. Richard Godden argues that both their readings of Sutpen – the former suggesting that Sutpen is a "New Dealer" (Godden 267), the latter that Sutpen's career "'conducted in the name of equality,' is dedicated to 'vindicating the American dream itself'" (Godden 267, citing Porter) – "descend from Sutpen out of Cleanth Brooks" (267).

are mainly based on social oppression, which Kartiganer describes as "the desire for order and ownership, for neat, unassailable boundaries both on land and human behavior" (292).[38] According to Melvin Backman, "Sutpen is both the pride and shame of the South" (604) – an only apparent contradiction which also corroborates my own argument: That the legend of Thomas Sutpen is exemplary for Faulkner's rebuttal of the Cavalier myth by means of the – no less mythical – narrative of Southern guilt. Faulkner narratively stages Sutpen in the same manner as the 'noble' ancestors of Yoknapatawpha's 'aristocracy,' but he ultimately lays bare their 'original sin' by stressing the dependence on and commitment to slavery. Thus, he overwrites pride with guilt (in a similar manner like Cash and Smith after him).

Among the ancestors of Faulkner's novels, John Sartoris is perhaps designed as the noblest of them all. He even contrasts with the other members of early 'Southern aristocracy' like McCaslin or Compson, who, as Backman emphasizes, "got their land by hook or by crook" (598). Therefore, Backman assigns the latter to the so-called "new men" and even places them on the same level with Sutpen. He explains that

> Compson acquired his [land] by swapping a mare to the Indians, Sutpen got his with a little Spanish gold, and McCaslin 'bought the land, took the land, got the land no matter how.' Faulkner has not told us how Sartoris got his land, but Sartoris possessed the 'violent and ruthless dictatorialness and will to dominate' which generally characterize the founders of the Yoknapatawpha ruling clans (598, citing *Go Down, Moses* and *The Unvanquished*).

For Backman, Sartoris seems to be the only character of truly 'aristocratic' origin, and he clearly states that

> Faulkner has made a distinction between Sartoris and Sutpen. They are different, not in the sense that Sartoris was an established Yoknapatawpha planter when Sutpen arrived at Jefferson in 1833—Sartoris did not arrive until a few years after Sutpen—but in the sense that Sartoris' origin was 'aristocratic' whereas Sutpen's was plebeian. Colonel Sartoris, as we see him in *Sartoris* and later in *The Unvanquished*, is a much more traditionally romantic figure than Sutpen (598).

---

[38] Kartiganer undergirds his point by referring to Frederick Hoffmann, Olga Vickery and Ilse Dusoir Lind. The latter has equally stressed the relatedness of Sutpen and the Southern plantation owners – and has been controverted by Brooks at times – by drawing attention to their moral flaws. For her, "Sutpen falls through innate deficiency of moral insight, but the error which he commits is also socially derived and thus illustrates the flaw which dooms with equal finality the aspirations of a whole culture" (887).

Backman's analysis corresponds with the genealogies which cite Sutpen himself as the first of his family tree, whereas John Sartoris can apparently refer to an ancestor whose date of birth reaches as far back as to make him a contemporary of the Founding Fathers of the United States.[39] In this sense, Sartoris is truly unique and a thorough embodiment of the kind of ancestor which the Cavalier legend describes. Furthermore, he had "slaves and gear and money" (*Requiem for a Nun* 502) when he came from a Carolina plantation. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Faulkner, as it is generally accepted by Faulkner criticism, based the Sartoris character on the model of his own great-grandfather Colonel William C. Falkner (cf. Backman 598).

As Backman notes, Faulkner's great-grandfather came to Mississippi from Tennessee without means – an origin, or, depending on one's point of view, a *lack* of origin, which rather bears resemblance to Sutpen (cf. 599). Thus, Backman comes to the crucial conclusion that whereas "Sartoris represents in part a projection of the legend, … Sutpen represents the reality" (599). In light of this fact, Sutpen is even less likely to be designed as a non-Southerner, let alone a 'Yankee.' Instead, he represents those aspects of Southern heritage which are usually drowned by the legend of the Anglo-Saxon Cavaliers. He is not opposed to Southerners like Sartoris, Sutpen's brutality is simply a more blatant version of the 'aristocratic' one.

This circumstance is reflected in the similar narrative design of Sutpen and Sartoris. On the level of story, Sutpen is introduced as a Confederate soldier. At the beginning of the novel, it is stated that Sutpen was a Colonel: "*It seems that this demon—his name was Sutpen—(Colonel Sutpen)—Colonel Sutpen*" (*AA* 6). Thus, the character's military rank is designated, and it gets clear where his loyalties lie. As was expected from any Southerner, Sutpen served during the Civil War. He fought for the cause, which makes him, at least in ideological terms, a proponent of the antebellum societal system whom postbellum Southerners can relate to. Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, Sutpen is said to have fought *together* with Sartoris: "Colonel Sartoris and Sutpen were raising the regiment which departed in '61, with Sutpen, second in command, riding at Colonel Sartoris' left hand" (*AA* 66). Later on,

---

[39] See the biographical notes on the "Earliest American Sartoris" in the *Digital Yoknapatawpha Project*. http://faulkner.drupal.shanti.virginia.edu/content/earliest-american-sartoris-0. (Last Access: June 19, 2019).

Sartoris is even replaced by Sutpen as a Colonel. According to Kartiganer, this is due to the “laxity of the town itself” (“The Discovery of Values” 294).

On the level of discourse, Faulkner also arranges Sutpen like an ‘aristocratic’ ancestor character. One only has to compare the narrative situations of the beginnings of *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Flags in the Dust*. In both novels, there are two characters who meet for the very reason that they want to – or have to – talk about old times and about those representing these times. In *Flags in the Dust*, Bayard hosts Old Man Falls in his office in the bank. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa Coldfield invites Quentin Compson and meets him at her house. Both these situations – as is often the case with the beginnings of Faulkner’s novels according to Matthews (see above) – hint at a loss: Often, as in *Flags in the Dust*, they do so by means of a ghost or a ghost-like presence. In the initial narrative situation of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen is staged in a similar way, as a long-gone man whose spirit haunts the surviving dependants. *Flags in the Dust* begins with Old Man Falls, who is said to have brought with him the spirit of John Sartoris, so that

> John Sartoris seemed to loom still in the room, above and about his son, with his bearded, hawklike face, so that as Old Bayard sat with his crossed feet propped against the corner of the cold hearth, holding the pipe in his hand, it seemed to him that he could hear his father’s breathing even, as though that other were so much more palpable than mere transiently articulated clay as to even penetrate into the uttermost citadel of silence in which his son lived (*FD* 543).

This passage bears a remarkable analogy to *Absalom, Absalom!*. At the beginning of the novel, Rosa Coldfield keeps talking

> until at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound and the long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust (*AA* 5).

In either case, the dead assumes a quasi-human appearance. And what is more, both ‘visitations’ seem to allude to the Old Testament as they are compared or related to the material that god is said to have created humankind with. John Sartoris’ ‘vitality,’ for example, is verified by comparing him to clay, which is described as “mere transiently articulated”. Clay, in turn, is the primary substance of mankind in Isaiah 64:8: “But now, O Lord, thou *art* our father; we *are* the clay, and thou our potter; and

we all are the work of thy hand." It is similar in the passage concerning Thomas Sutpen. He arises "out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust". In Genesis 2:7, it is stated that "[…] the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." In the passage quoted above, however, it is not god who creates Sutpen or his spirit, but the pure "outraged recapitulation" of Rosa Coldfield.

As the story continues, Sutpen's appearance is described in more detail. He also seems to take shape, as he appears "[o]ut of quiet thunderclap" – again an allusion to the Old Testament and the notion of thunder as the voice of god (see Psalms 18:13 and 29:1-11) – "upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair and clothes and beard" (*AA* 6). The forces of Sutpen's 'resurrection' seem to have left that certain smell of sulfur dioxide which is produced at the burning of sulfur. In his scientific treatise on the chemical element, *Sulfur: History, Technology, Applications and Industry*, Gerald Kutney provides a detailed survey of the etymology of the term "sulfur" as well as its allusions. After pointing out the derivation relation from the Latin word "sulfurium," which means "burning stone," and mentioning the synonymous term "brimstone," Kutney refers to the biblical exegesis and the resulting idiom of "fire and brimstone" (cf. 5) According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Reference and Allusion*, the expression is a "biblical description of the torments of Hell, as in 'a lake which burns with fire and brimstone' (Book of Revelation) and 'upon the ungodly he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, storm and tempest' (Psalm 11)" (136), or simply a "way of referring to torment in Hell" (136). Kutney continues: "Within this religious framework an ancient dichotomy arose between heathens and barbarians" (5). An interpretation of the novel passage quoted above might thus result in the idea that Sutpen, now revived as a ghost, rose directly out of hell. Undoubtedly, this notion corresponds to Rosa Coldfield's low opinion of her brother-in-law within the story world.

But in the novel passage, it is also said that Sutpen arose "[o]ut of quiet thunderclap." As mentioned above, there are several biblical allusions to thunder, too. In general, however, thunder goes hand in hand with lightning. Now Kutney explains that the Greeks, in contrast to the Christians, discovered the smell of sulfur dioxide not "by accidently dropping sulfur into a fire" (5), but noticed it from lightning (cf. 5). He elaborates on the opposing beliefs of both cultures, and states that "[w]hile the early Christian fathers, barbarians to the Greeks, associated sulfur with hell, the earlier and

more enlightened ancient Greeks, heathens to the Christians, tied it to heaven" (5). As lightning is associated with the power of Zeus, the smell of sulfur dioxide has a completely different connotation in Greek mythology. Faulkner, who was demonstrably familiar with Greek culture, obviously puns with the broad range of meaning which the discussed concepts cause – a fact which illustrates the ambivalence of Thomas Sutpen as a character.[40]

At the end of both opening scenes, the respective ghost takes a manlike shape. In case of John Sartoris, the reader seems to see "his bearded, hawklike face" (*FD* 543), in case of Thomas Sutpen, his visual identity presents itself with "hair clothes and beard" (*AA* 6). Thus, Faulkner clearly stages Sutpen as a Southern ancestor. Faulkner's other ancestor characters, like General Compson or Gail Hightower's grandfather, have been 'orientation lights' for their respective *families*. Thus, as has been elucidated in the previous subchapter, family narratives have played a significant role for perpetuating the memories of these ancestors. Thomas Sutpen, by contrast, becomes a figure of identification for the *whole community* of Yoknapatawpha County. His sudden appearance in Jefferson and his building of a mansion, which all his life he tries to beget an heir for, can be considered a foundational narrative of Faulkner's post-bellum Southern civilization.[41] It seems that in 1909, the year in which the main frame story of *Absalom, Absalom!* unfolds, the legend of Thomas Sutpen is a common point of reference within the story world of the novel. When Rosa Coldfield calls Quentin Compson to meet her at her house in order to tell him the story, he is already familiar with it:

> It was a part of his twenty years' heritage of breathing the same air and hearing his father talk about the man; a part of the town's—Jefferson's—eighty years' heritage of the same air which the man himself had breathed between this September afternoon in 1909 and that Sunday morning in June in 1833 (*AA* 8f.).

The story of how Sutpen built his mansion seems to form a part of the cultural canon of Faulkner's postbellum South more than seventy years later. Just as every Christian is familiar with the biblical creation story, so is every character of Faulkner's South with

[40] For a detailed discussion of Faulkner's tragic vision of Thomas Sutpen, see Björk, Lennart. "Ancient Myths and the Moral Framework of Faulkner's 'Absalom, Absalom!'" *American Literature*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1963, pp. 196–204.

[41] Referring to Heide Ziegler, the analogy between Sutpen's and god's creation ex nihilo has already been explained above.

the story of Thomas Sutpen. For Quentin *as well as* the whole community, Sutpen's story has become a legend, an identity-establishing narrative by which to make sense of the social background one is born into: the postbellum South. Once more, this legend is preserved on the one hand by means of the oral tradition ("hearing his father talk"), on the other hand by the consistency of the place which, at least in Quentin's imagination, is still surrounded by the same air that Sutpen himself had breathed several decades ago.

The similar narrative designs of the 'aristocratic' Sartoris and the 'plebeian' Sutpen are clearly a manifestation of ambivalence towards an internally inconsistent South. Not unlike many Southerners, Faulkner himself relished the idea of an aristocratic Southern ancestry. As the analysis above has shown, this idea is brought into shape in the Sartoris character. However, not even Sartoris's status was god-given, but must have been hard-won. Cash claims that there were indeed a selected few who could be rated as aristocrats – "[i]n Virginia … in South Carolina and Georgia … and in and around Hispano-Gallic New Orleans … there was a genuine, if small, aristocracy" (4f.) – but they emerged "by slow stages from a primitive backwoods community, made up primarily of farmers and laborers" (5f.). As mentioned in chapter 3, this is Cash's main argument in refuting the Cavalier myth, and according to Singal, *Absalom, Absalom!* makes a similar suggestion: "Sutpen represents the total negation of the mythical Cavalier. He is the planter as nouveau riche, the southern aristocrat as self-made man, whose every action hinges on his self-centered, calculating ambition" (188). Singal further argues that with Sutpen,

> Faulkner added an ironic twist that made his attack on the myth more devastating, for as the tale unfolds it becomes clear that the source of Sutpen's raw and ruthless materialism lies not in his greed, but in his innocence. … In depicting Sutpen as principally a victim of naiveté, Faulkner was touching the most sensitive southern nerve of all. The story suggests that the Cavalier identity as associated with the men who dominated the region just prior to the Civil War was born in response to a painful consciousness of backwoods crudeness and isolation, that the pose of aristocratic sophistication was created to cover up an essential provinciality (190).

This "painful consciousness" is mirrored in the novel, in which the already established planters view Sutpen with mistrust, perhaps because his ambitions to become a planter remind them of their own "provincial" heritage.

Sutpen is said to have come "*out of nowhere and without warning upon the land*" (*AA* 6). He appears out of the blue, with no plantation in Carolina to refer to as his place

of origin, with no one to have ever seen or heard of him before. For a closed community like Jefferson, this is a significant gap in Sutpen's personal history, a lack of origin, which the inhabitants are unable to overlook. Within the story world, this fact is emphasized by means of Rosa Coldfield's aunt, who "had agreed never to forgive him for not having any past" (*AA* 42).

With this opening, *Absalom, Absalom!* could be read as having a classical plot structure in accord with what Tolstoy called "a stranger comes to town," where the outsider is usually rejected at first but profoundly changes the community in the end. Especially Cleanth Brooks's reading of Sutpen, which has been discussed above, seems to correspond to such an interpretation. And in fact, it cannot be denied that the novel features most of the common elements of a plot structure like "stranger comes to town." However, Sutpen is a stranger only at first glance, who upon close examination turns out to be a distorted mirror image of the community itself. Because in contrast to what they claim, "the ante-bellum South, though once ruled by the planter class, did not consist only of planter aristocracy and poor whites; the great majority of its people have always been hard-working small farmers" (Backman 597). The anger and obstinacy with which the community faces Sutpen is only a result of the vague premonition that he is just like them, and the fear that his presence might disclose the secret they have so successfully hidden even from themselves.

By introducing Sutpen as an apparent stranger while simultaneously designing him like Sartoris, Faulkner adumbrates the fact that the Southern aristocracy – that concept of several generations of Southerners which particularly makes the Cavalier legend so strong – is actually a pretense. Backman notes that there were

> almost no members of the Cavalier aristocracy [who] ever left England for America, that the Southern aristocracy derived from the low and middle classes, and that the aristocracy of the Deep South was made in one generation (598).

Sutpen's story is a painfully obvious demonstration of these facts which his Southern characters try to ignore. After all, their self-conception, the whole idea of a noble, Southern descent is reduced to absurdity or, at least, deeply challenged by reading someone like Sutpen as a Southern ancestor.

But it is not only Sutpen's narrative arrangement which makes him a Southern ancestor. Upon closer examination, the story of his design turns out to be one of the most Southern tales of all. At this point, it should be emphasized that Sutpen's origin

is not as great a mystery as it seems at the beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!*. Though it is true that no one in Jefferson is aware of it at the time when Sutpen arrives, it turns out in the seventh chapter of the novel that Sutpen himself has told Quentin's grandfather exactly where he came from. General Compson, in turn, told his son about Sutpen's origin, who then told his son about it. Thus, Quentin is able to tell Shreve, so that the reader is finally let in on the 'secret' that Sutpen grew up in the mountains before he and his family moved to the flatlands. Of course, this kind of personal history is worth nothing in a world determined by descent and the possession of property. The young Sutpen experiences this for himself when he approaches a huge mansion and is sent to the backdoor by a black slave. He feels embarrassed, humiliated, and ashamed of his background, because, as Polk argues, "[w]ithout having a language to understand it, Sutpen has discovered class differences, discovered that there are people who are rich and own other people who look down on him because he isn't rich and doesn't own them" (53). Sutpen wants to be more like the ones humiliating him instead of opposing them. Kartiganer points out that

> Sutpen, rather than becoming the rebel against the society which has humiliated him, rather than matching his own mountain code of individualism […] against society's code of order and repression, chooses instead to become one of them, to play society's game on its own ground, with its own rule ("The Discovery of Values" 294).

Sutpen sets out to emulate those people who already have a noble name and private property. The novel delineates in great detail how he proceeds in order to achieve his goal. Thus, Faulkner uses Sutpen's story as a blueprint for retracing the development of Southern society as a whole: As Sutpen wants to be like the Southern planters, he imitates their actions, which shows the reader how they proceeded in order to achieve their goals.

Sutpen's story is an exact representation of the efforts to turn 'virgin land' into a plantation and to become a Southern landowner. Driven by nothing but his iron will, Sutpen

> *came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange n— 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—(Safe by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson* (*AA* 6f., emphasis in the original).

With this “little not-even-paragraph” (xi), as John Jeremiah Sullivan calls it, Faulkner “tells us on the third page (*in italics*) pretty much everything that will happen in the book, action-wise” (x). By means of allegory, Faulkner also shows us what it took to become a Southern planter: Land, forced labor, and an heir to bequeath one’s life’s work to. As the novel reveals, Sutpen himself is well aware of these necessities, and he does his utmost to achieve his goal. He tells General Compson: “I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife. I set out to acquire these, asking no favor of any man” (*AA* 218). This passage itemizes in great detail the ‘resources’ that ante-bellum Southern society is based upon: slavery, land and lineage. Thus, it points out the natural flaw which taints Sutpen’s plantation as well as the Southern societal system. This follows from the narrative arrangement of the Sutpen legend within the novel. As has been indicated above, this legend can be considered as a foundational narrative of the whole community and thus bears analogies to god’s creation ex nihilo as described in the Book of Genesis.

But as the bible does not end after the passage of creation, neither does the Sutpen story after the mansion has been built. The bible, right after treating creation, attends immediately to the tale of original sin, which is why it could be argued that it is one, if not *the* most decisive element of the narration: god “planted a garden eastward in Eden” (Genesis 2:8) and told Adam: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17). But the serpent, being “more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God made” (Genesis 3:1), beguiled Eve, who thereupon “took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (Genesis 3:6). This transgression results in the Fall of Man, whereupon guilt becomes the basis of human existence. However, as this passage from the bible illustrates, humankind does not incur guilt maliciously, but due to weakness: Eve is beguiled by the serpent. It is crucial though that the bible does not give any explanation as to where the serpent, in turn, gets its malice from, as Jörg Splett argues in his entry on “Schuld,” the German word for guilt (cf. 1282). Thus, the origin of evil remains uncertain.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the narration of the building of Sutpen's Hundred is followed by the narration of an original guilt which resembles the biblical original sin, but in contrast to the bible, this guilt *coincides* with creation. This way, the novel does not only tell the reader which act exactly is the transgression causing the guilt, but also identifies the perpetrators. Whereas the bible circumvents the question of the origin of evil, *Absalom, Absalom!* portrays a man who built a plantation not by the sweat of his (own) brow, but by exploiting enslaved people who were degraded by law. Herein lies, for Backman, a congruence of the Sutpen story and the bible: "Sutpen's decision is a moral one: he committed the sin that would visit the iniquity of the father upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generation" (600). He argues that "Thomas Sutpen, who transplanted his slaves from Haiti to the Mississippi wilderness and transformed the wilderness to a plantation, was part of a large historical movement" (600f.). Thus, Backman emphasizes the inherent flaw of the South in general, and the way in which Sutpen is designed to represent that flaw.

The Sutpen story is perhaps Faulkner's most elaborate narration of the so-called *guilt thesis*, which proposes that, to cite Foster again, "[in their heart of hearts] white Southerners felt guilty about slavery" (665). Therefore, so the argument goes, they incited a war and brought about their own defeat, which would finally free them from the issue that troubled them so. There are several allusions in *Absalom, Absalom!* that suggest a similar cause-effect relation like the *guilt thesis*. Right at the outset of the novel, Quentin ruminates on the reason why Rosa Coldfield has chosen him as a listener to her account of the Sutpen story, and concludes:

> *It's because she wants it told … so that people … will read it and know at last why God let us lose the War: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He* [Sutpen] *stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth* (*AA* 8).

The Civil War and the loss that resulted from it were the price that had to be paid in order to extinguish an exemplary, albeit perverted, dynasty like Sutpen's, which was based on the enslavement and exploitation of black people – that "*band of strange n*—" that Sutpen brought with him from Haiti so that he could build a plantation, "[tear] *violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says*" (*AA* 6). This passage also stresses the necessity of self-destruction that is an elementary aspect of the *guilt thesis*, as claimed, for example, by Smith, who argues that white Southerners "felt … a need to suffer, and like guilty people everywhere, they had to find 'enemies' to be punished by"

(62). Sutpen needed to "*stay this demon*," had to cling to and fight for that 'peculiar institution' white Southerners apparently felt was deeply wrong, knowing that the South ultimately had to be defeated so that slavery could be ended. With their eyes open, this line of argument seems to suggest, white Southerners like Sutpen "*efface*[d their] *name and lineage from the earth,*" they sacrificed themselves, bringing about, in the manner of tragic heroes, their own defeat for the greater good.

Another allusion to the idea that white Southerners incited the Civil War to get rid of slavery is Shreve's musing about Quentin's Southern heritage and how it is so very different from his own: "We dont live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (*or have I got it backward and was it your folks that are free and the n— that lost?*) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forget" (*AA* 297, my emphasis). The italicized passage suggests that slavery was a burden weighing heavily on Quentin's ancestors, holding them captive, and that it took a lost war and the abandonment of their social system to get free. Quentin has a similar thought at the beginning of the novel, thinking of his ancestors as ghosts who recovered,

> even forty-three years afterward, from the fever which had cured the disease, waking from the fever without even knowing that it had been the fever itself which they had fought against and not the sickness, *looking with stubborn recalcitrance backward beyond the fever and into the disease with actual regret*, weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence (*AA* 9, my emphasis).

Due to the number of years that is mentioned and the year of Quentin's plot line (1909), it is easy to deduce that the fever signifies the war itself, and not too far-fetched to assume that the disease represents slavery. Here, too, the war is considered as a means to end slavery, and by describing the latter as a disease, it appears as something that bothered white Southerners rather than something they were committed to. The passage also attests confusion to the Southerners about what they were actually fighting against, stating that it was the war itself and not slavery. Applied to the *guilt thesis*, this would mean that white Southerners were not capable or courageous enough to abolish slavery themselves, even though they knew it was wrong. Accordingly, the idea of white Southerners fighting *against* the war could be interpretated as a fight *against winning* the war, or, in other words, a weakness of morale. Foster discusses the argument of weak morale resulting in defeat which is

advanced by proponents of the *guilt thesis*. The latter claim that "[w]eak morale resulted not only from the failure of leaders to develop and sustain popular support for the cause but also from 'the inherent frailty of the cause itself,' since, 'except for the institution of slavery, the South had little to give it a clear national identity.' Defeat offered white southerners a 'reward: a way to rid themselves of the moral burden of slavery'" (Foster 673f., citing Kenneth M. Stampp).

Upon closer examination, the passage quoted above seems highly charged for a white writer from the South of the 1930s, in which proslavery apologia was still prevalent. In fact, the italicized subordinate clause about Quentin's ancestors looking back "into the disease with actual regret" is perhaps the closest Faulkner has ever come to directly addressing guilt. On the one hand, the ancestors' regret could refer to them feeling sorry for themselves, missing 'the good old days' of the antebellum South in which they were considered Cavaliers. On the other hand, regret could also be understood as "remorse," "a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs" (*Merriam Webster*), which to me seems to be a more likely interpretative approach, especially since, as the sentence continues, the newly gained freedom is described as the freedom of impotence. What makes guilt so troubling an emotion is the inability to go back in time, to reverse the misdeed, to repair what was broken. The past is inaccessible, but it constantly hovers over the present. This kind of regret Quentin's ancestors feel is even intensified by the fact that they did not fight the disease directly: Instead of at least taking responsibility by abolishing slavery themselves, they 'took the detour' of a devastating war.

As has been elaborated above, Sutpen's legend is arranged as a foundational narrative of Yoknapatawpha, as the bible is for Western Christian civilization, which means that it also explains to Faulkner's characters fundamental principles of their Southern condition: As humankind is born into an original sin, Faulkner's characters are born into the original sin of slavery.

In the biblical narration, Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This resulted in the Fall of Man. God punished them by banishment from the Garden of Eden, and declared humankind as inherently guilty. In the logic of Faulkner's works, slavery causes the Civil War. At the beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa Coldfield asks whether it is "any wonder that Heaven saw fit to let [them] lose [the Civil War]?" (*AA* 15). The defeat of the Southerners bears comparison with the banishment from the Garden of Eden, because the world as they knew it

disappeared afterwards. Adam represents humankind, which due to him inherits guilt. Due to their ancestors – of whom Thomas Sutpen is only an allegory – the Southern descendants are also declared guilty – a fact that is narratively manifested in their curse of “listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts which had refused to lie still even longer than most had, telling ... about old ghost-times” (*AA* 6). This original guilt of the South is a kind of legacy, which functions according to the biblical verse in which it is said that god “will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 34:7). Thus, although slavery is abolished after the Civil War, guilt starts to unfold all the more: It perseveres in the subconscious mind of descendant after descendant, torturing them in the form of an overwhelming past which seems to get revitalized and reactivated by means of even the tiniest material remnant of the antebellum and Civil War era.

5 MYTHS OF ENDURANCE

The previous chapter has shown how Faulkner used the narrative category of space as a metaphor for a guilty conscience, as the spatial entities in his fiction are evocative of past events and wrongdoings which continue to haunt his characters. In the context of guilt and guilt-ridden perpetrators, the largest of these entities, the land, has a dual role, as it functions as both *witness* and *victim* of the transgressions Faulkner's works deal with. In *Absalom, Absalom!* for example, Haiti, the island where Thomas Sutpen first earns a plantation after having quelled a slave revolt, is described as "a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers" (*AA* 207).[42] Besides creating an 'eerie' atmosphere that pervades the whole novel, this passage also and more importantly indicates the history of the transatlantic slave trade and suggests that the slaves who have been forced to work the land have mythically merged into that land.[43] It is this merging which 'enables' the land to function as a guilty conscience, to perpetuate the slaves' memory and to remind the descendants of the perpetrators of their violent history. Most of the Haitian slaves died, but by figuratively soaking the soil with their blood, Faulkner, as Louise Westling argues, "lays the basis for his claim that [the slaves'] chants and throbbing drums are the voice of the volcanic earth itself" (129). Whereas their dead bodies are mostly gone, their "old unsleeping blood that had vanished into the earth they trod still cried out for vengeance" (*AA* 207). In this scenario, the land as witness to white men's crimes forms an alliance with their victims, thus providing some kind of strongpoint for the haunting of the perpetrators.

---

[42] Faulkner smothers the fact of the successful slave revolt in San Domingo in 1791. Godden notes that, historically, by the time of Sutpen's arrival, "[t]here were neither slaves nor French plantations in Haiti in 1827" (251). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, "one of the key facts of nineteenth-century black American history" (251) is rewritten, as the novel suggests that both the revolt as well as its combat are historically unprecedented. According to Godden, this is no historical error, but an intentional falsification of history, which Faulkner needs for his characterization of Sutpen's callous design: "read together, these anomalies make absolute historical sense. Given that Faulkner wishes to foreground the continuous potential for revolution within the institution of slavery, he needs Haiti, the only successful black revolution. Given that he wishes to characterize the plantocracy as a class that suppresses revolution, he requires that his ur-planter suppress the Haitian revolution and go on doing so" (255).

[43] Thadious M. Davis works out the connection between the depiction of black people and the land, arguing that "[t]he 'wild' slaves as an imagined reality in the novel serve to create psychological atmosphere and mood similar to the function of natural landscape or setting in some nineteenth-century novels (such as the moors in Wuthering Heights)" ("The Signifying Abstraction" 77).

At the same time, the merging of the slaves with the very land they work(ed) is reminiscent of an established trope which Faulkner, and other modernist writers, often draw on: the notion of an authentic and primal closeness of black people to nature. This notion is part of what Lothar Hönnighausen describes as the pastoral tradition, a "modernist effort to gain a new, secular redemption for man by artistically exploring his affinity with the natural world" (199). As both the 'aristocratic' South of the antebellum years as well as the so-called 'New South' are opposed to the wilderness which had to be tamed in order for both to come into existence, it is self-evident that the primitivism of the pastoral tradition had to be ascribed mostly to people excluded from dominant white society. Thus, these 'primitivist' ideals, as Hönnighausen calls them, are usually to be found in black or indigenous characters. Whereas Hönnighausen considers Faulkner simply sharing "the contemporary fascination with a version of man less developed, less spoilt, and closer to nature" (199), Westling demonstrates the troubling animalization of Sutpen's Haitian slaves in *Absalom, Absalom!*.[44] She points out that "[t]he wagon in which they arrive is said to be 'a black tunnel filled with still eyeballs and his smelling like a wolfden,' they are sent by Sutpen to hunt in the swamp like a pack of hounds, and one is described as sleeping in the mud like an alligator and only narrowly prevented from killing an unsuspecting coon hunter who stumbles upon him by accident" (131). However, Westling also points out Sutpen's dependency on the "primitive landscapes" and "their avatars, the 'wild n—'" (128), whom he needs in order to achieve wealth and power. Thus, the narrative fusion of non-white people and nature indicates the enormous scope of exploitation and subjugation upon which the Southern (and American) wealth is based, or, as Westling argues, "[i]n Faulkner's mind, white men's crimes against the land are paralleled by, and implicated in, crimes against dark-skinned people" (128). As this statement illustrates, the land is more than a 'witness' of slavery and the concomitant bloodshed: It is the most primal victim not only of the Southern quest for economic prosperity, but of "the entire European colonial project" (Westling 127). In order to conquer the wild landscape of the 'New World,' colonizers required a labor force they considered as equally 'wild.' This means that the

[44] It must be noted, however, that Hönnighausen's essay cannot easily be discounted as apologetic and outmoded. While his reference to the pastoral tradition (which, tradition or not, does not make the attribution of black people with animals and the wilderness less racist), seems at odds with the current awareness of racist patterns in literature and society, Hönnighausen's point is exactly that such a depiction of black people is not based on any reality, but instead a product of the white imagination.

Southern guilt which is the subject of this work is entangled in an even more extensive guilt narrative which encompasses the entire Western world.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner tries to come to terms with this guilt-ridden past of enslavement and exploitation. Especially Isaac McCaslin of *Go Down, Moses* becomes more and more estranged from his white family and their entanglement in this history. Consequently, he imagines a mythical union of non-white people with the natural world from which white people are excluded. He praises black people's primitiveness, their authenticity and moral high ground, which will guarantee their survival long after the perpetrators' decay. Thus, he reverts to the exact same tropes that made these iniquities possible in the first place. Instead of acknowledging the humanity of non-white people, this kind of narrative turns out to be a myth used to absolve its narrators from their guilt. This mythmaking is yet another narrative strategy to deal with guilt and will be investigated in what follows.

5.1 ‘VIRGIN LAND’ AND THE WILDERNESS[45]

The concept of *property* is a key aspect of Western thought. John Locke, a central figure of political philosophy and the “Father of Liberalism,” defined it as one of three natural rights, among life and liberty. In his political theory, property primarily refers to man’s “property in his own person,” which he describes as follows: “this nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his” (159). According to Ellen Meiksins Wood, this “[s]elf-ownership, and the property that every man has in his own labour, then becomes the source of *property in things and land*” (267, my emphasis). For Locke, the ability and right of ownership thus exceeds the individual’s body. The latter is not only the master of himself, but of everything he fabricates or changes in the process of labor.[46] Wood further explains that, according to Locke,

> [a]nything in which man ‘mixes his labour’, anything which, through his labour, he removes or changes from its natural state, anything to which he has added something by his labour, becomes his property and excludes the rights of other men. This is how private property grows out of common ownership, not by common consent but by natural right – as an extension of a man’s person and his labour, in which he has an exclusive right by nature (267).

---

[45] The two terms which gave this chapter its title, ‘virgin land’ and ‘wilderness,’ are expressive of the American trope of the westward movement and its representation in nineteenth-century frontier historiography, whose most central work is probably Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” published in 1893. In it, Turner develops the so-called ‘frontier thesis,’ describing the end of the (identity establishing) frontier experience and the significance it had on the development of the country: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” The frontier line, Turner further argues, was expanded by people “crossing a continent … winning a wilderness … developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life.” Since the publication of Turner’s essay, the term ‘wilderness’ is understood as an antonym of civilization. *The Frontier in American History*. 1920. Dover Publications, 2010, pp. 1–38, pp. 1f. The term ‘virgin land’ traces back to Henry Nash Smith’s study *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), which relates Turner’s thesis to the prevalent myths and stereotypes about the west in the nineteenth century: “Whatever the merits or demerits of the frontier hypothesis in explaining actual events, the hypothesis itself developed out of the myth of the garden.” Harvard UP, 1950, p. 292. For an extensive analysis of the garden myth, as it is also, and more fully, developed by Leo Marx in *Machine in the Garden*, see, for example Ostwald, Conrad Eugene. *After Eden. The Secularization of American Space in the Fiction of Willa Cather and Theodore Dreiser*. Bucknell UP, 1990, especially chapter 1, “‘America’ as Paradise Lost. Spatial Disorientation at the End of the Nineteenth Century.”

[46] The argument which is brought forward in this subchapter focuses on white people’s claims on the land and inanimate objects at most. I will not discuss white claims of ownership over slaves in light of Locke’s theory in the *Two Treatises*. Any such discussion would clearly go beyond the scope of this work. For a detailed overview of research on Locke and slavery, see, for example: Glausser, Wayne. “Three Approaches to Locke and the Slave Trade.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 51, no. 2, 1990, pp. 199–216.

In this light, it does not come as a surprise that Locke's ideas are often considered as having served as a basis for one of the most identity-establishing documents of the United States: The Declaration of Independence. In *Property and the Pursuit of Happiness*, Edward J. Erler points out that the Declaration is distinct from other revolutionary documents because it did not proclaim an exchange of rulers, but, "for the first time in history, [the founding of a nation] dedicated to a universal principle—the principle that 'all men are created equal'" (2). This nation relies on natural right and natural law, which, as Erler further argues, "provided the ground for a new kind of constitutionalism" (2).

The three unalienable rights which the Declaration states in one of its most famous phrases – "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" – are clearly evocative of Locke's theory, although the substitution of a right to property with the pursuit of happiness might surprise. Erler conducts a detailed analysis of the sources which have informed American constitutional thought in general and Thomas Jefferson's phrase in particular. According to Erler, the phrasing in the Declaration of Independence stems from George Mason's draft of Virginia's Declaration of Rights, but was shortened by Jefferson:

> The Virginia document included both property and the pursuit of happiness when it proclaimed, '[t]hat all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights of which … they cannot by any compact deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety' (Erler 91).

As Erler proceeds, he states that Jefferson's modification and deletion is interpreted by some historians as a "significant break with Locke's doctrine of property" (92). Vernon L. Parrington, for example, declares that Jefferson "set the pursuit of happiness above abstract property rights" and considers his rejection of Locke as "singularly fortunate for America" (qtd. in Erler 92). And Jean M. Yarbrough argues that Locke's notion of a natural right to property is of little importance to Jefferson's thought (cf. Erler 93f.). Erler, on the other hand, argues that the right to property was omitted by no means, but that it

> was understood by the founders as the comprehensive right that included all other rights. Understood in this manner, the right to property was described in our most authoritative document as the 'pursuit of happiness,' which was considered not only a natural right but also a moral obligation (3).

Thus, Erler identifies the right to property as foundation for the pursuit of happiness central to the Declaration of Independence, and the Lockean right to property as a significant factor of influence for this document.[47]

The world in Faulkner's fiction is a pre-industrial and agrarian one in which labor is usually defined by manual work. Locke refers to a similar world, and his idea of acquiring the right to property through labor starts from the premise that people work with their hands. The correlation between property and labor becomes particularly relevant in terms of the possession of land, which is probably one of the most abstract possessions one can claim to obtain, for it has existed long before humans ever walked the earth. Furthermore, its existence is by no means to be considered the fruit of men's labor. However, it is necessary to distinguish between Locke's and, for that matter, Western (political) philosophy's concept of land as something men have improved on by means of their labor, and a rather mythical notion of land as unspoiled nature. After all, Locke's theory of labor-based property proposes an *agricultural* conception of land, and certainly not a *pastoral* one. In his *Two Treatises*, he states:

> God gave the world to men in common; but since he gave it to them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational (and *labour* was to be *his title* to it) (163, emphasis in the original).

In his reference to god, Locke rejects any moral obligation to the natural world, thus subordinating it to humans' needs. And in a next step, he makes labor the key to – and justification of – private land ownership.[48] Thus, unspoiled nature becomes a primary resource out of which the labor of people creates productive land.

---

[47] Erler also comments on "the exact origin of the phrase 'pursuit of happiness'" and states that it was also Locke who "frequently used [that] phrase" (97). He proceeds: "This is exceedingly curious, but I think easily explained because Locke … never says that the pursuit of happiness is a natural right and, in fact, never uses the phrase in *Two Treatises of Government*. Rather, he presents the pursuit of happiness in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a moral duty. The founders were certainly acquainted with Locke's Essay, and the decision to present 'the pursuit of happiness' in the Declaration as a natural right may indicate that there was a conscious effort on their part to consider this third of the trilogy of specifically named natural rights as both a right and a duty" (97f.). By writing two separate treatises, Locke faced the theological-political problem which "made it necessary for him to treat regime questions and moral questions in separate works" (Erler 101). Erler argues that it was particularly Locke's writing which enabled the American founders to resolve this problem "based on the separation of church and state" (3).

[48] As Wood points out, "Locke does, to be sure, maintain that there are certain limits on accumulation established by natural law. The most obvious – apart from the physical limits of the capacity to labour –

This dichotomy of agricultural and pastoral conceptions of land is characteristic for the American imagination. In *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny defines as

> America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction (4).[49]

For Europeans, this idea of paradise, of untouched nature, of 'virgin land,' was little more than a wishful dream before the discovery of America. For the early settlers in the so-called 'New World,' however, this mental image became reality.[50] As they moved to America, they experienced, as Kolodny argues, the "regression from the cares of the adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape" (6). They discovered a landscape which stretched itself out in front of them with abandon, a "realm of 'wonderful plenty,' its rich soil supporting an abundance of game and growing crops 'plentiful, sweet, fruitful and wholesome,' with 'divers other wholesome and medicinable herbs and trees'" (Kolodny 10, citing M. Arthur Barlowe 13-20). What the documents chronicling the early exploration and colonization of America have in common is that they create in the mind of the reader an image of a 'promised land' in which the settlers could begin a new, more authentic life in contrast

---

is that no man should accumulate so much that he cannot consume it and lets it go to waste or spoil. Nor should he accumulate so much that he damages the interests of his fellows. He must leave enough, and good enough, to respect everyone else's right to subsistence. These 'spoilage' and 'sufficiency' limitations seem to mean that a man's own capacity for labour together with that of his family, and his own capacity for consumption together with that of his household, set strict natural – and moral – limits on what he can accumulate" (267). However, Wood also remarks that Locke considered money to be the absolute and simple answer to probable inequalities of wealth, as it would enable people to "accumulate more than they themselves can consume without violating the natural law of prohibition against spoilage" (267).

[49] Kolodny's works *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* and *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier, 1630–1860*, are considered as foundational works in ecocriticism and especially ecofeminism.

[50] Noel Polk argues that early settlers attempted to "opt out of history, … start over, change things, take control of and then micromanage their own destinies," but that the "Puritan forebears brought with them, even as they came to discover and to own the new Eden, both a history and a vision of the future, rank with the odor of purpose, which they then attempted to impose upon the new world Eden" (48). The "Edenic wilderness" they found is a prominent topic in American literature – "For such writers as Emerson and Thoreau, Nature was generous, expansive, and lifegiving, and human beings were inextricable from it; others, like Bradford, Hawthorne, and Melville, understood it rather as dark, troublesome, and chaotic" – that Faulkner also engaged with: For him, "forests were inherent with neither positive nor negative moral value. He understood that people rather imposed such value on forests by the uses to which they put them. … For him the wilderness was *both* Eden *and* raw material for moral and commercial appropriation" (49).

to that in the 'Old World.'[51] In fact, as Kolodny argues, it was "[t]hrough documents like these, published and circulated widely, [that] England first came to know America" (11).[52]

But neither the settlers' exhilaration, nor the experience of the pastoral fantasy come true were permanent. The very settlement brought with it a change of the land, a disruption of the unspoiled state of nature which is one of the reasons people had emigrated in the first place – quite apart from the fact that the 'pristine' land the settlers discovered had already been inhabited (but more on this later). Kolodny states:

> Colonization brought with it an inevitable paradox: the success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else—a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, and urban nation. As a result, those who had initially responded to the promise inherent in a feminine landscape were now faced with the consequences of that response: either they recoiled in horror from the meaning of their manipulation of a naturally generous world …, or … they succumbed to a life of easeful regression … Neither response, however, obviated the fact that the despoliation of the land appeared more and more an inevitable consequence of human habitation (7).

In order to really *live* in 'paradise,' one has to work and customize it. But naturally, once you change it, it is not paradise anymore. With the discovery of the American continent, there came the great promise of a new beginning, of a mother welcoming her children to a new home. This is what Kolodny calls the "pastoral impulse," the "yearning to know and to respond to the landscape as feminine" (8). The settlers abandoned themselves to this impulse, thus bringing about their own ruin. Because the "real dangers [sic.] of the pastoral impulse […] is not the '*Fiction* of the land of Ease,' but its reality" (Kolodny 14, emphasis in the original). The reading Kolodny offers of the American nation is metaphorically rich and almost biblically charged, for she detects a collective sense of original sin, an almost tragic experience which remains at the heart of American (national) identity to this day:

---

[51] For a concise overview of these documents, see Kolodny's chapter "Surveying the Virgin Land," pp. 10–25.

[52] Such a spiritual charge of the land was unimaginable in Europe and is considered "a distinctively American set of ideas" which stems from "the cultural inferiority that inevitably defined America's relation to the Old World" (Evans 183f.). Evans explains how the Puritans founded the idea of America by identifying "the western continent as the foreordained site of revelation," thus investing place with special meaning that the European Protestant tradition denied "because it smelled suspiciously of Catholic superstition" (186).

> Only in America has the entire process remained within historical memory, giving Americans the unique ability to see themselves as the willful exploiters of the very land that had once promised an escape from such necessities. With the pastoral impulse neither terminated nor yet wholly repressed, the entire process—the dream and its betrayal, and the consequent *guilt* and anger—in short, the knowledge of what we have done to our continent, continues even in this century, as Gary Snyder put it, 'eating at the American heart like acid' (8, my emphasis).

Kolodny reveals an American guilt narrative – that of having laid waste one's own living environment – as well as a feminist reading of its structure, which she describes elsewhere in the book as "an exercise of destructive masculine power over a vulnerable feminine" (23f.).[53] Thus, the parts of offender and victim are plainly assigned.

Kolodny's analysis fits for my project about the narrative negotiations of guilt in Faulkner, because she produces a guilt narrative, too. In fact, her story of the exploitation of the land is also narratively explored by Faulkner, and probably nowhere else as elaborately as in *Go Down, Moses*. The novel's protagonist is Isaac McCaslin, at least for those parts which Michael D'Alessandro calls "a trilogy of stories within *Go Down, Moses*—'The Old People,' 'The Bear,' and 'Delta Autumn'" (376). Each of these parts is characterized by Ike's voice, which narrates his experiences as a young boy, an adolescent and an old man respectively.

Like many other characters in Faulkner's fiction, Ike is driven by the search for a pure origin. But whereas the "dignity of beginnings," as I have labelled it in chapter 4, is achieved by means of the family narrative and an adaptation of the Cavalier legend in novels like *Flags in the Dust*, *The Sound and the Fury* and *Light in August*, Ike seeks after a pure origin elsewhere. Disappointed by his family and having a vague premonition of their misguided way of life, he turns away from them. Instead of identifying himself with his ancestors, Ike imagines an origin story for himself which he connects to a mythically charged wilderness. This wilderness is narratively constructed on two different levels in *Go Down, Moses*: On the one hand, it is the narrative space that Faulkner designed for a large part of the plot to unfold. On the other, it is a product of Ike's imagination. Both levels are imaginative, but it is crucial to note that most of

---

[53] Analyzing a journal by John Woolman, Kolodny demonstrates how the structure of manly connoted violence over feminine nature is often represented by a femininely imagined moon and the sun as a "traditionally […] masculine generative force" (23).

the times, the reader 'sees' the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses* through the eyes of Ike. This narrative complexity allows Faulkner to insinuate the "cultural symbolism" of the distinctively American notion of sacred nature, because, as David H. Evans argues, "'The Bear' is really about the *invention* of nature or, more accurately about the way in which the principal character, Ike McCaslin, defines a natural world in order to invest it with special significance" (180, emphasis in the original).

Ike imagines an alternative to the spoiled nature he experiences around him, and thus responds to the wish for a life in harmony with a nature that is perceived as feminine and motherly, which Kolodny has called the "pastoral impulse." As a young boy, he senses that something is wrong with the way he and his family live and use their living environment. He reflects upon the land that his relatives call their own:

> … although it had been his grandfather's and then his father's and uncle's and was now his cousin's and someday would be his own land which he and Sam hunted over, their hold upon it actually was as trivial and without reality as the now faded and archaic script in the chancery book in Jefferson which allocated it to them and that it was he, the boy, who was the guest here and Sam Fathers' voice the mouthpiece of the host (*GDM* 127).

This passage seems to address the tenuousness of the principle of inheritance according to which landholdings are kept in the family. The right to property as it has been defined by Locke and thus served as a basis for the Declaration of Independence is distorted here, as it is not acquired by labor but due to genealogy. Whereas Thomas Jefferson, as Erler points out, thought "that an acre of land becomes the *temporary* property of the one who occupies it, and that the right to property in that acre ceases when occupation terminates" (94, my emphasis), Faulkner's characters – and the whole western world – have turned property into something inheritable and thus *everlasting*.

In the South, the prerequisite of *labor* was even eliminated, as white, rich planter families owned their land without the intention of *using* it: They had others *work* their land for them. This procedure is criticized, for example, in the seventh chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Quentin Compson and Shreve McCannon recollect what Quentin's grandfather has told him about Thomas Sutpen's origins. Sutpen grew up in the mountains before he and his family moved to the flatlands. Up to that point, he is said to have

> had never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them … 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 (*AA* 183).

Where Sutpen comes from, the land had been used collectively, and "everybody had just what he was strong enough or energetic enough to take and keep" (*AA* 183). There, status did not depend on possession, and possession was not attached to ancestry and blood. As Kartiganer states, this place is "directly opposed to the valley society" to which the Sutpen family is passing ("The Discovery of Values" 292). The system at work there is described as rather odd, which is stressed by the emphasizing "actually:" Sutpen just cannot believe that men are *actually* able to *own* a piece of land. The passage also trenchantly observes that white men's actions amounted to nothing 'useful' and that their habit of *doing* nothing was ensured by others who *had* nothing. Thus, the Lockean need for labor is 'outsourced,' because white people do not work themselves, they have others work for them in order to possess.

What the young and probably perplexed Thomas Sutpen experiences afterwards is the often-discussed embarrassment about him being sent to the back door of a mansion by a black slave, which makes him want to be more like the ones humiliating him instead of opposing them. Therefore, he makes up his "design" – "To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife" (*AA* 218) – and sets out to acquire all those necessary 'ingredients.' In a society which is structured according to the possession of land, family and thus an heir to pass this possession on to is an equally important precondition for sustaining the hierarchical system. Therefore, Sutpen's story revolves around building a dynasty in order to preserve what he has arduously claimed.

The passages from *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* address the same issues, but their characters' perspectives differ: Whereas Sutpen learns that there is another way of life which divides the land into plantations and thus structures society according to the possession of these plantations, Ike discerns that his family's procedure is no natural state, but something arbitrary. Their responses, therefore, are diametrically opposed, because Sutpen longs for something Ike wants to get rid of: Whereas Sutpen decides to take possession of the land, Ike repudiates his heritage

when he is a little older.[54] He does so because he gradually begins to interpret the world he lives in differently and assigns another part to himself in its fabric: that of a guest. Ike begins to sense that something is deeply wrong with the balance of power between humanity and nature in the society he lives in. By describing himself as a guest and also by evoking the image of a host, Ike suggests a superior entity which has been neglected by his people and their system of inheritance. Ike describes the flaw of that system as follows:

> For six years now he had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document.—of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it, of Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey; bigger than Major de Spain and the scrap he pretended to, knowing better; older than old Thomas Sutpen of whom Major de Spain had had it and who knew better; older even than Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief, of whom old Sutpen had had it and who knew better in his turn (*GDM* 140).

Here, Ike begins to interpret his environment in mythical terms and in accord with a pastoral conception of nature, as the wilderness is described as a rather timeless entity invaded by humanity, which has turned the wilderness into a resource. This original sin is the result of the acquisition of land in general, and of the specific transaction from Ikkemotubbe, the father of Sam Fathers, to Thomas Sutpen in particular. The passage describes the moment when the land first changed hands, from a *collective* represented by a Native American to an *individual*. The former is characterized as an egomaniac, an “Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it had been his to convey,” the latter as a fool, a “white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it.”

The two novel passages quoted above illustrate the illusory hold upon the land which white men claim and defend. This attitude is ridiculed in *Go Down, Moses* when a group of hunters is confronted with an intrusion into their living environment. This

---

[54] Polk makes a somewhat similar note, arguing that the “heroes of these two chronicles of the American South, Thomas Sutpen and Isaac McCaslin, are thematic siblings in Faulkner’s work. To oversimplify, Sutpen desperately wants to have what Isaac just as desperately wants to give away: that peculiarly Southern way of life built upon the exploitation of land and people. That is, they are both looking at the same thing, but from entirely opposing and mutually exclusive perspectives. Like Quentin, like the founders of America, like the founders of Jefferson, both of them want to step outside of their histories in order to start things over” (52).

intrusion resembles their own settlement, a comparison they cannot draw and therefore have to fight:

> '… It was Old Ben,' Major de Spain said. 'I'm disappointed in him. He has broken the rules. I didn't think he would have done that. He has killed mine and McCaslin's dogs, but that was alright. We gambled the dogs against him; we gave each other warning. *But now he has come into my house and destroyed my property, out of season too*. He broke the rules. It was Old Ben, Sam.' (157, my emphasis).

Major de Spain, feels offended by the bear Old Ben, whose hunt is a central part of the story. He assumes a kind of unspoken contract between them which Old Ben has broken from de Spain's point of view. He describes himself as a victim, and the bear as a perpetrator. He accuses the bear of trespassing and property damage. Major de Spain is seriously astonished and truly believes himself harmed. But within the words of his character, Faulkner has hidden another guilt narrative, albeit a short one: Of the harms that the wilderness has suffered. In fact, the crimes which Major de Spain claims have been done to him are those which his ancestors have committed in the first place. But Major de Spain does not realize that. He takes for granted rules which were not in effect when white men disseized and exploited the land. And Old Ben broke these rules by "com[ing] into [his] house and destroy[ing] [his] property." The sad irony of this passage lies in the fact that de Spain can see the intrusion into one's living environment as unlawful, but that he remains blind to the resemblance it bears to his forefathers' occupation and settlement. Nature seems to hold up a mirror to the hunters, but de Spain does not recognize himself in it because he thinks he is civilized, superior.

Throughout the novel, the bear Old Ben functions as a representative of the wilderness. By narrating the hunting ritual and the characters' treatment of and interaction with the bear, Faulkner draws attention to the human transgressions towards nature. Moreover, de Spain also expresses the old contrast between civilization and savagery at the heart of American national identity. The bear as an image of the wilderness has to be tamed or otherwise put in its place by superior, civilized men. Major de Spain, like white men in general, disregards that actual savage crimes have been committed by ostensibly civilized white men wrecking the bear's habitat and forcing the "yearly pageant-rite" (*GDM* 142) of the hunt upon it and finally

killing it.[55] Thus, the novel passage ironically points out the double standards of de Spain's set of rules. At the same time, the passage implies that any civilization thrives at the expense of the wilderness and the living creatures it hosts, and that the destruction of nature is to be seen, to quote Kolodny again, as an "inevitable consequence of human habitation" (7).

It is curious, however, that the victim in this guilt narrative is the admittedly abstract or 'impersonal body' of nature and not also the great number of Native American nations which have been dispossessed and expelled from their home during European colonization. Instead, indigenous people seem to be portrayed as accomplices of the white settlers because of their ruthlessness to sell the land of their people: "Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief, of whom old Sutpen had had it and who knew better in his turn."

Faulkner's Native American characters are rarely discussed by Faulkner criticism, compared against African American characters, for example. But nonetheless, there are a few elaborate studies on their design and function in Faulkner's works. Kinney, for example, calls them "Faulkner's Other Others" in his essay of the same title. For him, the "forgotten red race in Faulkner—the truly other others—remains a potentially highly charged if largely untapped resource in his work in part because we have taken less time to interpret them" (196). Faulkner himself, as Kinney further argues, was familiar at least with the history of the Chickasaw and the Choctaw, and his "stories about Indians, then, use Indians to comment on something else" ("Faulkner's Other Others" 197). Michael D'Alessandro explicitly disagrees, noting that Faulkner "eschewed research" and that he admitted himself: "I never read any history … I talked to people. If I got it straight it's because I didn't worry with other people's ideas about it" (375, citing Robert Cantwell). But still, D'Alessandro's analysis ascribes a certain function to Faulkner's Native American characters, especially Sam Fathers of *Go Down, Moses* (but more on this momentarily).

---

[55] In *Absalom, Absalom!*, there is a similar passage revealing such an intentional misrepresentation, which is discussed by Louise Westling. When Quentin and Shreve reconstruct General Compson's conversation with Thomas Sutpen about the latter's Haiti history, they have Compson define Haiti as "a theater for violence and injustice and bloodshed and all the satanic lusts of human greed and cruelty" (*AA* 207). Westling says that "[r]eaders should notice, though Shreve and Quentin may not, that the satanic lusts of greed and cruelty General Compson mentions were exercised by supposedly civilized white men who tore the Africans from their homes and forced them to shed their blood on the Caribbean island" (129).

Kinney mainly focuses on four of Faulkner's short stories – "Red Leaves," "A Justice," "A Courtship," and "Lo!" – and he investigates the 'seduction' of Ikkemotubbe, who sold the land to Thomas Sutpen, by the white settlers in the third one. In it, Ikkemotubbe and David Hogganbeck compete for a woman, accepting several challenges, only to find out that a third suitor has married her while they battled against each other. According to Kinney, this experience causes the humiliation which "will lead, in the case of Ikkemotubbe, to the birth of Doom the despot" ("Faulkner's Other Others" 197) in the story "A Justice," which was published earlier, but whose plot unfolds years after the events narrated in "A Courtship." In "A Courtship," it is told, "in a flash forward" (Kinney, "Faulkner's Other Others" 197), that

> Moketubbe was the Man when Ikkemotubbe returned, named Doom now, with the white friend called the Chevalier Soeur-Blonde de Vitry and the eight new slaves which we did not need either, and his gold-laced hat and cloak and the little gold box of strong salt and the wicker wine hamper containing the four other puppies which were still alive, and within two days Moketubbe's little son was dead and within three Ikkemotubbe whose name was Doom now was himself the Man (363).

When he went to New Orleans, Ikkemotubbe felt ashamed, but once he returned, he was another man. As Kinney points out, the

> fine white man's clothes and the white man's poison with which he returns to seize control of the tribe where he was embarrassed make this contest too a struggle that in time will use intimidation to achieve dominance. The white man supplied the doom of the Indian by inspiring Doom himself to employ the white man's values and ways ("Faulkner's Other Others" 197).

Ikkemotubbe's unscrupulousness, which is addressed in *Go Down, Moses*, can thus be interpreted as an imitation of the white man. And when he trades the land later on, his decision is caused by the corruption of his character by them: Ikkemotubbe has been tricked into selling the land of his people.

D'Alessandro's article concentrates on another Native American character in *Go Down, Moses*: Sam Fathers. He states:

> A half-Chickasaw elder and wilderness guide to Yoknapatawpha's youth, Sam serves a crucial role in young Isaac ('Ike') McCaslin's miseducation. As a ten-year-old boy in 1878, Ike stands in line to inherit his grandfather's plantation. But after learning of his ancestor's sordid histories, he identifies an alternate birthright as a Native American (D'Alessandro 375f.).

It turns out that Ike's imagination of the wilderness, his pastoral impulse, to use Kolodny's term, is linked to a profound misunderstanding of his companion Sam Fathers. It is *through* Sam and his alleged relationship with nature that Ike conceives his idea of the wilderness. According to D'Alessandro, Faulkner has constructed Sam Fathers "as a performative, false Native American" on purpose: "Contrary to previous critics' assessments, Faulkner seeks to draw readers' attention to, and not distract notice from, this inherent performativity [of presumed Native American traditions]" (376).

In this act of "playing Indian" (D'Alessandro 376), Ike attempts to escape the severe changes of modernization which the South experienced after the Civil War. During Reconstruction, Southerners tried to defend Southern culture and traditions against an apparently irruptive modernity and industrialization.[56] In order to do so, they needed a convincing narrative. One of these narratives was the reactionary Cavalier legend, which has already been discussed in chapter 4. Another one was a romanticized version of Native American history which was supposed to be 'purer' than the European heritage of the settlers. As D'Alessandro notes, "[f]or white Americans anxious about becoming absorbed within this period's progress, playing the Indian offered an alternate country promising a supposedly genuine identity" (379).

As discussed in chapter 4, characters like Bayard Sartoris of *Flags in the Dust* or Gail Hightower of *Light in August* live in the past and reconstruct their ancestors of the antebellum years as noble gentlemen, thus drawing on the Cavalier legend. Ike shares these characters' inability to move on, but he refuses to refer back to the violent and tainted history of his family, which he does not mistake for a noble Southern planter class. He neither relates to nor glorifies his ancestors' past. Instead, he invents a new heritage for himself, and weaves an alternate tale, which he finds in "a fictional Native American world opposing modernity" (D'Alessandro 380). In order to enter this world, Ike needs a teacher, which he finds in Sam Fathers. The latter is a highly unusual character: Being the son of Ikkemotubbe and a so-called "quadroon slave," he is "a

---

[56] The Southern opposition to modernization and industrialization has also been criticized by a group of people known as the Southern Agrarians. Faulkner's works are often interpreted in the light of this group's claims. The relation of Faulkner's fiction to the agrarian movement, however, is complicated and ultimately inconclusive, and would warrant a separate treatment. For a more elaborate study of the issue, see for example Watkins, Floyd C. "What Stand Did Faulkner Take?" *Faulkner and the Southern Renaissance*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1981, pp. 40–62.

man of mixed black and Chickasaw bloodlines" (D'Alessandro 378). Moreover, Sam has been separated from his father Ikkemotubbe – the latter sold his own son together with the mother – and this separation "severed him from a Chickasaw culture even before the tribe departed westward. Thus, Sam seeks to initiate Ike into a Native American society to which Sam never wholly belonged in the first place" (D'Alessandro 386). This narrative choice enables Faulkner to show Sam "not as a real Indian but merely as Ike's mythic one" (D'Alessandro 386).

Sam initiates Ike into the wilderness, but the latter is only a mythicized version of nature. Ike imagines a close relation between Sam and the environment, while his idea of both is only a distorted picture. Thus, Faulkner addresses Ike's vain attempt of re-writing his own descent: Ike dissociates himself from his family by appropriating a Native American heritage and by enacting a spiritual affinity to the wilderness which he imagines Native Americans to have. Hence, Ike's accounts of the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses* have to be interpreted in view of this fact.

Ike's initiation is executed by the killing of his first buck: "So the instant came. He pulled the trigger and Sam Fathers marked his face with the hot blood which he had spilled and he ceased to be a child and became a hunter and a man" (*GDM* 132). Shortly afterwards, Ike is described as having undergone a change, as the wilderness is

> less inimical now and never to be inimical again since the buck still and forever leaped, the shaking gun-barrels coming constantly and forever steady at last, crashing, and still out of his instant of immortality the buck sprang, forever immortal;—the wagon jolting and bouncing on, the moment of the buck, the shot, Sam Fathers and himself and the blood with which Sam had marked him forever one with the wilderness which had accepted him since Sam said that he had done all right" (*GDM* 132).

Ike 'belongs' to the wilderness now, "he assumes a newfound masculinity deriving from past cultures. Ike interprets the event not only as an induction to nature but also as an invitation to Native American lineage" (D'Alessandro 388).[57] The spiritual, mythical

---

[57] It is important to note that the attainment of manhood requires the conquest of a nature which 'behaves' welcoming afterwards. Based on Kolodny's theory, it is easy to interpret this portrayal as femininely connoted, which applies to the majority of American literary works (Kolodny analyzes, for example: Saul Bellows' *Henderson the Rain King*; James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Prairie* (among others); F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; William Gilmore Simms' *The Forayers; or, The Raid of the Dog-Days* and *Katharine Walton; or, The Rebel of Dorchester*, to name but a few).

experience of the wilderness begins with this passage of the novel, which displays it as a rather timeless entity: the wilderness is described as everlasting and immortal, and Ike's union with it is equally eternal. As a consequence of his initiation, Ike acts as an opponent to ('civil') society from this moment on, as the latter destroys the wilderness bit by bit. This destruction dominates most of the remainder of *Go Down, Moses*.

One sector that played a significant role in terms of environmental destruction in the U.S.-American South is the lumber industry. Its effects are also treated in the novel, for example when Major de Spain sells his land to a Memphis lumber company. Thus, the change of ownership continues, this time from a man who has other people work his land for him to a commercial enterprise which exploits land and labor on a grand scale. After the sale, it is once again Ike who discovers

> in shocked and grieved amazement even though he had had forewarning and had believed himself prepared: a new planing-mill already half completed which would cover two or three acres and what looked like miles and miles of stacked steel rails red with the light bright rust of newness and of piled crossties sharp with creosote, and wire corrals and feeding-throughs for two hundred mules at least and the tents for the men who drove them (*GDM* 236).

Faulkner uses this passage strategically to emphasize the narrative contrast between nature and civilization, which is formed throughout the novel. Ike, who has been so sensitive to the wilderness, its seeming superiority and its vast expanse up to this point, now sees himself confronted with items of civilization which do not belong there, and which he realizes will cause its decline. The image of a planing mill which is drawn in the quoted passage not only refers to a visual disturbance of the landscape, but also represents the exploitation of nature, in this case the "big woods." Its trees are cut down and then turned into lumber by the planing mill. The milled boards are the alienated elements of nature which humans claim in order to build their 'hubristic' civilization, as they do not intend to live in accord, but in contrast with it.

Faulkner addresses what Lawrence Buell calls the "concise history of the cut-and-get-out phase of the timber industry in the Deep South" (2) already in *Light in August*. In the first chapter of the novel, it is said that

> [a]ll the men in the village worked in the mill or for it. It was cutting pine. It had been there seven years and in seven years more it would destroy all the timber within its reach. Then some of the machinery and most of the men who ran it

> and existed because of and for it would be loaded onto freight cars and moved away. But some of the machinery would be left, since new pieces could always be bought on the installment plan—gaunt, staring, motionless wheels rising from mounds of brick rubble and ragged weeds with a quality profoundly astonishing, and gutted boilers lifting their rusting and unsmoking stacks with an air stubborn, baffled and bemused upon a stumppocked scene of profound and peaceful desolation, unplowed, untilled, gutting slowly into red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and the galloping fury of vernal equinoxes (*LA* 401f.).

Here, Faulkner paints a lively, yet dark image of nature left alone after it has been exploited, of the effects of “intensive exploitation and chronic wastefulness (of forest, soil, people, and equipment)” (Buell 2). All that is left of the forest are stumps among which the machinery out of use bears witness to the devastation it has caused. As in the passage from *Go Down, Moses*, the planing mill can be read as a condensed form of the overall destruction of nature in this paragraph from *Light in August*. The enormity of the latter is emphasized with the reference to the short period of time – fourteen years in total – that it takes the mill to annihilate an ecosystem which has existed longer than anyone could imagine.

The passage from *Light in August* describes an abandoned region. In *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner has a character return to a similar one. Ike has been attached to the wilderness and has hunted its grounds since he was a young boy. When he returns decades after he first discovered the mill, he finds that “[m]ost of that was gone now. Now a man drove two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in” (*GDM* 251). However, as Buell further notes regarding the passage from *Light in August*, in addition to the destruction, Faulkner also paints “(no less strikingly) the environment’s power to fight back in its own way, as the machinery disintegrates in ‘the red and choked ravines beneath the long quiet rains of autumn and the galloping fury of vernal equinoxes’” (4). Generally, nature does not only fight back, but is designed as an enduring entity despite its ravishment. Faulkner elaboratively establishes this endurance throughout *Go Down, Moses* and has it temporarily collapse, though “not being conquered, destroyed, so much as retreating” (*GDM* 253), in its fifth part “The Bear.”

In a passage already quoted above, the wilderness is paraphrased as “the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document” (*GDM* 140), or, as Gerhard Hoffmann elaborately demonstrates, is “expressed either in formulas of summation like ‘the ancient woods’ and ‘the woods’ … or by the abstracting role of attributes like ‘gray

solitude' … 'obscurity' … or 'loneliness'" (668). In line with these formulas, Ike thinks of nature as not measurable in units of time, because it does not comply with practices of documentation bound to chronology: it is older than anything men could ever produce and keep. For him, the wilderness is timeless, something *beyond* time. According to Hoffmann, Faulkner conveys the "impression of an unbroken *continuum*" (668, emphasis in the original), which is represented by the animals of the forest, especially the bear Old Ben. The moments in which Ike spots them are "frozen moments" (qtd. in Hoffmann 667, citing Slatoff):

> Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon's hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the sun's full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder. Then it was gone. It didn't walk into the woods. It faded, sank back into the wilderness without motion as he had watched a fish, a huge old bass, sink back into the dark depths of its pool and vanish without even any movement of its fins (*GDM* 153f.).

The bear is not bound to chronological time, but Ike's experience is: "*Then* he saw … *Then* it moved … *Then* it was gone." The narrative description of the bear, on the other hand, can do without temporal references, at least those beyond the 'scope' of the present. Thus, the bear does neither come nor go: In the "frozen moment" on the glade, neither past – where the bear came from – nor future – where it will go – are relevant. The bear *is* simply there. And as Ike spots it, his visual perception is unable to sense the bear's 'locomotion.' The way he sees it, the bear does not "emerge" or "appear," as if to suggest that it has been standing on the glade all along, and that it only took the boy('s) time to set his eyes on it. As the passage describes how Ike sees the bear against the light, the scene creates a preternatural atmosphere: Visualizing it, one cannot but picture the bear as surrounded by a halo. The bear seems like a superior being, and Ike is given the rare opportunity to share a moment with it. For him, this moment vanishes as fast as it has come, and again, he is unable to sense the bear's departure: suddenly, it is just "gone." It does not simply walk (away), it rather vanishes without motion, without the human eye being able to perceive. Like a fish, its silhouette gradually blurs against the backdrop of the woods.

Ike has imagined this encounter before:

> Because there would be a next time, after and after. He was only ten. It seemed to him that he could see them, the two of them, shadowy in the limbo from which

> time emerged and became time: the old bear absolved from mortality and himself who shared a little bit of it (*GDM* 149).

D'Alessandro interprets this passage in terms of Ike's misconception of Native American heritage (cf. 392f.) or what Philip J. Deloria calls the "primitive authentic" (102).[58] Ike wants to escape the modern world, and in order to do so he appropriates an imagined Native American culture which he associates with a long gone, simpler, and therefore purer lifestyle. But he does not merely seek for simplicity, but rather for exculpation. He is aware of the fact that white people like his ancestors are responsible for the destruction of the environment, and he is all too well aware that the Native Americans, whose heritage he romanticizes and claims as his own, have been dispossessed by the settlers. In this light, his appropriation can also be interpreted as a manifestation of guilt and its temporal structure. D'Alessandro argues that "[b]y rewinding to a pre-plantation, pre-occupied South, Ike ignores and, in effect, erases the region's histories of slavery and Indian dispossession" (391). Unlike other Faulkner characters who wish themselves back into an antebellum South and thus a time when these crimes had already been committed (dispossession), or were still ongoing (slavery), Ike would like to undo them altogether, or at least not be associated with them. His dealing with guilt is evasive, incapable of acts like admission, apology, or atonement, which could pave the way for a better future for both victims and perpetrators. Instead, he covers the tracks that might lead to his share of the blame by *inventing* a different personal history. This is one instance of the temporalities of guilt this work deals with: The guilt he feels refers back to events in the past. And instead of serving future justice, Ike is oriented towards the past or, even worse, a *fiction* of that past. Without confession or redemption, the temporal structure of guilt leaves out the future, it bridges only the past and the present.

Ike imagines a temporal structure in which he, as a reborn Native American, and the bear are on the same level, separated from society. Thus, he also tries to dissociate himself from the acts of violence which are committed against the wilderness by the other huntsmen in *Go Down, Moses*. For him, as D'Alessandro

---

[58] In *Playing Indian*, Deloria demonstrates in how far carrying out these misconceptions is rooted in American leisure activities and education. He points out that New England boys' camps "emphasized contact with the natural world," and that "Nature study often displayed this primitivistic cast, … insisting that to feel nature one had to journey back in time to a simpler life, grasp the experience, and then return, richer but unable to articulate what this pseudomystical encounter had been all about (102).

further points out, his “hunting rituals become central to his endeavors of Indian imitation” (392). His description of the bear therefore also displays his imagined mythical relationship with nature. For Ike, the bear

> ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it. It loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not malevolent but just big, too big for the dogs which tried to bay it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it; too big for the very country which was constricting its scope (*GDM* 141).

Ike claims that the bear, and with it the wilderness, are something bigger than himself, bigger even than the fenced area people have erected around it. The opposition between civilization and nature is expressed nowhere as clearly as in the image of the immaterial construct of a country which is laid around the natural living environment like a snare. But for the moment, Old Ben remains mostly unaffected by the dogs and horses and bullets which people fire at him. Likewise, the wilderness as it is portrayed by Ike in *Go Down, Moses* defies the attempts to conquer it for some time:

> —the two changing yet constant walls just beyond which the wilderness whose mark he had brought away forever on his spirit even from that first two weeks seemed to lean, stooping a little, watching them and listening, not quite inimical because they were too small, even those such as Walter and Major de Spain and old General Compson who had killed many deer and bear, their sojourn too brief and too harmless to excite to that, but just brooding, secret, tremendous, almost inattentive (*GDM* 131).

In this passage, the wilderness is shown as mainly unaffected by men and their actions. Bound to the passage of time, their “sojourn” on earth is “too brief” to make a difference. They are clearly marked as inferior to the wilderness, and yet, the latter keeps a wary eye on the hunters. Nature’s superiority, thus, is fragile. After all, although wilderness and civilization are staged as opponents, the former is not to be understood as an area detached from and unconnected to the latter. As Hoffmann notes, “the mythically experienced world is not only rendered as a self-contained and self-sufficient area outside civilization but exists *in contiguity with and in opposition to the social world*” (669, my emphasis). And opponents, in contrast to independent entities, can cause each other harm.

The sense of foreboding, which looms in the novel passages in which Ike is a young boy, becomes more manifest when Ike is an adult. As throughout the whole

novel, the imminent destruction of nature is strongly linked to Ike's perception. He begins to realize that the wilderness is not as impregnable as he thought it was:

> It was as if the boy had already divined what his senses and intellect had not encompassed yet: that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes who feared it because it was wilderness, men myriad and nameless even to one another in the land where the old bear had earned a name, and through which ran not even a mortal beast but an anachronism indomitable and invincible out of an old dead time, a phantom, epitome and apotheosis of the old wild life which the little puny humans swarmed and hacked at in a fury of abhorrence and fear like pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant (*GDM* 141f.).

Again, Faulkner's language is very visual: It evokes an image of a huge wood decreasing literally bit by bit from the edge to the center, as manmade tools like plows or axes work it like rodents. Similarly, the bear, which represents the wilderness as it is "phantom, epitome and apotheosis" all at the same time, is wounded by hunting weapons and has "one trap-ruined foot" (*GDM* 141). Still, another impressive image clarifies the proportions of men and wilderness: men hacking at nature like "pygmies about the ankles of a drowsing elephant." On the one hand, it visualizes the preposterous efforts to shape and subdue the wilderness, and on the other, nature's superiority and indifference in the long run. But in this passage, the wilderness is also described as doomed, because at some point, permanent gnawing is going to leave a mark.

This doom is impersonated by Lion, an unbelievably huge dog. Whereas, as the analysis above has shown, Ike and the group of hunters around him have difficulties hunting down Old Ben, Lion is able to finally bay the bear. The first time the dog does so, the bear gets away. Nevertheless, Ike senses that

> he should have hated and feared Lion. Yet he did not. It seemed to him that there was a fatality in it. It seemed to him that something, he didn't know what, was beginning; had already begun. It was like the last act on a set stage. It was the beginning of the end of something, he didn't know what except that he would not grieve. He would be humble and proud that he had been found worthy to be a part of it too or even just to see it too (*GDM* 166).

The fatality which Ike foresees here is obviously that of the bear, because Lion bays him again in the subsequent hunting trip. Although the dog dies as a result of the fight,

Boon, one of the hunters, finally kills Old Ben. And with the bear, as Hoffmann notes, the wilderness also dies (cf. 670).

Due to his invented heritage, Ike deems himself a part of the wilderness just like the bear. Therefore, the death of the wilderness signifies for Ike the end of his newly created living environment. And as he has distanced himself from his fellow human beings, he can finally abdicate any personal responsibility for the destruction of the wilderness and instead stage himself as a victim of its demise. He eliminates himself from the American guilt narrative of having destroyed one's own continent. His surrogate narrative is an imagined Native American lifestyle: He associates himself with the peoples who actually inhabited this part of the world and whose behavior he romanticizes as pristine and innocent.

Kolodny interprets Ike's behavior "as a comment on the course of an entire nation's pastoral impulse," and argues that by repudiating his heritage, Ike takes "a position that essentially denies the validity of private ownership—at least with regard to the land" (140f.). In an argument with his cousin Carothers McCaslin Edmonds, Ike states:

> 'I cant repudiate it. It was never mine to repudiate. It was never Father's and Uncle Buddy's to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Grandfather's to bequeath them to bequeath me to repudiate because it was never Ikkemotubbe's fathers' fathers' to bequeath Ikkemotubbe to sell to Grandfather or any man because on the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realised, that he could sell it for money, on that instant it ceased ever to have been his forever, father to father to father, and the man who bought it bought nothing' (*GDM* 189).

Ike backtracks the complete change of ownership his family's land has undergone only to point out the absurdity of this process. He assumes a moral authority according to which the self-proclaimed landowners have forfeited their 'right' to the land as soon as they greedily grabbed at it in order to enrich themselves. Kolodny suggests that for Ike, "the illusion of ownership, control, mastery, call it what you will, is the final illusion, and makes him who falls prey to it incapable of knowing the real meaning of the land and man's relation to it" (141). This notion is reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson's opinion that land can only be a *temporary* and *non-hereditary* property, which has been discussed above. And as Ike refuses to inherit his father's land, he seems to act upon that principle, trying to break its cycle of *father to father to father*.

But Ike's efforts seem to make no difference, as both D'Alessandro and Kolodny conclude in their readings of *Go Down, Moses*. The former attempts to show how Ike

could have solved his problem, claiming that "[i]f he had accepted the land intended for him, he could have shielded at least a small plot from industrial forces" (395). But as Ike does not, his "disavowal of his inheritance has no lasting impact" (395). D'Alessandro bases his conclusion on Cleanth Brooks, who 'accuses' Ike of "a dodging of responsibility" (qtd. in D'Alessandro 395). Kolodny refers to the same passage by Brooks, but ingeniously notes that

> this is precisely Faulkner's point. Always concerned with the difficulties and ambiguities of moral action, Faulkner has here taken the opportunity to point up the hopelessness of pastoral longings by making *any* gesture in their behalf appear ultimately futile (142, emphasis in the original).

For Kolodny, it is clear that there is no "responsible" (142) masculine activity towards the landscape as long as the latter is experienced and responded to as feminine. Thus, both the exploitation of the wilderness *as well as* any attempt to hold a protective hand over it are fatal and vain, because no action can be "both satisfying and nonabusive" (142).

Kolodny demonstrates this point by way of her reading of "Delta Autumn," in which Faulkner draws an "analogy between the human feminine and the hunted doe" (142). In it, Ike returns to the wilderness decades after Old Ben has been killed. There is a new, younger group of hunters with whom Ike rides to the woods, and he explicitly tells them not to hunt for does in order to hold the balance of nature. However, "the story ends on Ike's saddened but tacit acceptance of who, in this world, are inevitably to be the hunted" (Kolodny 143). Because when one of the hunters returns to the tent, Ike realizes that they did not heed his advice and have, in fact, killed a doe. This final insight trenchantly illustrates the tragedy of humanity, which is going to bring about its own demise by conquering its own living environment:

> Encapsulated in that last, short line, is an implicit statement of enormous and tragic contradictions. Ike realizes that his earlier warnings have not been heeded: this generation does not understand that to kill does and fawns will reduce the number of bucks in future years … In short, the end of the story reemphasizes Ike's multifaceted and growing awareness that, before the masculine, the feminine is always both vulnerable and victimized (Kolodny 143).

At least in Faulkner's (mythical) story world, however, justice will prevail. After all, humanity's self-destruction is narrated as an immediate consequence of the destruction of nature. And whereas both nature and humanity decay, the former is

reinvigorated not in a material manner, but in terms of moral superiority. As Ike sits together with the young hunters, he muses that god might not have "put the desire to hunt and kill game in man but I reckon He knew it was going to be there, that man was going to teach it to himself" (*GDM* 257). Ike argues that god wanted to test humanity:

> He put them both here: man, and the game he would follow and kill, foreknowing it. I believe He said, 'So be it.' I reckon He even foreknew the end. But He said, 'I will give him his chance. I will give him warning and foreknowledge too, along with the desire to follow and the power to slay' (*GDM* 257).

As he saw them fail, god made sure that man would inflict his own punishment: "The woods and fields he ravages and the game he devastates will be the consequence and signature of his crime and guilt, and his punishment" (*GDM* 257). This characterization of the wilderness as a note of warning, as a monument even, suggests nature's persistence *despite* its decay.

For Hoffmann, the wilderness dies with Old Ben's death, and nature becomes "itself subject to time's linearity, i.e., faces its own destruction" (670). But on the other hand, as Hoffmann further demonstrates, the social world also adopts a "repetitive, circular scheme" as it "has produced only the sameness of exploitation, corruption, and suppression" (671). This brings him to the conclusion that

> Faulkner – in an ironic form – contrasts two incompatible life worlds and world-views that are characterized by the self-same repetitive, circular time structure, which means, ultimately, that both cannot and will not change and remain in unbridgeable contrast, and in fact, in irreversible decline, *the one being the moral victor but destined to perish, the other the historical victor but contaminated by moral decay* (671, my emphasis).

Obviously, the wilderness is depicted here as a victim while the social world has burdened itself with guilt. But by describing the former as the "moral victor," Hoffmann ascribes a layer of ambiguous meaning to *Go Down, Moses*: The wilderness may be destroyed and "destined to perish," but at the same time, it has 'fought nobly' and morally superior when faced with its own destruction. Furthermore, the double ascription of victory to both opponents suggests that none of them will cease to exist completely, because the notion of victory always implies the capacity to conquer and thus to overcome or vanquish. This means that humanity will live to see and suffer its own decay, which the wilderness may notice with satisfaction: "No wonder the ruined woods I used to know dont cry for retribution! [Ike] thought: The people who have

destroyed it will accomplish its revenge" (*GDM* 269). To me, however, the idea of revenge is not an expression of Ike's moral consciousness, because he does not show the slightest inclination to right any kind of wrong: Ike simply waits and hopes that the wilderness will eventually overcome its destruction. In Faulkner's works, the capacity to overcome is known as *endurance*. In *Go Down, Moses*, this endurance is ascribed to the mythically charged wilderness. Although its inhabitants are hunted down and killed, its wooden walls cut down, its territories contaminated, it does not die:

> there was no death, not Lion and not Sam: not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one: and Old Ben too, Old Ben too (*GDM* 244).

Faulkner evokes the repetitive characteristics of nature and thus its ability to endure *despite* its damage, its power to heal itself and to reclaim its territories, as has been described at the beginning of this subchapter with reference to *Light in August*. The wilderness does not die, it rather changes its shape, constantly perpetuating itself. As it exists not as an empty space but comprises all its living creatures, it gathers strength again as those creatures do not vanish, but merge into one unified whole.

5.2 MORAL VICTORS DESTINED TO PERISH

The way Faulkner imagines and depicts black people alters, as Philip M. Weinstein notes, “significantly throughout the course of [his] career” (172). What is never altered, however, is the fact that these depictions function not as representations of actual, realistic black lives, but instead as “pure symbol,” as Weinstein likes to call it (173), as a “white metaphor” (Hönnighausen 193), “an essentialized, always already ‘typed’ configuration” (Davis, “The Signifying Abstraction” 69), or as “the black image in the white mind” (Sundquist, “Faulkner, Race, and the Forms of American Fiction” 3). No matter which term these critics choose to describe the rhetorical figure, they all seem to agree that black characters in Faulkner’s works always signify a travesty: a black character not “based on any political, economic, or social black reality,” but “a contrast and supplement to the decadence of the white imagination” (Hönnighausen 193). The purpose, thus, of using black characters as a rhetorical figure is to create an antithesis or a “counterimage” (Hönnighausen 193) of the white world which is the obvious center of Faulkner’s novels. For white characters to come to life, to remind the reader of actual human beings he or she knows outside the fictional world of the stories, to move the reader with their fate, these characters need something, or rather someone, from whom to set themselves apart. Weinstein argues that “Faulkner’s black characters are … the key to his whites (how could you have whites without blacks to silhouette and make salient their whiteness?)” (170). They are what Toni Morrison calls “the Africanist presence” (*Playing in the Dark* 46), and “[e]ven, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of *demarcation*” (46f., my emphasis).

Faulkner’s most effective means to demarcate black and white characters is his “aesthetic of endurance,” a term, coined by Erin Kay Penner, which I would like to borrow for my own argument. At the heart of this aesthetic is the idea of a pure and primal form of existence with which white people are no longer or have never been in touch, but which is still a key characteristic of black people. According to Karl F. Zender, we see Faulkner “[t]ime and again in his fiction … toying with the notion that black experience—wordless black experience—may be more authentic than white experience, and that blacks may have access to ‘a Oneness with Something somewhere’ that is denied to whites” (283, citing *Soldier’s Pay* 319). This vague “Something somewhere” with which black people are associated here is nature, in the form of both the wilderness still untouched by civilization, as well as arable land. On

the one hand, black people have been enslaved in order to turn the wilderness into farming land and then work it. Their subjugation goes hand in hand with the subjugation of nature. Therefore, they share in the same suffering, still bearing the mark of hundreds of years of exploitation. On the other hand, they are claimed to be the moral victors who, like the land, are going to outlive the perpetrators eventually.

In *Go Down, Moses*, there is a description of the aftermath of slavery, suggesting that those “who made the cotton” are bound for life to “the land their sweat fell on” (*GDM* 217). As in the *Absalom*-passage about the Haitian slaves that is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, this union is established by means of a bodily fluid: Like the blood that is said to have manured the Haitian soil in the *Absalom*-quote cited above, the sweat of the slaves soaks into the ground, thus binding the laborers and the land they work. Ike, however, assumes a dimension that exceeds individual lives:

> Yes. Binding them for a while yet, a little while yet. Through and beyond that life and maybe through and beyond the life of that life’s sons and maybe even through and beyond that of the sons of those sons. But not always, because they will endure. They will outlast us because they are—— (*GDM* 217f.).

By suggesting a hereditary bond to the land which black people had to work as part of their enslavement, Ike draws a parallel to the cross-generational workings of the guilt of the slaveholders. This approach emphasizes the connecting element between victim and perpetrator, as well as Faulkner’s understanding of the temporalities of guilt. For one thing, the legacy of slavery makes itself felt both in the victims as well as the perpetrators: as trauma, in case of the former, and as guilt, in case of the latter. In both cases, it is an echo from the past, resounding in the present. For another thing, guilt in Faulkner’s sense involves the contrastive pair of endurance and decay.

Here, Faulkner approaches guilt by means of myth: His aesthetic of endurance ‘endows’ black characters with a future in which their tormentors will have vanished, but at the same time, it deprives them from an autonomous life in the present. When Ike predicts the extinction of his own people – for him, that means white people – he ascribes it to their frailty which is opposed to black people’s moral fiber. The latter, he states, “will endure. They are better than we are. Stronger than we are. Their vices are vices aped from white men or that white men and bondage have taught them” (*GDM* 218). He rules out any inherent vices of black people and lists as their virtues endurance,

> —and pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity and love of children … whether their own or not or black or not. And more: what they got not only not from white people but not even despite white people because they had it already from the old free fathers a longer time free than us because we have never been free (*GDM* 218).

This characterization is problematic for several reasons. Although Ike admits, if only between the lines, that black women used to nurse and care for white women's children while the latter entertained themselves or relaxed, he suppresses the fact that black women have been forced to do so and had to neglect their own children. He veils the violence of that history, making it sound like a story of kindness and devotion. Furthermore, he romanticizes the physical and psychological horrors of bondage as he shifts the meaning of freedom: Making little of the actual freedom of the body while obsessing over spiritual freedom. This kind of freedom is said to be inherited "from the old free fathers," which again is a turn to the trope of a primitivist way of being.

Whereas Ike ascribes a moral superiority to black people which will allow them to see a future withheld from their former persecutors, he is more than vague about when exactly this future might begin, or what exactly might trigger its coming into being. Instead, Ike assumes that black people will only have to wait "for a while yet, a little while yet" and that their bond to the land will "not always" last. In another passage already quoted elsewhere in this work, he suggests to the black man who married Fonsiba that "your people's turn will come because we have forfeited ours. *But not now. Not yet*" (*GDM* 206, my emphasis). Thus, what might seem like a profound understanding of his own fate, an understanding of having done wrong and thus being destined to die, amounts to nothing but an empty promise. Ike's adverbs of time are noncommittal and hollow, they promise future justice while maintaining the status quo. Because on closer inspection, it becomes clear that Ike's predictions of the future absolve him from taking action in the present, from actually trying to change the situation of black people.

The narrative of the endurance of black people Ike comes up with does not resonate with reality because it is a *mythologization* of black people. And as such, it resembles the narrative strategy which is also used in terms of the wilderness in *Go Down, Moses*. In both cases, the 'object' of mythologization is characterized as morally superior. Hence, the wilderness is represented as an anterior entity threatened by humanity. To this circumstance, as has been analyzed in the previous subchapter, Ike responds by means of the prophecy of its final (moral) victory over the people who

have wrecked it. The black characters in *Go Down, Moses* share these characteristics of moral superiority and endurance and are part of a similar utopian narrative in which their exploiters will have perished.

Faulkner's aesthetic of endurance seems to untie the novel's black characters from pragmatic time. Not only are black people said to survive once white people are going to die, the former are also described as having preceded the latter: As Ike says, they have "old free fathers a longer time free than us." This phrase echoes the characterizations of the wilderness as "the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document" (*GDM* 140) or "the timeless woods" (*GDM* 147).

This notion of anteriority is significantly distinct in Lucas Beauchamp, and most obvious in his opposition to Carothers "Roth" Edmonds. The latter struggles with descending from a maternal line of McCaslins, which is why Lucas refuses to call Edmonds's father "mister" and instead refers to him as "Mr Edmonds." Lucas, on the other hand, descends from the oldest McCaslin and one of his slaves. Thus, when Edmonds approaches Lucas in "The Fire and the Hearth," he thinks:

> *I am not only looking at a face older than mine and which has seen and winnowed more, but at a man most of whose blood was pure ten thousand years when my own anonymous beginnings became mixed enough to produce me* (*GDM* 55; emphasis in the original).

Edmonds clearly feels inferior to Lucas. This sense of inferiority manifests itself in notions of kinship and blood. Although being a white member of an 'aristocratic' Southern family, he considers Lucas as higher in rank. Edmonds even describes his own family line as "usurpers, yesterday's mushrooms" (*GDM* 88) in a place where Lucas' descendants have always lived. Thus, he bitterly declares: "*Edmonds. Even a n— McCaslin is a better man, better than all of us*" (*GDM* 89, emphasis in the original). Toward the end of Edmonds' rumination, Lucas is almost apotheosized:

> *He's more like old Carothers than all the rest of us put together, including Old Carothers. He is both heir and prototype simultaneously of all the geography and climate and biology which sired old Carothers and all the rest of us and our kind, myriad, countless, faceless, even nameless now except himself who fathered himself, intact and complete, contemptuous, as old Carothers must have been, of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own* (*GDM* 91, emphasis in the original).

Here, Lucas again merges with nature ("the geography and climate and biology") and is considered part of a supernatural Oneness, as the phrasing "both heir and prototype simultaneously" suggests an endless cycle of birth and re-birth and denies the kind of chronology Roth himself feels bound to.

This mythologization of Lucas clearly originates from Roth's dissatisfaction with his social status in the postbellum South, where "[e]*ven a n— McCaslin is a better* man." This statement, although lacking empirical reality, resonates with the sense of loss and defeat which many of Faulkner's white characters share. In Faulkner's South, every mode of being is determined by the loss of the Civil War, or, as Végsö puts it, "the lost Southern cause. To be born in the post-bellum South is to be born into the heritage of something that is lost forever" (626f.). Thus, even someone like Roth, born more than three decades after the end of the war, is caught up in a social hierarchy in which whiteness, linked with property and a respectable family name, marked the highest position. Like his ancestors, he still feels the need to establish his white identity as opposed to blacks. But the latter were, at least theoretically, equal members of society. Therefore, as Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman demonstrates, former planters experienced an identity crisis after the Reconstruction era, struggling to distinguish their masculinity from black manhood:

> [e]nfranchisement masculinized black men because it established both their humanity and their U.S. citizenship; furthermore, black men's legal right to marriage and to function as fathers granted them a recognizable position within the (implicitly patriarchal) symbolic order. Taken together, the status of black men in the postemancipation South made them akin to white men ... The position of African Americans after slavery posed a threat not only to the established social schema but also to the very symbolic order that gave whiteness coherence. The end of slavery disrupted the oppositional relation between black slaves and white master-citizens (176).[59]

Roth doubtlessly feels threatened by these developments. With Lucas's father being the son of the McCaslin progenitor, and without the 'institution' of slavery to put Lucas

---

[59] Up until then, only poor whites had to 'compete' with black men, as is illustrated by means of Sutpen's epiphany in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Being sent to the back door of a mansion by a slave, Sutpen realizes, as John N. Duvall notes, "that his being Caucasian is a necessary but insufficient condition to enjoying the status of southern whiteness" (99). Hence, Sutpen conceives the plan of his design in order to climb the social ladder. He imitates the owner of the mansion, because, as Duvall further argues, "[b]oth the poor white and the African American are denied humanity by southern whiteness; indeed both groups are identified as animals. Beginning as a Caucasian animal, Sutpen seeks nothing less than a specieschange (from subhuman to human)" (100). "'A Strange N—' Faulkner and the Minstrel Performance of Whiteness." *Faulkner and Whiteness*, edited by Jay Watson, UP of Mississippi, 2011, pp. 92–106.

in his place, Roth's insecurities about being only a second-class family member are reinforced. His descent from a maternal line of McCaslins and Lucas's changed status keep Roth away even more from what he considers his noble heritage. Thus, when Roth states that even a black McCaslin was a better man, it is not so much his personal opinion as it is a resentful comment on social change. And as he cannot dissociate himself from black people legally, Roth tries to do so spiritually by ascribing a primitive purity to Lucas ("*a man most of whose blood was pure ten thousand years*"). Here, Faulkner's aesthetic of endurance is used again as a means of demarcation, because the purity of blood Roth is referring to functions as a characteristic for an allegedly 'primitive race' distinct from civilization.

Faulkner simply reverses the signs of the clinical concept of the purity of blood, which, as Dorothy Nelkin states, is

> associated with physical health, but … is also a racist construct used to define ethnicity and to justify exclusion and discrimination. In its social meanings, blood can stand at once for purity and contamination, vitality and death, community and corruption, altruism and greed (275).

In order to justify both slavery as well as the Jim Crow laws, purity of blood was usually an 'ideal' associated with whiteness. As a part of Faulkner's aesthetics in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*, however, it is turned into an attribute of blackness, but remains divisive and racist. The concept seems to have lost its 'appeal' to Faulkner's white characters, as it does not guarantee them advantages, neither socially nor monetarily. Therefore, it is reduced to an idea of the spirit, to a notion of an otherworld, for which 'civilized' men have little use anyway. In fact, civilization seems to be the last bastion for a postbellum character like Roth, who feels cheated of honor and heritage. He has nothing to live for except the past, and the only way for him to defend an otherwise unjustifiable way of living is to highlight his ancestors' noble and civilized manners in contrast to an alleged savageness of blacks.[60] Reconstruction might have granted former slaves equality and freedom, but white people could still distance themselves from them by claiming fundamentally different lifestyles. To keep the color line, they even ascribe to themselves the negatively connoted characteristics of the concept of blood purity Nelkin lists, like Roth, who refers to his "*own anonymous*

---

[60] Other groups excluded in the same manner are Native Americans, women, and poor whites. For more information concerning this matter, see Kolodny's and Westling's analyses.

beginnings [which] *became mixed enough to produce* [him]" (contamination). Or they associate positively connoted characteristics to black people, like Ike, who talks about the latter's "pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity and love of children" (altruism) and doubts that they have any vices of their own, only "vices aped from white men or that white men and bondage have taught them," thus emphasizing the corruption of white people. This reversal of signs might mark white people as immoral and about to decay, but it prevents them from accepting black people as equal human beings. Therefore, the virtues that are ascribed to the latter are mainly highlighting their closeness to the wilderness, which gets clear when Ike's cousin constantly interrupts his enumeration:

> and McCaslin
> 'All right. Go on. And their virtues——' and he
> 'Yes. Their own. Endurance——' and McCaslin
> 'So have mules:' and he
> '—and pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity and love of children——' and McCaslin
> 'So have dogs' (*GDM* 218).

McCaslin dampens Ike's enthusiasm about the virtues of black people, belittling them as traits that animals have rather than human beings. As has been demonstrated in the previous subchapter, Ike appropriates a Native American heritage in order to emphasize his own closeness to nature and to absolve himself from the guilt of having destroyed it. As regards black people, Ike does not appropriate their experience to himself. He passionately argues for black people's moral superiority, which he bases on an allegedly authentic primitiveness that he lacks. And it seems that by having McCaslin point out alleged similarities to mules and dogs, Faulkner at least hints at the racist aspects of the trope of a more primitivist way of life. Ike's list of virtues, on the other hand, seems to cover up a deep-felt insecurity with the role he or his ancestors played in the fate of "them who made the cotton" (*GDM* 217), as black people are described as benign. Ike chooses not to tell a direct guilt narrative determining the crime, but instead weaves an alternative, distractive story: He does not confess that his ancestors have enslaved and exploited black people, but draws attention to black people's capacity to endure enslavement, whose cause he remains short on. Although Ike does not revert to the Southern legend of the noble cavalier, which has been analyzed in chapter 4, his counternarrative is just as much an evasive maneuver in

order to circumvent his guilt.[61] His assertion of black people being "better than we are. Stronger than we are" (*GDM* 218), as well as his claim of the deserved downfall of white people is no *mea culpa*, but the self-justification of someone who has no idea as to how to atone for his guilt.

There is one type of non-white characters in Faulkner's works, however, which turns out to be the ultimate threat to white self-perception and worldview, because it reduces any demarcation of black and white to absurdity: Faulkner's biracial characters. In the logic of the South, their very existence is a violation of the principle of the purity of blood. The technical term for that 'transgression' is *miscegenation*, pejoratively denoting interracial marriages, relationships and intercourses. As the focus of the majority of works of the U.S.-American literary canon is white society or someone white, it is usually the "mystical 'black' blood," as Morrison notes in her *New Yorker*-article "The Color Fetish," which threatens whiteness, which is considered the norm. Within this framework, 'white blood' is generally associated with purity, whereas 'black blood' signifies the contamination that this 'white blood' is exposed to. According to this logic, a person cannot be white if one ancestor, no matter how distant, was black. In fact, even the slightest proportion, the notion of even 'one drop of black blood,' marks a person as non-white, leading to such abstruse constructs as quadroons, octoroons or even hexadecaroons, classifying people either one quarter, one eighth or one sixteenth black. Morrison claims that "[f]or the horror that the 'one-drop' rule excites, there is no better guide than William Faulkner." After all, the notion of a 'drop of black blood' is what sets in motion, or "haunts," as she puts it, many of his novels. Thus, blood is used as a powerful metaphor whenever the plot requires a twist or a conflict to get underway.

Of the conflicts imaginable in the context of blood, miscegenation is probably the biggest taboo. As Morrison argues, "[b]etween the marital outrages incest and miscegenation, the latter (an old but useful term for 'the mixing of races') is obviously the more abhorrent" in Faulkner's works. Whereas incest at least leaves the purity of 'white blood' intact, miscegenation is seen as the ultimate threat to the Southern value

---

[61] Moreover, the story he tells is reminiscent of the myth of the noble savage, which was usually applied to Native Americans. Ter Ellingson argues that the "Savage," along with the "Oriental," "were the two great ethnographic paradigms developed by European writers during the age of exploration and colonialism; and the symbolic opposition between 'wild' and 'domesticated' peoples, between 'savages' and 'civilization,' was constructed as part of the discourse of European hegemony, projecting cultural inferiority as an ideological ground for political subordination." *The Myth of the Noble* Savage. U of California P, 2001, p. xiii.

system whose core is ancestry. It does therefore not come as a surprise that the society depicted in Faulkner's works struggles to integrate biracial children into its 'ideally' binary system of black and white. Or, as Peter Lurie states in his essay "History's Dark Markings: Faulkner and Film's Racial Representation:"

> Faulkner's fiction also reveals the only partly unknown or unacknowledged body at the heart of the plantation system and Jim Crow. Charles Bon, Joe Christmas, Lucas Beauchamp, Tennie's Jim (or his granddaughter) – such mixed-race characters in Faulkner's novels trouble white characters such as Doc Hines, Ike McCaslin, Thomas Sutpen, and Quentin Compson, and serve to remind them (and us) of the body *within* whiteness that the South would wish to deny (39, emphasis in the original).

The white characters Lurie lists all share an obsession with pure blood and noble ancestry which they find hard to reconcile with the mere existence of the biracial characters. By suggesting a "body *within* whiteness," Lurie emphasizes biracial characters as a connecting link between two allegedly incompatible ethnicities. While the South, as Lurie further argues, "would wish to deny" these characters, their very existence proves that the 'outrage,' the 'abomination,' the 'contamination' of blood is far more common than the white South tries to make itself believe. Faulkner's white characters do not know what to make of these biracial characters. Their reactions, therefore, range from abhorrence to repudiation to ideologization.

Doc Hines of *Light in August*, for example, feels a loathing for Joe Christmas. In his dialog with god, he imagines the latter to say about Joe: "It's that bastard. Your work is not done yet. He's a pollution and a abomination on My earth" (*LA* 684). It is easy to associate the notion of pollution with the metaphorical idea of contaminated blood: Not only is Joe Christmas's blood considered impure, but he himself is seen as a being that must not be, for he threatens and sullies what Doc Hines regards as god's order. For Doc Hines, even the faint suspicion of 'mixed blood' requires for Joe to be eradicated.

Thomas Sutpen, on the other hand, simply leaves his first wife when he finds out that she has black ancestors. When Charles Bon, the child resulting from that marriage, appears on his plantation, he denies paternity. However, his motives are rather pragmatic, as he strives to become a successful Southern planter. His cold and calculating tactic in achieving this goal has already been explained in more detail in the previous chapter. Thus, in contrast to Doc Hines, Sutpen is less driven by abhorrence than strategic thinking.

Quentin Compson is the one who tells the Sutpen story to his fellow student Shreve McCannon in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and together, these two set out to reconstruct the progression of events which ultimately lead to Charles Bon's murder. Quentin, caught up in his "concept of Compson honor" ("Appendix. Compson: 1699–1945" 1131), uses the incestuous ménage à trois between Judith and Henry Sutpen and their half-brother Charles Bon as a projection surface for his own dysfunctional relationship with his sister Caddy. Shreve, on the other hand, is rather focused on the ethnic aspects of this story. Towards the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, Shreve summarizes the story he and Quentin have been working on for the whole novel, and talks about how it "takes two n— to get rid of one Sutpen" and about how this "is all right, it's fine" (385). After that, however, he says that there is one more thing he and Quentin have to consider, and declares, quite dramatically, it seems: "You've got one n— left. One n— Sutpen left. Of course you cant catch him and you dont even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you've got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Dont you?" (*AA* 310). For Shreve, it seems that there is always one black person who outlives a white one. This idea of survival brings him to the final conclusion that

> in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings (*AA* 311).

The resemblance this passage bears to the ones from *Go Down, Moses* discussed above is remarkable. For one thing, Shreve claims that in the future, the Americas will be populated not by white people like him and Quentin, but by biracial people, whom he subsumes as "*the* Jim Bonds." This idea is similar to Ike's suggestion that the former slaves will "outlast" their former slaveholders. Furthermore, the conception of time in Shreve's scenario is not unlike Ike's empty promise that black people's turn will come, "[b]ut not now. Not yet." For another thing, black people are idealized and debased at the same time, once by describing them as "African kings," once by comparing them to animals again. What is different about Shreve's statement, though, is his notion of conquest, his idea that white people will have ceased to exist *because* of 'miscegenation.'

In Shreve's scenario, a 'drop of black blood' outweighs, even eliminates, whiteness. Within this logic of vulnerability and of recessive and dominant genetics, the aesthetics of endurance takes on a whole new meaning: According to Shreve, "the Jim Bonds" do not simply survive, they survive *because* they eliminate white people: "it *takes* two n— to *get rid of* one Sutpen," while one biracial person is left. Shreve's comment reproduces the ideological contradiction between white people on the one hand, and non-white people on the other, while suggesting that an 'intermixture' will result not in a more diverse society, but the decay of white people.

This notion of survival by elimination is evocative of the racist ideology of white supremacy and its proponents' involvement in the conspiracy theory of white genocide. As Barbara Perry notes, white supremacists are concerned with "the perpetuation of a pure, all-white race, which they see as currently threatened by the politics of multiculturalism and tolerance" (75). The conclusion which is drawn from this belief – that it is necessary to segregate based on ethnicity – is an instance of how the ideological concept of the purity of blood becomes manifest in certain hate groups. For white supremacists, it is especially the Civil Rights Movement which is considered the root of all evil. In combination with changes in immigration law, it is described by white supremacist Jared Taylor as "the end of a certain kind of America" (qtd. in Perry 75). In other words, it is seen as the end of an America in which white people dominate non-white people.

However, the idea of pure whiteness and the anxiety of extinction emerged long before the late 1950s, as the earliest miscegenation laws of the colonial era make clear. As George M. Fredrickson points out, a lot of female servants in seventeenth century America were lower-class English women, whereas most black slaves were male. Therefore, "[t]he early concern about miscegenation … was directed primarily at a particular form of intermixture that was the temporary consequence of the transitional stage between indentured servitude and slavery" (Fredrickson 103). This concern, however, was rather practical: As white masters aimed at increasing their numbers of slaves by also enslaving the slaves' children, it does not come as a surprise that "[i]ntermarriage with free people was hindering the efforts to solve the labor problem by creating a class of hereditary bondsmen" (103). If the mother of these biracial children was white, they were considered free. However, the dominant white class neither accepted them as equal members of society, nor as more "privileged than

unmixed blacks" (Fredrickson 105). Thus, a "unique two-category system of race relations" based on "antipathy to mulatto aspirations" began to develop (105).

According to Fredrickson, there are at least two reasons for this antipathy. One of these reasons is the descent of these biracial children, because more often than not, their white parents belonged to the lower class instead of planters. Thus, they were stigmatized not only as (illegitimate) descendants of slaves, but also as descendants of poor whites. The second reason is that free biracial children fulfilled no function for a slaveholding society. In contrast to the West Indies, where they were used as part of the militia controlling the slaves, this task was accomplished by poor whites in the colonies. Therefore, the white planter class felt incited to minimize the numbers of free biracial people (cf. Fredrickson 105f.).

Freedom for non-white people posed a general threat. As Winthrop D. Jordan points out, "the Negro who was not a slave" was a "chief source of danger" (64). Governor William Gooch of Virginia, for example, was convinced that "there had been a Conspiracy discovered amongst the Negros to Cutt [sic.] off the English, wherein the Free-Negros and Mullatos [sic.] were much Suspected to have been Concerned, (which will forever be the case)" (qtd. in Jordan 64). Except for one case, Jordan denies the existence of any such conspiracy, and notes that

> [t]he colonists' claim was grounded on a revealing assumption: that free blacks were essentially more black than free, that in any contest between oppressed and oppressors free blacks would side not with their brethren in legal status but with their brethren in color. The flowering of racial slavery had crowded out the possibility, which had once been perhaps close to an actuality, that some free blacks would think of themselves as full members of the white community (64).

The governor's statement about the conspiracy lays bare a pervasive and centuries-old ethnic fear of black and biracial people which is still prevalent in the ideologies of today's hate groups as the white supremacist movement or the Ku Klux Klan. Whereas the rhetoric of these groups, as Perry explains, has become more moderate in order to increase its reach, "the message remains the same as it has been for a century and a half: the 'other' is not to be trusted; the 'other' threatens the white, Christian, heterosexual hegemony" (78).

In the antebellum years, biracial children by white males and black females did not cause such serious problems for maintaining the status quo because black people were restricted to testify against whites in court, and white males were unlikely to incriminate themselves. Furthermore, these biracial children had the status of the

mother, which is why they could be held as slaves. In this context, Fredrickson points out that “the main purpose of the restrictive policy was not so much to prevent race mixture per se as to control its results” (106). It is thus not a coincidence that Charles Bon is seen as a threat and gets murdered by his white half-brother, for he is about to marry a white woman. The fact that Judith is his half-sister is less the problem. The sexual relationships of Sutpen and his slaves, as well as the resulting offspring, do not cause similar conflicts. Clytie, for example, lives on Sutpen’s plantation without constituting a threat.[62] Charles Bon, on the other hand, lives up to the stereotypes Fredrickson describes, those of “African ‘lasciviousness’” (100) or “black hyper-sexuality” (104), which are usually attributed to black males.

Those are the two extremes of Faulkner’s aesthetic of endurance: a histrionic praise of black people’s noble characteristics and their capacity to endure; and the suggestion of physical stamina which allows them to exterminate the white race (sometime in the future). Both these manifestations maintain the idea of racial segregation and are part of the belief system of Faulkner’s white characters. The polarity of Faulkner’s aesthetics, however, may shed light on the author’s own schizoid emotions in terms of black and especially biracial people. According to Abdur-Rahman, “miscegenation is … the principal means by which Faulkner contemplates and represents the imperiled state of white masculinity in the post-Reconstruction era and the homoerotic desire and dread underpinning the white male obsession with black manhood” (171). Abdur-Rahman’s analysis focuses primarily on Joe Christmas and convincingly works out the sexual aspects of violence against black men in *Light in August*. She notes that “lynching functions as a ‘communal rape’ of black manhood” (186, citing Trudier Harris 23) and concludes that “[l]ynching’s bloody rituals function to abate the threat of black masculine similarity/parity with white men in the post-Reconstruction era by feminizing the black male body and by simultaneously reracializing it” (186). In his analysis of Charles Bon, Weinstein attributes a similar, although less violent, homoerotic tendency to Faulkner’s treatment of miscegenation. He identifies Bon as “the erotic center of *Absalom, Absalom!*” whose “appeal is inseparable from his exoticism” (180), and states that

---

[62] Clyties unique role in the Southern system and the loneliness that it causes are explained extendedly in Davis, Thadious. “The Yoking of ‘Abstract Contradictions’: Clytie's Meaning in *Absalom, Absalom! Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 7, no. 2, Johns Hopkins UP, 1979, pp. 209–219.

> [t]hus constituted, thus appealing, thus distinguished from the native black (and white) specimens, Bon can house Faulkner's most audacious fantasy: that black is more beautiful than white, that the unconscious desire for miscegenation lurks deep within the white psyche. Bon represents in his lithe body and unfailing civility the novel's inadmissible desire for racial union, a desire that compels even so recalcitrant a Southerner as Rosa Coldfield, so long as his blackness remains invisible and the desire for union be denied its true name. But of course the reverse is equally true in *Absalom, Absalom!*: once identified *as* black, he loses his exotic camouflage, his menace is revealed, and he becomes (despite the persistence of desire) the target of every native code (181).

Faulkner, although constantly perpetuating stereotypes, is capable of imagining touching black characters like Dilsey, Clytie, Bon or Rider, whom Penner describes as "Faulkner's most extensive exploration of African American mourning" (404).[63] At the same time, he falls back on racist codes and blatantly characterizes Sutpen's slaves as wild animals. His artistic desires and power of imagination do not transcend the limits of his Southern identity, which is why neither his white nor his black characters are capable of escaping the South and its violent history:

> Bound to each other through seven generations that begin and end with miscegenation, the blacks see in the whites the conditions they cannot escape, the whites see in the blacks the guilt they cannot assuage. Inescapable because the traditional South is the only place Faulkner can imaginatively endorse, even for his blacks; and unassuageable because the act that Faulkner would have to affirm for his whites to get clear of guilt—the act of miscegenation—remains taboo. The traditional South would, it seems, collapse to its foundations if it were to legitimize such a mixing of the races (Weinstein 187).

The history of enslavement and economic as well as sexual exploitation still weighs heavily on both perpetrators and victims, binding them together for an indefinite period of time. And as neither his white characters nor Faulkner himself can think of a way to mitigate their guilt, they come up with a promise of future redemption by predicting their own decay. There seems to be an undeniable wish for atonement, but instead of making amends and accepting black people as equal human beings, Faulkner and his characters weave a narrative of endurance, a story of a morally superior ethnicity of primitive men (and women) who live in harmony with nature and whose time will come "in a few thousand years" when the morally depraved will have vanished from the earth.

---

[63] Penner identifies "Pantaloon in Black," the story about Rider, as the only Faulkner text in which endurance is not a key characteristic of a black character. She provides a detailed analysis of the story and demonstrates how Faulkner shifts focus from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement.

6 SOLUTIONS OF GUILT

As the previous chapters have shown, there are two interrelated crimes at the heart of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha: the exploitation and ultimate destruction of nature, and the violent transportation and enslavement of millions of people from Africa, who were forced to transform the wilderness into plantations, work the land, and thus increase the wealth of their 'owners.' The questions of guilt that follow from these crimes are negotiated, as has been analyzed so far, most elaborately in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Go Down, Moses*. In the former, the identity-establishing Cavalier legend, which suggests that the antebellum planter class was an aristocracy, is transformed by Faulkner into a guilt narrative which constitutes the cultural heritage of Yoknapatawpha. In chapter 4, I have demonstrated in how far Thomas Sutpen serves as a figure of identification for the whole community, and how, by telling his story, Faulkner's protagonist Quentin Compson narrates the violent history of the South. In *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner revisits the issue of Southern guilt and emphasizes the destruction of nature as a crime committed by white people, which is mirrored in the crimes against black people. In chapter 5, I have shown how the novel's protagonist, Isaac McCaslin, avoids dealing with this guilt by inventing a new heritage for himself, and by re-narrating the victims as moral victors whom he promises future redemption.

As part of the plot of both novels, Faulkner also narrates an interracial relationship – or has his characters narrate it, as in *Absalom, Absalom!* – which is a key element of the respective stories: In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen's daughter Judith is about to marry her brother Henry's friend Charles Bon, who turns out to be biracial; in *Go Down, Moses*, Ike learns that his cousin Roth Edmonds had a relationship with a non-white woman. Some critics interpret these interracial relationships as opportunities to overcome and solve the guilt of the past, but they are thwarted by the characters in Faulkner's novels. As stated above, Weinstein argues that Faulkner's white characters cannot assuage their guilt "because the act that Faulkner would have to affirm for his whites to get clear of guilt—*the act of miscegenation*—remains taboo" (187, my emphasis). In other words, accepting black people as equal human beings, granting them the right to choose their partners regardless of their ethnicity, could lead to reconciliation, and probably initiate the process of coming to terms with the past. Weinstein's claim also emphasizes the fact that Faulkner, as a writer, specifically *chooses* not to narrate these relationships as successful – he does not "affirm" the act. In what follows, I will discuss this narrative choice as a refusal to narrate redemption

and, ultimately, salvation, and I will argue that problems of guilt are not solved, but evaded. Thus, Faulkner keeps his characters in the self-same circle of guilt, and has them move not towards social progress, but from the guilt of slavery to the guilt of blatant racism. I will also argue that Faulkner's focus on social transgressions has shifted during his writing career, and that issues of class, which have been discussed by means of the love triangle between Quentin and Caddy Compson, and Dalton Ames in *The Sound and the Fury*, seem to fade from the spotlight in *Absalom, Absalom!* as well as *Go Down, Moses*, as miscegenation becomes the ultimate transgression in Faulkner's fictional universe.

6.1 FAULKNER'S RE-NARRATION OF QUENTIN'S INDIVIDUAL GUILT

Faulkner criticism often summarizes *The Sound and the Fury* as "the fall of the house of Compson," which, in turn, is interpreted as a metaphor for the fall of the Old South.[64] The Compsons appear as a once noble family of the antebellum years, whose decay is brought about by the neuroses and personal shortcomings of the youngest generation and runs parallel to the supposedly destructive effects of the Reconstruction era. A central storyline of *The Sound of the Fury* is Caddy Compson's 'promiscuous' behavior, which causes offence to each of her three brothers, and is often cited as a reason for Quentin's suicide at the end of his chapter in the novel.

Throughout that chapter, Quentin suffers from the fact that Caddy has lost her virginity to Dalton Ames. In the "Appendix. Compson: 1699–1945," it is stated that Quentin

> loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and (he knew well) only temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead as a miniature replica of all the whole vast globy earth may be poised on the nose of a trained seal (1131f.).

While Quentin, as this passage shows, knew all too well that Caddy's virginity was only a temporary condition, the actual fact of her sexuality troubles him. On the one hand, the impermanence of his sister's maidenhood is one instance of Quentin's struggle with the passage of time: Once it is lost, it gone forever, and Quentin is unable to live with this kind of ultimacy (but more on this in chapter 6.3). On the other hand, the link Quentin draws between his family's honor and his sister's virginity is a manifestation of the idea of gendered purity which dates back to the antebellum years. Of course, Caddy had to lose her virginity, but she was supposed to lose it to a member of the social class that deems itself 'aristocratic,' and whom she should have married first, ideally. Dalton Ames, in contrast, is a poor white character that Quentin and his family consider an unfit candidate to marry the sister or daughter, let alone have a sexual relationship with. In an environment in which the social and legal rules of the era before the Civil War no longer apply and the strict hierarchy between rich and poor people,

---

[64] Singal argues, for example, that "[t]he piecemeal sale of [the Compsons'] property, down to the last stick of furniture, epitomizes the steady dissolution of the Old South following the Civil War" (*The War Within* 173); the phrase "fall of the House of Compson" is also used by Bleikasten, p. 140; Brooks, "History and the Sense of the Tragic," p. 29; and in Singal, *The Making of a Modernist*. U of North Carolina P, 1997, p. 138.

as well as white and black people or people of color became blurred, honor seems to be the last stronghold for Quentin and his family. Nathaniel Miller points out that "honor does not quite have an objective existence—it is something peculiar to Quentin's subjectivity. This can only be true because the society around Quentin—the New South that Faulkner wishes to discuss—is no longer a place where honor objectively exists" (39). In order to compensate for the cessation of the social category of honor, Quentin attaches importance to Caddy's body, which he romanticizes as a hallmark of nobility. This supposed nobility is threatened by Ames, who belongs to a different social class. Thus, Quentin and his family thwart Caddy's relationship. Only then does she start to have multiple sexual partners, gets pregnant by one of them, and is ultimately forced to enter into a loveless marriage to keep her family's honor.

Quentin opposes the relationship between Caddy and Dalton Ames in many ways: Dissatisfied with the partner she chose and obsessed with the loss of honor this choice entails, Quentin suggests either incest or a double suicide to his sister. This reveals that his concept of honor is particularly perverted, because he even deems a sexual relationship between Caddy and himself more appropriate than one with Dalton Ames. Furthermore, Quentin confronts Caddy's lover on a bridge and intends to kill him. However, none of those plans – incest, double suicide, the murder of Ames – is ever realized. During the last day of his life, Quentin remembers and relives his proposals and the intended killing several times. There is one memory, however, that surfaces only once, when Quentin is knocked unconscious by his fellow student Gerald Bland in Cambridge. This memory

> begins as Caddy runs up to Quentin after hearing the pistol shots. On the way, she apparently met Dalton and, thinking he had shot her brother, sent him away, telling him she never wanted to see him again. This encounter with Dalton is suggested when, upon finding her brother unharmed, she tells Quentin that she must hurry and rectify her mistake in sending Dalton away. But Quentin holds her back. Concerned about her brother, she stays, and, as far as the reader knows, never sees Dalton Ames again (Bauer 80).

According to Bauer, this suppressed scene is the crucial point of Quentin's chapter, as it marks the moment when Caddy's relationship is destroyed beyond repair, and also

explains his complicity in this destruction.[65] As Quentin went through with neither the suggested incest nor the murder, he must have downplayed his share of the blame. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that he suppressed the scene summarized above, because in holding Caddy back, Quentin put a plan into action for once.[66] I will discuss this scene and its relevance for Quentin's suicide in chapter 6.3. For now, I want to concentrate on the structural resemblance the triangle constellation in *The Sound and the Fury* – Caddy Compson, Dalton Ames, Quentin Compson – bears to the one in *Absalom, Absalom!* – Judith Sutpen, Charles Bon, Henry Sutpen – and demonstrate how Faulkner's focus on social transgressions has shifted over the intervening years.

The so-called "fall of the house of Compson" is also often associated with "the fall of the house of Sutpen," as depicted in *Absalom, Absalom!*. [67] Brooks, however, points out that "the breakups of these two families come from very different causes, and if we wish to use them to point a moral or illustrate a bit of social history, surely

---

[65] In "The Composition of *The Sound and the Fury*," Gail M. Morrison also points out the importance of this particular scene, demonstrating how it was set originally at the beginning of Quentin's chapter in Faulkner's manuscript, and that he moved it later on in order to "preserve the climactic drama of the confrontation [between Caddy and Quentin] by revealing it late in the monologue; by positioning it early he might have been aware that the rest of the monologue could not help seeming anticlimactic." *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. William Faulkner's* The Sound and the Fury, edited by Harold Bloom, Infobase Publishing, 2008, pp. 3–30, p. 16.

[66] Singal also mentions guilt in the context of Quentin and Caddy: He refers to a scene in which Caddy falls into the creek because Quentin slapped her "for flaunting her sexuality before another boy. 'It was all your fault,' she insisted afterwards, implying that Quentin had been responsible for ‚soiling' her." Singal seems to suggest that Quentin feels guilty for having initiated Caddy's sexual life, for he states that "Quentin's strategy [of proposing to tell their father that the siblings have committed incest] … is designed to expiate his guilt and simultaneously to restore Caddy's purity by turning an actual evil into a pure and imaginary one" (*The War Within* 177).

[67] Molly Hite mentions "the obsessive storytelling about fathers and sons" in *Absalom, Absalom!*, "in which the design governing the fall of the house of Sutpen seems more and more to predestine the fall of the house of Compson." "Modernist Design, Postmodernist Paranoia." *Faulkner and Postmodernism*. UP of Mississippi, 2002, pp. 57–80, p. 71;. Gail McDonald simply states that "*Absalom, Absalom!* is the Fall of the House of Sutpen, just as *The Sound and the Fury* is the Fall of the House of Compson," *American Literature and Culture, 1900–1960*. Blackwell, 2007, p. 57. Noel Polk even connects "The House of Compson" to "The House of Snopes," arguing that they "fall almost simultaneously, and the Compson mansion becomes one with Thomas Sutpen's and Joanna Burden's dark houses, burned to the ground by their own children." *Children of the Dark House. Text and Context in Faulkner*. UP of Mississippi 1996, p. 98. The hint at Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* is made explicit both in reference to *The Sound and the Fury* as well as *Absalom, Absalom!*. Irwin notes that "[t]he apparition of [Roderick's] sister returned from the crypt frightens him to death, the narrator flees the mansion, and the House of Usher (both building and family) collapses into the narcissistic mirroring pool. In *Absalom* that collapse of the house and the family, the destruction of the mansion containing the white half brother and the black half sister, is accomplished when Clytie sets the house on fire" (11); Mark Spilka argues that "Quentin's incestuous love for Caddy is typical, rather, of aristocratic decadence, of neurotic states like those which Poe records in 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'" qtd. in Kristal, Efraín. "The Incest Motif in Narratives of the United States and Spanish America." *Internationalität nationaler* Literaturen. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2000, pp. 390–403, p. 396.

they point to different morals and illustrate different histories" ("History and the Sense of the Tragic" 29). In its own right, the story of the Sutpens bears structural analogies to the story of the Compsons: It is about a wealthy family from the planter class that feels threatened by an outsider who is about to 'infiltrate' Southern 'aristocracy' through a relationship with the daughter or sister. In both stories, the female denotes the 'Achilles'' heel' of the noble Southern family: It is the leak through which 'outside blood' enters a supposedly superior bloodline, the weak spot that, through its reproductivity, can bring about the ruin of dynasties.[68] Sutpen's daughter Judith is about to marry her brother Henry's friend, Charles Bon, and Henry can accept that relationsship even as he learns that Charles is their half-brother. But once he learns that the suitor might be black, Henry opposes the relationship and ultimately kills his half-brother.

As in *The Sound and the Fury*, it falls to the brother to protect both the sister as well as the family's honor. However, there are two crucial differences: On the one hand, Faulkner has changed the social category that demarcates the outsider: From class in *The Sound and the Fury*, to race in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The issue of race is what sets both novels apart from each other most obviously. As Singal argues, "Faulkner's novels of the late 1920s touched on all major aspects of contemporary southern life save one. Race, as an issue, occupied a distinctly peripheral place among Faulkner's concerns," but by "the start of the depression … the relationship between the races in the South had turned far too problematic for Faulkner, with his great sensitivity, to ignore" (181). Faulkner began working on *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1934.[69] In it, he attempts to fathom the history of this complicated relationship between black and white

---

[68] The clinical concept of the purity of blood and its meaning for Faulkner's works have already been discussed in more detail in chapter 5. In terms of Faulkner's portrayal of women, their fecundity, and the misogynist undertones that many critics have found in Faulkner's works, see for example Fowler, Doreen. "The Ravished Daughter: Eleusinian Mysteries in *The Sound and the Fury*." *Faulkner and Religion*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1991, pp. 140–156. According to Fowler, "Faulkner's women embody the power of cyclical renewal, and Faulkner's men seek the status of an almighty father-god, with the power to control nature and women. This tension between Faulkner's men and women, between transcendence and immanence may help to explain the often observed misogyny in Faulkner's fiction. For example, Quentin's indictment, 'the dungeon was mother herself' (215), may allude to his mother's role as a channel of the life force. In other words, the mother is perceived as dungeon because she embodies the trap of cyclical renewal. Women are hated as representatives of nature's power to transform and replace" (153f.).

[69] As Singal notes, the first treatment of the social development during the Great Depression and the issue of race was realized in *Light in August*, in which Faulkner reverses the stereotyped character of the 'tragic mulatto' and achieves nothing less than to "undercut[…] the official history and mythology of a whole society by indicating that the 'n—' is a creation of the white man" (182, citing Warren). For a detailed analysis of Faulkner's treatment of race by means of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*, see Singal 181ff.

people in the South, and he stages it, as the previous chapters have shown, as tainted with a legacy of guilt which makes it impossible for both parties to move on.

Moreover, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, class transgressions seem socially accepted, even if only reluctantly: Sutpen, although a rich planter by the time of the Civil War, lacks the supposedly noble background that makes the families from the Old South, like the Sartorises, the McCaslins, and the Compsons, feel socially superior, which I have already discussed in chapter 4. In fact, he comes from a poor background, and by marrying Ellen Coldfield, "the daughter of a pious man and storekeeper," Sutpen attempts, as Hugh Holman notes, "to achieve some stability and respectability" (40). Unlike Dalton Ames, Sutpen has managed to move up the social ladder, and even ranks as a Colonel during the war. However, the circumstances of Sutpen's social advancement must not be ascribed to social progress, because the events of his story predate Dalton Ames's by many decades and occurred during the antebellum years. Sutpen's rise is highly unlikely and unique, specifically because Faulkner needed this character in order to make a point.

According to Brooks,

> [o]ne could even argue that Faulkner's most pertinent account of the fall of the Old South is set forth in his story of the rise of the Snopes clan. The latter-day Compsons, Sartorises, and Benbows lack the requisite resolution and toughness to cope with the conditions of the modern world. The Snopeses, therefore, because they recognize no values but self-interest and have unlimited vitality, threaten to take over the modern South. But the story of Flem Snopes is a kind of success story, not a tragedy; *and if Snopesism is destroying the older aristocracy, it is not Snopesism that destroys Sutpen* ("History and the Sense of the Tragic" 29, my emphasis).

Faulkner's Snopes character are portrayed, very much like Dalton Ames, as 'poor white trash.'[70] In the logic of Faulkner's works, their ascent due to the ignorance of Old Southern values brings about the fall of the old order, which is a causality that has very much on common with the idea of Dalton Ames's 'outside blood' contaminating the Compsons' purity. Snopeses as well as Sutpen disregard their 'original' place in Southern hierarchy. But if Snopesism does not destroy Sutpen, then what does?

---

[70] For a more nuanced discussion of Faulkner's poor white characters, see Robert Penn Warren's "Cowley's Faulkner," in which he differentiates between the writer's portrayal of the villainous and morally degraded Snopes family and his sympathetic treatment of the Bundrens in *As I Lay Dying*.

Sutpen's dynasty begins to crumble with the appearance of Charles Bon. He is a fellow student of Henry Sutpen and accompanies his friend at Sutpen's Hundred, where he meets and apparently falls in love with Henry's sister Judith. In the course of the narration, we learn more about Bon's background: At first, it is revealed that Charles is Sutpen's son of a previous marriage. While Henry is able to accept an incestuous relationship, he cannot tolerate an interracial one. Once he learns that Bon is biracial, he sabotages the relationship and ultimately kills Charles. It is never revealed what Judith thinks about either of these revelations, which does not come as a surprise due to her function in the plot as the 'Achilles'' heel of the Southern family (see above). Henry's perception of social restrictions is poignantly summarized by Charles when he states: "*it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear*" (*AA* 293). Apparently, Henry's set of values is similar to Quentin's in *The Sound and the Fury*: Both are able to tolerate or, in Quentin's case, even suggest, an incestuous relationship, and Henry rejects race transgression as vehemently as Quentin does class transgression. This parallelism, however, is more than a change of social category. With the narration of Thomas Sutpen's highly unlikely social advancement, Faulkner allows the transgression of class boundaries that used to be a taboo in *The Sound and the Fury*. At the same time, the writer stages a structurally similar story of a love triangle, which emphasizes miscegenation not only as a different kind of transgression, but apparently as the more serious, ultimate transgression.

The second crucial difference in contrast to the love triangle in *The Sound and the Fury* is the way Faulkner has embedded it within *Absalom, Absalom!*: Henry, Judith, and Bon, rather than 'classical' characters, are "imaginative construct[s]" of the narrators in the novel.[71] One of those narrators is, indeed, Quentin Compson, who tells the story of Thomas Sutpen to, and, eventually, along with, his fellow student Shreve McCannon. Within the chronological order of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, this narrative situation occurs about five months before Quentin commits suicide in the earlier *The Sound and the Fury*. In a letter to Harrison Smith about the book project that was to become *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner identifies Quentin as the protagonist of the novel and explains that he needs him as a narrator of the Sutpen story "so that it is not

---

[71] Brooks claims the same for Thomas Sutpen, whom he describes as "a set of interferences—a hypothesis put forward to account for several peculiar events" ("History and the Sense of the Tragic" 31).

complete apocrypha."[72] Furthermore, he cites the fact that Quentin "commit[s] suicide because of his sister" as his reason for using this character, and declares that the "bitterness [Quentin] has projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people" will help Faulkner "to get more out of the story itself than a historical novel" (qtd. in Bleikasten, 254).

But what about the South is it that Faulkner felt Quentin's hatred would help him reveal? What else should his novel refer to than "the more or less violent breakup of a household or family from 1860 to about 1910," as he puts it in the same letter (254), and why is it essential that Quentin narrates this story? One of the reasons why Faulkner chose Quentin as a narrator of *Absalom, Absalom!* might be the purport of the legend of Sutpen, whom Singal describes as "the total negation of the mythical Cavalier" (188). Faulkner needed a way "to articulate him safely," and therefore

> employ[ed] four separate narrators, each of whom would rehearse the key events in Sutpen's life with a different slant of interpretation. The reader would thus ... end[...] up with a reconstruction of history that was probably true, but that can never be made certain. Nor could Faulkner's own views ever be pinned down with precision. ... Only under those conditions could he cope with the subversive implications of the Sutpen story (Singal 188).

Faulkner uses Quentin as a kind of buffer zone between himself as a writer and the guilt narrative at the heart of his novel. If *Absalom, Absalom!* was a novel about Thomas Sutpen and the story of how he built his plantation, Faulkner would have had to directly negotiate the unresolved problems this guilt narrative presents society with. Buschmeier argues that guilt narratives provide societies with possible alternatives for their actions, because literature condenses social experiences in a way that initiates re-negotiations of guilt (45). But what kind of possible alternatives could Faulkner have provided in *Absalom, Absalom!*, if he had even wanted to?

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Weinstein determines interracial relationships as the solution of guilt that Faulkner refuses to narrate. This conclusion is applicable to the Sutpens, as the affirmation of Judith and Charles's marriage would have resulted in the reunion of the once abandoned son and his father,

---

[72] I have already commented on the way Faulkner presented himself in a godlike manner in chapter 4. His statement about the necessity to make the Sutpen story more than apocrypha, a collection of religious texts that does not belong to the biblical canon, is another example of his interpretation of Yoknapatawpha as a universe whose creator he is.

as long as one is able to pass over or look over the issue of incest. It would also, if reading the house of Sutpen as a symbol for the South, have resolved the deadlock that centuries of enslavement and forceful racial segregation had brought about. In chapter 4, I have interpreted Quentin's thoughts about his ancestors' ghosts, looking back on slavery "with actual regret" but without realizing their impotence towards that violent history. This impotence is what makes guilt particularly agonizing, because the act they feel guilty about is beyond control: Their crimes cannot be made undone. In contrast to that impotence, overcoming fears of miscegenation offers a powerful alternative, because it involves the establishment of a new form of society and coexistence. It does not change the past, but it prevents history from repeating itself.

This kind of solution of guilt, however, is not Faulkner's point. He is eagerly interested in the psychological turmoil that guilt causes, but he eschews to narrate any kind of reconciliation, because the reverberations of the Southern past provided him with a boundless stock of storytelling material that he could capitalize on as a writer. Fred Hobson makes a similar point when he explains as "an irony of southern literary history" that the South's

> legacy of defeat and failure served well the writer in the South. Like Quentin Compson at Harvard, the southern writer wore his heritage of failure and defeat—and often guilt—as his badge of honor. It provided him or her something that no other American writer, or at least American novelist, of the twentieth century had in any abundance—that is, a tragic sense (*The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* 2).

Faulkner had drawn on this tragic sense since *Flags in the Dust*, and with every Yoknapatwapha novel that followed he refined his fictional version of that "legacy of defeat and failure." In fact, he took an active part in shaping that supposedly Southern heritage, because "[f]ar more than any other writer of his generation, Faulkner made Southern evil visible; after him, the region's perception of itself could never be the same again" (Singal 154). I have already demonstrated in how far Faulkner's version of guilt relates to the *guilt thesis* of the writers of the Southern Renaissance in chapter 4, but I want to emphasize it again in order to point out Faulkner's interest in the *distinctiveness* of his region, because that, as Hobson's analysis illustrates, helped make him distinctive among his fellow American writers.

At the beginning of his writing career, Faulkner did not write about the South, as he was interested not in provincial, but universal truths, and his ambitions were

modernist rather than regional. Therefore, his first two novels, *Soldier's Pay* and *Mosquitoes*, "display Faulkner's simultaneous desire to appear unmistakably au courant and to place himself, as he put it, well above the 'yelping pack'" (Singal 158). After *Mosquitoes*, however, Faulkner realized that he could 'have it both ways,' that it was possible to approach the South by means of Modernist aesthetic devices.[73] Before *Absalom, Absalom!* was published in 1936, *The Sound and the Fury* was perhaps Faulkner's boldest realization of the attempt to reconcile both his modernist and regional ambitions as a writer. Singal describes the novel as "an unparalleled portrait of the South's buried subconscious rendered in the Modernist vein, containing only the barest hint of possible future redemption" (173), and Miller argues that "with suicide [Quentin] manages a sort of Modernist expression of the problems of Southern history" (45).

This suicide and its Modernist narrative realization in *The Sound and the Fury* could be seen as the second reason why Faulkner used Quentin as a narrator for *Absalom, Absalom!*. With the former novel, he had already revealed "the region's deepest ills" (Singal 173), meeting and perhaps even exceeding Modernism's aesthetic standards, but to him, something seemed missing. For Faulkner, the book was his "most splendid failure" (*Faulkner in the University* 77), the one he felt "tenderest towards. I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again, though I'd probably fail again" (qtd. in Bleikasten 138).

In *The Sound and the Fury*, Quentin is obsessed with Caddy's loss of virginity to a poor white, as well as his failure to preserve or restore his family's honor. His approach to solving the problem of his sister's 'sin' is incest, but it is not brought to fruition. Towards the end of his chapter, shortly before he kills himself, Quentin imagines a conversation with his father in which he would have confessed that incest:

> and he [Mr. Compson] i think you are too serious to give me any cause for alarm you wouldnt have felt driven to the expedient of telling me you had committed

---

[73] John N. Duvall has written intensively on the apparent paradox between modernism and regionalism, arguing that "[a]ny attempt to link regionalism to American modernism may seem, at first blush, a perverse enterprise. After all, definitions of modernism tend to cast it as nearly the antithesis of regionalism" ("Regionalism" 242). He further points out that "[f]or much of its history, the term was synonymous with the phrase, 'writers of local color,' a designation frequently used to devalue women writers by signaling that they were only of regional, not national, importance" (243). Regarding the South and especially Faulkner, Duvall claims that the former is "the region with the clearest and most self-conscious relation to modernism" (254), while he describes Faulkner as "an exemplar both of international modernism and regionalism" with the ability to "blend[…] formal experimentation and commitment to place" (255).

> incest otherwise and i [Quentin] i wasnt lying i wasnt lying and he *you wanted to sublimate a piece of natural human folly into a horror and then exorcise it with truth* an i it was to isolate her out of the loud world so that it would have to flee us of necessity and then the sound of it would be as though it had never been and he did you try to make her do it and i i was afraid to i was afraid she might and then it wouldnt have done any good *but if i could tell you we did it would have been so and then the others wouldnt be so* (*SF* 1012f., my emphasis).

This passage reveals Quentin's perspective on the sexual restrictions of Southern society, and how he thinks they can be passed over. He imagines his father describing Caddy and Dalton having sex as "a natural piece of human folly," while the incest Quentin suggests is determined as "a horror." By means of this horror – or rather, by claiming to have committed it – Quentin wanted to "sublimate," to overwrite Caddy's and Dalton's sexual intercourse with (the thought of) one between himself and his sister, which he considers as socially more acceptable. Quentin also ascribes more importance to the assertion than the actual act of incest, which illustrates once more that honor does not objectively exist (anymore). Every instance of Caddy having sex with any man would be wiped off, "wouldnt be so," if Quentin could only convince his father that he and Caddy had sex. Incest trumps any other form of sexual intercourse Caddy might have had. It is, for Quentin, the ultimate tool to recover the purity of blood. But his father, at least the version Quentin imagines in this passage, sees right through Quentin and his intentions, and, by refusing to believe Quentin's claim of incest, frustrates the son's plan to restore the family's honor. Caddy's (loss of) virginity is beyond control. Quentin's despair in *The Sound and the Fury* and the suicide it results in are, to a large extent, caused by the sense of impotence that his failure entails.

Earlier on in the novel, Quentin remembers his father saying that "[w]omen are never virgins. Purity is a negative state and therefore contrary to nature. It's nature hurting you not Caddy and I said That's just words and he said So is virginity and I said you dont know" (*SF* 965f.). This line of thought is continued in *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Mr. Compson gives his account of the Sutpen story to Quentin. Probably alluding to Quentin's struggle with Caddy's virginity and his suggestion of incest, Mr. Compson speculates that Henry Sutpen

> may have been conscious that his fierce provincial's pride in his sister's virginity was a false quantity which must incorporate in itself an inability to endure in order to be precious, to exist, and so must depend upon its loss, absence, to have existed at all. In fact, perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realising that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at

> all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband (*AA* 80).

When Quentin takes over as the novel's narrator in the sixth chapter, he exhausts the narrative possibilities that the love triangle of Judith, Henry, and Charles offers him.[74] In the subsequent attempt of Quentin and Shreve to reconstruct the course of events that ultimately result in Henry killing Charles, the layers of identity of the latter are gradually revealed. By having Quentin engage in this kind of forensics, by letting him discover piece by piece the secrets of Charles Bon's 'blood,' Faulkner seems finally able to get to the heart of Quentin's obsession in *The Sound and the Fury*. Maybe one of the reasons why Faulkner felt he had not told that story right was that Quentin's motivation for suicide was not elaborate enough. Quentin's struggle is supposed to be the impotence towards history, but his psychology "is shaped so conclusively by and within the domestic sphere" (Miller 43). His internal battle remains solely subjective, it is fought – if not only within himself – merely within his own family. It does not exceed the limits of his household. The class transgressions that are bothering him may be an expression of the South's social standards, or of what Cowley describes as "the men of the old order['s] … fight against a new exploiting class descended from the landless whites of slavery days" (39). But on closer inspection, these transgressions can only provide an insufficient explanation for the distinctive pathology of the South which Faulkner wants to convey.

In the course of *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is first revealed that Charles had an "octoroon mistress," and with her a child. Charles tries to assuage the sorrows this relationship might cause in Henry by taking him to New Orleans, thus exposing him, as Eric Sundquist notes, to "the peculiar sexual conventions" (131), of that place.[75] He tries to "convince Henry that the mulatto mistresses of New Orleans are neither whores nor wives but part of a doomed race" (131). Henry's and Charles's conversation is part of Mr. Compson's account of the Sutpen story, and its verisimilitude is challenged by formulations like "And I can imagine how Bon told Henry," "I can imagine Henry in New

[74] Irwin points out the psychological significance of Quentin taking over as narrator, which he seems to determine as an act of self-empowerment not only towards his father, but also towards history: "For Quentin, the act of narrating Sutpen's story, of bringing that story under authorial control, becomes a struggle in which he tries to best his father, a struggle to seize 'authority' by achieving temporal priority to his father in the narrative act" (114).

[75] All citations from Sundquist in this chapter refer to *"Absalom, Absalom!* and the House Divided," as reprinted in Hobson's *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!. *A Casebook*, pp. 107–149.

Orleans" (*AA* 89), "Yes, Henry would know" (*AA* 94) every now and again. At some point, Mr. Compson, unaware that Charles is biracial, has the latter state:

> Not whores. And not whores because of us, the thousand. We—the thousand, the white men—made them, created and produced them; we even made the laws which declare that one eighth of a specified kind of blood shall outweigh seven eighths of another kind … But that same white race would have made them slaves too, laborers, cooks, maybe even field hands, if it were not for … these few men like myself without principles or honor either … We cannot … save all of them … But we save that one (*AA* 95).

This passage is one of the few instances where Faulkner directly addresses the tragic existence of biracial people and links it to the sexual desire of white men for black women which the laws of slavery and segregation actually forbid. Henry's repulsive reaction, as imagined by Mr. Compson – "But you married her. You married her" (*AA* 97) – is countered by Charles with a "trump:" "Have you forgot that this woman, this child, are n—? You, Henry Sutpen of Sutpen's Hundred in Mississippi? You, talking of marriage, a wedding, here?" (*AA* 98). The conversation that Mr. Compson invents simultaneously acknowledges and denies the humanity of black and biracial people, as it accepts white men's transgressions, as long as the sacred institution of marriage remains intact. Here, as Sundquist argues, "the ultimate barrier of the novel is preliminarily revealed" (131), but it is quickly hidden again by the barrier of incest which is revealed soon after.

Both obstacles – the fact of Bon's "octoroon mistress" as well as the fact that he is Henry's and Judith's half-brother – are eventually overcome in the course of Quentin and Shreve's reconstruction of the events. The way is cleared, only to be blocked off again by the final revelation of Charles's biracial identity which Henry responds to by killing his brother. Sundquist urges us to consider "the brutal immediacy of this act, for the novel strives heroically to delay it, obscure it, render it unfathomable or mysterious, hide it from view—and yet makes murderously apparent the overriding reason for it" (133). Henry was able to ignore Charles's own racial transgression with the "octoroon mistress" while he was under the impression that Bon himself was white. It also did not prevent him to accept Charles as his brother. But once the revelation of kinship is followed by the revelation of Charles's race, miscegenation becomes an intolerable factor:

> Miscegenation and incest, here in fiction and as elsewhere in fact, create a drama of intimate merger and extreme alienation that both doubles and divides husband and wife, father and son, brother and brother. More to the point, however, the potential miscegenation between Bon and Judith cancels out the potential incest. No one fact more characterizes the schizophrenic nature of slaveholding miscegenation. In killing for the first, Henry denies the latter: Bon is not his brother but, as he himself puts it to Henry, 'the n— that's going to sleep with your sister' (Sundquist 134).

The reason why Henry kills his own brother is given to us by Quentin, the same character that obsessed about his sister's virginity in *The Sound and the Fury*. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, Quentin realizes "that his frantic obsession with Caddy's purity, as well as his inability to ensure it or preserve it for himself, are motivated by the contagious threat of miscegenation. For Quentin, incest ensures not only emotional and moral purity but also purity of blood; what the Sutpen tragedy reveals to him, however, is that incest *may not* ensure such genealogical purity" (Sundquist 135). By having Quentin narrate the love triangle of Judith, Charles, and Henry, Faulkner forces that character – and the reader, too – to recognize how incest and miscegenation are entangled in the South, and he retroactively superimposes this social background of *Absalom, Absalom!* onto the domestic one from *The Sound and the Fury*. And at long last, Quentin's suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* appears no longer as motivated merely by the crisis of a family, but by a crisis that tormented the whole white South. Thus, Faulkner was able, once again, to render the region and its inhabitants as a special and distinctive people.

In the letter to Harrison Smith, from which I already quoted above, Faulkner mentions Quentin's "bitterness which he has projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people" (qtd. in Bleikasten 254). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin comes to understand his own entanglement with the South and its people, because he recognizes himself in Henry Sutpen. Like Henry, Quentin has thwarted his sister's relationship due to the morbid fear of 'outside blood.' But both characters also realize that this barrier of blood never really existed except in theory, for what the existence of a biracial character like Charles Bon proves to both of them is the sexual violence of the system of slavery. It was already insinuated in the New Orleans passage of *Absalom, Absalom!* in which Charles claims that white men "made … created and produced …" the "mulatto mistresses" of that city. The explosive power of this circumstance, however, culminates in the ultimate discovery of forbidden kinship that this kind of miscegenation necessarily entails: Bon is the *black brother* whose

existence a slaveholding society must violently deny. The result of interracial sexual intercourse, or rather the rape of enslaved women by their masters, becomes visible only years later when the children seek and are denied their place in society. With the system of slavery still intact, this did not pose much of a problem, because the children of female slaves had the same status as their mothers. Thus, any ties of kinship could easily be denied: “Slavery controlled miscegenation and whatever incest accompanied it by denying that they had any meaning,” but “[e]mancipation … destroyed the mechanisms of control” (Sundquist 135). This is what forces Henry to the violent act of a fratricide, which occurs shortly *after* the end of the Civil War, with the rules of the antebellum South no longer intact. To Henry, Charles is both his brother and not his brother, and he flees the scene of the crime, but he returns to his father’s house, where he remains hidden until Quentin finds him there in September 1909. In January 1910, Quentin tells Shreve about this encounter, and the latter draws his attention to Jim Bond, Charles Bon’s grandson, who is still alive, although his whereabouts are unknown. Shreve asks Quentin: “You still hear him at night sometimes. Dont you?” (*AA* 310), and Quentin affirms. This short passage links the novel’s storylines from 1865 and 1909/10, and it reveals Henry’s failure to destroy the evidence of the “monstrous double” of incest and miscegenation (Sundquist 140), which continues to impose its horror through time. Jim Bon is “the remaining fragment[…] of Sutpen’s nightmarish design, and as such … continue[s] to express the long trauma that outlived the design” (Sundquist 143). Quentin suffers from this trauma, and his suicide can be seen as an attempt to flee his historical consciousness, thus mirroring Henry’s attempted escape. Here, it becomes apparent that Faulkner does not solve guilt: He repeats it. And the only option he offers his characters to cope with it is evasion. I will analyze the evasive maneuvers Faulkner narrates in more detail in chapter 6.3, but before I can do so, I will demonstrate how Faulkner continued to narratively explore the “monstrous double” of incest and miscegenation in *Go Down, Moses*, whose protagonist Isaac McCaslin also tries to escape his family’s and the South’s violent legacy.

6.2 ALTRUISM OR EGOISM? – AN INVESTIGATION OF ISAAC'S MOTIVES

Go Down, Moses is the third of the three novels that I discuss as a narrative triad.[76] In it, Faulkner revisits several topics he touched upon in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, like the white Southern patriarchs' simultaneous denial of and involvement in miscegenation. Bleikasten even argues that with *Go Down, Moses*, "almost all of [Faulkner's] previous work is rewritten and recast in a new light" (309), like "the unresolved question of the relationship between white and black," which is now linked to "the relationship between the white man and the wild spaces of the New World and its first inhabitants, the Native Americans" (310). I have already discussed the interrelation between the crimes of slavery and forced land alienation, as well as Isaac McCaslin's attempts to reinterpret the fate of the victims of these crimes, in chapter 5. Here, I want to keep focusing on the junction of incest and miscegenation that slavery entails in Faulkner's fiction, and on the possibility to overcome guilt by allowing interracial relationships which Faulkner ignores.

The three novels discussed here are not only linked by their topic, but also by their central characters. *Go Down, Moses*, published in 1942, has its roots in several short stories that Faulkner had written and, in some cases, already published since the 1930s. In Faulkner's case, this is not an unusual procedure, but it is crucial that the original protagonist of some of the short stories that evolved into *Go Down, Moses* was Quentin Compson. Polk points out this narrative kinship, noting that "[i]n *Absalom*, Faulkner resurrects Quentin Compson to help narrate that novel's reconstruction of Thomas Sutpen's story. *Go Down, Moses* grew out of a story he wrote in 1935, while he was writing *Absalom,* called 'Lion,' which features that same *resurrected* Quentin Compson as its central character, later to *metamorphose* into Isaac McCaslin" (52, my emphasis). At the end of his analysis of the intertextuality between *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sundquist also refers to Ike in what seems to be a future prospect: After briefly summarizing the subject of *Go Down, Moses*, he states: "In several stories that went into the novel in revised form, the character who finally became Ike McCaslin was first represented as—who else?—Quentin Compson. *He*

---

[76] There is some dissent among Faulkner critics on whether *Go Down, Moses* counts as a novel or rather a collection of stories. Based on Faulkner's statements concerning that matter, I chose to refer to it as a novel in the course of this work: "Moses is indeed a novel … nobody but Random House seemed to labor under the permission that [it] should be titled 'and other stories'" (qtd. in Bleikasten 308).

was still not dead" (144, my emphasis). In chapter 6.1, I have already discussed Quentin's function for the narration in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as well as the interpretative potential of reconsidering his suicide in retrospect, when the social perspective in *Absalom* is superimposed on the domestic one in *The Sound and the Fury*. I mention it again at this point because the diction of both Polk's and Sundquist's statements – "resurrected;" "metamorphose;" "still not dead" – seems to suggest that Ike is a reincarnation of Quentin. In this light, Ike fulfills a similar function for *Go Down, Moses* as Quentin did for *Absalom, Absalom!*: To approach an 'old' topic from another perspective. One could argue that with *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner felt he still had not told that topic right, as he did after finishing *The Sound and the Fury*, his "most splendid failure" (see above). Thus, he made Ike a literary revenant of Quentin Compson, one that did not kill himself at the tender age of twenty, but one that became an old man. Although this is highly speculative, I want to consider Ike as a reenactment of Quentin, which allowed Faulkner to play through a different, albeit no less evasive, response to guilt.

In the fifth part of *Go Down, Moses*, "The Bear," Isaac is twenty-one years old when he repudiates his heritage. As mentioned above, this part of the novel stems from the 1935 short story "Lion," with a sixteen-year-old Quentin as its protagonist. The sharp contrast that Faulkner paints between the wilderness and civilization in *Go Down, Moses*, as discussed in chapter 5, is already laid out in "Lion," with Quentin smelling "the solitude, the loneliness, something breathing out of this place which human beings had merely passed through without altering it," and then thinking "about how just twenty miles away was Jefferson, the houses where people were getting ready to wake up in comfort and security, the stores and offices where during the day they would meet to buy and sell and talk, and I could hardly believe it" (192). Very much like Ike, Quentin seems to be absorbed into the wilderness, dissociating himself from the "people" of Jefferson with their "houses" and "stores and offices," but he also realizes his own insignificance compared to the wilderness: "*Yes, and you are just a puny assortment of bones and meat that cannot get one mile from where you stand without that compass to help you and could not spend one night where you are and live without fire to keep you warm and perhaps that gun to protect yourself*" (192).

"Lion" is a highly rudimentary version of "The Bear" that does not even include the act of repudiation. Nevertheless, given that the story was written while Faulkner worked on *Absalom, Absalom!*, it is conceivable that Ike's relinquishment has its roots

in Quentin's struggle to find his place in the 'New South'. Considering the storylines, the following passage from *Go Down, Moses* is to be situated shortly before the end of "Lion." As in the novel, Boon Hogganbeck has just killed the bear Old Ben, but his dog Lion was killed during the hunt. This incident, as demonstrated in chapter 5, initiates the death of the wilderness. While the short story jumps immediately to another hunting trip that happens probably a few years later, Faulkner inserts a large subchapter into "The Bear." It begins, mid-sentence, with Ike:

> then he was twenty-one. He could say it, himself and his cousin juxtaposed not against the wilderness but against the tamed land which was to have been his heritage, the land which old Carothers McCaslin his grandfather had bought with white man's money from the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted it, and tamed and ordered or believed he had tamed and ordered it for the reason that the human beings he held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it and in their sweat scratched the surface of it to a depth of perhaps fourteen inches in order to grow something out of it which had not been there before and which could be translated back into the money he who believed he had bought it had had to pay to get it and hold it and a reasonable profit too (*GDM* 188).

Ike denies having a claim on the land that is supposed to be his heritage, because he realizes the crimes underneath his grandfather's acquisition of property. Despite the long succession of years between writing "Lion" and "The Bear," Faulkner's segue from Quentin to Isaac appears seamless, with the former realizing that his only chance to survive the wilderness is by means of the tools of civilization – compass, fire, gun – as opposed to the indigenous "grandfathers without guns" in the passage from *Go Down, Moses*. More importantly, this passage hints at the planter's dependence on his slaves, who, by "remov[ing] the forest" and "scratch[ing] the surface," grew the crop that produced the wealth of the former. Ike understands that inheriting the McCaslin property would make him an accomplice in this crime of forced labor, which is why he wants to relinquish it. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner confronts Quentin with a similar insight. Describing Sutpen's design to Shreve – "The design. —Getting richer and richer. It must have looked fine and clear ahead for him now: house finished … and he with his own band of n— even" (*AA* 215) – Quentin thinks that maybe it took "*Thomas Sutpen to make all of us*" (*AA* 216). Richard Godden argues that by telling Sutpen's story, Quentin realizes that "his Harvard fees derive from the sale of some of his grandfather's landed property," which makes him "in a very real sense, Sutpen-made, a product of planter efforts to ensure their class's continuity" (266f.).

If Quentin's insights in *Absalom, Absalom!* serve, as argued in chapter 6.1, as an elucidation of his suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*, then Ike's relinquishment in *Go Down, Moses* can be understood as a reenactment of Quentin's suicide, because Ike's insight – the land is "tamed and ordered … for the reason that the human beings … held in bondage and in the power of life and death had removed the forest from it and in their sweat scratched the surface of it" – is an echo of Quentin realizing that he is "Sutpen-made," entangled in Sutpen's design of getting "richer and richer" through the labor of a "band of n—." As mentioned above, "Lion" and *Absalom, Absalom!* were written almost simultaneously, which means that Faulkner formulated Quentin's recognition – staged as a retrospective motive for his suicide – at the same time as he was laying the foundation for "The Bear," with a protagonist that would try to evade his ancestors' guilt by repudiating his heritage.

I have explained the analogy between Quentin's suicide and Ike's relinquishment in such great detail in order to emphasize Faulkner's refusal to solve the problem of guilt. In his piece on "Guilt" for *The Companion to Southern Literature*, Collin Messer also compares Quentin's and Ike's actions as a failure to confront their families' guilt, arguing that although

> Ike considers [his] disavowal as noble and courageous, Faulkner ultimately characterizes it as sterile and cowardly … Quentin Compson's guilt in *Absalom, Absalom!* … is arguably more communal than familial. Nevertheless, he is dismayed and ultimately undone by the South's and Yoknapatawpha's legacy of slavery and racial sin as it is embodied in the story of Thomas Sutpen … As the negative examples of Ike and Quentin demonstrate, for Faulkner it seems that the only way to face and finally vanquish the South's guilt is to engage its origins and history directly and affirmatively, although he seldom if ever dramatizes such a courageous and honest act (324f.).[77]

As sketched out in chapter 6.1, one way to actually dramatize such an act is to overcome fears of miscegenation by narrating successful interracial relationships. In

[77] Especially Ike's decision is often discussed as insufficient. Polk, for example, states that Ike "constitutes himself as a self-appointed Moses, or Christ, who will intervene in history to free a people long in bondage, and change the course of the future by breaking the chain of causality that history has imposed upon slaves and owners alike. But unlike Moses and Christ, he believes that a simple act of renunciation of his region's history will suffice" (57). He also hints at a conceivable alternative Faulkner could have narrated, arguing that "[h]ad [Ike] accepted and not repudiated the burden, engaged his history, he would have assumed, along with the guilt and the shame, the power and privilege that history wanted to hand him, and he might indeed, from such a position of privilege and power, have come nearer to effecting change" (60). Bleikasten states that Ike's "freedom is just a delusion, his innocence is simply a refusal to confront reality in any way" (319). Davis comments on Ike's failure to act, which is the only way to "forcefully resist evil in society … passivity is no solution, because it cannot generate a social reformation" (*Games of Property*, 221).

Absalom, Absalom!, this chance is forfeited not only because Henry kills Bon in order to stop him from marrying their sister Judith, but also because Quentin shudders at the very thought of Jim Bond, whose biracial identity must be denied according to his racist value system. In the sixth part of *Go Down, Moses*, "Delta Autumn," there is a short scene in which Ike meets his cousin Roth Edmonds's lover and their son, and discovers not only that the couple is related, but that woman and child are biracial. Here, Faulkner seems to repeat the pattern he had already used in *Absalom, Absalom!* and reverts, once again, to the "monstrous double" of incest and miscegenation. As in the former novel, the information about the woman's identity is revealed only piecemeal, and in the same order: Ike becomes aware of the incest before he recognizes the miscegenation.

Set at the beginning of the 1940s (the present time when the book was published), "Delta Autumn" shows Ike as an old man, more than fifty years after his visit to the commissary, where he discovered that his grandfather had raped his own slave daughter. While on a hunting trip, a young woman comes to see him. She is carrying a baby, and Ike knows immediately that it is Roth's. He also senses that she is "bringing something else, something intangible, an effluvium which he knew he would recognise in a moment" (*GDM* 263) with her, and he becomes "aware of her eyes" and the way she looks at him "with that immersed contemplation, that bottomless and intent candor, of a child" (*GDM* 264). It is that look which, a moment later, helps him realize that the woman is related to Roth and him: "'His great great——Wait a minute.—great great *great* grandfather was your grandfather. McCaslin. Only it got to be Edmonds'" (*GDM* 265). Furthermore, it is clear to both Ike himself as well as the reader, that Ike is missing something. When he asks her whether she has any folks, she replies: "'Yes. … I was living with one of them. My aunt, in Vicksburg. … my aunt was a widow, with a big family, taking in washing to sup——'" (*GDM* 266). At that moment, it dawns on him: "'Took in what?' he said. 'Took in washing?' He sprang, still seated even, flinging himself backward onto one arm, awry-haired, glaring. Now he understood what it was she had brought into the tent with her … the pale lips, the skin pallid and dead-looking yet not ill, the dark and tragic and foreknowing eyes" (266). When he was trying to figure out where to locate her on the family tree, it did not occur to him that she might be a descendant of one of his grandfather's slaves. But she is the granddaughter of James Beauchamp, whom they call "Tennie's Jim," and who is himself the son of the boy Old McCaslin got with his own slave daughter. It is significant

that Ike remained mostly calm while he was still trying to figure out whether the woman belonged to the McCaslin or the Edmonds line, that means the white line of the family. Like Quentin and Henry, he seems able to accept such an incestuous relationship.[78] It is only when he realizes that she belongs to McCaslin's black descendants that he cries out, "not loud, in a voice of amazement, pity, and outrage: 'You're a n–'" (*GDM* 266). The poignant summary that Bon uses in *Absalom, Absalom!* when he tells Henry that "*it's the miscegenation, not the incest, which you cant bear*" (*AA* 293) pertains to Ike as well. He is caught in the same rigid racist system that made Quentin destroy the life of his sister, and Henry commit fratricide by shooting his sister's fiancé. Nothing has changed: With *Go Down, Moses*, the reader watches another interracial relationship bog down.

After all, Ike cannot live up to his own standards. According to Bleikasten, the woman's baby provides "the virtual promise of reconciliation" because in it, "for the first time, both branches of the McCaslins have been joined" (320). But Ike refuses to consider such a reconciliation, thinking: "*Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America … But not now! Not now!*" (*GDM* 266). This thought bears resemblance to the ones already discussed in chapter 5, where Ike predicts a future in which it will be black people's turn and white people will have vanished from the earth. In each case, Ike refers to the future so as not to take responsibility in the present. Instead, he insists on giving her money, and advises her: "Go back North. Marry: a man in your own race. That's the only salvation for you—for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait. Marry a black man. You are young, handsome, *almost white*; you could find a black man who would see in you what it was you saw in him" (*GDM* 268, my emphasis). For Ike, whiteness remains the principal ideal according to which the social hierarchy of the South is structured, as he seems to think, as Davis points out, that what the woman "saw in Roth was his whiteness, his race, just as any future black husband will see in her almost-whiteness, the visible sign of her almost-escape from an inferior race" (*Games of Property* 222). Moreover, Ike's "invidious belief," as Davis calls it, helps to understand the motive behind his decision to repudiate his heritage when he was twenty-one: As opposed to what his passionate speech about the virtues of black

---

[78] In "Her Shape, His Hand: The Spaces of African American Women in *Go Down, Moses*," Minrose Gwin offers a feminist reading of that scene and Ike's double standards, noting that his "first response to the woman indicates disapproval of her sexual behavior outside marriage (as a white woman)" (89). For a detailed analysis of how the woman from "Delta Autumn" "imperils both the essential binaries of race and gender," see pp. 90f. *New Essays on* Go Down, Moses, edited by Linda Wagner-Martin, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 73–100.

people would have us believe – “Endurance … and pity and tolerance and forbearance and fidelity and love of children” (*GDM* 218) – Ike still regards black people as inferior human beings. He certainly refuses to hold them in bondage, but he will not accept ‘black’ as equal to ‘white.’ His relinquishment is not an attempt to solve guilt, but to *ab*solve himself from the *sense* of guilt. In other words, Faulkner does not treat guilt as a moral problem, which is why Ike will not fight for social change, as Polk argues he could have done (cf. 60). It is a problem of temporality and thus an expression of Faulkner’s concept of time, of the constant repetition of the past. His characters can never break this cycle, they can only break *away*. Guilt is a supporting column of the temporal architecture of Yoknapatawpha, it is never solved as a ‘fact,’ only numbed as a feeling. Therefore, the key, for Ike, is not for white people to change their view of black people, but for black people to change their appearance. In Ike’s view, *passing as white* is equated with *passing the time*, it is “the only salvation” he can think of, “for a while yet, maybe a long while yet. We will have to wait” – for his ‘utopia’ of a world purged of ‘his people.’

This belief is already laid out in “The Bear,” where the commissary building is described as

> placarded over with advertisements for snuff and cures for chills and salves and potions manufactured and sold by white men to bleach the pigment and straighten the hair of negroes that they might resemble the very race which for two hundred years had held them in bondage and from which for another hundred years not even a bloody civil war would have set them completely free (*GDM* 188).

It is probably not by chance that this passage takes up the point that Shreve makes at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, describing to Quentin how “the Jim Bonds … will bleach out again” and that “in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings” (*AA* 311). Godden argues that Shreve’s suggestion “that his and Quentin’s heirs … will eventually descend from a great black father,” is “a joke against white paternalism” (270), one that Quentin is clearly unable to take, because it leaves him “panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark” (*AA* 311), vehemently denying that he hates the South. Ike continues the thought from “The Bear” at the end of “Delta Autumn.” This is his last appearance in the novel, and it is striking that the moment we leave Ike seems like a reverberation of Quentin’s final scene in *Absalom, Absalom!*. The woman leaves the tent, and in a manner quite similar to

Quentin, Ike lies "back once more, trembling, panting, the blanket huddled to his chin and his hands crossed on his breast … And cold too: he lay shaking faintly and steadily in it, rigid safe for the shaking. This Delta, he thought: This Delta" (*GDM* 268f.). At the beginning of the last chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner evokes a similar atmosphere of a cold night, in which Quentin begins "to jerk all over, violently and uncontrollably until he could even hear the bed, … lying there and waiting in peaceful curiosity for the next violent unharbingered jerk to come" (*AA* 368). Confronted, once more, with the "monstruous double" of incest and miscegenation, their bodies begin to rebel physically. Ike's personal horror scenario even trumps Quentin's, as his racism becomes anti-Asian and antisemitic: "*Chinese and African and Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares*" (*GDM* 269). Ike *does* care, and it is very likely that Quentin would have cared to, if he had still been alive in the early 1940s. Both characters remain in their rigid set of codes, repeating their ancestors' guilt even as they try to escape it, because Faulkner's concept of time denies any kind of progress or, as Backman argues: "innocence has become unacknowledgeable guilt. As loyalty to the Old South has turned into savage racism, the planter's power to act has deteriorated for his twentieth-century descendants into a stasis of will" (604).

6.3 TEMPORALITIES OF GUILT

"If grief makes a noise, then I would say that Faulkner not only found it, but discovered a way to represent it by the manipulation of marks on the page. Much of the magic here is conveyed by *the labor of repetition*" (Spillers 36, my emphasis). To me, this statement by Hortense J. Spillers is a perfect summary of the narrative correlate that Faulkner found to represent the South's dwelling on the past, the overarching retrospective of a community that got stuck between the past and the present and is therefore forever unable to move forward to the future. The labor of repetition, as Spillers calls it, is Faulkner's main stylistic device to fix on the page what cannot be grasped in the real world. We usually sense noise when multiple people talk all at once. While this is certainly an appropriate description of what is going on in many of Faulkner's novels – one only has to think of the multitude of narrators contributing their share to the Sutpen story, or of Quentin and Shreve's "happy marriage of speaking and hearing" (*AA* 261) – it is rather the act of repetition that makes Faulkner's works 'noisy.' For as we read and read on, our experience is not so much one of progression, where we discover all there is to a story in easily digestible chunks. It is rather a stasis, an endlessly prolonged moment during which the words rain down on us and tell us the same story over and over again until all we hear is a loud humming noise which, once we finally close the book, reveals 'the big picture.'

Many a critic has written on Faulkner's style, many a reviewer has praised or complained about the tough time they had with a story or a novel by Faulkner. One of the most recent studies concerned with Faulkner's style and how it represents the South's violent past of slavery and the Civil War is Michael Gorra's monography *The Saddest Words*. In the eponymous chapter of the book, Gorra refers to the respective "saddest word" for each Quentin Compson and his father: For Mr. Compson, it is *was*, whereas for Quentin, it is *again*. Both come up in an imagined conversation between the two characters which Quentin remembers just moments before his chapter closes and he will commit suicide.[79] Gorra offers an inspiring interpretation of the interplay of

---

[79] Gorra seems to treat the narration of that conversation at the end of the Quentin-chapter as a memory of a real event, arguing that it "returns" to Quentin and that he "has already had that conversation; we haven't" (319f.). Bauer, in contrast, states that "Quentin holds an imaginary debate with his father over the value of his codes of honor and morality in one last attempt to exorcise his guilt by establishing that his ideals are more important than Caddy's life" (85). In Virginia, Faulkner was indeed once asked whether Quentin actually had that conversation, and he replied that it was an imaginary what-if-situation, that Quentin "just said, Suppose I say this to my father, would it help me, would it clarify, would I see

those words, *was* and *again*, and suggests that the repetition which happens in Quentin's mind is an expression of an inability to escape the past. "On the last day of his life," Gorra argues, "most of what happens to Quentin happens in memory" (315).

In what follows, I will now argue that Faulkner uses repetition, both on level of content as well as on level of style, as an expression of the temporalities of guilt which underlie the structure and subject of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and to a great extent also *Go Down, Moses*.

Guilt is an emotion that is entirely based on the past. It surfaces only once a deed is done, a word has been spoken, a crime committed. In that very moment, every active access to the action itself is blocked. We cannot *do* anything about it anymore. It is this unbridgeable distance which makes it possible to link the sense of guilt to trauma. In her influential, humanities-based study on the subject, Cathy Caruth describes trauma as something that "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). The study of trauma is usually concerned with victims of crimes or mass atrocities, and the question whether the term could or should be applied to perpetrators is highly controversial. However, as part of the rather new field of perpetrator studies, the study of perpetrator trauma has emerged.[80] It proceeds on the assumption that "perpetrators can experience their own crimes or wrongs as trauma" (Mohamed 265), and are thus suffering from a "wound of the mind," as Caruth calls it, which "is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that … is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 3f.). As is the case with the term "trauma," there are controversies as to how to define who or what a perpetrator is. In the criminal sense, "a perpetrator is a person who does something that the law defines as a crime" (Mohamed 267). But there is a much broader understanding of the term outside criminal law, according to which "[a] perpetrator might be a person who has committed

---

clearer what it is that I anguish over?" (*Faulkner in the University* 262f.). If we want to believe Faulkner, that means that the interplay of the saddest words *was* and *again* that Gorra so thoroughly describes also has its only source in Quentin's mind. In other words, it means that Quentin reflects on his father's world view and comes to the conclusion that the saddest word for him must be was, while he himself experiences the past differently.

[80] For a concise overview of the controversies that go along with the study of perpetrator trauma, see Mohamed 268ff.

not a crime, but rather a moral wrong that may not be defined as a crime" (Mohamed 267).

On the understanding that perpetrators, in both the legal and the moral sense of the term, can suffer from trauma, I contend that the *sense* of guilt in Faulkner's works, which is the focus of my study, is a traumatic experience: A belated emotion that sets in only after the crime or the wrong. The reason behind my claim is the "particular temporal structure" which Buschmeier ascribes to guilt. He describes the deed (or crime, or wrong) as an incident which "happens and ends instantaneously, [whereas] guilt requires prolonged time … Guilt unfolds bonding forces only in time. And because of guilt's temporal structure, it connects people across time and interrelates generations" (47, my translation). For a perpetrator, guilt is what remains of their crime – contrary to the victims, who are left with different physical and/or psychological symptoms caused by the crime they fell prey to. Quentin tries to repress his memory, but it creeps into and tampers with his present. In other words, it haunts him. The shifts from present to past and back are "represented in italics and interspersed into the dialogue going on around him, which is printed in regular type and properly punctuated" (Bauer 75). As explained above, Caruth argues that the traumatic event is unavailable to consciousness until it resurfaces again in the traumatized person's nightmares. Quentin's nightmare starts once he is knocked unconscious, which is marked in the text when Faulkner abruptly "switches to standard type without punctuation or capitalization for the flashback" (Bauer 75). He is forced to relive his past without being able to change it, and that is what saddens him most. The burden his father feels because of something that *was* is multiplied for Quentin, because the past did not just happen to him once, it happens *again* in his mind, and each repetition is probably more painful than the original: He will "remember Caddy *again*, sadder than was, saddest of all" (Gorra 320, my emphasis).

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Quentin puts that interplay of *was* and *again* into words, thinking:

> *Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn't matter: that pebble's watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space to the old ineradicable rhythm* (266).

This train of thought, significantly pervaded with repetitions, is a perfect illustration of the temporalities of guilt in Faulkner's work. Crimes or moral wrongs *happen* and become inaccessible, but they are not *finished* in the sense that nothing remains. The *pebble sinks*, the deed is done, but in that very moment, the *ripples* begin to form as a *watery echo* that resonates in the perpetrator's mind, they are what Buschmeier describes as "dirty remains" (44). Buschmeier's analysis of guilt serves as particularly useful here, because it is possible to interpret the *narrow umbilical water-cord* which connects all the *pools* as the bonding forces with which guilt interrelates generations. Therefore, Quentin, who did not throw the *pebble* into the *water*, still experiences guilt as an *echo whose fall it did not even see*. Quentin formulates these thoughts while he and Shreve try to reconstruct the Sutpen story. In chapter 4, I already pointed out that this story is designed as a cultural canon in Yoknapatawpha, and that Faulkner rewrote the Southern myth of the Cavalier legend as a guilt narrative. As Quentin continues talking to Shreve, he experiences this heritage as a burden: "*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*" (*AA* 228f.). Quentin left the South for Massachusetts, but he cannot outrun Southern guilt. The story that he has been told all his life resurfaces again and again. According to Buschmeier, "narrative illustrations are the central medium of realizing socio-collective dimensions of the concept of guilt. But guilt narratives not only illustrate, they also rather (re-)produce that version of guilt within the culture" (44). In the fictionalized culture that Faulkner depicts in *Absalom, Absalom!*, this guilt narrative presents Quentin with an unsolvable problem, because it puts him in a period of time into which he does not belong. Gorra argues that

> all sons are condemned to a sense of belatedness simply because they *are* sons, because they've had fathers who themselves are 'struggling in the grip of Father Time.' That repetition precludes any sense of one's own generative power; it condemns each son to a life in which, as Mr. Compson says, all 'tragedy is second-hand,' a catastrophe that has already happened … Quentin lives in an afterlife, and what he has to tell us about the South is that it all happens over and over again" (321f., citing Irwin).

Gorra's analysis makes clear that Quentin struggles with his heritage because the society he lives in has not found an adequate answer to its guilt. This failure to account for the past is what forces him to reproduce the self-same story repeatedly.

Guilt, in the way Faulkner narrates it, only leads back into the self-same cycle of *was* and *again*. In order to escape that endless loop, Quentin chooses a sphere of non-being: "A quarter hour yet. And then I'll not be" (*SF* 1010). The world he leaves, however, remains the same. Caddy, whom he leaves behind and whose life he helped ruin, "must go on living the life of selflessness Quentin has pushed her into, beginning with a loveless marriage and then apparent prostitution, whereby she repeatedly sacrifices herself for the pleasure of others" (Bauer 86).[81] In *Go Down, Moses*, Ike relinquishes his heritage, but as with Quentin, his allegedly selfless act has no other effect than silencing his conscience. The reason why both Quentin and Ike are unable to bring about social change in their respective story worlds is that guilt, the way it is narratively negotiated by Faulkner as a traumatic experience, is an entirely egocentric emotion of the perpetrators that ignores the moral components of guilt. When Quentin commits suicide upon recognizing his guilt towards Caddy, he does so because he cannot live with *himself*, not because Caddy has to live the life he forced upon her. When Ike repudiates his heritage, he does not think so much about the fate of the female slave, who was raped by her own father/master, but rather about his grandfather's miscegenation. Guilt narratives, at least the ones Faulkner tells, seem to be stories about perpetrators, told by perpetrators, for perpetrators. And while it is crucial that guilt is acknowledged – which is not the case in Faulkner's works – its narration must not belie the victims' suffering. Faulkner did not tell Southern stories of moonlight and magnolias, like Mitchell, illustrating slavery as a benign relationship between white and black people.[82] But his works do not account for the violence of

---

[81] Bauer links Caddy's sacrifice to the setting of Quentin's chapter in *The Sound and the Fury* on Maundy Thursday, arguing that it "is evidence that the author intended guilt as a crucial motivation for Quentin's suicide. Maundy Thursday is the day not only of the Last Supper but also of Judas's betrayal of Christ." Hence, Bauer reads Quentin as a Judas figure, who kills himself after recognizing his sin, whereas Caddy seems more like Christ, who "still had to withstand his torture and bear his cross." However, "[u]nlike Christ … Caddy is not so 'fortunate' as to die the day after Quentin's betrayal" (85f.).

[82] Bleikasten notes, however, that after finishing *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Faulkner "had no immediate plans for another novel," he suggested "a collection of skillfully written good old Southern stories," to publisher Bennett Cerf. "The timing seemed perfect for a book about the Old South and the Civil War. In July 1934 Stark Young had published the best seller *So Red the Rose*, the story of two Southern families during the Civil War, made into a film the following year by King Vidor. *Gone With the Wind* was published two years later, to immediate acclaim. It is easy to see why Faulkner wanted to take advantage of this craze for the South" (270).

slavery and the Jim Crow South, either. Gorra notes that "in writing of the pre-1865 South Faulkner never depicts a slave auction or a family broken by sale. Nor does he describe a whipping, still less the salt and pepper that were often rubbed into the skin the leather had broken; none of his people have a tree of scars upon their back" (177). Faulkner's works, as well as the sense of guilt they demonstrate, are concerned only with the white South. Such a focus seems rather outdated from a twenty-first century perspective. But according to Davis, Faulkner's works, at the time that they were written, began to turn an established tradition of Southern literature:

> the Negro in the South (either slave or free) usually stands for the dark that has overshadowed and blighted the South, and Faulkner himself sometimes uses this notion. However, in *Absalom, Absalom!* it is, as the ending suggests, the southerner himself, his own mind … that encompasses and creates the dark … Faulkner relies upon an emotional experience (as he does in resolving *The Sound and the Fury*) to imply an abandoning of a traditional position: Look at what the black man has done to me; look at what the black man has made me do. Even though the new position is more a felt experience than a statement, it seems to be: See what I have done to myself ("The Signifying Abstraction" 105).

But neither does Faulkner say: Look at what I have done *to* the black man, which shows once again that Faulkner's treatment of guilt is not about morality. Instead, such a process of 'navel-gazing' hints at the one-sidedness of guilt narratives, because they seem to perpetuate the lopsided balance of power between perpetrator and victim: It is the former who tells the story. Quentin is sick of that story, of having "*to never listen to anything else but this again forever*" (*AA* 229). Faulkner, on the other hand, seems far from done telling that story, and if he ever meant to solve the problem of Southern guilt, to go beyond what Hobson has called the writer's "tragic sense," to imagine a future for the South that is more than a distorted image of the past, then he certainly failed, again – most splendidly, as he perhaps would have added.

7 CONCLUSION

The three novels discussed in this study were written and published in the first half of the twentieth century, in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. They were read, or re-read, however, in a new light and with seemingly different expectations after Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1949/1950. Robert Jackson argues that afterwards, "Faulkner was approached routinely for his views on many contemporary issues, from the early Cold War tensions he addressed in his brief, celebrated Nobel speech to the increasingly visible – and, for white southerners, unavoidable – African American struggle for civil rights that would consume his native region well beyond his death in 1962" (185). The views Faulkner offered in response, often only reluctantly, seem to have found their way into a large part of academic criticism, by scholars who thus "have added to our sense of how the recalcitrant public Faulkner and the Faulkner most at home, and most daring, in his fiction merged into a single figure" (Jackson 188). In the course of this work, I have tried to avoid suggesting such a conflation between Faulkner as a "public intellectual" and Faulkner as a writer, because my focus is rather narratological than informed by this kind of public discourse. Nevertheless, I do not consider fiction as an entirely self-referential medium, and my study of guilt as a narratological construct in Faulkner's works is undeniably and perhaps inevitably influenced by Faulkner criticism that relates Faulkner's public statements, his essays and letters on the civil rights movement and the persistent racism in the South, to his fiction.

Moreover, my own reading of Faulkner's literary works is unavoidably influenced by the current discourses on racism in the United States and the Black Lives Matter movement, perhaps in much the same way as his readers after 1950 were unable to ignore the Jim Crow laws and the civil rights movement when they came across Faulkner's black, white, and biracial characters. To explore such an influence would be the substance of another study, but I mention it here in order to stress that even a mostly narratological approach as mine does not defy the social-cognitive or cultural aspects of its writing process. I also mention it here because of another influence that Catherine Gunther Kodat points out in her contribution to *The New William Faulkner Studies* (2022), in which she explores "how the writing of Toni Morrison – the essays as well as the fiction – offer a key to understanding how Black writing has changed, and will continue to change, the ways in which we read and understand the work of William Faulkner" (86). Apart from a thorough examination of the academic criticism of

the relationship between Faulkner and African-American literature, Kodat's article provides another valuable insight into Faulkner's current significance:

> To understand our present literary reality, then, and Faulkner's place within it, we must acknowledge that any significance his fiction continues to have in the American cultural landscape is tied to the ways in which it both *blocks and affirms* the truth that Black lives – and the reading and writing undertaken and achieved during and about those lives – matter (97, my emphasis).

My analysis of Faulkner's works is an investigation of the ways in which this truth is *blocked* by means of the writer's narrative representation of guilt as a problem of temporality rather than a moral problem. It also shows in how far Faulkner's version of guilt bears relation to what Foster calls the *guilt thesis*, "the contention that [in their heart of hearts] white southerners felt guilty about slavery" (665), which lacks empirical reality and used to be a common, rather mythical theme among the writers of the Southern Renaissance. I have demonstrated that the only response to this kind of guilt which Faulkner *chooses* to narrate is evasion, which is why guilt is not discussed as a moral question and is therefore ultimately unsuitable as a starting point for debating issues of social change or social justice.

This is not to say, of course, that Faulkner's works are inherently unfit to provide insight into and illuminate ethical questions, but rather that his particular treatment of guilt, in relation to the memory of the violent system of slavery that causes it, is not to be understood as a critical comment on the immorality of that system. And yet, there are several Faulkner critics, however, who suggest this kind of purport, and who usually refer to the unspoken, or the silences of Faulkner's works. One of them is Édouard Glissant, who claims that

> [b]oth on the Plantation and in the world developed around it, something's rotten in the act of appropriation and colonialization, as long as one persists in slavery and its unpardonable derivative, miscegenation (founded on rape). Faulkner never says this (he shouts it out indistinctly every so often) because he suffers in his flesh (the South) from truly thinking in this way (132).

Colin Messer's reading is also exemplary for this line of argument, as he suggests that "[t]hrough the very failure of his characters … Faulkner perhaps partially absolved himself of his own sense of guilt as a southerner" (*The Companion to Southern Literature* 325). Gorra passes a similarly psychoanalytical judgement on Faulkner, as he urges us "to listen to the silence and read for what his work leaves unsaid" (201),

and comes to the conclusion that Faulkner's works "speak to us of a riven soul; of a battle in which the right side doesn't always win and he fights others as a way of fighting himself; of the civil war within him" (351).

Such statements and interpretations suggest that the characters' struggle with their region's legacy represents Faulkner's own struggle, that he was somehow forced to narrate this struggle in exactly that way, that he suffered from guilt himself and had to narrate it in this very way in order to free himself from that burden. I do not see it that way. The only judgement of Faulkner's character I allow myself to make is that he was too much of an artist to submit to his feelings, which we *cannot* know, or the alleged guilt complex of Southern society. Moreover, to consider Faulkner a writer tortured by his own, or his region's, conscience, whose only salvation was to pour out his woes by means of writing, is to be deceived by the myth of Southern guilt that Faulkner helped weave, to continue to accept as fact that Southerners felt guilty "in their heart of hearts." I believe that Faulkner had a choice, and that his characters' responses to guilt are to be seen as the writer's conscious narrative decisions, that his representation of guilt itself is a carefully considered decision that fits Faulkner's overall aesthetic and his narrative concept of time. Faulkner is one of the Southern writers in the first half of the twentieth century with what Hobson calls "the tragic sense," and Hobson has a convincing explanation as to where it came from:

> the southern writer [after the late 1920s], who in most cases had left home for a time, focused his eye on a changing South, an industrializing South, but looked as well at a South that was slipping away, and the result was a creative mixture of detachment and involvement—an escape from, then an attempt to return to the southern community—that contributed greatly to the work of Faulkner and Wolfe and the Southern Agrarians (*The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* 3).

Singal makes clear that "Faulkner did spend his life in the small Mississippi town of Oxford, but we now know that his schooling in the avant-garde was more complete than that of any southerner of his generation" (157). Faulkner's extensive reading of the classical and modern literary canon, as well as his visits to New York, Paris, and New Orleans in the 1920 demonstrate that "his exposure to Modernist culture was so extensive that by the time he started his own writing in earnest about 1927 Faulkner was perched on the furthest reaches of the literary frontier, with nothing left to assimilate" (Singal 157). Faulkner did not write the way he wrote by accident, tortured

by a sense of guilt that could only be alleviated by expressing on the page what was repressed in the mind, he knew his craft due to "long, deliberate training" (Singal 157).

Describing Faulkner's literary treatment of guilt as a conscious narrative choice is not meant to be a moral judgement, or to blame him for not writing different books, 'better' books. It is rather to emphasize once again that Faulkner's version of guilt is not an expression of an ethical concern, neither on the part of the writer nor on the part of his characters, but the narrative construct of a writer whose subject was the past, and how it imposes itself on people. I do not consider his works as a portrayal of the 'real' South, if such a thing exists, from which to draw conclusions about Southern society, but rather as a fictional *reinvention* of his native land. Why else would he call it Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, when he could just have called it by its name, let his stories unfold in, say, Oxford, or plainly Mississippi? With Yoknapatawpha, he has created something that was truly *his*, "a cosmos of [his] own" (qtd. in Lee, Introduction 7), with him being the "sole owner and proprietor." Likewise, his characters are not merely literary equivalents of his fellow citizens, they are supposed to be "much better people than God can [create]" (*Faulkner in the University* 118). Therefore, the sense of guilt that these characters experience does not conform to the rules of any 'real' South or society, but solely to the literary laws of Yoknapatawpha.

This study has been concerned with some of the methods and strategies of that fictional reinvention. Its purpose was to clarify by which means the "crushing sense of guilt" that Faulkner criticism often describes as one of the writer's "usual themes" is narratively manifested in his works. I have demonstrated how Faulkner borrows different concepts and ideas, like the curse narrative, myth, original sin, or trauma, in order to emphasize the *temporalities* of guilt that reinforce his overall concept of time. I have also shown that the only response to the sense of guilt in Faulkner's fiction is evasion. And even if his works, as Duvall argues, provide insight into "the social contradictions growing out of race in the South," even if Faulkner is "acutely aware … that, in a white community that wishes both to make absolute the distinctions between the races and to demonize black male sexuality, the races have already been mixed, almost exclusively by white men's abuse of black women" ("Regionalism" 255f.), he still does not solve the sense of guilt that allegedly stems from that insight in any way that benefits society. The way Faulkner narrates guilt does not, as Buschmeier argues in case of guilt narratives in general, provide society with possible alternatives for their actions (45), it does not have any kind of "productive power," because this is clearly

not the point Faulkner wants to make. Faulkner deals with guilt not to accelerate progress, but to express deadlock, retrogressivity, and impotence, because they supply his literary engine with fuel, keeping alive those "garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" in a South "dead since 1865." In this sense, Faulkner's version of guilt has more in common with Audre Lorde's vision of guilt:

> Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness (130).

All this is true of Yoknapatawpha, where constant repetition wrecks all hope of a new beginning. Thus, Faulkner's narrative negotiation of guilt illustrates under which circumstances debates about guilt may be a productive force for social justice, and under which circumstances they are an obstacle to such progress. My analysis of Quentin Compson's and Isaac McCaslin's evasive responses to guilt has shown that *because* guilt is not acknowledged, the fictional South Faulkner depicts remains locked in the past, while the future is imagined as a time which is not supposed to set in during the following millennium. The defense mechanisms of these characters make clear, to refer to Frederick Douglass once again, how hard it is "to forgive those whom we injure." Faulkner's white characters see black people as a burden reminiscent of their violent legacy, and instead of accounting for this past by making it the subject of discussion, they focus on the feeling of unease it provokes in themselves.

This is an important insight for further research in the tradition of critical race theory and its commitment to social justice, because it shows that guilt is an inadequate impulse for the latter as long as it is addressed as a feeling rather than a fact.[83]

Duvall claims that Faulkner is "acutely aware" of "white men's abuse of black women," and whenever he draws the readers' attention to that crime, we see "Faulkner at his best" ("Regionalism" 255). But Duvall seems to overlook that the abused black women in Faulkner's works are only a minor matter, mentioned only because abuse

[83] As Vida Robertson points out in his contribution to *Critical Race Studies Across Disciplines. Resisting Racism through Scholactivism*, "critical race theory is deeply indebted to the theorizations of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida … Marx and others maintained an earnest commitment to move beyond thought into action … Marx foreshadows critical race theory's principle commitment to alleviate oppression through research that strives for social justice reform" (170).

requires an object. What Faulkner's characters see when confronted with these crimes is white men, and they recoil in horror not because they see black women in agony, but because they recognize themselves in these men. The resulting sense of guilt is paralyzing rather than empowering, and it seems to block their view of the victims. Lorde states that she has "no creative use for guilt," because it "is only another way of avoiding informed action" (130). It has no potential for social change.

There are many reasons why people should read Faulkner, many reasons why I read Faulkner, none of which is relevant for my argument. Gorra claims to "read him despite, and … for or because or on account of his … moral difficulty, rather, the drama and struggle and paradox and power of his attempt to work through our history, to wrestle or rescue it into meaning" (351). I refuse to read Faulkner's works as an expression of a moral conflict about slavery and racism. They are significant in order to understand the nostalgia, the myths, even the egocentricity that often make it harder to account for the history of slavery in a meaningful way. If the latter is the purpose, however, there is probably not much of a stimulus there in Faulkner's works, not even if you read between the lines.

Read *alongside* the (literary) works of some of Faulkner's African American contemporaries and successors, however, Faulkner's works continue to display an enormous topicality. The same applies to his statements as a "public intellectual." Kodat demonstrates this in her article on Morrison's impact on Faulkner studies, especially in regard to Kiese Laymon's online essay "I Am a Big Black Man Who Will Never Own a Gun Because I Know I Would Use It" (2018), in which he dismisses the final sentence of Faulkner's letter on the death of Emmett Till – "If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don't deserve to survive, and probably won't" – by arguing that "there has never been a time in this desperate nation's history when American grown folk have refused to murder children" (qtd. in Kodat 96). Laymon's essay reveals a central blind spot that applies to both Faulkner's public statements as well as his writing. It seems that Faulkner's artistic vision always lacked authentic representation of black lives, but Kodat clarifies how especially Morrison continued from there, searching for "the 'artistic articulation' of that undead past, and its haunted present" and making it her own (97).

This kind of storytelling is what critical race theory's founder Richard Delgado has termed "counterstories, which challenge the received wisdom" (2414), and "can

be used to challenge a stock story and prepare the way for a new one" (2416). Vida Robertson identifies James Baldwin "as another forebear of critical race theory" who expanded "the theoretical footprint of counterstories into arenas of racialized gender and sexuality. In the midst of the turbulent 1960s, James Baldwin artfully highlighted the cruel anti-Black sentiment of American society which violently commandeered African American life" (171). At that time, Baldwin also addressed Faulkner's often-discussed "A Letter to the North" (later published as "A Letter to a Northern Editor"), in which he advises "the NAACP and all the organizations who [sic.] would compel immediate and unconditional integration" to "[g]o slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment" (87). In his essay "Faulkner and Desegregation," Baldwin takes up Faulkner's "go slow"-phrase and states that "[t]he time [Faulkner] pleads for is the time in which the southerner will come to terms with himself, will cease fleeing from his conscience" (162). Baldwin's examination of Faulkner's statements and his stalling techniques, while aimed at his political views rather than his fiction, nevertheless get to the heart of Faulkner's artistic understanding of time, which I have interpreted here in relation to his narrative treatment of guilt. Faulkner's works are inhabited by characters who are unable to admit their own and their society's guilt. It is, as I have demonstrated, the unresolved problem at the center of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*, each of which shows that the failure to account for the past prevents social change. In the latter novel, Isaac McCaslin feeds the woman from "Delta Autumn" with hopes of a future which might never come. In his letter, Faulkner does something similar, assuring the NAACP that they "can afford to withhold for a moment" (87), and asking them to "give [the Southerner] a space in which to get his breath" (91). Baldwin takes up the salvation Faulkner promises and pulls it from the future back into the present, demanding immediate steps. He claims that "the time Faulkner asks for does not exist—and he is not the only Southerner who knows it. There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now" (162). Faulkner's concept of time, however, implies that there is never time, because time itself is a thing of the past, as exemplified in *The Sound and the Fury*: During the imagined dialog between Quentin and his father at the end of the second chapter, *was* is described as "the saddest word of all there is nothing else in the world its not despair until time *its not even time until it was*" (1014, my emphasis). The contrasting juxtaposition of Baldwin's and Faulkner's understanding of time illustrates once more how the usage of guilt as a means of expression of a cursed,

deadlocked South perpetuates changelessness. Moreover, it calls back to mind that while some can afford to go slow, not everyone has time to catch their breath.

8 WORKS CITED

Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah I. "White Disavowal, Black Enfranchisement, and the Homoerotic in William Faulkner's *Light in August*." *Faulkner and Whiteness*, edited by Jay Watson, UP of Mississippi, 2011, pp. 170–188.

Backman, Melvin. "Sutpen and the South: A Study of *Absalom, Absalom!*" *PMLA*, vol. 80, no. 5, 1965, pp. 596–604.

Baldwin, James. "Faulkner and Desegregation." *The Price of the Ticket. Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985*, Beacon Press, 1985, pp. 157–162.

Bauer, Margaret D. "'I Have Sinned in That I Have Betrayed the Innocent Blood': Quentin's Recognition of His Guilt." *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, pp. 70–89.

Bleikasten, André. *William Faulkner. A Life through Novels*. Translated by Miriam Watchorn, Indiana UP, 2017.

Brooks, Cleanth. "'*Absalom, Absalom!*': The Definition of Innocence." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 59, no. 4, 1951, pp. 543–558.

---. "History and the Sense of the Tragic: *Absalom, Absalom!*" *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!. *A Casebook*, edited by Fred Hobson, Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 17–46.

---. "On *Absalom, Absalom!*" *The Novels of William Faulkner*, special issue of *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1973, pp. 159–183.

Buell, Lawrence. "Faulkner and the Claims of the Natural World." *Faulkner and the Natural World*, edited by Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 1–18.

Burns, Robert, and Cunningham, Allan. *The Works of Robert Burns: With His Life*. Boston: Hilliard, Gray, and Company 1834.

Buschmeier, Matthias. "FELIX CULPA? Zur kulturellen Produktivkraft der Schuld." *Communio*, vol. 47, 2018, pp. 38–50.

Campbell, Neil, and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. 1997. Routledge, 2005.

Cantwell, Robert. "The Faulkners: Recollections of a Gifted Family." *William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism*, edited by Fredrick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery, Michigan State UP, 1960, pp. 51–66.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*. 1996. Johns Hopkins UP, 2016.

Cash, W. J. *The Mind of the South*. 1941. Vintage Books, 1991.

Cowley, Malcolm. “Introduction to The Portable Faulkner.” *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Penn Warren, Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 34–45.

D’Alessandro, Michael. “Childless ‘Fathers,’ Native Sons: Mississippi Tribal Histories and Performing the Indian in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*.” *Special Issue on William Faulkner,* special issue of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2014, pp. 375–402.

Davis, Thadious M. *Games of Property. Law, Race, Gender, and Faulkner’s* Go Down, Moses. Duke UP, 2003.

---. “The Signifying Abstraction: Reading ‘the Negro’ in *Absalom, Absalom!*” *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! A Casebook*, edited by Fred Hobson, Oxford UP, 2003, pp.69–106.

Delgado, Richard. “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative Legal Storytelling.” *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 87, no. 8, 1989, pp. 2411–2441.

Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. *Critical Race Theory. An Introduction*. 2001. New York UP, 2017.

Deloria, Philip J. *Playing Indian*. Yale UP, 1998.

DeVoto, Bernard. “Witchcraft in Mississippi.” Review of *Absalom, Absalom!*, by William Faulkner. *Saturday Review of Literature*, Oct. 1936. In: *William Faulkner. The Critical Heritage*, edited by John Bassett, Routledge, 1975, pp. 198–204.

Dickerson, Mary Jane. “‘The Magician's Wand’: Faulkner's Compson Appendix.” *William Faulkner*, special issue of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1975, pp. 317–337.

Dickey, Jennifer W. *A Tough Little Patch of History.* Gone with the Wind *and the Politics of Memory*. U of Arkansas P, 2014.

Douglass, Frederick. “The Color Line.” *The North American Review*, vol. 132, no. 295, 1881, pp. 567–577.

Duvall, John N. “Regionalism in American modernism.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, edited by Walter Kalaidjian Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 242–260.

Erler, Edward J. *Property and the Pursuit of Happiness. Locke, the Declaration of Independence, Madison, and the Challenge of the Administrative State*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

Evans, David H. "Taking the Place of Nature: 'The Bear' and the Incarnation of America." *Faulkner and the Natural World*, edited by Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 179–197.

Fargnoli, A. Nicholas, Michael Golay & Robert W. Hamblin. *Critical Companion to William Faulkner. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Facts on File, 2008.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* 1936. *William Faulkner: Novels 1936–1940*. Library of America, 1990, pp. 1–315.

---. "A Note on Sherwood Anderson." 1953. *William Faulkner. Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, edited by James B. Meriwether, Modern Library, 2004, pp. 3–10.

---. "Appendix. Compson: 1699–1945." *William Faulkner: Novels 1926–1929*. Library of America, 2006, pp. 1125–1141.

---. *Flags in the Dust*. 1973. *William Faulkner. Novels 1926–1929*. Library of America, 2006, pp. 541–875.

---. *Go Down, Moses*. 1942. *William Faulkner. Novels 1942–1954*. Library of America, 1994, pp.1–281.

---. "Letter to a Northern Editor." 1956. *William Faulkner. Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, edited by James B. Meriwether, Modern Library, 2004, pp. 86–91.

---. "Lion." *Uncollected Stories*, edited by Joseph Blotner, Vintage, 1979, pp. 184–200.

---. *Requiem for a Nun*. 1951. *William Faulkner. Novels 1942–1954*. Library of America, 1994, pp. 471–664.

---. *The Sound and the Fury*. 1929. *William Faulkner: Novels 1926–1929*. Library of America, 2006, pp. 877–1141.

---. *The Town*. 1957. *William Faulkner: Novels 1957–1962*. Library of America, 1999, pp. 1–326.

"fire and brimstone." *Oxford Dictionary of Reference and Allusion*. 3rd ed. 2012.

Foner, Eric. *Forever Free. The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*. Vintage Books, 2006.

Foster, Gaines M. "Guilt over Slavery: A Historiographical Analysis." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1990, pp. 665–694.

Foucault, Michel. “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, 1977. Cornell UP, 1980, pp. 139–164.

Fredrickson, George M. *White Supremacy. A Comparative Study in American and South African History*. Oxford UP, 1981.

Freud, Sigmund. “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis.” *Three Case Histories*. 1963. Touchstone, 1996.

Gallagher, Gary W. Introduction. *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, edited by Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, Indiana UP, 2000, pp. 1–10.

“genealogy.” *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2019. Web 23 April 2019.

Glicksberg, Charles. “The World of William Faulkner.” *William Faulkner. The Critical Heritage*, edited by John Bassett, Routledge 1975, pp. 361–371.

Glissant, Édouard. *Faulkner, Mississippi*. 1996. U of Chicago P, 2000.

Godden, Richard. “*Absalom, Absalom!* Haiti, and Labor History: Reading Unreadable Revolutions.” *William Faulkner’s* Absalom, Absalom!. *A Casebook*, edited by Fred Hobson, Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 251–281.

Gorra, Michael. *The Saddest Words. William Faulkner’s Civil War*. Liveright, 2020.

Gregory, Horace. Review of *Collected Stories by William Faulkner*. *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, Aug. 1950. In: *William Faulkner. The Critical Heritage*, edited by John Bassett, Routledge, 1975, pp. 372–377.

“Guilt.” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Reprint ed. 1972, vol. 3, 1967.

“Guilt.” *The Companion to Southern Literature, Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. 2002.

Gwynn, Frederick L. and Joseph L. Blotner, editors. *Faulkner in the University. Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957–1958*. U of Virginia P, 1959.

Hardwick, Elizabeth. “Faulkner and the South Today.” *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Penn Warren, Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 226–230.

Hobson, Fred. Introduction. *William Faulkner’s* Absalom, Absalom!. *A Casebook*, edited by Hobson, Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 3–15.

---. *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*. U of Georgia P, 1991.

Hoffmann, Gerhard. “Myth, Ideology, Symbol and Faulkner's Modernism / Postmodernism.” *William Faulkner: German Responses*, special issue of

Amerikastudien / American Studies, vol. 42, no. 4. Heidelberg: Winter, 1997, pp. 661–678.

Holman, C. Hugh. *Three Modes of Southern Fiction. Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe*. 1966. U of Georgia P, 2008.

Hönnighausen, Lothar. “Black as White Metaphor: A European View of Faulkner’s Fiction.” *Faulkner and Race*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi 1987, pp. 192–208.

Irwin, John T. *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge. A Speculative Reading of Faulkner*. 1975. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Jackson, Robert. “William Faulkner, Public Intellectual.” *The New William Faulkner Studies*, edited by Sarah Gleeson-White and Pardis Dabashi, Cambridge UP, 2022, pp. 185–199.

Jordan, Winthrop D. *The White Man’s Burden. Historical Origins of Racism in the United States*. Oxford UP 1974.

Kartiganer, Donald M. „Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*: The Discovery of Values.“ *American Literature*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1965, pp. 291–306.

---. “Faulkner’s Art of Repetition.” *Faulkner and the Craft of Fiction*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, Mississippi UP, 1989, pp. 21–47.

---. Introduction. *Faulkner and Psychology*, edited by Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1991, pp. vvi–xvi.

Kazin, Alfred. “The Stillness of *Light in August*.” *Faulkner. A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Penn Warren, Prentice Hall, 1966, pp. 147–162.

Kinney, Arthur F. “Faulkner’s Other Others.” *Faulkner at 100. Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 2000, pp. 195–203.

---. “The Family-Centered Nature of Faulkner’s World.” *College Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1, John Hopkins UP, 1989, pp. 83–102.

Kodat, Catherine Gunther. “Faulkner After Morrison.” *The New William Faulkner Studies*, edited by Sarah Gleeson-White and Pardis Dabashi, Cambridge UP, 2022, pp. 84–100.

Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land. Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. 1975. U of North Carolina P, 1984.

Kutney, Gerald. *Sulfur. History, Technology, Applications and Industry*. ChemTec Publishing, 2007.

Lee, A. Robert. Introduction. *William Faulkner. The Yoknapatawpha Fiction*, edited by Lee, Vision Press, 1990, pp. 7–18.

---. *Gothic to Multicultural: Idioms of Imagining in American Literary Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, 1991.

Lind, Ilse Dusoir. "The Design and Meaning of *Absalom! Absalom!* [sic.]" *PMLA*, vol. 70, no. 5, 1955, pp. 887–912.

Locke, John. Two treatises of government. In the former the false principles and foundation of Sir Robert Filmer and his followers are detected and overthrown. The letter is an essay concerning the true original extent and end of civil government. By John Locke. Dublin, 1794. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Universitaetsbibliothek Potsdam. 31 Oct. 2019 <http://find.gale.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=potsdam&tabID=T001&docId=CB127986624&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>. (Last access Oct. 31 2019).

Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*. 1984. Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 124–133.

Lurie, Peter. "History's Dark Markings: Faulkner and Film's Racial Representation." *The New Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner*, edited by John T. Matthews, Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 29–43.

Matthews, John T. *The Play of Faulkner's Language*. Cornell UP, 1982.

Meriwether, James. B. "Faulkner's 'Mississippi.'" *'Faulkner and History': Papers of the 'QUARTERLY'S' 1971 SCMLA Symposium*, supplement of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 25, 1972, pp. 15–23.

Mighall, Robert. *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction. Mapping History's Nightmares*. 1999. Oxford UP, 2003.

Miller, Nathaniel A. "'Felt, Not Seen Not Heard:' Quentin Compson, Modernist Suicide and Southern History." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2005, pp. 37–49.

Mohamed, Saira. "The Contours and Controversies of Perpetrator Trauma." *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies*. Routledge 2020, pp. 265–275.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. 1992. Vintage Books, 1993.

---. "The Color Fetish." *The New Yorker*. September 14, 2017. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-color-fetish (last access: 19.03.2020).

Nelkin, Dorothy. "Cultural Perspectives on Blood." *Blood Feuds. AIDS, Blood, and the Politics of Medical Disaster*, edited by Eric A. Feldman and Ronald Bayer, Oxford UP, 1999, pp. 273–292.

"Note to the Appendix." *The Sound and the Fury*. 1929. Modern Library, 2012, p. 315.

Oklopcic, Biljana. *Faulkner and the Native Keystone. Reading (Beyond) the American South*. Springer, 2014.

Penner, Erin Kay. "Fighting for Black Grief: Exchanging the Civil War for Civil Rights in *Go Down, Moses*." *Special Issue on William Faulkner,* special issue of *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 3, 2014, pp. 403–428.

Perry, Barbara. "'White Genocide': White Supremacists and the Politics of Reproduction." *Home-Grown Hate. Gender and Organized Racism*, edited by Abby L. Ferber, Routledge, 2004, pp. 75–96.

"Plantation." *The Companion to Southern Literature. Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. 2002.

Polk, Noel. "'The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives': Faulkner and the Greening of American History." *Faulkner in America*, edited by Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 2001, pp. 45–63.

Rau, Susanne. *History, Space, and Place*, eBook. Translated by Michael Thomas Taylor, Routledge, 2019.

"remorse." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2023. Web 8 January 2023.

Robertson, Vida. "Intersections between African American Literature, Cultural Studies, and Critical Race Studies." *Critical Race Studies Across Disciplines. Resisting Racism through Scholactivism*, edited by Jonathan Chism, Stacie Craft DeFreitas, Vida Robertson, and David Ryden, Lexington Books, 2021, pp. 169–176.

Rubin, Anne Sarah. "Seventy-six and Sixty-one: Confederates Remember the American Revolution." *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, edited by W. Fitzhugh Brundage, U of North Carolina P, 2000, pp. 85–106.

"Schuld." *Handbuch philosophischer Grundbegriffe*, vol. 5, 1974.

Singal, Daniel Joseph. *The War Within. From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945*. 1982. U of North Carolina P, 2007.

Smith, Lillian. *Killers of the Dream*. 1949. Norton, 1994.

"Space in Narrative." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. 2005. Routledge, 2008.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Faulkner Adds Up: Reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*." *Faulkner in America*, edited by Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 2001, pp. 24–44.

Sullivan, John Jeremiah. Foreword. *Absalom, Absalom!*, by William Faulkner, 1936. Modern Library, 2012, pp. ix–xix.

Sundquist, Eric J. "*Absalom, Absalom!* and the House Divided." *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!. *A Casebook*, edited by Fred Hobson, Oxford UP, 2003, pp. 107–149.

---. "Faulkner, Race, and the Forms of American Fiction." *Faulkner and Race*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1987, pp. 1–34.

Taylor, William R. *Cavalier and Yankee. The Old South and American National Character*. 1957. Oxford UP, 1993.

The Bible. Authorised King James Version, Collins, 1991.

Végsö, Roland. "'Let me play a while now': The Hermeneutics of Heritage and William Faulkner's 'Absalom, Absalom!'" *William Faulkner: German Responses*, special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies,* vol. 42, no. 4. Heidelberg: Winter, 1997, pp. 625–636.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. "*Go Down, Moses*: Faulkner's Interrogation of the American Dream." *Faulkner in America*, edited by Joseph R. Urgo and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 2001, pp. 136–152.

Watson, Jay. "Situating Whiteness in Faulkner Studies, Situating Faulkner in Whiteness Studies." *Faulkner and Whiteness*, edited by Jay Watson, UP of Mississippi, 2011, pp. vii–xxix.

---. Introduction. *Faulkner's Geographies*, edited by Watson and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 2015, pp. ix–xxiii.

---. *William Faulkner and the Faces of Modernity*. Oxford UP, 2019.

Warren, Robert Penn. “Cowley’s Faulkner.” Review of *The Portable Faulkner*, by Malcolm Cowley. *New Republic*, Aug. 1946. In: *William Faulkner. The Critical Heritage*, edited by John Bassett, Routledge, 1975, pp. 314–328.

Weinstein, Philip M. “Marginalia: Faulkner’s Black Lives.” *Faulkner and Race*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1987, pp. 170–191.

Westling, Louise. “Thomas Sutpen’s Marriage to the Dark Body of the Land.” *Faulkner and the Natural World*, edited by Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1999, pp. 126–142.

Wittenberg, Judith. “Go Down, Moses and the Discourse of Environmentalism.” *New Essays on Go Down, Moses*, edited by Linda Wagner-Martin, Cambridge UP, 1996, pp. 49–72.

Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from the Renaissance to Enlightenment*. London, Verso, 2012.

Wyatt-Brown, Bertram. Introduction. *The Mind of the South*, by W. J. Cash, 1941, Vintage Books, 1991, pp. vii–xxxviii.

Zender, Karl F. “*Requiem for a Nun* and the Uses of the Imagination.” *Faulkner and Race*, edited by Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, UP of Mississippi, 1987, pp. 272–296.

Ziegler, Heide. “The Fragile Pandora's Box of Scrawled Paper: A Different Reading of ‘Absalom, Absalom!’” *William Faulkner: German Responses*, special issue of *Amerikastudien / American Studies,* vol. 42, no. 4. Heidelberg: Winter, 1997, pp. 637–648.

9 GERMAN SUMMARY

Diese Arbeit setzt sich mit der narrativen Verhandlung von Schuld im Werk William Faulkners auseinander. Schuld ist ein Schlüsselbegriff der Faulkner-Forschung und wird bereits in Malcolm Cowleys Einleitung des *Portable Faulkner* erwähnt, einem der bedeutendsten Sekundärtexte zu Faulkner. Cowley skizziert die „Legende" (*legend*) von Yoknapatawpha und stellt die Behauptung auf, es gäbe in Faulkners fiktionaler Welt eine „Erbschuld" (*inherent guilt*), die sich in Form eines *Fluches* auf das Land gelegt habe und durch das Verbrechen der Sklaverei hervorgerufen wurde. In ähnlicher Weise geht Robert Penn Warren davon aus, Sklaverei werde bei Faulkner als Fluch verhandelt, verkörpert durch seine schwarzen Charaktere, die Warren zufolge mahnend an die Schuld erinnern würden. Weder Cowley noch Warren führen ihre Interpretation von Schuld als Fluch bei Faulkner tiefgehender aus; ihre jeweilige Lesart legt aber ein Grundverständnis von der zeitlichen Struktur von Schuld offen, die auch Kern dieser Arbeit ist: Die Beschreibung von Schuld als Fluch lässt die Bindungskräfte deutlich hervortreten, mit denen Schuld die Vergangenheit an die Gegenwart bindet und umgekehrt. In diesem Sinne erscheint Schuld bei Faulkner als Ausdruck seines Zeitverständnisses, als Instrument, das die Vergangenheit am Leben erhält und, wie zu zeigen sein wird, den Weg in die Zukunft verstellt.

Die Allgegenwart der Vergangenheit in Faulkners Werk ist von der Forschung vorrangig vor dem Hintergrund der männlichen Vorfahren und Urväter untersucht worden. Letztere entsprechen dem Mythos der sogenannten *Southern Cavaliers*, die im Selbstverständnis des US-amerikanischen Südens bis in die erste Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts hinein als Teil einer vollentwickelten Aristokratie galten, die sich vom ‚gemeinen Volk,' oftmals pejorativ als *white trash* bezeichnet, nicht nur durch ihre ökonomische Stellung, sondern auch durch die Idee einer überlegenen Blutlinie abgrenzten.

Kapitel 4 dieser Arbeit setzt sich mit Faulkners Umgang mit der sogenannten *Cavalier Legend* in *Absalom, Absalom!* auseinander und legt dar, inwiefern diese Erzählung einer noblen Herkunft anhand der Geschichte Thomas Sutpens in ein Schuldnarrativ umgeschrieben wird. Anhand zahlreicher Erzählungen durch die Charaktere des Romans werden die Herkunft Thomas Sutpens und die Errichtung seiner Plantage, *Sutpens Hundred*, nachvollzogen. Sutpen stammt von besitzlosen Weißen ab und wurde als Kind vom schwarzen Haussklaven eines Herrenhauses, an

das Sutpen geklopft hatte, an die Hintertür verwiesen. Für den jungen Sutpen ist dies ein Offenbarungserlebnis, das ihn die Unzulänglichkeiten kaukasischer Abstammung erkennen lässt, solange diese nicht an Besitz gekoppelt ist. In der Folge setzt er alles daran, ein erfolgreicher Plantagenbesitzer zu werden, zunächst auf Haiti, wo er aber in seinem Plan zurückgeworfen wird, als er erfährt, dass seine Frau schwarze Vorfahren hat. Er verstößt seine Frau und ihr gemeinsames Kind, Charles Bon, und beginnt erneut, seinen Plan von der Errichtung einer Plantagendynastie in die Tat umzusetzen. In Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha County, heiratet er Ellen Coldfield, die ihm zwei Kinder, Henry und Judith, gebärt. Meine Analyse in Kapitel 4 zeigt auf, inwiefern Faulkner Sutpens Aufstieg zum wohlhabenden Plantagenbesitzer nutzt, um exemplarisch zu verdeutlichen, dass dieser Wohlstand auf der Ausbeutung von Sklaven und der Natur basiert. Indem Faulkner Sutpen als Mitglied der südstaatlichen ‚Aristokratie' beschreibt, widerlegt er zum einen die sogenannte *Cavalier Legend* und deren Kerngedanken einer langen Dynastiegeschichte: Sutpens ‚Dynastie' reicht nicht über zwei Generationen hinaus. Zum anderen schreibt Faulkner das Narrativ der noblen Herkunft in ein Schuldnarrativ um. Anders gesagt wird die für die Nachfahren der Plantagen- und Sklavenbesitzer identitätsstiftende *Cavalier*-Erzählung somit zu einem Urschuld-Motiv umgedeutet. Diese Schuld vergeht nicht und legt sich wie ein Fluch auf das Land und seine Bewohnerinnen und Bewohner.

Die Widerlegung der *Cavalier Legend* ist zentraler Bestandteil der sogenannten *guilt thesis*, der zufolge die weiße Bevölkerung des Südens Schuld an der Sklaverei empfindet, weil sie sich nicht mit ihren demokratischen und evangelikalen Werten vereinbaren ließ (vgl. Foster 665). Die Befürworter dieser These gehen davon aus, dass dieses Schuldgefühl die Konföderierten dazu veranlasst hat, einen Bürgerkrieg anzuzetteln, von dem sie wussten, dass sie ihn verlieren würden, um somit ihre Bestrafung herbeizuführen. Als für die Formulierung der *guilt thesis* zentrale Texte gelten W. J. Cashs *The Mind of the South* und Lillian Smiths *Killers of the Dream*. Beide Texte attestieren dem Süden und seinen Bewohnerinnen und Bewohnern einen Schuldkomplex, der mit der bis dahin vorherrschenden Tradition der Geschichtsschreibung, welche die Sklaverei eher als wohltätiges System zu rechtfertigen versuchte, brach. Cashs und Smiths Ansätze waren nicht primär historisch, sondern soziologisch und zum Teil sogar autobiografisch. Ihre Texte hatten aber großen Einfluss auf die Geschichtsschreibung, für die C. Vann Woodward die

guilt thesis salonfähig machte. Auf diesen historiographischen Kontext wird im dritten Kapitel dieser Arbeit detaillierter eingegangen.

Das Erklärungsmuster eines von Schuld an der Sklaverei geplagten Südens, der seine eigene Niederlage durch Anzettelung eines Bürgerkrieges herbeiführte, findet sich schon bei Faulkner: In *Absalom, Absalom!* fragt beispielsweise der Kanadier Shreve McCannon, ob denn mit dem Ende des Bürgerkriegs tatsächlich die Sklaven befreit worden wären, oder nicht eher die Weißen. Somit wird die Sklaverei als eine Bürde, die vorwiegend auf den Tätern lastet und das Leid der Opfer ausklammert, dargestellt. Mit Fragen von Opfer- und Täterschaft und Faulkners narrativer Bearbeitung dieser Themen setzt sich das fünfte Kapitel dieser Arbeit auseinander. Hier wird untersucht, inwiefern Faulkner die unberührte Natur, die bei ihm unter dem Begriff *wilderness* zusammengefasst wird, und seine schwarzen Charaktere auf ähnliche Weise narrativ inszeniert. Wesentlich ist hierbei die Erkenntnis, dass Faulkner die Natur und seine schwarzen Figuren historisch gesehen zwar als Opfer darstellt, ihnen aber Attribute moralischer Überlegenheit verleiht, aufgrund derer sie „überdauern" und ihre Peiniger überleben werden. Dieses Konzept des Überdauerns bei Faulkner nennt sich *endurance*. Im Hinblick auf die Frage nach der für diese Arbeit zentralen Verhandlung von Schuld erscheint dies als ein weiteres narratives Instrument, anhand dessen Faulkners Zeitverständnis deutlich zutage tritt: Während die Gegenwart als von der Schuld der Vergangenheit überschattet dargestellt wird, werden Lösungen für dieses Schuldproblem auf unbestimmte Zeit in die Zukunft verschoben. Zeit ist bei Faulkner eine Kategorie der Vergangenheit, was sich eindrücklich anhand einer Passage aus *The Sound and the Fury* erkennen lässt, in der Quentin Compsons Vater behauptet, Zeit existiere erst, wenn ein Ereignis als abgeschlossen betrachtet wird. Die Gegenwart hingegen bedeutet Stillstand, eine ewige Wiederkehr der Vergangenheit und der mit ihr verbundenen Schuld. In Faulkners Werk kann dieser Kreislauf nicht aktiv durchbrochen werden, sondern löst sich passiv selbst auf. Isaac McCaslin trifft beispielsweise in *Go Down, Moses* zwei Vorhersagen: Zum einen behauptet er, die Menschen, die die Natur ausgebeutet und somit ihren Wohlstand generiert haben, würden ihren eigenen Untergang herbeiführen und somit eigenhändig das von ihnen an der Natur verübte Unrecht rächen. Zum anderen schreibt er den ehemaligen Sklaven seines Großvaters Tugenden wie Barmherzigkeit, Toleranz und Geduld zu, die ihr Überleben, im Gegensatz zu Isaacs weißer Familie, sichern werden. Zugleich räumt er ein, dass diese Art der

ausgleichenden Gerechtigkeit, sowohl in Bezug auf die Natur als auch auf die ehemaligen Sklavinnen und Sklaven und deren Nachfahren, erst in ferner Zukunft eintreten werde. Die Auseinandersetzung mit der eigenen und der ererbten Schuld wird also von Isaac durch die Umschreibung von Opferschaft in moralische Überlegenheit umgangen.

Das den Hauptteil dieser Arbeit abschließende sechste Kapitel setzt sich mit einer narrativen Alternative zur Auflösung von Schuld auseinander, die von Faulkner zwar angedeutet, deren Auserzählung jedoch scheinbar bewusst verweigert wird. Hierbei handelt es sich um sexuelle Beziehungen zwischen weißen und nicht-weißen Figuren, die eindeutig nicht in die Kategorie der Vergewaltigung von Sklavinnen durch Sklavenhalter fallen, diesen historischen Tatbestand aber verdeutlichen. Konkret geht es um die Romane *Absalom, Absalom!* und *Go Down, Moses* und die Beziehungen zwischen Judith Sutpen und Charles Bon, sowie zwischen einer namenlosen Frau und Isaac McCaslins Cousin Roth Edmonds. Beide Beziehungen rufen zunächst keinen Widerstand hervor, nicht einmal, sobald deutlich wird, dass zwischen den jeweiligen Partnern eine Verwandtschaftsbeziehung besteht. Charles Bon stellt sich als Halbbruder von Judith und Henry Sutpen heraus, jedoch wird diese inzestuöse Beziehung vom Bruder akzeptiert, wodurch Faulkner auf die vermeintliche Südstaaten-Aristokratie und das rassistische Konzept von der ‚Reinheit des Blutes' anspielt. Im weiteren Romanverlauf erkennt Henry jedoch, dass es sich bei Charles Bon um seinen und Judiths nicht-weißen Halbbruder aus Sutpens erster Ehe handelt, die letzterer auflöste, nachdem er von der Abstammung seiner ersten Frau erfuhr. Die Enthüllung der Ethnie folgt auf die Enthüllung der Blutsverwandtschaft und kulminiert in der Erkenntnis eines für den Süden eigentlich inakzeptablen, oftmals auf Vergewaltigung von Sklavinnen durch ihre Sklavenhalter basierenden Beziehungsgeflechts, welches sich im Kontext der Sklavenhaltung verschleiern ließ, nach Abschaffung der Sklaverei aber offen zutage tritt. Charles Bon wird somit zum schwarzen Bruder, dessen Existenz Henry gewaltsam dementieren muss.

Narrativ erschlossen wird diese Begebenheit durch Quentin Compson, einen der Haupterzähler von *Absalom, Absalom!*. Somit verbindet Faulkner die verschiedenen Handlungszeiträume von 1865 bis 1909/10 und betont den Schrecken, den die Verflechtungen von Inzest und interethnischen Beziehungen fast ein halbes Jahrhundert nach Ende des Bürgerkrieges noch immer hervorrufen. In *Go Down, Moses* setzt Faulkner sich weiter mit diesen Verflechtungen auseinander: Im Kapitel

„Delta Autum“ wird der mittlerweile fast achtzigjährige Isaac McCaslin auf einem Jagdausflug von einer Frau besucht, die ein Baby auf dem Arm trägt. In einem Erkenntnisprozess, der jenem aus *Absalom, Absalom!* ähnelt, erkennt Ike zunächst, dass es sich bei dem Kind um den Sohn seines Cousins Roth Edmonds handelt. In zwei weiteren Schritten wird schließlich offenbar, dass die Beziehung der beiden sowohl inzestuös als auch interethnisch ist. Die namenlose Frau stammt in einer direkten Linie vom Urvater der McCaslins ab, der nicht nur eine seiner Sklavinnen vergewaltigte, sondern ebenfalls die aus dieser Vergewaltigung hervorgehende Tochter. Ähnlich wie Henry in *Absalom, Absalom!* akzeptiert Isaac zwar die inzestuöse Beziehung, lehnt diese jedoch ab und weist die Frau zurück, sobald er von ihrer Ethnie erfährt. Im Gegensatz zum früheren Roman führt Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses* allerdings die Figur des Kindes ein, das der Faulkner-Forschung zufolge das Versprechen auf Versöhnung in sich trägt, da sich in ihm erstmals beide ‚Linien‘ der McCaslins vereinen.

Dass Faulkner diese Versöhnung nicht auserzählt, sondern sowohl die Beziehung zwischen der namenlosen Frau aus „Delta Autumn“ und Roth Edmonds als auch jene zwischen Judith Sutpen und Charles Bon von seinen Charakteren durchkreuzen lässt, muss als bewusste narrative Entscheidung verstanden werden. Hier wird deutlich, dass Faulkner Schuld nicht als moralisches, sondern als zeitliches Problem versteht, anhand dessen er sein Zeitverständnis von der ewigen Wiederkehr der Vergangenheit untermauern kann. Seine Charaktere können diesen Zyklus nicht durchbrechen, sie können ihm lediglich ausweichen.

Solche Ausweichmanöver werden in Kapitel 6.3. anhand von Quentin Compson und Isaac McCaslin untersucht. Dabei werden Quentins Suizid in *The Sound and the Fury*, dem die Erzählhandlungen in *Absalom, Absalom!* unmittelbar vorangestellt sind, und Isaacs Erbschaftsausschlagung in *Go Down, Moses* als verwandte Reaktionen auf die Schuld ihrer Vorfahren, deren Ausmaß sich durch die Erkenntnis der inzestuösen und interethnischen Verflechtungen offenbarte, gelesen. Die Tatsache, dass Schuld bei Faulkner nicht gelöst, sondern lediglich umgangen wird, verdeutlicht, dass es sich hierbei um ein egozentrisches Gefühl handelt, welches das Leid der Opfer ausklammert. Der Fokus von Faulkners Werken liegt auf dem weißen Süden, seine Schuldnarrative sind einseitig und erhalten die ungleich verteilten Machtverhältnisse zwischen Tätern und Opfern aufrecht, da sie ausschließlich von ersteren erzählt werden.

10 ENGLISH ABSTRACT

This study focuses on William Faulkner, whose works explore the demise of the slavery-based *Old South* during the Civil War in a highly experimental narrative style. Central to this investigation is the analysis of the temporal dimensions of both individual and collective guilt, thus offering a new approach to the often-discussed problem of Faulkner's portrayal of social decay. The thesis examines how Faulkner re-narrates the legacy of the *Old South* as a guilt narrative and argues that Faulkner uses guilt in order to corroborate his concept of time and the idea of the continuity of the past. The focus of the analysis is on three of Faulkner's arguably most important novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. Each of these novels features a main character deeply overwhelmed by the crimes of the past, whether private, familial, or societal. As a result, guilt is explored both from a domestic as well as a social perspective. In order to show how Faulkner blends past and present by means of guilt, this work examines several methods and motifs borrowed from different fields and genres with which Faulkner narratively negotiates guilt. These include religious notions of original sin, the motif of the ancestral curse prevalent in the Southern Gothic genre, and the psychological concept of trauma. Each of these motifs emphasizes the temporal dimensions of guilt, which are the core of this study, and makes clear that guilt in Faulkner's work is primarily to be understood as a temporal rather than a moral problem.

11 GERMAN ABSTRACT

Die vorliegende Arbeit widmet sich William Faulkner, der in seinen Werken den Untergang des auf Sklaverei begründeten „Alten Südens“ während des Bürgerkriegs in einer höchst experimentellen Erzählweise verhandelt. Im Mittelpunkt dieser Untersuchung steht die Analyse der zeitlichen Dimensionen von individueller und kollektiver Schuld, die einen neuen Zugang zu Faulkners vielfach erörterter Darstellung des gesellschaftlichen Verfalls bietet. Im Verlauf der Arbeit wird untersucht, wie Faulkner das Erbe des „Alten Südens“ als Schuld-Narrativ neu erzählt, wodurch Schuld als eine Untermauerung von Faulkners grundsätzlichem Zeitverständnis und der Idee von der Kontinuität der Vergangenheit dient. Der Schwerpunkt der Analyse liegt auf drei von Faulkners wohl bedeutendsten Romanen: The Sound and the Fury, Absalom, Absalom! und Go Down, Moses. Jeder dieser Romane verfügt über eine Hauptfigur, die zutiefst überwältigt von den Verbrechen der Vergangenheit ist, seien sie privater, familiärer oder gesellschaftlicher Natur. Dadurch wird Schuld sowohl aus familiärer als auch aus sozialer Perspektive beleuchtet. Um aufzuzeigen, wie Vergangenheit und Gegenwart bei Faulkner anhand von Schuld verschmelzen, werden im Verlauf der Arbeit die aus unterschiedlichen Feldern und Genres entlehnten Methoden und Motive untersucht, mit denen Faulkner Schuld narrativ verhandelt. Dazu zählen religiöse Vorstellungen der Ursünde, das insbesondere im Genre der Southern Gothic verwendete Motiv des Fluches sowie das psychologische Konzept des Traumas. Jedes dieser Motive unterstreicht die zeitlichen Dimensionen von Schuld, deren Untersuchung Kern dieser Arbeit ist, und verdeutlicht, dass Schuld bei Faulkner vordergründig als zeitliches und nicht als moralisches Problem zu verstehen ist.