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## "Absalom, Absalom!" and the Southern Code of Honor

Kevin Gardner

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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**ABSALOM, ABSALOM! AND THE  
SOUTHERN CODE OF HONOR**

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Kevin Gardner

1986

APPROVAL SHEET

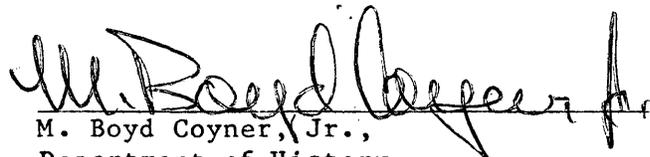
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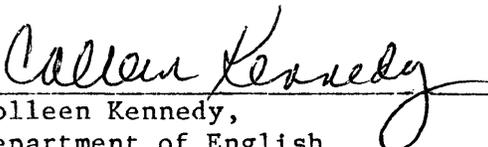
Master of Arts

  
Kevin Gardner

Approved, January 1987

  
Walter Wenska,  
Department of English

  
M. Boyd Coyner, Jr.,  
Department of History

  
Colleen Kennedy,  
Department of English

To PawPaw  
**HORACE D. MOORE**  
(1905-1985).  
In Memoriam

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to illustrate the importance of the idea of honor in the Old South, especially as represented in fiction. I have chosen William Faulkner's novel Absalom, Absalom! as exemplary of this subject matter.

In this thesis I have explored the injustices of class society, particularly in the effects of barriers in social, racial, and sexual strata. I have also shown how the insistence upon a code of honor served to perpetuate inequities, essentially because a person was expected to behave in a certain manner, depending upon his status, no matter the morality involved. In addition, I make the argument that the social turpitude of the Old South led to an individual moral decay.

The results of this study suggest that, inherent injustices aside, Thomas Sutpen directed his life along a specific pattern of honor in his drive to build a dynasty - first, that he strove for the homogeneity of Southern aristocracy; second, that in order to achieve this status he had to conduct his affairs along rigid societal lines; and third, that he continued all his life to strive for his goal even in the face of certain defeat. Thus, I argue that Sutpen achieved and retained honor even in his ignominious demise.

**ABSALOM, ABSALOM! AND THE  
SOUTHERN CODE OF HONOR**

## I

Perhaps the most frequently pondered question about the Old South concerns the unique mind of the Southerner and how he justified ideals of freedom, justice, and virtue in a society which denied these ideals to such a large portion of its population. This is not just a recent question, for in the years prior to the Civil War, the Northern journalist and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted made an extensive journey through the slaveholding states, noting characteristic differences between Northerners and Southerners. In his journal, The Cotton Kingdom, he attempted to analyze the Southern mind:

The South endeavors to close its eyes to every evil the removal of which will require self-denial, labor and skill. If, however, an evil is too glaring to be passed by unnoticed, it is immediately declared to be unconstitutional, or providential, and its removal is declared to be either treasonable or impious -- usually both; and, what is worse, it is improper, impolite, ungentlemanly, unmanlike. And so it is ended at the South.<sup>1</sup>

Olmsted used harsh words to explain how Southerners could ignore or justify their sins and injustices, but his judgment did not stop there:

The habitual reference of the Southerner in his judgment of conduct, whether of himself or another, whether past or

contemplated, to the conventional standard of honor, prevents the ascendancy of a higher standard. This habitual contemplation of a relation so essentially wrong as that of slavery, as a permanent and necessary one not reformable, not in progress of removal and abolition, destroys or prevents the development of his sense of any standard of right and wrong above a mere code of laws, or conventional rules.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to see how Olmsted might have believed that such a blatant injustice as slavery could prevent a higher standard of honor from arising. But behind a Southerner's paradoxical reconciliation of slaveholding with pretensions to virtue, as Olmsted noted, lay neither falsehoods nor self-delusions but a complex code of honor toward which almost every Southerner strove. What Olmsted was looking for, however, was a code of honor imbedded in a strong moral base rather than in a social one. The social code of the Old South helped to disguise the evils that Olmsted could yet see. A full comprehension of this code of honor can help contemporary students of history and literature understand how Southerners apparently legitimized the injustices of their class system.

In his book Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South, Professor Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains the genesis of this code of honor:

Apart from a few lonely dissenters, Southern whites believed (as most people do) that they conducted their lives by the

highest ethical standards. They thought that they had made peace with God's natural order. Above all else, white Southerners adhered to a moral code that may be summarized as the rule of honor. Today we would not define as an ethical scheme a code of morality that could legitimate injustice -- racial or class. Yet so it was defined in the Old South.<sup>3</sup>

One of the better examinations in literature of the Southern code of honor and its components and driving forces can be found in William Faulkner's fictional account of the inception and dissolution of the Sutpen domain. Absalom, Absalom! is about the creation and destruction of a dream, of a territorial empire, of a family, and most importantly of one man's honor. To grasp fully the theme of honor in Absalom, Absalom!, it will be useful to summarize some of the important features of Southern honor that Wyatt-Brown has singled out.

According to Wyatt-Brown, there exist three basic, interdependent components of honor. First is the inner conviction of self-worth. Second is the claim before the public of that self-assessment. The essence of honor, however, lies in the "evaluation of the public," the assessment of the claim by the public, "a judgment based upon the behavior of the claimant. In other words, honor is reputation." Honor motivates the claimant toward socially approved behavior. It serves as an "ethical mediator" between the individual and his neighbors, who assess him and reflect his image just as he reflects society's. Honor is self-regarding, yet since its existence lies in reputation, honor

reflects the common desires of society.<sup>4</sup> William Faulkner himself referred to this reputation so essential to the honorable Southerner as "respectability." In his class conferences at the University of Virginia in 1957, Faulkner noted that the importance of respectability rests with a community's judgment, not an individual's: "Respectability is an artificial standard which comes from up here. That is, respectability is not your concept or my concept. It's what we think is Jones's concept of respectability."<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville saw more or less the same thing more than one hundred years before, when he wrote in Democracy in America that "Honor is nothing but this particular rule, based on a particular state of society, by means of which a people distributes praise or blame."<sup>6</sup>

Tocqueville also discovered how a code of honor could become more complex in a society based on a caste system. Democracy, he asserted, destroyed many of the behavioral complexities associated with aristocracies. But in the South, where aristocracy was paradoxically an accessory to American democracy, a code of honor was bound to be prominent. Indeed, the South's caste system often resembled a feudal aristocracy:

Honor plays a part in democratic ages as well as in those of aristocracy, but it is easy to show that it presents a different physiognomy in the matter.

Not only are its injunctions different, but as we shall shortly see, they are fewer, less precise, and more loosely

obeyed.

There is always something more peculiar about the position of a caste than about that of a nation. Nothing in this world is more exceptional than a little society, always composed of the same families, such for instance as the medieval aristocracy, whose aim was to concentrate and keep all education, wealth, and power exclusively in its own hereditary hands.

Now, the more exceptional the position of a society, the more numerous are its special needs; and its notions of honor, which correspond to those needs, are bound to multiply.

The prescriptions of honor will therefore always be less numerous among a people not divided into castes than among any other.<sup>7</sup>

Southerners found themselves in a complex system of castes including the aristocratic, upper-class planter, the ambitious yeoman farmer, the poor white trash, the free Negro, and of course the slave. For one man to achieve honorable status there were many others who had to remain in class or racial subjugation. Thus it was, according to Tocqueville's description, that the Southern code of honor became so complex. Southerners committed themselves to what they thought was true honor -- inner virtue -- and thus were able to ignore the paradox of injustice in a supposedly virtuous society.

Echoing Olmsted's opinion, Wyatt-Brown states that honor and shame, not conscience or guilt, were the psychological underpinnings of Southern culture.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the prickings of one's own conscience result in the emotions of guilt, shame results from society's pressures. Sadly, then, and all too often, for someone to achieve honor he had to rely upon the shame of others. This insistence upon honor and shame could vary according to a man's caste status, as Tocqueville noted:

That some particular virtue or vice was proper to the nobility rather than to the commons, that a certain action was harmless when it affected only a villein, but punishable when it touched a noble -- these were often arbitrary questions; but that honor or shame should attach to a man's actions according to his condition -- that was the result of the very existence of an aristocratic ordering of society. The same phenomenon appears in fact in every country which has had an aristocracy. As long as there is any trace of it left, these peculiarities will remain: to debauch a Negro girl hardly injures an American's reputation; to marry her dishonors him.<sup>9</sup>

Tocqueville's obvious jibe at the Southerner's view of miscegenation becomes of particular importance in any discussion of Absalom, Absalom! and it will receive extensive treatment in the body of this thesis. Because the honor of the Old South was built not upon conscience or

guilt but upon honor and shame, the Southern gentleman was able to make compatible values both Christian and worldly.

According to Professor Wyatt-Brown, popular concepts of honor in the Old South grew out of traditions stretching back to ancient values and customs, such as honoring one's parents, revenge ("an eye for an eye"), the subordination of Eve's daughters to Adam's sons, the banishment of Ham, and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Furthermore, one should not ignore the Biblical parallels found in the book of II Samuel that can be drawn with the novel.

While some Southerners were religious and others indifferent, so also some accepted the notions of honor and shame as traditions deriving from the Bible and from classical sources while others did not.<sup>10</sup> These ancient values take obvious form in Absalom, Absalom!. The Christmas Eve confrontation between Sutpen and Henry is an affront to the honor ordinarily due the patriarch. Revenge surfaces in Bon's unflagging insistence upon marrying Judith simply because Sutpen will not recognize Bon as his son. This matter is further complicated with the likelihood of incest being committed because of Bon's desire to marry his half-sister, just as Adam's sons married Eve's daughters or as Amnon desired to lie with his sister Tamar. Noah's expulsion of Ham is reflected in Sutpen's rejection of his Haitian wife and child who could not be a part of "the central motivation of his entire design"<sup>11</sup> (263). Finally, Sutpen sacrifices Bon through Henry (and ultimately

sacrifices Henry, too) to save his dream, his design, from destruction. Each of these traditional conflicts will be examined to a fuller extent in the body of this thesis, which is organized thus: first, the birth of Sutpen's dream and his grasp for honor; second, an evaluation of Sutpen's behavior according to Southern standards; and third, the demise of Sutpen's dream. For Thomas Sutpen, it can be said, the demands of honor were undeniable: achieving honor became, by nature of the Southern code, essential to the successful completion of his dream.

## II

Thomas Sutpen's beginnings were of a most inauspicious sort: he was born into a large family of poor whites of Scotch-English stock, deep in the mountains of western Virginia in 1807. The Sutpens, living in the backwoods, probably were unfamiliar with any other way of life than their own. It was not until they moved to the Tidewater area that they discovered the traditional aristocratic code of honor and its attendant class distinctions, prejudices, and pride. Young Thomas Sutpen saw pride in wealthy men, pride in honorable men. He did not understand the code of honor then, but he knew that he wanted to attain

what these men had, not to compete with them but to seek revenge for being shunned by the Negro butler of a wealthy planter. He did not understand pride, but even at that young age he began formulating his dream. From the day his ego was wounded

"he turned his back upon all that he knew -- the faces and the customs -- and (he was just fourteen then, he told your grandfather) set out into a world which even in theory he knew nothing about, and with a fixed goal in his mind which most men do not set up until the blood begins to slow at thirty or more and then only because the image represents peace and indolence or at least a crowning of vanity...." (53)

For Sutpen to exchange the values of honor in a simple, backwoods society for those of the more complex, aristocratic community, where class strata actually existed and were an acknowledged facet of social life, he had to raise himself above the level of his subjugators. As the historian Clement Eaton has noted of ambitious poor whites, "The society in which they lived was flexible enough for the talented and energetic to rise into the ruling class..."<sup>12</sup>

Wyatt-Brown also examines this phenomenon of lower classes occasionally striving upward for honor. While poor whites were first employed in America as indentured servants,

whites who did migrate southward, particularly the Scots-Irish in the eighteenth century, settled less often as bonded

servants than as free peasants. They either subsisted in the uplands as squatters or smallholders or else ambitiously sought to become slaveowners themselves. They too, no less than Tidewater planters, were imbued with the principles of honor.<sup>13</sup>

This is not to say that poor whites were accorded the same measure of honor as were aristocrats, but that they understood their own place in the hierarchy of honor. However, poor whites, with Thomas Sutpen as a perfect, albeit fictional, example, were endowed with the potential to raise themselves, to adopt a new set of principles.

Eaton, in The Growth of Southern Civilization, has noted also the immigration of the principles of honor along with the settlers from the upcountry:

The ideal of the country gentleman was carried by emigrating Virginians and Carolinians to remote corners of the South. At the close of the ante-bellum period Henry Stanley, the future explorer of Africa, encountered this powerful social force while clerking in a country store in Arkansas. In Cypress Bend he was amazed to see his fellow clerks and the plain farmers who visited the store bowing to a stern code of conduct that was aristocratic in origin -- the obligation to uphold personal honor....<sup>14</sup>

But this new territory became the domain of a new ruling class of

nouveau riche. Wilbur J. Cash, in the definitive study of Southern characteristics, The Mind of the South, explains the phenomenon of these newly rich planters of the Deep South, "the strong, the pushing, the ambitious, among the old coon-hunting population of the backcountry. The frontier was their predestined inheritance. They possessed precisely the qualities necessary to the taming of the land and the building of the cotton kingdom. The process of their rise to power was simplicity itself."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Thomas Sutpen is described in the thoughts of Quentin, the novel's protagonist, as having the proper composition to assume the responsibilities commensurate to the taming of a virgin land:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize water color, faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men, in attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect with his air grim, haggard, and tatter-ran. Immobile, bearded and hand palm-lifted the horseman sat; behind him the wild blacks and the captive architect huddled quietly, carrying in bloodless paradox the shovels and picks and axes of peaceful conquest. (8)

Even if a new land facilitated the rise of someone of Sutpen's

stature, one should not assume that the caste strata so characteristic of the South were crumbling, however, for it could be only as single entities, not as a group, that members of the lower classes could escape the chains of the caste system. And when they escaped it was not to make the system any fairer but to strengthen aristocracy's stronghold by becoming landed gentry themselves. As Cash notes:

Again, if the Southern social order had blocked in the common Southerner, it had yet not sealed up the exit entirely. If he could not escape en masse, he could nevertheless escape as an individual. Always it was possible for the strong, craving lads who still thrust up from the old sturdy root-stock to make their way out and on: to compete with the established planters for the lands of the Southwest, or even ... to carve out wealth and honor in the very oldest regions.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Thomas Sutpen possessed the rugged determination to complete his design by assuming the role of the honorable Southerner that he first discovered in Virginia.

Down in the cotton country of the Deep South, the Southerner tried to establish an aristocracy like that of the Tidewater and its feudal model in England. The English squire, however, was a far cry from the "squire" of the American South, into which Sutpen was metamorphosing. Cash's study of the squire in The Mind of the South has someone of

Sutpen's stature in mind:

The whole difference can be summed up in this: that, though he galloped to hounds in pursuit of the fox precisely as the squire did, it was for quite other reasons. It was not that hoary and sophisticated class tradition dictated it as the proper sport for gentlemen. It was not even, in the first place, that he knew that English squires so behaved, and hungered to identify himself with them by imitation, though this was of course to play a great part in confirming and fixing the pattern. It was simply and primarily for the same reason that, in his youth and often into late manhood, he ran spontaneous and unpremeditated foot-races, wrestled, drank Gargantuan quantities of raw whiskey, let off wild yells, and hunted the possum: -- because the thing was already in his mores when he emerged from the backwoods, because on the frontier it was the obvious thing to do, because he was a hot, stout fellow, full of blood and reared to outdoor activity, because of a primitive and naive zest for the pursuit in hand.<sup>17</sup>

These characteristics are hardly those of the nobleman, yet it is not difficult to imagine a Southern aristocrat momentarily casting aside his fancy clothes and forgetting the unread classics that line his library shelves for a feral wrestling match or an impetuous romp

through the woods.

Sutpen, too, participates in a type of fox hunt that resembles that of the English squire. His chase of the architect who tried to escape is conducted as one might a fox chase. Sutpen uses dogs and his "wild niggers" to sniff out the architect, and they toy with him for sport, being more interested in the chase, really, than in his immediate capture. The architect himself uses sly means to outwit his pursuers, and the whooping of the slaves resembles the baying of hounds. At the end of the "race" (256) the architect raises a bottle of whiskey in his "coon-like hands" (257) and salutes his captors. Despite this barbarism, Sutpen, like the wealthy frontiersmen Cash describes in the following passage, had every intention of becoming an American aristocrat:

If the backcountryman turned planter was plainly no aristocrat, he yet had his feet firmly planted on a road that logically led to aristocracy. And the presence of these old realized clumps of gentry served to bring that fact, which otherwise would scarcely have been perceived, clearly into the foreground of consciousness. Inevitably, therefore, they became the model for social aspiration.

The nouveaux would not, in fact, be content merely to imitate, merely to aspire, to struggle toward aristocracy through the long reaches of time, but wherever there was a sufficient property, they would themselves immediately set up

for aristocrats on their own account.<sup>18</sup>

Essential to becoming an aristocrat, of course, was the achieving of reputation and respectability -- i.e., honor. Thomas Sutpen, like so many men of his generation, sought to bring himself up from the lower classes not to gain wealth as an end in and of itself, but as a means to an end, the end being the achieving of honor and respectability from society. William Faulkner wrote of hard-won honor, heroic yet frequently inglorious -- especially through the eyes of some of his biased narrators such as Miss Rosa. However, in Southern society honor could still exist even when wealth had been lost or not fully reached, a fact which Miss Rosa sometimes overlooks.

If Sutpen's goal is honor, the origin of his quest is the rebuff he receives at the Tidewater plantation, and his motivation is revenge. John Irwin, in his fascinating and generally insightful study of Faulkner, Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge, discusses the psychology behind Sutpen's quest for revenge:

The ruthless odyssey on which Sutpen embarks is a quest for revenge for the affront that he suffered as a boy -- not revenge against a system in which the rich and powerful can affront the poor and powerless but against the luck of birth that made him one of the poor when he should have been one of the rich.... Ideally, he accepts the justice of that mastery which the powerful have over the powerless, which the rich

planter has over the poor boy, a father over his son. The fact that circumstance happened to start Sutpen off by casting him in the role of the powerless, poor boy is merely personal. A mere stroke of chance does not invalidate that hierarchy -- or rather, patriarchy -- of power. Sutpen seeks revenge within the rules of patriarchal power for the affront that he suffered; he does not try to show the injustice of the system, but rather to show that he is as good as any man in the system. If the planter is powerful because he is rich, then Sutpen will have his revenge by becoming richer and more powerful than the planter. And he will pass that wealth and power on to his son, doing for his son what his own father could not do for him. Sutpen comes to terms with the traumatic affront that he suffered as a boy by accepting the impersonal justice of it even though he feels its personal inappropriateness. He incorporates into himself the patriarchal ideal from which that affront sprang...Henceforth, he will no longer receive the affront, he will deliver it.<sup>20</sup>

Sutpen subconsciously realizes that the social strata of the South -- essentially an aristocracy -- cannot be changed. Thus he does not fight it; by joining it he can be regarded by the same code of honor as the Tidewater aristocrat whose house he shunned him. This is how he

will exact his revenge.

One might wonder why Sutpen does not choose a more conventional method to avenge his hurt pride. He tells himself:

"If you were fixing to combat them that had fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make, wouldn't it?" and he said Yes. 'But this ain't a question of rifles. So to combat them you have got to have what they have that made them do what the man did. You got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You see?' and he said Yes again." (238)

So Thomas Sutpen went to the West Indies to pursue his dream, at the same time adapting to himself new principles of the honor of the aristocratic South. He became overseer of a large plantation and successfully thwarted a slave rebellion. He married the daughter of the planter and set out to have a family. Marriage and progeny were essential parts of the Southern code of honor (in order to perpetuate a caste-system), and Sutpen knew that progeny was necessary to keep his dream alive. His plans suffered a setback, however, after his son was born. Although some critics have challenged the traditional reading of the story that Sutpen discovered that his wife (and son, naturally) had Negro blood, that particular theory seems to fit best Sutpen's reasoning and his striving for honor. Miscegenation was common among

white men and black women in the Old South, but a marriage between the two races, as Tocqueville noted, was neither legitimate nor honorable. Eulalia Bon, his wife, and Charles, his son, could have no part of his dream. Sutpen tells General Compson: "'I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside.'" (240) Sutpen's rejection of Charles is not unlike the ancient tradition of Noah's banishment of Ham. Although Ham was banished for sexual sin, not because of skin color, the similarity should not be overlooked. Sutpen had to relinquish most of his amassed fortune in Haiti to Eulalia (his honor would not allow him to use tainted money), yet he felt he retained his honor. He was, after all, trying to live by Old South standards, not Caribbean standards, where mixed-race marriages were not uncommon. By abstracting the unwritten code of Southern honor, then, he acted honorably even while losing his wealth.

Many critics do not see Sutpen's design as being fashioned out of the Southern conception of honor but as demonic or at least idiosyncratic, a fault which sometimes occurs when one relies upon a confused or grudge-bearing narrator. (Miss Rosa sees Sutpen's design as being personal to him alone and without "rhyme or reason" (18); Mr. Compson believes that Sutpen's drive results from a naive innocence.) John Irwin, for instance, has attempted to interpret Sutpen's drive

psychoanalytically:

Throughout Absalom, Sutpen is presented as a type of the rational ego -- a man with a conscious plan for the conduct of his life -- a design to acquire land, build a mansion, found a family -- a design that he pursues with a radical innocence indistinguishable from ruthlessness, using those people who accord with his design and discarding those who do not. Indeed, Sutpen is portrayed as a kind of Faust, whose grand design represents the rational ego's will to power in its attempt to do away with the undesigned and irrational ...<sup>21</sup>

But this speculative treatment can lead to some serious problems when dealing with Faulkner. Irwin's error lies in neglecting Faulkner's historical sensitivity, for recreating the Southern myth is the author's chief concern, both from the respect of presenting a statement about the South as well as the effect of the Southern myth upon the novel's twentieth-century protagonist, Quentin Compson, who ties together the novel.

C. Vann Woodward, in his treatise The Burden of Southern History, fixes upon the historical consciousness of the writer of the Southern Renaissance:

His sensitivity to the current change heightened his awareness of past differences, and his intensified remembrance of things past added corresponding poignancy to his awareness of things

present....[He is] an inextricable part of a living history and community, attached and determined in a thousand ways by other wills and destinies of people he has only heard about.<sup>22</sup>

Faulkner's historical consciousness, then, allows the reader to see Sutpen not as a demon ruthlessly and arbitrarily amassing a fortune, but as a representative Southerner as well as an injured man seeking vengeance, calculatedly achieving honorable status by joining the upper class.

The effect of the novel's basis in historical fact, legend, and myth, is one in which the reader along with Quentin discovers what caused Thomas Sutpen's dynasty (and thus his dream) to collapse. While this concern will receive extensive treatment further in the body of this thesis, it might help to eliminate another unfounded but long-held myth about the nature of Sutpen's design. Louis D. Rubin has popularized the belief that Sutpen's problem was unique, that he was a demon and that this is what caused his downfall: "He lived outside his society, attempted to use it only to further his ends. Everything existed for his design, an abstract scheme in which the human beings who of necessity figured in it were considered as so many pawns."<sup>23</sup> Rubin denies Faulkner's reliance upon what the author himself knew to be (at minimum) historical legend -- the Southern code of honor. Instead, Rubin relies upon the vengeful and fanciful legend of Sutpen that Miss Rosa renders out of spite ("It's because she wants it told,"

(11) Rubin quotes Quentin).

Cleanth Brooks also occasionally falls into the trap of classifying Sutpen as one who does not live by accepted standards. In The Yoknapatawpha Country Brooks asserts that "Once Sutpen has acquired enough wealth and displayed enough force, the people of his community are willing to accept him. But they do not live by his code, nor do they share his innocent disregard of accepted values."<sup>24</sup> Brooks further states that if the reader finds in Absalom, Absalom! "something that has special pertinence to the tragic dilemma of the South, the aspect of the story to stress is not the downfall of Thomas Sutpen..."<sup>25</sup>

It is because Sutpen is representative of the South, however, that the novel receives its tragic quality. Sutpen represents the nature of the Old South to cling to values which, however corrupt or obsolete, remained of great value to that society even after the Civil War proved them futile. And one of the most tragic elements of the Old South was its adherence to such a code of honor. In fact, while Sutpen as a physical being may have lived outside of society (as Rubin remarks), his behavioral patterns closely conformed to the standards of Southern frontier/genteel society. His scheme, while abstract only in the sense that it was based upon his impressions of a complex code of honor (he did not have the benefit of having been raised in the society he now wanted to join), was truly a well-conceived design not to defeat the

code of the gentry but to join and surpass it -- to make himself better than the Tidewater aristocrat -- to become a sort of perverted Uebermensch or its Old South counterpart, a Confederate colonel. Both Brooks and Rubin want Thomas Sutpen to be non-representative of the South, and while he is obviously not a typical planter, what he is striving for is the homogeneity of Southern aristocracy.

### III

To achieve the status of aristocrat and to be accorded the degree of respectability and honor which he so desired, Sutpen had to conduct his affairs along rigid societal lines. In determining honor, Wyatt-Brown observes, Southerners evaluated a person's conduct according to five unwritten tenets: "(1) honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances."<sup>26</sup>

As Sutpen's community stature grew his conduct was evaluated by each of these five standards of honor.

In regard to honor as valor, or personal bravery, Sutpen stood out among a class of Southerners who were known for their courage. Wyatt-Brown supports a theory that Southern demands of courage had ethnic roots that could be carried from one land to a new one, and passed from father to son, since many settlers in the interior "had roots in the unsophisticated parts of the British Isles, coming particularly from Scottish, Scots-Irish, and Welsh stock."<sup>27</sup> Thomas Sutpen was, of course, of Scotch-English origin.

Sutpen's first important courageous act is an open defiance of Haitian insurgents, and his subsequent valorous leadership in the Civil War quickly propels him to the rank of colonel. Wash Jones, poor white drinking companion of Sutpen, accords him the high compliment of bravery: "'It aint that you were a brave man at one second or minute or hour of your life and got a paper to show hit from General Lee. But you are brave, the same as you are alive and breathing.'" (284) In fact, Sutpen does receive recognition for his effort in the war: "he brought home with him a citation for valor in Lee's own hand" (68). Again Sutpen shows brave conduct after his return from the war when a deputation (that one can gather from another Faulkner novel, The Unvanquished, is a variant of the Ku Klux Klan) tries to force him to join, at the point of being either friend or enemy. Sutpen defies

them, "telling them that if every man in the South would see to the restoration of his own land, the general land and South would save itself" (161). One critic, Elizabeth Kerr, has called this principle "sound and courageous".<sup>28</sup> In this instance, Sutpen is most likely concerned about his own personal valor, for unless the Old South recreates itself, his design becomes meaningless. "Oh yes, I watched him," states Miss Rosa, "watched his old man's solitary fury fighting now not with the stubborn yet slowly tractable earth as it had done before, but now against the ponderable weight of the new time itself as though he were trying to dam a river with his bare hands and a shingle" (162). Sutpen's indomitable drive is characteristic of the South, as Frederick Law Olmsted noted: "The Southerner cares for the end only; he is impatient of the means. He is passionate, and labors passionately, fitfully, with the energy and strength of anger, rather than of resolute will. He fights rather than works to carry his purpose."<sup>29</sup>

An essential characteristic of the plantation system is that it promoted individualism, due in large to a plantation's great distance from other plantations. On Sutpen's Hundred one could ride for miles in any direction and never leave Sutpen's land. This "aloneness" served to increase Sutpen's own valor and bravery as well as his innate individualism. Wilbur Cash attempts to show how individualism was formed and how it led to an intrepid character:

... one of the effects of the plantation system was to

perpetuate essentially frontier conditions long after their normal period had run -- to freeze solid many of the aspects of the old backwoods which had operated for individualism in the first place.... Now, as before, and despite the striking gregariousness which had long been growing up in counter-balance, the Southerner, whoever and wherever he was, would be likely to be much alone. Or if not strictly alone, then accompanied only by his slaves and members of his own family, to all of whom his individual will could stand as imperial law.<sup>30</sup>

On his domain Sutpen ruled his plantation like a monarch, because of his removal from civilization; indeed this virtually imperialistic individualism abetted the ruggedness of Sutpen's (or any Southerner's) will as well as his bravery. Furthermore, not only did it boost the self-confidence so essential to the Southerner's code of honor, it served also as a form of assurance for the members of his family, whose own honor must be protected at all costs.

Thomas Sutpen stood strong when faced with challenges both from angry men and from impending doom. He exemplified brave conduct and a capacity for revenge, but Wyatt-Brown says that intimately related to these two traits was family protectiveness -- not only to assure survival but also as a way to avoid criticisms.<sup>31</sup> Following Sutpen's wedding ceremony, for example, the new couple was challenged by an angry mob armed with clods of dirt and vegetables. They threw the

objects at him, not meaning to injure but merely to disgrace "the bride shrinking into the shelter of his arm as he drew her behind him and he standing there not moving ... He retreated to the carriage, shielding the two women with his body ..." (57). Not only at the wedding did he fulfill the role of family protector. After the war the colonel returned to Sutpen's Hundred to protect his surviving family members -- Judith, Clytie, Miss Rosa -- and to attempt once again to rebuild his dream. He returned as a provider, and because his means were so severely limited he turned to storekeeping to support himself. Faulkner was obviously aware of the prevalence of this feature of post-war South. As Thomas Clark, in Pills, Petticoats, and Plows: The Southern Country Store, says: "Crossroads stores popped up like mushrooms" because "Confederate veterans everywhere turned to storekeeping as a side line to operating disorganized plantations."<sup>32</sup> Yet Sutpen's presence alone was honorable. Providing for and protecting one's family were essential to a Southerner's honor, and Sutpen fulfilled his necessary role for his family. Even Miss Rosa realizes this: "because now he was all we had, all that gave us any reason for continuing to exist, to eat food and sleep and wake and rise again: knowing that he would need us, knowing as we did (who knew him) that he would begin at once to salvage what was left of Sutpen's Hundred and restore it." (154)

The second element of honorable conduct concerns the opinions of

others as a gauge of self-worth and a guide to personal identity. The greatest standard of merit in the Old South was integrity -- an unsullied reputation. Unfortunately for Thomas Sutpen, when he first arrived in Yoknapatawpha County and began construction of his fine home on the vast domain that came to be known as Sutpen's Hundred, idle gossip and unfounded speculation gave Sutpen a bad name, suggesting that he participated in vice and crime to have amassed such a fortune. He was even arrested for assumed illegal activities, and if it had not been for the intervention of Goodhue Coldfield and General Compson, Sutpen's reputation perhaps would have been permanently sullied and any hope for gaining honor be lost. One must recall that the basis for a person's honor rested essentially with the evaluation of the public, despite its whims or fancies. Man must conform to the standards of society to be worthy of its honor, says Alexis de Tocqueville: "Honor, in times of the zenith of its power, directs men's will more than their beliefs, and even when its orders are obeyed without hesitation or complaint ...".<sup>33</sup> The confines of the code of honor in the Old South directed men's will more fiercely than any other social force. One is reminded of Tocqueville's simple definition, that "Honor is nothing but this particular rule, based on a particular state of society, by means of which a people distributes praise or blame."<sup>34</sup>

After building his mansion and furnishing it as exquisitely as any Southern home could be, Sutpen took a wife as the first step in

establishing the good reputation which he desired, "since decorum even if not elegance of appearance would be the only weapon (or rather, ladder) with which he could conduct the last assault upon what Miss Rosa and perhaps others believed to be respectability -- that respectability which, according to General Compson, consisted in Sutpen's secret mind of a great deal more than the mere acquisition of a chatelaine for his house." (37) The townspeople of Jefferson were slow, however, in recognizing Sutpen's character, for they misread his desire to have a wife: "They did not think of love in connection with Sutpen. They thought of ruthlessness rather than justice and of fear rather than respect, but not of pity or love: besides being too lost in amazed speculation as to just how Sutpen intended or could contrive to use Mr. Coldfield to further whatever secret ends he still had." (43) Even though Sutpen was not looking for love, the townspeople formed wrong impressions about him because they knew so little about him. They believed him to be after Mr. Coldfield's money, when really he was after Jefferson itself, using the townspeople to actualize his design.

Wyatt-Brown asserts that one's reputation or even one's rank in society could be affected by how one's spoken words and physical gestures were viewed by society.<sup>35</sup> The townspeople hardly knew Sutpen's inner feelings, since he avoided all socializing while he lived in town at the Holston House. They saw only his outward gestures and initially viewed him as "underbred." (46) But General Compson knew

Sutpen personally and had several long conversations with him. Through Sutpen's opening of his soul to him, General Compson learned something of Sutpen's character, and decided that Sutpen was a much different individual than the townspeople imagined. Wyatt-Brown's assertion that "public factors in establishing personal worth conferred particular prominence on the spoken word and physical gesture" seems to hold true in the case of Thomas Sutpen. Because he was publicly silent, many people were initially harsh in their judgment of Sutpen's integrity.

The third part of Southern conduct that Wyatt-Brown cites is physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit. Great physical stature and strength often come to mind when one imagines the honorable Southern gentleman. The "rocklike" Thomas Sutpen (97) had these same characteristics. He worked doggedly alongside his brutish slaves in constructing his mansion, which rose plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp where the clay and timber waited ... So he and the twenty negroes worked together, plastered over with mud against the mosquitoes ... until the day after the house was completed save for the windowglass and ironware which they could not make by hand ... working in the sun and heat of summer and the mud and ice of winter, with quiet and unflagging fury. (37-8)

One is reminded of Frederick Law Olmsted's reference to the Southerner's valor and drive, that the Southerner cares only for his

goal, method notwithstanding, and works or fights, even, with the strength and passion of anger to achieve his purpose.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in his fury, Sutpen did not merely build or labor: he "tore violently a plantation" (9)! Sutpen's impatience with the "means" of obtaining his plantation is evident in his tireless energy working from sunup to sundown, regardless of weather. It took two years for Thomas Sutpen with his slaves, his brute strength, and his fierce determination to build his mansion and lay out the formal gardens and fields, but its completion became a testament to Sutpen's physical strength and inner will.

Wilbur Cash has made a connection between the previously mentioned individualism of the plantation owner and his physical appearance, ferocity, and braggadocio:

... the individualism of the plantation world would be one which, like that of the backcountry before it, would be far too much concerned with bald, immediate, unsupported assertion of the ego, which placed too great stress on the inviolability of personal whim, and which was full of the chip-on-shoulder swagger and brag of a boy -- one, in brief, of which the essence was the boast, voiced or not, on the part of every Southerner, that he would knock hell out of whoever dared to cross him.

... And being what they were -- simple, direct, and

immensely personal -- and their world being what it was -- conflict with them could only mean immediate physical clashing, could only mean fisticuffs, the gouging ring, and knife and gun play.<sup>37</sup>

While much of this swaggering consists in bluffing, such as roosters at a cockfight, physical clashing was not uncommon. Thinking of Thomas Sutpen brings to mind his brutish wrestling with his slaves. When his wife Ellen enters the barn expecting to see two slaves fighting, she saw not

the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another's eyes as they should not only have been the same color, but should have been covered with fur too.... as a matter of sheer deadly forethought toward the retention of supremacy, domination, he would enter the ring with one of the negroes himself. Yes. That's what Ellen saw: her husband and the father of her children standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at his feet and bloody too, save that on the negro it merely looked like grease or sweat-- (29).

This horrible spectacle is little more than an assertion of Sutpen's ego, his physical superiority, and his imperial status as lord of the manor. More important, however, is the fact that this spectacle is

performed before the general public -- both the "gentlefolks" and the "scum and riffraff." (28) Sutpen's assertion of his physical masculine prowess and ferocity is an effort to bolster his reputation in the eyes of his compeers, and in general to become more honorable.

Much of a Southerner's pugnacious strutting and crowing about his physical prowess was obviously not merely hot air, as Wilbur Cash has noted. Frequently the appearance of a man with Herculean abilities was more important than having a Cavalier ancestry:

Great personal courage, unusual physical powers, the ability to drink a quart of whiskey or to lose the whole of one's capital on the turn of a card without the quiver of a muscle -- these are at least as important as possessions, and infinitely more important than heraldic crests. In the South, if your neighbor overshadowed you in the number of his slaves, you could outshoot him or outfiddle him, and in your eyes, and in those of many of your fellows, remain essentially as good a man as he.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Thomas Sutpen lost the whole of his capital, his first fortune, in Haiti, on the figurative turn of a card -- when he found out that, for whatever reason, his wife and child could have no part in his design. He suffers no quivering muscles, nor does he look back upon his misfortune with regret. Instead he undauntedly starts again to surpass his neighbors in his unceasing drive for revenge for the

affront he suffered as a boy.

Turning his back upon his world in Haiti took courage enough but to set out into another new world, a frontier, a wild, untamed land -- and penniless, no less -- showed an unmeasureable courage. But the Mississippi frontier was suited for a man with nothing but experience and courage. Tocqueville notes that this courage was the greatest and most honorable a man could have:

... the type of courage best known and best appreciated is that which makes a man ... face without complaint the privations of life in the wilds and that solitude which is harder to bear than any privations, the courage which makes a man almost insensible to the loss of a fortune laboriously acquired and prompts him instantly to fresh exertions to gain another.<sup>39</sup>

Mr. Compson tells Quentin that Sutpen's physical appearance abetted his indefatigable will: "it was in his face; that was where his power lay, your grandfather said: that anyone could look at him and say, Given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything" (46). Twice Sutpen was faced with a destroyed fortune and a seemingly failed design, he yet maintained his will to overcome all obstacles. After the war he returned home to find his plantation and his family in shambles. This second misfortune must have been all the more discouraging, for he had come so close to perfecting his design.

Instead of letting a second failure destroy him, he set out again with almost no chance for success but with the boundless determination of youth which Grandfather Compson called "innocence." Sutpen, alone once again except for the three women, Judith, Clytie, and Miss Rosa, found once more the strength and will to try to save his design. These characteristics of individualism, great strength, and ferocity of will produced the courage that made the Southern man honorable.

The fourth aspect of a Southerner's evaluation of conduct concerns a man's sexual honor -- a defense of male integrity and a mingled fear and love of woman. Part of male integrity included sexual activity, especially prior to marriage (as well as extra-maritally). Thus Sutpen keeps his pre-marital virginity a secret from everyone except his only close friend, General Compson:

"You will probably not believe that, and if I were to try to explain it you would disbelieve me more than ever. So I will only say that that too was a part of the design which I had in my mind' and Grandfather said, 'Why shouldnt I believe it?' and he ..., 'But do you? Surely you dont hold me in such contempt as to believe that at twenty I could neither have suffered temptation nor offered it?'" (248)

Obviously, sexual activity was essential to male honor for Sutpen to be so sensitive about his virginity. It was only for the sake of his "design" that he secretly sacrificed this one part of "honorable"

conduct.

Accompanying this facet of male integrity, however, was an ambiguous feeling of simultaneous love and fear of woman. Miss Rosa explains to Quentin Sutpen's distrust of the fairer sex:

"He trusted no man nor woman, who had no man's nor woman's love, since Ellen was incapable of love and Judith was too much like him and must have seen at a glance that Bon, even though the daughter might still be saved from him, had already corrupted the son. He had been too successful, you see; his was that solitude of contempt and distrust which success brings to him who gained it because he was strong instead of merely lucky." (103)

A distrust of woman was not characteristically a part of a Southerner's conduct simply by definition; it was something almost inborn among males. When General Compson questions Colonel Sutpen's conscience, he (Compson) admits the prevalence of this general distrust: "'... didn't the dread and fear of females which you must have drawn in with the primary mammalian milk teach you better?'" (265)

Southern society offered many reasons for men to distrust and fear women. Even justice, Compson tells Sutpen, will not guarantee immunity from an angry woman. Wyatt-Brown notes that because woman was both powerful and powerless -- she was the weaker sex yet she had the ability to shame her husband before other men through cuckolding,

illegitimate births, miscegenation, or simply by publicly announcing him to be a poor lover, thereby dishonoring him -- there was bound to be considerable misogyny.<sup>40</sup> Sutpen indeed shows misogynistic tendencies. There is some question as to whether he loves Ellen Coldfield or whether he marries her simply because his plan calls for a wife. He has no use for Miss Rosa as a wife; he wishes her only to bear a son to carry on his line. He copulates with Milly Jones, and when she gives birth to a girl instead of the son he so much desires, Sutpen, concerned only with his design and careless of his means, says, "'Well, Milly: too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable'..." (286). Sutpen has more use for his mare and her newborn colt than for Milly and her little girl. One might argue that "class" was a factor in his treatment of Milly; however, one should not forget that Sutpen held all women in a remarkably low regard. Though misogyny was common in the South, even among "honorable" males, it was a deleterious characteristic of Sutpen, since it was his misogynistic attitude toward Milly and the child which led to the death of Sutpen and his dream.

Despite the misogyny, a Southern man was extremely protective of the female members of his family. Wyatt-Brown states that it was a social fact that a male's moral bearing resided not in him alone, but also in his women's standing. To attack his wife, mother, or sister was to assault the man himself. Outside

violence against family dependents, particularly females, was a breach not to be ignored without ignominy. An impotence to deal with such wrongs carried all the weight of shame that archaic society could muster.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Sutpen's protection of his family when challenged by the wedding boycotters shows conformity to the standards of family honor. And perhaps of greater import, when the sanctity of his family (as paramount to his design) was threatened by incest and miscegenation -- by Bon's and Judith's proposed marriage -- Sutpen was forced to stop it.

According to Mr. Compson's version of the story, Sutpen's first ploy would have been to tell Henry of Bon's octoroon wife/mistress in New Orleans. Quentin and Shreve, in what is probably the correct account of the story, decide between them that what really transpired on that fateful Christmas Eve was that Sutpen confronted Henry with the story that Bon was Sutpen's son. Quentin and Shreve believe that Henry would have found the morganatic wedding "ceremony" between Bon and the octoroon irrelevant, since Henry "aped" Bon in so many of his worldly habits. As Eric Sundquist, in The House Divided, has noted, "So far as the novel is capable of revealing it, the incest as well would have the same repulsive attraction; for as Quentin and Shreve reconstruct it, even incest can be overpassed by love."<sup>42</sup> In either case, Sutpen's final "trump" is to tell Henry that Bon is part Negro. The fact that

incest was a threat as well as of little import to Henry or Sutpen; miscegenation was a much nastier blow to a Southern family's honor and unsullied respectability. Sundquist continues:

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 nigger that's going to sleep with your sister.'<sup>43</sup>

Sutpen's duty to protect his daughter from miscegenation was foremost, then, because Judith "could not have known the reason for her father's objection to the marriage. Henry would not have told her, and she would not have asked her father." (120) Sutpen's duty was so strong that he had to sacrifice two sons, in a sense -- Henry, in the giving of the lie on Christmas Eve, and Bon, whom Henry, also acting honorably, knew he must kill in order to protect the purity of the family whose birthright he had rejected. Even though Sutpen's heretofore successful design began crumbling when his own progeny repudiated him, the necessity of safeguarding the Sutpen family honor won out. Paradoxically, both Sutpen and Henry act according to the standards of honor, but in their actions Sutpen's attempt to join the ranks of honorable men is thwarted. For the Sutpen family, aspiring to honor becomes a futile gesture when a conflict arises between two strict points of honor -- honoring one's parents and opposing

miscegenation. One should remember that the code of honor was grounded in a social rather than moral context; thus the social or legal code concerning miscegenation takes precedence over a moral code and the fifth commandment ("Honor thy father and mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee."<sup>44</sup>). The irony inherent is that Henry, neglecting the moral code, lives a long, albeit miserable, life.

The final ingredient of the Southerner's evaluation of conduct involved oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances. The taking of an oath was a ritual which once taken could not be reneged, for to try to rescind one's oath would cause one to lose honor. Henry's repudiation of his birthright was inextricably connected with his father's repudiation of his first wife and child, Eulalia and Charles Bon. Each repudiation can be seen as an oath which neither could or would take back.

In a lengthy conversation with General Compson, Colonel Sutpen explains how his entire dream hinged upon both conflicts:

"I was faced with condoning a fact which had been foisted upon me without my knowledge during the process of building toward my design, which meant the absolute and irrevocable negation of the design; or in holding to my original plan for the design in pursuit of which I had incurred this negation. I chose, and I made to the fullest what atonement lay in my

power for whatever injury I might have done in choosing, paying even more for the privilege of choosing as I chose than I might have been expected to, or even (by law) required. Yet I am now faced with a second necessity to choose, the curious factor of which is not, as you pointed out and as first appeared to me, that the necessity for a new choice should have arisen, but that either choice which I might make, either course which I might choose, leads to the same result: either I destroy my design with my own hand, which will happen if I am forced to play my last trump card, or do nothing, let matters take the course which I know they will take and see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried forward to the moment of this choice, this second choice devolving out of that first one which in its turn was forced on me as the result of an agreement, an arrangement which I had entered in good faith, concealing nothing, while the other party or parties to it concealed from me the one very factor which would destroy the entire plan and design which I had been working toward, concealed it so well that it was not

until after the child was born that I discovered that this factor existed'---" (273-4).

When Sutpen takes the oath to repudiate his wife and son because they are no longer a part of his design, fate, by Sutpen's thinking, caused the son to appear again to destroy Sutpen's dream another time. The first threat occurred in Haiti; Bon's second opposition to Sutpen's dream was twofold: first, the threats of incest and miscegenation, and second, the sacrifice of Henry. In other words, in order to protect the honor and purity of Judith and the whole family, Sutpen has to face Henry with the truth about Bon. Although Bon is not seeking revenge, but merely looking for recognition from his father, Sutpen cannot make this sacrifice because it would negate his design.

So with the Civil War nearing its close (and a bullet not having resolved the issue) and aware that Bon would return to Sutpen's Hundred to carry out his threat, Sutpen desperately summons Henry to his camp and tells the boy about Bon's black blood. As Walter Taylor, in Faulkner's Search for a South, put it,

For Henry, that was traumatic; but for Bon, it offered a potentiality that was fully as terrifying, for Bon would have to come to grips with the truth about his place in that family. If Henry were still ignorant of Bon's African blood, he might yet have allowed an incestuous marriage; aware of it,

he never would, and Judith's reaction would be no different. They would see in their dark brother only the social catastrophe every plantation family dreaded.<sup>45</sup>

Sutpen and Henry certainly dread this catastrophe -- even if they are the only ones ever to know about it. Judith, however, "would have acted as Sutpen would have acted with anyone who tried to cross him: she would have taken Bon anyway." (120-1) Although when Mr. Compson says this he does not know about Bon's black blood, he is probably correct. First, race differences mean little to Judith who having grown up with a mulatto half-sister in the house is less conscious than her father of racial differences. As Cleanth Brooks has noted, "Miss Rosa is much more typically Southern [than Judith] when she tells Quentin, with evident distaste, that Clytie and Judith sometimes slept in the same bed."<sup>46</sup> Further evidence of Judith's ignoring racial restrictions occur when she sends for Bon's octoroon mistress to visit Bon's grave and, after his mother dies, sends for Bon's son and even cares for him as he dies of yellow fever and she follows him in death. Finally, as Miss Rosa says, "Judith was too much like him" (103), and like her father she will not have let anything stand in the way of achieving the ends she strives for. Thus, because Henry cannot simply inform Judith that she will not be allowed to marry Bon and have that be the end of the entire affair (after all, she would no more listen to and obey her brother than she would her father), he is forced to kill

Bon, his own brother, because of Bon's taunts -- "I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry." (358)

To get back to the point, the more important confrontation, the one between Sutpen and Henry, was of course on that Christmas Eve when Sutpen tells Henry that Bon is Henry's brother. Henry, enraptured with his friend Bon and his New Orleansian wordliness, "corrupted" by Bon, as it were, has no choice but to "give the lie" -- to deny his father's assertion even while knowing that his father would not speak falsely on such a matter. Henry's repudiation of his family and birthright was "'instantaneous and irrevocable between father and friend, between ... that where honor and love lay and this where blood and profit ran, even though at the instant of giving the lie he knew that it was the truth.'" (90) Despite the fact that he dishonors his father in the repudiation, Henry takes the path according to strict lines of honor. To Bon, however, it must have represented something very foreign, for his cultural background was so divergent from Henry's. The future explorer Henry Stanley noted in his autobiography that "In New Orleans ... the social rule was to give and take, to assert an opinion, and hear it contradicted without resort to lethal weapons, but in Arkansas [as in Mississippi], to refute a statement was tantamount to giving the lie direct, and was likely to be followed by an instant appeal to the revolver or bowie."<sup>47</sup> The difference in the two social/geographical mores can be linked to the ethnic origins of the areas. The cotton

country of Arkansas and Mississippi was settled by the hot-tempered and honor-bound Celtic and English people, but New Orleans contained a population comprised of French, Spanish, and Negro, people whose temperament was much more passive. Thus they created an entirely different system of values and code of honor. And though Bon's father is of Scotch-English origin, his mother is Haitian -- largely a mix of the French, Spanish, and Negro blood which colonized the island -- and Bon was raised in New Orleans. Therefore, while Henry acts honorably according to one tenet of the code of honor in his denial of his father's assertion (he repudiates rather than kills a family member), Bon at the same time comes to terms with his and his mother's position in Sutpen's drive for honor, "'who must have surrendered everything he and mother owned to her and to me as the price of repudiating her'" (331). Both Sutpen and Henry, then, follow traditional patterns in the taking of their oaths and their subsequent disavowals of family obligations and allegiances.

#### IV

In the eyes of his community, Thomas Sutpen, for the most part,

proved himself honorable according to the five criteria by which Southerners unconsciously judged a man's honor. Earlier we saw Sutpen striving to reach the ranks of honorable men with the birth and development of his dream. We are now faced with the demise of Sutpen's dream -- the death of his design -- and how he continued to reach for honor even in the face of a certain and impending doom. Previously I noted a tendency in the Old South toward a belief that deterministic forces operated in undeniable ways in life. Wyatt-Brown refers to this as an "honor-bound fatalism." Behind this Southern reasoning, he states, lay sufficient grounds: scourges of war, disease, flooding, and drought, as well as other natural calamities, were frequent and drastic.<sup>48</sup> The best example, however, of deterministic forces wreaking havoc with Southerner's lives holds true in Absalom, Absalom!: "Finally, the mutability of family fortunes -- despoiled by the caprice of nature or by some personal degeneracy -- was a circumstance well known to the white ruling class."<sup>49</sup> Southerners used destiny as a convenient rationalization, as a way to overlook other, natural causes for their own undoing. However, since Thomas Sutpen's honor has already been established, the demise of his empire cannot be attributed to any personal degeneracy, despite Miss Rosa's attempts to pin the entire family tragedy upon him. By studying closely the way in which Faulkner presents the tragedy, one can realize that it can be linked to destiny.

Sutpen's life is, indeed, wrapped up in an honor-bound fatalism.

Even in his early years there is evidence of fate working in his life:

"Sutpen's trouble was innocence. All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do, had to do whether he wanted to do it or not, because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on, with all the dead ones waiting and watching to see if he was going to do it right, fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face not only the old dead ones but all the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead." (220)

The sense of, or preoccupation with, honor with which Sutpen was born drives him to his frenzied dream. He learned about a place called the West Indies when he was fourteen, and that a poor man could go there and become rich, "'so long as that man was clever and courageous: the latter of which I believed that I possessed, the former of which that, if it were to be learned by energy and will in the school of endeavor and experience, I should learn.'" (242) Then Sutpen told Grandfather Compson "'how he thought there was something about a man's destiny (or about the man) that caused the destiny to shape itself to him like his clothes did, ... destiny had fitted itself to him, to his innocence,

his pristine aptitude for platform drama and childlike heroic simplicity ..."' (245-6). Again Sutpen's destiny is bound in innocence. Destiny is an undeniable force which he allows to guide him through (and shape his reaction to) obstacles and barriers in his life.

Yet fate seems to turn against Thomas Sutpen. When he discovers during his investigation in New Orleans that Bon is his son, he senses that perhaps fate would once again crumble the dream which twice now it had allowed him to build. Mr. Compson describes to Quentin the encroaching tide of disaster:

Because the time now approached ... when the destiny of Sutpen's family which for twenty years now had been like a lake welling from quiet springs into a quiet valley and spreading, rising almost imperceptibly and in which the four members of it floated in sunny suspension, felt the first subterranean movement toward the outlet, the gorge which would be the land's catastrophe too, and the four peaceful swimmers turning suddenly to face one another, not yet with alarm or distrust but just alert, feeling the dark set, none of them yet at that point where man looks about at his companions in disaster and thinks When will I stop trying to save them and save only myself? and not even aware that that point was approaching. (73-4)

And so eventually when the war began and Sutpen went off to fight, it

became apparent that it would end disastrously for the South. Yet Miss Rosa expected, knew, that Thomas Sutpen would return and rebuild his dream which his destiny drove him toward, although she saw not destiny but simple ruthlessness. When Sutpen returned, indeed he did not pause, but destiny ("electric furious immobile urgency and awareness of short time and the need for haste" (160)) drove him -- not fear now, just concern. He did not feel impotent to rebuild, even though he had no idea how he would undertake the Herculean task, but he was concerned that he would not have time to do it before he would have to die. "But it did not stop him, intimidate him," Miss Rosa tells Quentin. "His was that cold alert fury of the gambler who knows that he may lose anyway but that with a second's flagging of the fierce constant will he is sure to ..." (160). Obviously it is Sutpen's destiny to continue to fight to save his dream and to strive for honor, even when he is faced with almost no hope, but with a "desolation more profound than ruin" (136).

Sutpen's last hope to create a dynasty, after a horrified Miss Rosa rejects his advances, rests with Milly, the granddaughter of Wash Jones. He uses her as if she were an animal and he a stud. As I noted earlier, Sutpen has no use for a daughter; a girl cannot carry on his name and perpetuate a dynasty. Although by bedding a lower class girl Sutpen would not really lose honor, using her to propagate in order to salvage his design is beneath a man attempting to join the higher

ranks.

The actual copulation between Sutpen and Milly is, of course, insulting to Wash, but because of the rules of deference that Wash abides by, Thomas Sutpen had not yet stepped out of bounds. As Wilbur Cash has noted, "Everybody in the South was aware of, and habitually thought and spoke in terms of, a division of society into Big Men and Little Men, with strict reference to property, power, and the claim to gentility."<sup>50</sup> Wash still looked up to Sutpen, almost worshipped him, in the same fashion that Cash states many of the poor whites longed for the aristocratic carriage of their "betters":

[The aristocratic ideal] determined the shape of those long, lazy, wishful day-dreams, those mirages from an unwilling and non-existent future, in which they saw themselves performing in splendor and moving in grandeur. And its concept of honor, of something inviolable and precious in the ego, to be protected against stain at every cost, and imposing definite standards of conduct, drifted down ... to the poor white in the most indistinct and primitive shape -- to draw their pride to a finer point yet, to reinforce and complicate such notions of "the thing to do" as they already possessed, and to propel them along their way of posturing and violence.<sup>51</sup>

But, as Cash had earlier stated, a poor white might have seen a planter "not as an antagonist but as an old friend or kinsman" and have

been in the habit of honoring him by "deferring to his knowledge and judgment, of consulting him on every occasion, and of looking to him for leadership and opinion", simply because of "the kindness and easiness of men who have long lived together on the same general plane, who have common memories, and who are more or less conscious of the ties of blood". With this comprehension of a general kinsmanship between the two, it would be difficult to think of him as "being made of fundamentally different stuff from yourself ... You might defer to him as a rich man, and you might often feel spite and envy: but to get on to genuine class feeling toward him you would have to have an extraordinarily vivid sense of brutal and intolerable wrong, or something equally compulsive."<sup>52</sup>

Wash, one may rest assured, subconsciously senses a widening gap between what is moral and the socially approved actions of Sutpen (the violation of his granddaughter), but he does not yet feel personally aggrieved for the insult. But when Sutpen returns spite for spite, and says to the mother of his child: "Well, Milly; too bad you're not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable" (286), it becomes a personal affront to Wash. Jones wishes simply for the decent dignity due any human being; when his granddaughter is given less respect than a mare, Wash himself is degraded to the level of mere beast. Recalling the words of Wyatt-Brown, to assault a female family

member was to assault the man himself.<sup>53</sup> Wash, as much as Sutpen, was "imbued with the principles of honor."<sup>54</sup>

And now Wash stands there thinking with "that morality of his that was a good deal like Sutpen's, that told him he was right in the face of all fact and usage and everything else" (287), and saying to himself: "And how could I have lived nigh to him for twenty years without being touched and changed by him? Maybe I am not as big as he is and maybe I did not do any of the galloping. But at least I was drug along where he went." (287-8) Wash Jones, then, is struck with a sense of "brutal and intolerable wrong" and there remains only one recourse for him to redeem the primitive honor of his which Sutpen destroyed. Violent response, as Henry Stanley had noted, was the only form of honor which Wash could still call upon. Thus, he takes up the rusty scythe and slays Sutpen. Wilbur Cash also notes the necessity for Wash's calling upon arms to rectify his injured honor:

One of the notable results of the spread of the idea of honor, indeed, was an increase in the tendency to violence throughout the social scale. Everybody, high and low, was rendered more techy.... These men of the South would go on growing in their practice of violence in one form or another, ... because of the feeling, fixed by social example, that it was the only quite correct, the only decent, relief for wounded honor -- the only one which did not imply some subtle derogation, some

dulling and retracting of the fine edge of pride, some  
 indefinable but intolerable loss of caste and manly face.<sup>55</sup>

This feeling that a killing is the only just means to save honor first appears in the story when Henry kills Charles to stop the threat to his family's and his sister's honor. After the war, when the entire code of the Old South has crumbled, Wash can seek the same means to avenge his wound.

In what is presented as an extremely shocking act, Wash kills not only Sutpen, but his granddaughter and great-granddaughter as well. This horrific scene is a further attempt to salvage honor, however. His offspring has been horribly offended by Sutpen, for now there would be no marriage as had been expected. But more important, Wash realizes that Sutpen did not even venture out to the shack to find out about Milly and her child but to find out about his mare. The insult is upon his entire family; that is why he takes his own life:

Better if his kind and mine had never drawn the breath of life on this earth. Better that all who remain of us be blasted from the face of it than that another Wash Jones should see his whole life shredded from him and shrivel away like a dried shuck thrown into the fire ... (291)

Wash kills Sutpen for denying Milly and the baby the treatment he accords his mare. His murder of the two girls and subsequently of himself in the face of the posse is nothing more than an outward assertion of the realization that he and his family have been denied

the dignity due any human beings.<sup>56</sup>

V

Wash's actions reveal the emptiness of the standards of honor and the resultant societal degeneracy of the Old South in the years following the Civil War. Perhaps one can see these shocking murders as a "dead end", symbolic of the direction that an unregenerate South was headed as it tried to reconstruct a past glory. Thomas Sutpen tried to continue a lifestyle which, corrupt at its heart in the antebellum period, was now rendered obsolete. Wash resorted to the violence of the code of honor of the mountains, the code that Sutpen forswore after his affront as a little boy when he realized that killing the rich planter would not constitute defeating him. Because Sutpen clung to a code which could not, would not, work, his design was doomed. He insisted upon living in the shadow of antebellum ideals, but the notion of moss-draped hardwoods shading a large white house no longer could be. What he wanted to achieve would not survive Reconstruction; the economics of a new society would insist upon the demise of the plantation system while the changed political situation would make the code of honor inoperable. Finally, Sutpen, although he conformed to the strict code of the aristocratic South, undeniably played the game

for no one but himself. Perhaps this is his fatal flaw in his drive for honor, that he had revenge as his single motivation. Had he been less singularly driven, he might have found it easier to bend a little to secure his goal of an aristocratic dynasty.

This, then, is the end of Thomas Sutpen. He "believed he could restore by sheer indomitable will the Sutpen's Hundred which he remembered and had lost" (184), but when he saw the baby girl on the pallet with Milly, he knew that his dream was over. Thus, he perhaps subconsciously goaded Wash into killing him. With no more hope for fulfilling (or reconstructing) his design, there was no purpose for existing. Sutpen's life centered on his dream: when his last hope -- the birth of Milly's child -- proved fruitless, his life ended the same day. Therein lies Thomas Sutpen's spirit -- that he struggled to save his dream until his dream died.

Thomas Sutpen's dream was his life. By his community's standards, his dream was an honorable one; indeed, it almost embodied honor itself. Therefore, for Thomas Sutpen, honor was life. The two were (and are) inseparable. Cleanth Brooks wrote that "efficiency as an end in itself is self-defeating. It is man's fate to struggle against nature; yet it is wisdom to learn that the fight cannot finally be won, and that the contest has to be conducted with love and humility and in accordance with a code of honor."<sup>57</sup> Yet it was Sutpen's life to fight against what he saw as uncontrollable destiny. Many years after the

time of Thomas Sutpen, Ralph Ellison echoed Sutpen's philosophy when he said that "humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat."<sup>58</sup> This postulate recalls in a modern sense Sutpen's life, who without a dream and without honor could not exist. Yet even with Sutpen's death and his land divided and sold, the spirit of his honor remained. Miss Rosa recognizes this and tells Quentin: "'We are on his Domain. On his land, his and Ellen's and Ellen's descendants. They have taken it from them since, I understand. But it still belongs to him, to Ellen and her descendants.'" (363) At last perhaps she realizes that his dream was somehow preserved, in the land. Indeed, through the devising of his dream, through its ultimate demise, and through the lifetime evaluations of his conduct according to the confusing, unwritten, mythical code of Southern honor, and despite the clarity of the injustices of the system to which he attached himself, Thomas Sutpen remained honorable.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, The Cotton Kingdom, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 617. Originally published in 1861.

<sup>2</sup> Olmsted, p. 619.

<sup>3</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Wyatt-Brown, pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Co., 1969), p. 617. Originally published in 1840.

<sup>7</sup> Tocqueville, p. 623.

<sup>8</sup> Wyatt-Brown, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville, p. 618.

<sup>10</sup> Wyatt-Brown, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1972). Originally published in 1936. Subsequent references are from this edition.

<sup>12</sup> Clement Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization 1790-1860 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> Wyatt-Brown, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Eaton, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Wilbur J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 14.

[Notes to pages 13-28]

16 Cash, p. 37.

17 Cash, p. 30.

18 Cash, pp. 59-60.

19 Wyatt-Brown, p. 21.

20 John Irwin, Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 98-99.

21 Irwin, p. 84.

22 C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History, Rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960 and 1968), p. 32, 37.

23 Louis D. Rubin, The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 52.

24 Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 297.

25 Brooks, pp. 318-319.

26 Wyatt-Brown, p. 34.

27 Wyatt-Brown, p. 36.

28 Elizabeth M. Kerr, Yoknapatawpha: Faulkner's "Little Postage Stamp of Native Soil" (New York: Fordham University Press, 1969), p. 97.

29 Olmsted, p. 616.

30 Cash, p. 32.

31 Wyatt-Brown, p. 35.

32 Thomas D. Clark, Pills, Petticoats and Plows: The Southern Country Store (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944), pp. 21, 23. Quoted in Kerr, p. 97.

33 Tocqueville, p. 616.

34 Tocqueville, p. 617.

[Notes to pages 29-56]

- 35 Wyatt-Brown, pp. 46-7.
- 36 Olmsted, p. 616.
- 37 Cash, pp. 42-3.
- 38 Cash, p. 38.
- 39 Tocqueville, p. 622.
- 40 Wyatt-Brown, p. 52.
- 41 Wyatt-Brown, p. 53.
- 42 Eric J. Sundquist, Faulkner: The House Divided  
(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 121.
- 43 Sundquist, pp. 121-2.
- 44 Exodus 20:12.
- 45 Walter Taylor, Faulkner's Search for a South  
(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 108-9.
- 46 Brooks, p. 299.
- 47 Quoted in Eaton, pp. 2-3.
- 48 Wyatt-Brown, p. 29.
- 49 Wyatt-Brown, p. 30.
- 50 Cash, pp. 34-5.
- 51 Cash, p. 73.
- 52 Cash, pp. 52, 40-1, 35-6.
- 53 Wyatt-Brown, p. 53.
- 54 Wyatt-Brown, p. 16.
- 55 Cash, p. 73.
- 56 See also Kerr, p. 215.
- 57 Brooks, p. 308.
- 58 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage  
Brooks, Random House, 1972), p. 564. Originally published  
in 1952.

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## VITA

Kevin J. Gardner was born in Freeport, Texas, on October 24, 1962, and was reared in Lake Jackson, Texas, where he attended school. In 1981 he graduated from Brazoswood High with honors in music and German.

He received his Bachelor of Arts in English in 1984 from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. In his senior year, he became a member of the English Honor Society.

In the fall of 1984, he enrolled in the Master of Arts program in American Studies at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Since finishing his master's work he has taught English. At the present (January 1987) he is an instructor in the Literature Department of Point Loma Nazarene College in San Diego, California.