The Search for Truth: Narrative Technique in "Lord Jim" and "Absalom, Absalom!"

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THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH:
NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN LORD JIM AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to show the basic similarities between the narrative technique of Joseph Conrad in *Lord Jim* and of William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!*

In both novels the narrative technique is influenced by the perplexing protagonist who defies easy categorization and understanding. The narrators examine their respective protagonists from multiple angles in an effort to achieve a satisfactory explanation of the protagonists' lives. Through this technique the reader becomes involved in the quest for understanding the protagonist.

The technique of the narrators in telling their stories is also characterized by a disjointed chronology; that is, neither novel unfolds its events in the order in which they occurred. This technique forces the reader to become more involved in the tale as he strives to uncover all the facts.

Ultimately the search for understanding of the protagonists in both novels goes beyond the facts of their stories and even beyond their characters; the reader begins to question the moral and ethical codes of the societies in which the protagonists live. The narrators do not offer the definitive truth about the protagonists, preferring instead to leave final judgment to the reader.

In dealing with the issue of how to learn the truth about a man, William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* adopted and expanded the basic narrative technique developed by Joseph Conrad in his search for truth in *Lord Jim.*
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Few, if any, twentieth century authors can write without some influence from their literary predecessors, but pinpointing such influence is difficult for the critic. One case in point is the relationship between Joseph Conrad and William Faulkner. Faulkner himself stated, "I got quite a lot from Conrad" from frequent readings of his work,¹ but he failed to elaborate on specific instances. When questioned at West Point about his favorite author, Faulkner responded by saying that characters, not authors, were important to him; he added that "the people that I know and love are . . . some of Conrad's people. . . . Some of Conrad's writing is bad writing, but some of Conrad's people that he created are marvelous and endured."² Beyond these references there are few direct links between the two authors.³ One of Faulkner's critics, Richard Adams, finds a similarity in both authors' using the same characters and settings in more than one story, as if both created their own fictional world to write about.⁴ Becoming more specific, Adams also believes that Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! are most closely related to Conrad's works and that "internal evidence" in Faulkner's writing indicates that Lord Jim exerted an
influence. Yet much remains to be done in marshaling the evidence to support such statements. Herewith an effort will be made to show specific influences in technique of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* on William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

Basic similarities exist between the two novels; for example, the narrators in both *Lord Jim* and *Absalom, Absalom!* deal with perplexing protagonists who defy easy categorization and understanding. In *Lord Jim* the narrator Marlow still tells the story of Jim long after it has happened in an effort to explain Jim's case to himself. Instead of dismissing Jim as a cowardly young seaman who abandons his ship when he erroneously believes it is sinking, Marlow sees him as a man worth studying and explaining, "one of us" (p. 27). However, as Marlow contemplates Jim's life from the time of his trial for jumping ship to his life in Patusan, he introduces memories in the order that they enter his consciousness rather than in chronological order. The reader, unable to follow the time shifts from the beginning of Marlow's narrative because he lacks Marlow's comprehensive knowledge of the subject, becomes dependent on the narrator in unraveling the truth about Jim. Marlow discusses Jim's case with several people involved in the *Patna* episode and considers their views in trying to achieve a satisfactory reconciliation between Jim's elevated self-image and his flawed behavior; but when Marlow withdraws from a final explanation at the end, the reader is left on his own to interpret the protagonist made
fascinating though still enigmatic by the narrator.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner also deals with a protagonist, Thomas Sutpen, who defies community standards yet cannot be easily dismissed by certain sensitive narrators. Instead of filtering impressions of his protagonist through one narrative consciousness, Faulkner uses four narrators: Miss Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson and his son Quentin, and Quentin's Harvard roommate Shreve. Although Miss Rosa is Sutpen's sister-in-law and knew him personally, the other three narrators are fascinated by Sutpen through hearsay from others. The basic facts of Sutpen's design to acquire wealth, family, and prestige in the antebellum South gradually emerge as each narrator tries to interpret Sutpen. Because each narrator knows the general facts of the story, each, like Marlow, discusses Sutpen with radical time shifts as he focuses on one important part of the protagonist's life and then moves to another. Miss Rosa, for example, concentrates on Sutpen's devastating effect on her sister Ellen by marrying her; on his daughter Judith by forbidding her marriage to Charles Bon; and on herself by indecently proposing to her. Mr. Compson concerns himself with Sutpen's social relationships in Jefferson as well as with trying to explain the quarrel between Sutpen and his son Henry over Bon. Quentin and Shreve exchange facts and ideas in an effort to understand why Sutpen left his first wife and son, Eulalia Bon and Charles, and why Henry really
killed Charles Bon. The reader, as in *Lord Jim*, becomes dependent on the narrator's view of his subject; but when Faulkner presents four narrators with different points of view, the reader again seems forced to interpret the protagonist in his own way.

Given these general similarities the question arises concerning how much influence Conrad's *Lord Jim* exerted on Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* In discussing Faulkner's writing techniques, Jean-Jacques Mayoux states that "Faulkner at times reminds us of Conrad—for example, in *Absalom, Absalom!* He had read widely in Conrad's works, and may have found in him a type of method which he made his own (such as putting the narrator into the tale)." David Thorburn confirms that Faulkner is "Conrad's greatest successor in the uses of this drama of the telling," where the narrator becomes central in the structure of the novel. For example, in both *Lord Jim* and *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrator manipulates the reader's feelings toward the protagonist through a disjointed chronology, which creates both suspense and confusion, and through the juxtaposition of characters and events, which controls sympathy and judgment. Albert Guerard perceives these functions of the narrator in both works and explains them even further in his discussion of *Lord Jim* as Conrad's "first great impressionist novel." He defines the aim of an impressionist as achieving "a fuller truth than realism can" by depriving the reader of a logical sequence
of facts; this creates in the reader "an intricate play of emotion and a rich conflict of sympathy and judgment, a provisional bafflement in the face of experience which turns out to be more complicated than we ever would have dreamed."

Guerard feels that *Absalom, Absalom* is the "culminating triumph of Conradian impressionism" in that it complicates each of Conrad's complications and involves the reader even more deeply in interpretation. Thus *Lord Jim* is a novel of "intellectual and moral suspense" with the conclusion lying with the reader; Guerard believes that "the reader, in a sense—and how true this will be of *Absalom, Absalom*—turns out to be the hero of the novel, either succeeding or failing in his human task of achieving a balanced view."

Another way of seeing the relationship of the two novelists is in terms of truth. Both authors are interested in truth and how to arrive at it; they have created novels to illustrate the technique of accumulating as many facts and ideas as possible. The reader becomes involved on two different levels of the novel: in the story line per se and in the way the story is told. As he searches for the facts of the story, the reader also becomes aware of the narrator's control of the storytelling and of the narrator's involvement with his subject. Thus in arriving at both authors' views of truth, the critic must concentrate on narrators who manipulate the reader through scrambling of time, through juxtaposition of events and characters, and
through an identification of themselves with their subjects; this identification affects the narrator's involvement in the storytelling itself and projects the narrator into the forefront of the novel.

In other words, Conrad's narrator and the many characters who discuss Jim serve the same function as Faulkner's numerous narrators and characters: to offer multiple contrasts, comparisons, and perspectives in viewing the protagonists. Guerard points out that Conrad gives us several different character types against which to view Jim: the "meditative idealist who is capable of action" (Marlow and Stein); the "cynic" (the Patna's captain, Chester, Gentleman Brown, Cornelius); and the "simple and unreflective men who almost effortlessly do the right thing" (the helmsman, the French lieutenant, Bob Stanton). The reader's judgment of Thomas Sutpen depends more on how the different narrators see him than on how he compares to other characters in the novel; thus Faulkner departs from Conrad's technique of introducing many characters who discuss the protagonist with a single narrator and instead creates many narrators. This expands and emphasizes the personal search for truth by involving more people who desire a full understanding of the protagonist. In the course of the novel, the reader is confronted with several pictures of Sutpen: Miss Rosa's demon, Mr. Compson's hero in a Greek tragedy, and Quentin and Shreve's romantic confounded by his innocence, as well as Grandfather Compson's
friend he refuses to judge and Wash Jones' hero, the brave and invincible colonel.

The reader's ultimate opinion of the protagonist in both novels, however, lies in his understanding of the narrator's relationship to the subject of his story. In both novels the narrators must first emerge as real people rather than mere voices, and the reader must feel their difficulties in presenting an accurate picture of the protagonist. In *Lord Jim* the narrative is interrupted several times to present Marlow the person distinct from Marlow the character functioning in a story he is telling. For example, Marlow pauses one time to relight his "expiring cheroot" (p. 57), and at other times Marlow reminds his listeners (and the reader) that he is creating Jim for them ("... after all it is only through me that he exists for you"—p. 137) and that the rendering of his memories into language is difficult. At one point Marlow says, "'All this happened in much less time than it takes to tell, since I am trying to interpret for you into slow speech the instantaneous effect of visual impressions'" (p. 30); and again, "'I am missing innumerable shades—they were so fine, so difficult to render in colourless words'" (p. 58). Finally succumbing to the difficulty of presenting Jim and his case accurately, Marlow writes his "privileged listener," "'I affirm nothing... It is impossible to see him clearly...; there will be no message, unless such as each of us can interpret for himself..."
from the language of facts, that are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangement of words'" (p. 206).

Faulkner employs the same techniques for acquainting the reader with the narrators and their problems in viewing Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom! Although the four narrators speak basically the same rhetoric often labeled by critics as Faulknerese, they often interrupt themselves to speak in their own idiom, thus becoming distinct figures for the reader. For example, Mr. Compson interrupts his story of the courtship of Charles Bon and Judith to say, "'You see? there they are: this girl,'" (p. 99) and Shreve frequently interrupts Quentin with such statements as "'The demon, hey?'" (p. 218) and "'For God's sake wait!"' (p. 216). These narrators, like Marlow, also have difficulty deriving any satisfactory answers from the facts of their story. In the following passage Mr. Compson defines the problem all the narrators in Absalom, Absalom! encounter in trying to reconstruct a factual account of the Sutpens:

... It's just incredible. It just does not explain. Or perhaps that's it: they [the facts] don't explain and we are not supposed to know. We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes and drawers letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affection which sound to us like Sanskrit or Chocktaw; we see dimly people, the people in whose living blood and seed we ourselves lay dormant and waiting, in this shadowy attenuation of time possessing now heroic proportions, performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable--Yes, Judith, Bon, Henry, Sutpen: all of them. They are there, yet something is missing; they
are like a chemical formula exhumed along with the letters from that forgotten chest, carefully, the paper old and faded and falling to pieces, the writing faded, almost indecipherable, yet meaningful, familiar in shape and sense, the name and presence of volatile and sentient forces; you bring them together in the proportions called for, but nothing happens; you re-read, tedious and intent, poring, making sure that you have forgotten nothing, made no miscalculation; you bring them together again and again nothing happens: just the words, the symbols, the shapes themselves, shadowy inscrutable, and serene, against that turgid background of a horrible and bloody mischancing of human affairs. (pp. 100-101)

Mr. Compson, like the other narrators of Sutpen's life, cannot explain Sutpen by accumulating all the known facts, for something more is needed. Just as Marlow struggles with the facts of Jim's case to get to the truth, Sutpen's narrators try to read into the facts the truth of the situation and convey it to the reader; they labor under the further handicap of the loss or distortion of information through the passage of time. Olga Vickery points out that in addition to the problem of searching for truth in *Absalom, Absalom*, the narrators must convey that truth in a language which necessarily falsifies it; hence the style of the novel becomes torturous with constant qualifyings and searchings for words as the narrators attempt to overcome a language inadequate to the facts and feelings with which they struggle.¹² Neither Marlow nor Sutpen's narrators ever feel that they solve the problem of welding the facts into comprehensible explanations.

Because they lack information to explain the known facts, the narrators in each novel rely on imaginative conjecture to
bridge gaps and give meaning to the story. As the narrators use their imaginations, they seem to become more involved with their subjects to the point, in some cases, of identification with the protagonists. For example, when Marlow has been disillusioned with facts, he has had to resort to conjecture to fill in gaps in Jim's story. Thus Marlow speculates on Jim's feelings when he returned to shore after rescue by the Avondale and learned the facts of the Patna: "... he told me nothing of them and it is difficult to imagine. I wonder whether he felt the ground cut from under his feet?" (pp. 50-51). In another instance Marlow's conjecture creates sympathy for Jim as he imagines the terrifying loneliness of the four officers of the Patna adrift on the sea in a tiny lifeboat (p. 75). Marlow also uses his imagination to conjure up a picture of Jewel's mother, and he develops more fully in his mind the relationship of mother and daughter from the few references Jewel makes to their conversations (p. 169). Finally, Marlow makes an important conjecture by projecting himself into Jim's mind and declaring that when Jim learned it was not safe for Tamb'Itam to go among the people because of his master's actions, "'he [Jim] had decided to defy the disaster in the only way it occurred to him such a disaster could be defied'" (p. 248)—through his death. Yet in spite of his imaginative involvement with Jim's story, in spite of his identification with Jim ("'Was it for my own sake that I wished to find some shadow of an excuse for that young
fellow"—p. 32) and his feeling that his part "'was to speak for my brother'" (p. 192). Marlow retreats from a final judgment and leaves it to the reader.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* the narrators also turn to conjecture: Quentin speaks for the importance of this imaginative process when, listening to his father, he thinks, "No. If I had been there I could not have seen it this plain" (p. 190). Although each narrator indulges in speculation, Quentin's and Shreve's are by far the most important in giving overall coherence, but they are also the farthest removed from the known facts. Miss Rosa confines her conjectures to conversations between her sister Ellen and Sutpen, and at the end of one she even reminds the reader, "'But I was not there!'" (p. 30). Mr. Compson's most important conjecture involves Bon's gradual revelation to Henry of the story of his octoroon mistress, the sham wedding ceremony, and the child (p. 108ff), which Quentin and Shreve discount as an insufficient cause for Henry's killing Bon and thus preventing the marriage of Henry's sister Judith and Bon.

Quentin and Shreve, as they become more imaginatively involved with their story, broaden the range of their conjectures to give more coherence to the facts. For example, Shreve invents the lawyer (p. 300) as a driving force to help Bon's mother achieve her revenge against Sutpen through Bon. Shreve even corrects Mr. Compson's conjecture that Bon was wounded in the Civil War and saved by Henry to just the
reverse: that Bon nursed Henry back to health even suspecting that Henry would kill him (pp. 344-5). Most important, however, is the solution Quentin and Shreve propose to explain Sutpen's originally disowning Bon and setting in motion his destruction; as they reach this point in the narrative, "it was not even four now [Charles and Shreve, Quentin and Henry, p. 334] but compounded still further, since now both of them were Henry Sutpen and both of them were Bon" (p. 351). They imagine Sutpen finally telling Henry about Bon. "It was not until after he was born that I found out that his mother was part negro" (p. 355). Yet in spite of this close identification and imaginative involvement, Quentin and Shreve, like Marlow, withdraw at the end and leave final interpretation and understanding to the reader. Shreve retreats into scoffing and ironic comments about the Jim Bonds taking over the earth while Quentin becomes embroiled in the attitudes and ideas he hates in the South, which the Sutpen story fully embodies.

To a certain extent this failure in both novels to reach a final interpretation is dictated by the type of protagonist each presents. Both Jim and Sutpen violate fixed community standards of conduct, for Jim betrays the seaman's code when he abandons the Patna and Sutpen defies the code of the Southern gentlemen in his acquisition of external trappings and in his relationship to his slaves; but their personal drive and self-proclaimed superiority
prevent their narrators from dismissing them lightly. Sutpen, like Jim, conceives a goal, an image of himself in boyhood that he dedicates his life to fulfilling. Like Jim he also enjoys some success in attaining his self-image as his design seems to reach a peak just before Bon and the Civil War interrupt his plans. Unlike Jim's ideals, however, Sutpen's code will not allow him to choose death when he fails, although his pursuit of his design through his abuse of the teen-aged Milly becomes almost suicidal. The goals of both protagonists seem clearly related to an egoistic, even romantic, pursuit of a self-image with an innocence (in Quentin's words) "which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (p. 263). Jim's innocence leads him to seek the perfect situation in Patusan in which to enact his dream, and he and Sutpen both disregard the feelings and basic humanity of others in blind pursuit of their designs. These protagonists appear fascinating yet inscrutable to their narrators, for Marlow even knows Jim personally and still has to cast about through a wide range of facts, ideas, and other acquaintances for ways to understand him. Faulkner's narrators, except Miss Rosa, are even further removed from Sutpen, who seems capable of confounding a whole century of countrymen through his extraordinary attempts and
spectacular failures.

The impossibility of imposing on experience a universally accepted pattern or interpretation is implied in the distorted chronology. The interruptions of chronological events in both novels not only keep them from being traditional mystery stories where the reader follows a trail of clues to a comprehensive revelation at the end; it also shifts the emphasis to the narrator and the technique of storytelling itself, as Joseph Reed explains in the following analysis of Absalom, Absalom! "Thickenings and complications and barriers, misplaced in the conventional structure, take on force and purpose in a structure aimed not at solution of what is told but rather at understanding of the telling, the hearing, the narrative, the fiction itself."\(^{13}\)

In developing his technique of storytelling and involving himself in the narrative, Marlow deals with a much shorter range of time than do the narrators in Absalom, Absalom! The first twenty-four years of the narrative of Lord Jim are left to an omniscient narrator, who summarizes Jim's background to the point when the Patna strikes something in the dark, smooth water. This incident ends Chapter Three, and Chapter Four shifts forward in time to Jim on trial, for what crime the reader has no idea. Marlow takes over the narrative in the courtroom at the beginning of Chapter Five, a shift in point of view that Guerard explains by saying that the omniscient narrator can no longer justify withholding
the information that the *Patna* did not sink; Marlow can continue to withhold this fact because his listeners know the result of a case infamous in their time. Guerard continues, "This is the basic convention of Conradian and Faulknerian impressionism: that the reader (who is merely 'listening in') knows as much as the narrator's nominal listeners. But of course he doesn't." 

The omniscient narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* is more fully integrated into the novel than the omniscient narrator in *Lord Jim*. Rather than introducing the novel and then fading into the background, Faulkner's omniscient voice sets the scene in all but two (the third and fifth) chapters of the book and even narrates the general background of Sutpen in Jefferson that begins the second chapter. However, in telling Sutpen's story the omniscient voice sounds like all the other narrators in the midst of the storytelling to the extent that Mr. Compson can pick up the thread of the tale (p. 43) without any significant change in style except for the periodic insertion of his name and sets of quotation marks. Thus the abrupt division between the omniscient narrator's function in the storytelling and another narrator's assumption of the tale does not occur in *Absalom, Absalom!* as it does in *Lord Jim*; there are however more abrupt shifts in time between the chapters of Faulkner's novel than Conrad's. That is, once the major shift from the omniscient narrator to Marlow occurs in *Lord Jim*, the chronological
disruptions are basically confined within chapters. Faulkner, however, not only shifts time within chapters but also has his narrators resume the story at a different point in time between every chapter but the fourth and fifth (pp. 133-4).

One typical interruption of time within a chapter in *Lord Jim* occurs when Marlow digresses into his past to remember other fine looking lads like Jim whom he helped train for the sea (pp. 27-8). This digression prevents the forward movement of the tale but, more importantly, it also offers an insight into Marlow's feelings about the story he is telling. Jim disturbs Marlow because, like the other young men of the sea, "he [Jim] looked as genuine as a new sovereign"; however, in Jim's case, "there was some infernal alloy in his metal" (p. 28), and Marlow is disturbed that appearances can be so deceiving—how is one to judge?

Faulkner achieves a similar effect in the interruption of time in the seventh chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!* when Shreve interrupts the telling of and listening to the Sutpen story to comment on it. By saying, "'Jesus, the South is fine, isn't it. It's better than the theatre, isn't it. It's better than Ben Hur, isn't it. No wonder you have to come away now and then, isn't it" (p. 217), Shreve is not simply being flippant. His feelings here remind the reader that his Canadian heritage allows him to distance himself from the narrative and thus comment on it more objectively than Quentin, a product of the same Southern heritage that produced
Sutpen. Shreve indicates that the story appears unreal to him, like plays or novels, yet it also exerts a fascination that forces him to follow it through to its conclusion. By digressing into the present of the novel, Faulkner achieves an insight into Shreve's feelings just as Marlow's moral commentaries in *Lord Jim* reveal his feelings.

 Interruptions of the time sequence also allow for the introduction of new characters, who often bring the reader added insight into the protagonist by providing a fresh comparison to the central character. For example, Marlow interrupts his impressions of Jim in the courtroom scene to summarize the life and character of Brierly, a captain who committed suicide shortly after Jim's trial (pp. 35ff). By the end of the novel the reader realizes that Brierly provides one way of seeing Jim's death—as a kind of suicide in order to prevent a life subject at any moment to a disastrous, dishonorable decision.

 Faulkner employs a similar technique at the beginning of the third chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!* (p. 59). Here Mr. Compson pauses in his narrative of Sutpen's marriage to Ellen Coldfield to characterize Rosa's maiden aunt and Mr. Coldfield, the two shaping forces in Miss Rosa's childhood, as well as to introduce Sutpen's half-Negro daughter Clytie. The Coldfield family, especially the aunt and the father, function as a moral yardstick against which to measure Sutpen. They represent respectability in Jefferson which
Sutpen never quite achieves, yet the aunt elopes with a mule trader (p. 76) and Mr. Coldfield nails himself in the attic to protest the Civil War (p. 82). Clytie also becomes an ironic commentary on Sutpen's design (especially his obsession with sons), for she displays a strength of character and a will to survive that allow her to outlive Sutpen's other children. Both Marlow and Mr. Compson introduce these characters in a casual, offhand manner, but their importance increases by the end of the book when the reader weighs all points of view of the protagonist. However, Faulkner typically complicates this technique in comparison to Conrad; while Marlow recounts the whole Brierly story in one interruption, Faulkner adds bits of information about his characters over many pages or, in Clytie's case, throughout the novel.

Both authors also give new information through a series of disjointed time sequences. One example of this in *Lord Jim* occurs in Chapter Thirteen (pp. 91-3). Here Marlow completes his recollection of the conversation with the French lieutenant three years after Jim's trial, briefly refers to seeing Jim as De Jongh's water clerk about the same time, and then mentions another young seaman, Bob Stanton. The narrative then moves forward to some unspecified future time to recount Stanton's death in an attempt to save a lady's maid from a sinking ship. Marlow then introduces a flashback to his conversation with Jim at the Malabar House during
the trial where Jim refuses Brierly's money for an escape. Yet the time shifts serve a purpose, for all this information needs to come together to achieve what Guerard calls "corrective juxtaposition." Thus with the heroism of the French lieutenant and Bob Stanton fresh in his mind, the reader finds Jim's refusal of Brierly's offer less impressive than otherwise.

Faulkner tempers Miss Rosa's judgment of Sutpen in a similar manner, by shifting time sequences at the beginning of the first chapter. As Miss Rosa tells in the present a story of the past, when Thomas Sutpen arrived in Jefferson, built a house, and married her sister, Quentin's thoughts wander away to his own feelings on the subject. Instead of listening in the present, he creates in the past a vision of a godlike Sutpen declaring "Be Sutpen's Hundred like the oldentime Be Light" (p. 9), giving Sutpen a grandeur that the "grim haggard amazed voice" (p. 7) of Miss Rosa denies him. Although the reader's confusion is greater at this point in Absalom, Absalom! since he begins the novel without benefit of an omniscient narrator's summary as in Lord Jim, the technique of shifting time to accumulate information or insights that influence judgment remains basically the same.

Of course, both authors also use a disjointed chronology simply to create suspense in an interesting tale as well as to drop hints that become relevant and comprehensible only after the reader reaches the appropriate revelation in the
One example of suspense through time shift occurs in *Lord Jim* at the break between Chapters Three and Four, when the reader feels the Patna strike something in the water and next sees Jim on trial. Jim finally resumes the tale of the Patna in Chapter Seven (p. 52); yet in spite of the numerous foreshadowings that become apparent on a second reading, the reason for Jim's trial is not explicitly revealed until Chapter Twelve (p. 82) when the reader discovers that the Patna did not sink. Marlow hints at the solution when the Patna's mate asserts that he saw the ship go down and Marlow hides his indignation at this "stupid lie" (p. 32); more directly Marlow states just before the revelation, "'And there were no dead'" (p. 81). Thus suspense and interest are heightened through time shifts and foreshadowing.

Faulkner's application of these techniques in *Absalom, Absalom!* often involves a greater delay in resuming an interrupted narrative thread and the lack of a factual, incontrovertible revelation as a culmination of a series of hints. For example, the reader learns almost immediately in the novel that Quentin is to accompany Miss Rosa out to Sutpen's mansion (p. 12). However, by the time the narrative returns to this information, even greater suspense results by delaying the apparent point of climax over what Quentin finds there (p. 216) to almost the end of the novel (p. 373) when the fact of Henry Sutpen finally appears. The other great mystery of the novel, why Sutpen abandoned his first
wife and son, is never solved. The most plausible explanation Quentin/Shreve can develop is that Eulalia Bon must have had some Negro ancestor that made her unfit for Sutpen's design; this idea receives several oblique references in Quentin's and Shreve's conjectures of Bon's thoughts. For example, they imagine Bon justifying his octoroon mistress to his mother by saying, "'And as for a little matter like a spot of negro blood--'" (p. 308); again they project Bon's thoughts on Sutpen's failure in his design and the guilt Bon feels in causing that failure, for they imagine that Bon would rather have failed in his revenge against Sutpen than have caused Sutpen to fail because of something Sutpen could not tolerate in Eulalia Bon's blood (p. 321). Yet these foreshadowing conjectures only end in a larger conjecture (p. 355) of Eulalia Bon's Negro blood, for there are no ultimate facts here to help solve problems for Faulkner's narrators and readers.

Both novels thus employ time shifts and foreshadowing in the unfolding of their narrative to show the deep involvement of the narrators. In the end, however, the narrators retreat from offering the reader a definitive solution to the problems they raise. In Lord Jim Marlow has more facts about his protagonist than Faulkner's narrators in Absalom, Absalom! have about theirs, but he can provide no clearer explanation of Jim than Faulkner's speakers can of Sutpen. Understanding and interpreting the protagonists is the crucial
problem facing the narrators, and thus the reader, in both novels; yet facts and plausible speculations offer no clear-cut guide. As a result, the protagonists of both novels have been interpreted in widely different ways by different readers.

In *Lord Jim* Marlow creates great sympathy for Jim as a youth with unrealized potential for greatness, but he cannot completely temper the feeling of cowardly escape that surrounds Jim's death. Because Marlow refuses to commit himself to one view of Jim, however, critics disagree on how to view Jim's death. Some see it as a tragedy of a valiant young man continually wronged by fate; for example, John Palmer believes that in *Lord Jim* Conrad creates a "final tragic irony—that a man of stature and self-consciously heroic intentions must nevertheless inhabit a world that will drive him to betrayal beyond his will, and hold him responsible for it." Other critics see Jim's death as the final act of a flawed dreamer who can only live in daydreams and cannot function in reality. Paul Wiley supports this idea when he explains his view of Jim as a

... fallible human and not the supernatural being of his legend. ... Jim deals with Brown... in accordance with a personal creed [romantic idealism] recognized by the society from which he has broken but having no relevance to the immediate needs of a secular community for self-preservation. Faithful to this detached ideal, he permits the ordered world that he has built to fall in ruins; and this fidelity makes the sacrifice of his own life both chivalrous and futile.17

Thus Jim remains as ambivalent a figure to modern readers as
he was to Marlow.

Sutpen's narrators and critics face similar ambiguities in interpretation. Miss Rosa contents herself with hating the vision of Sutpen as demon she has created. Mr. Compson prefers to see Sutpen as a tragic figure manipulated by fate; but in comparison to Quentin's and Shreve's version, his explanation also seems incomplete. Quentin and Shreve concentrate on Sutpen's moral innocence as they discuss Sutpen's conversations with Grandfather Compson; Sutpen tries carefully and logically to understand his tragedy by finding the fatal flaw in a plan he still believes to be morally correct. Critics similarly disagree on an interpretation of Sutpen. I. D. Lind agrees that Sutpen fails through a lack of moral insight, but she insists that he embodies the purpose of the novel, a "grand tragic vision of historic dimension." Sutpen is morally flawed, but his flaw is socially and culturally conceived; he represents the downfall of a whole social order, the collapse of the Old South. Another critic, John Longley, claims that Sutpen's much-vaunted innocence (Absalom, Absalom!, p. 263) which allows him to convert human relationships into abstractions is in reality "ignorance of the dynamics of morality." Thus Sutpen never becomes a tragic figure because he never develops any insight into his failure. He remains ignorant rather than innocent of true morality in dealing with others, for the seed of self-interest within him dominates his life.
and allows him to sacrifice anyone who interferes with his plan.21

Additional insight into Jim and Sutpen can be gained by looking beyond the protagonists themselves. Both Jim's and Sutpen's failures call into question not only their characters, but also the value of the codes that create in each the image he cannot attain. Perhaps the seaman's code, especially as it appears in the "sea-life of light literature" (p. 5) Jim read, actually foils the efforts of a sensitive person like Jim through creation of unattainable ideal in a code of conduct not applicable in every situation. Marlow realizes this problem when he tries to find "some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse" to lay to rest "the doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct" (p. 31). It is mainly through Marlow's questioning of how "one of us" like Jim can fail so dismally that the reader comes to question whether a person can be judged simply by a fixed standard of conduct, the seaman's code. The narrative technique in which Marlow approaches Jim's case from all angles fails to provide either a truly admirable example of the code that specifies honor, bravery, and self-sacrifice above personal safety at sea or a satisfactory alternative. The French lieutenant, who stays aboard the crippled Fatna at great personal risk, certainly keeps the honor which is all (p. 90); yet somehow Marlow's description of his honorable behavior is
balanced, if not offset, by his ponderous and dull personality. The only other positive character who might serve as an example to follow is Stein, who has shown bravery and perseverance in his youth; but like Jim, he achieves success in a world away from white men's ethical codes, and he becomes a recluse when he leaves that other world—and his success—behind.

However, Marlow's first reaction to Jim's story is not to wonder whether or not the seaman's code had anything to do with the failure of Jim's conduct on the Patna; rather, his first reaction to seeing Jim and the other officers arrive in port is that "I wanted to see him squirm for the honour of the craft" (p. 28). Later Marlow worries about Jim, "whose appearance alone added a touch of personal concern to the thoughts suggested by the knowledge of his weakness—made it a thing of mystery and terror—like a hint of a destructive fate ready for us all whose youth—in its day—had resembled his youth" (p. 32). At the heart of Marlow's bafflement is Jim's appearance, for he looks like the classic young man of the sea. If one who resembles an outstanding example of those who pledge their lives to the seaman's code can fail, what is one to think? Although somewhat guilty over his sympathies with Jim, Marlow draws the reader into greater sympathy as he tries to explain why Jim's was not a simple case of cowardice:

He swayed me, I own to it, I own up. The occasion was obscure, insignificant—what you will: a lost
youngster, one in a million—but then he was one of us; an incident as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an anthill, and yet the mystery of his attitude got hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind's conception of itself.

(p. 57)

Yet the "obscure truth" involved in Jim's story, the truth of how to judge him, continues to elude Marlow.

In addition to his conversations with Jim, Marlow's discussions of Jim and the code of the sea with Brierly also expand Jim's case from a personal to a general problem. Brierly, too, has been disturbed by the Patna affair, and he explains his views to Marlow:

"This is a disgrace. We've got all kinds amongst us—some anointed scoundrels in the lot; but, hang it, we must preserve professional decency or we become no better than so many tinkers going about loose. We are trusted. Do you understand?--trusted! . . . Such an affair destroys one's confidence. A man may go pretty near through his whole sea-life without any call to show a stiff upper lip. But when the call comes... Aha! . . . If I . . . ."

(p. 42)

Brierly's loss of confidence in the decency of seamen and his casual assumption in this conversation that he would have behaved properly recalls Marlow's comment on his suicide: "Maybe his confidence in himself was shook just a bit at the last" (p. 38). Both Brierly and Jim find they cannot live in a world that affirms a code which tolerates no mistakes.

Jim, like Brierly, condenses the seaman's code to "all in being ready" (p. 50). Thus he regards the Patna incident
as a chance missed to prove his superiority, his difference in quality of which he has been convinced throughout his training for the sea: "when all men flinched, then--he felt sure--he alone would know how to deal with the spurious menace of wind and seas" (p. 7). Marlow does not feel that Jim entirely lacks courage (he tells Brierly that Jim has the courage to stand trial when no one would care if he ran away--p. 41), but the older seaman cannot penetrate Jim's view of the situation to force the young man to look at the moral implications of his deed. Jim remains trapped in his personal interpretation of the seaman's code, which combines "heroic aspirations" and "romantic achievements" (p. 51) from his dreams with the reality of life at sea. Even in Jim's briefly successful enactment of these ideals in Patusan, Marlow becomes more and more convinced of the danger of committing oneself so completely to a personal ideal of conduct. However, he leaves Jim still committed to that "shadowy ideal" (p. 253), but he has drawn the reader into his own doubts. Perhaps the external codes and ideals of others bear as much responsibility for Jim's destruction and his inability to live in the white man's world he was born to as any internal flaw.

Faulkner also employs his narrators to plant seeds of doubt in the reader's mind as to the value of the code his protagonist seeks to live by. Sutpen's failure to achieve his design calls into question the code of the Old South, the
standards by which Sutpen tries to succeed and ultimately fails through his apparent horror of Negro blood and his belief that external evidence shows a man's worth. However, Sutpen differs from Jim in the externals of his situation: he is born poor and not educated in the code he later adopts; he is an outsider in appearance and manners who must create opportunity rather than wait for it to come; and he does not succeed in his plan away from the mainstream of those who share his code but rather in their very midst. In spite of these differences in circumstance, however, Faulkner uses his narrators in the same way as Conrad, for the multiple perspectives on Sutpen raise doubts about the man and the code of the Southern landowner.

The townspeople of Jefferson raise the first questions about the character of this newcomer, Thomas Sutpen. In fulfilling his dream of land, status, wealth, and progeny, Sutpen becomes a threat to the townspeople because of his unorthodox methods, for he ignores the unwritten law that in Jefferson, Mississippi, gentlemen are born, not made. Mr. Compson shares the telling with the omniscient narrator as the townfolk register their outrage not only over the way Sutpen goes about his business but also over the fact that he succeeds and they feel bound to honor his accomplishments—he builds the largest house, marries a highly respected woman, and produces two children to carry on his achievements. Only when Colonel Sutpen receives a citation for bravery in the
Civil War, however, does he become "one of us" in Jefferson, for on the field of battle his undeniable courage is recognized ungrudgingly.

Miss Hosa exemplifies on a personal level the reaction of the town to Sutpen. She indicts him for not living up to the Southern code, for not being a gentleman, although she admits that his actions in the Civil War somewhat redeem him (p. 19). As the reader traces Miss Hosa's hostility through the novel, he begins to wonder if Sutpen is as flawed as Jefferson sees him or if his code is more flawed than his character. Sutpen first meets the code in the form of rejection of his basic humanity, and even in emulating that code to the best of his ability, he is still rejected by those born and bred to it—for example, in the boycotting of his marriage to Ellen Coldfield. The unwritten absolute of denying Negro blood brings personal tragedy to Sutpen, who has previously resisted the total acceptance of this tenet when he boxed in his barn with his Negroes before the amazed men of Jefferson (p. 29) and especially when he refused to join the Ku Klux Klan (p. 161). Yet when he must make a choice between Charles Bon or the destruction of a design heretofore constructed rigidly by the code of a Southern gentleman, he will not live with a design apparently made a travesty by Negro blood.

Perhaps Quentin's reaction to Sutpen condemns the Southern code most strongly. Rather than threatening Quentin
on a social level as he did Miss Rosa and the townfolk, Sutpen threatens Quentin because he encourages one of the worst aspects of the present South: dwelling on past heroes and their failures. If these larger than life ghosts did not succeed, if their world was destroyed by the Civil War, how can Quentin—steeped from childhood in the same ethics and traditions Sutpen acquired by sheer willpower and determination—ever succeed in the eyes of the South? Does the code of the South, which emphasizes appearances and rejection of the humanity of any Negro, undermine a man's character in one respect and cause the moral taint to spread throughout? The effects of the Sutpen story on Quentin, poignantly summarized in his final cries that he does not hate the South, underscore Faulkner's at least partial blame for Sutpen's failure on the code of those Sutpen envied.

Thus the narrators in both novels force the reader to examine not only the character of the protagonists, but also the codes they choose to live by. Perhaps, after all, both Jim and Sutpen are tragic figures caught by fate in worlds whose standards prevent their potential from being realized. The possibility also exists that each author, by leaving final interpretation to the reader, is trying to suggest that one can never fully understand the truth of a man—the how and why of his actions. In explaining each novel's narrative form as related to its theme, critics disagree on whether or not Conrad and Faulkner are denying the possibility
of determining truth. James Guetti believes that Conrad's technique denies the existence of truth by presenting a narrative which illustrates that "final meaning is impossible" and can be approached only by "verbal contradictions and a sense of mystery." However, Dorothy Van Ghent believes that Conrad affirms the existence of truth through the technique of his novel, for his technical devices in exploring Jim "represent extreme ethical scrupulosity, even anxiety; for the truth about a man is at once too immense and too delicate to sustain any failure of carefulness in the examiner." Turning to Faulkner, Michael Millgate claims that we never have the truth about Sutpen, only a poetic recreation by Quentin's and Shreve's imaginations that substitutes for truth. In disagreeing with this assessment, Ruth Vande Kieft narrows the definition of truth; she believes that Faulkner's multiple perspectives show his interest in human, not factual, truth composed of various subjective views, all valid. Faulkner himself suggests this view of truth when he says,

... no one individual can look at truth. ... But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, he has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth.

Perhaps the best way of appreciating both novels and their techniques is to turn to statements by both authors on their art. Both men shared an unshakable belief in the creative spirit as shown in Conrad's essay on Henry James.
echoes of which occur in Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Conrad states his beliefs on the function of the artist when he says,

When the last aqueduct shall have crumbled to pieces, the last airship fallen to the ground, the last blade of grass have died upon a dying earth, man, indomitable by his training in resistance to misery and pain, shall set this undiminished light of his eyes against the feeble glow of the sun. The artistic faculty, of which each of us has a minute grain, may find its voice in some individual of that last group, gifted with a power of expression and courageous enough to interpret the ultimate experience of mankind in terms of his temperament, in terms of art. . . . The artist in his calling of interpreter creates (the clearest form of demonstration) because he must. He is so much of a voice that, for him, silence is like death; and the postulate was, that there is a group alive, clustered on his threshold to watch the last flicker of light on a black sky, to hear the last word uttered in the stilled workshop of the earth. It is safe to affirm that, if anybody, it will be the imaginative man who would be moved to speak on the eve of that day without to-morrow—whether in austere exhortation or in a phrase of sardonic comment, who can guess?

For my own part, from a short and cursory acquaintance with my kind, I am inclined to think that the last utterance will formulate, strange as it may appear, some hope now to us utterly inconceivable. For mankind is delightful in its pride, its assurance, and its indomitable tenacity.27

Faulkner echoes these sentiments when he explains the role of the creative man in the following speech:

He must learn them [basic values] again. He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid; and, teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his workshop for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice. Until he does so, he labors under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope and, worst of all, without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no universal bones, leaving no scars. He writes not of the heart but of
the glands.

Until he relearns these things, he will write as though he stood alone and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure; that when the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.

Both Conrad and Faulkner offer their readers this "privilege to help man endure" by involving them in the creative process in their novels rather than offering them definite conclusions. The reader, called upon to create truth for himself, can work his way through the complexities of Lord Jim and Absalom, Absalom! and achieve an increased understanding of man and of his creative language, "that meager and fragile thread... by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness" (Absalom, Absalom!, p. 251).
NOTES

1Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville, Va.: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959), pp. 20, 50.


3Faulkner does refer to Conrad in a review of Eugene O'Neill's drama. He cites both men as exceptions to the rule that art is "preeminently provincial." He continues: "These two men are anomalies, Joseph Conrad especially; this man has overturned all literary tradition in this point"—see William Faulkner: Early Prose and Poetry, ed. Carvel Collins (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1962), p. 86. Again in a review of Joseph Hergesheimer's works, Faulkner compares Hergesheimer's skills in characterization to Conrad's by saying that "the tricks of the trade were never employed with better effect, unless by Conrad." (Ibid., p. 102)


5Ibid., pp. 23, 21.


10Ibid., p. 145.


14 Guerard, p. 135.

15 Ibid., p. 154.


26Gwynn and Blotner, p. 273.


28Hoffman and Vickery, p. 348.
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