LAKE FOREST COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!”
The Function of Place in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!

by

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The report of the investigation undertaken as a
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Abstract

This paper explores the literary concept of place in William Faulkner’s novel *Absalom, Absalom!* I argue that as an inheritor of Naturalism, Faulkner frames his novel around the deterministic quality of place, suggesting that the South as a geographic and cultural region determines the fate of his characters. Faulkner’s narrative structure, which relies on the acts of storytelling and imaginative re-creation, challenges what is real and what is imagined in our conception of place and forces the reader to participate in a process of making meaning that reveals Faulkner’s theory of a cursed South. The events in the novel suggest that a curse has been brought on the South as a result of the abuse inflicted on slaves and on the Southern wilderness by plantation owners during the antebellum period. For those unable to come to terms with their Southern heritage, this curse spells out their doom.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the Professors who worked tirelessly to help me shape my thoughts and my argument. Without the assistance of Professor Glenn Adelson, Professor Brian McCammack, and Professor Joshua Corey this paper would not have been possible. I also thank my family for their encouragement and the support of my friends, especially Taylor Brando, who never stopped believing in me.
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Introduction

Written in 1936, William Faulkner’s acclaimed novel *Absalom, Absalom!* explores the reality of the American South before, during, and after the Civil War. One of the most significant threads of criticism concerning William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* is the position that throughout the novel Faulkner is attempting to determine the extent to which history is real or imagined. This is achieved through a process of storytelling, transmission, and re-creation. The novel itself tells two stories, the first being the story of Thomas Sutpen and his rise and fall as a cotton planter. The second is the story of Quentin Compson and his experience being told the story of Sutpen, and Quentin’s imaginative recreation of the events. This story takes up less of the actual narrative, but acts like a frame to the final portrait of the novel. Quentin’s story gives Sutpen’s story significance and contextualizes the purpose for the telling of the story in the first place. Because Quentin is inheriting Sutpen’s story, Faulkner is able to explore how history and present interact and intertwine to determine the fate of his characters.

In this exploration, Faulkner develops the theory of a cursed South. Through the voice of Rosa Coldfield, Faulkner describes the curse of the South:

> As though there were a fatality and curse on our family and God Himself were seeing to it that it was performed and discharged to the last drop of the dreg, Yes, fatality and curse on the South and on our family as though because some ancestor of ours had elected to establish his descent in a land primed for fatality and already cursed with it, even if it had not rather been our family, our father’s progenitors, who had incurred the curse long years before and had been coerced by Heaven into establishing itself in the land and the time already cursed” (14).

This moment signifies Quentin’s inheritance of the curse and foreshadows how being born a Southerner has doomed him for no other reason than the land itself being cursed. This is where my analysis deviates from that laid out by previous critics of Faulkner’s novel. In this paper I argue that Faulkner is concerned not only with whether history is
real or imagined, but whether place is real or imagined. Place in literature can be understood as both the physical and social setting of the novel. It is a difficult to define given that it is so ubiquitous, but place can best be understood as the defined space in which the events of the novel unfold. So while the location of the novel can change, it is constrained by the geography of the setting and the cultural atmosphere attached to that setting.

Place embraces the idea of location rather than just the location itself. In other words, the idea of place takes into account both the geographical features that make up the setting of the novel and the cultural and historical forces that are associated with the physical setting. For Faulkner, the idea of place is expressed through the creation of Yoknapatawpha County which mirrors both the real geography of the South and embodies the culture of the Deep South in microcosm. In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner evokes the idea that the South is cursed by playing out of the doom of both Sutpen and Quentin. While Faulkner’s curse of the South takes on a mythical quality, especially in the conception of the curse as it is described by Rosa, he identifies the root causes of Quentin’s doom as being the abuse of the land the institution of slavery. Sutpen’s doom is far more complex as he comes into the plantation culture from the mountains of West Virginia, influenced by his experience on a plantation in Haiti, and driven by an encounter with a Black servant in Virginia. However, once he arrives in Yoknapatawpha, his fate has been sealed by his need to fulfill the “design” of Southern plantation culture.

The idea of external forces defining the fate of his characters was inherited from the Naturalist movement, which exercises a philosophy of determinism. In the novel, place determines the fate of both Sutpen who is killed in his attempts to fulfill the
“design” he has crafted from Southern plantation culture, and Quentin who is unable to escape the guilt of his Southern heritage. The structure of Faulkner’s novel brings into question the nature of what is real and what is imagined. Faulkner’s curse of the South appears to be a reality for his characters, but it is their reaction to and relationship with this curse that ultimately defines their fate. In terms of how place functions in the novel, Faulkner considers how the geographic reality of the South is influenced by the social and cultural forces that defines what it means to be from the South. What remains absent from the criticism concerning Faulkner is a study of how Faulkner’s philosophy about the land shapes his novels. In his collection of stories titled *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner lays out a land ethic that reveals a love for the land and a love for the wilderness that is often ignored in the interpretation of his novels. Issues in Southern culture are often attributed to the legacy of slavery, but Faulkner’s land ethic suggests that the problems facing the South today stem from the destruction of the Southern wilderness in order to establish cotton plantations. This respect for the land as an entity that can be violated and abused gives significance to the idea of place in Faulkner’s novels.

In this paper, I explore the relationship between the literary concept of place, Faulkner’s relationship to the land, and the process of making meaning demanded by his narrative structure. In my first chapter I review the literature produced on Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* thus far, and I describe how the critics’ interpretations of place, determinism, and narrative structure contribute to my analysis and in what ways my analysis builds on and deviates from the established conceptions about Faulkner and his novel. My next chapter summarizes the events of the novel and demonstrates how the meaning-making process takes precedence in Faulkner’s narrative structure. I then explore Faulkner’s land ethic and the ecological bases for the idea of a cursed South,
emphasizing the relationship between the physical reality of the land with the imagined conceptions about the value of the land. My final chapter discusses how the literary concept of place and the inheritance of Naturalism are demonstrated throughout the novel and why a study of the function of place in Faulkner’s novels is not only relevant, but necessary in order to understand the full scope of their meaning.

The most important thing to be taken away from this paper is the way in which the literary concept of place guides the reading process. I will argue that an understanding of place is essential to an understanding the novel and that Faulkner’s comments on place extend beyond the pages of his book to influence the reality in which his stories project themselves. Throughout the progression of *Absalom, Absalom!* as a narrative Faulkner reveals how the South came to be the way that it is. Because Faulkner’s style and structure force the reader to partake in the meaning-making process alongside his characters, the function of place in *Absalom, Absalom!* is to challenge our conception of how land, history, and culture culminate to create the circumstances in which our fate is played out.
Chapter I: Literature Review

Throughout this paper I rely most heavily on the work of Olga Vickery, John Pilkington, Dale Breaden, Matthew Sivils, Leonard Lutwack, and Alex Vernon to argue that place in *Absalom, Absalom!* functions as both a real and imagined force in determining the fate of Faulkner’s characters. In this chapter I explore how these critics are in conversation with one another and how they interpret the meaning of the novel. This paper is divided into a three-part structure focusing on narrative, Faulkner’s land ethic, and the influence of determinism in Faulkner’s conception of place. In order to understand how Faulkner’s critics engage in dialogue with one another, it is necessary to break down their roles in the development of my analysis. Vickery and Pilkington provide the foundation for my interpretation of Faulkner’s narrative structure. Vickery breaks down the narrative by the genre evoked by each narrator while Pilkington expands the analysis of perspective to include Quentin and his external influence as a character in *The Sound and the Fury*. Breaden and Sivils provide the key commentary for making sense of Faulkner’s land ethic as they both explore the idea of Faulkner’s cursed South through an ecological perspective. My final chapter is shaped by the work of Leonard Lutwack whose definition of place guides my interpretation of the novel, and Alex Vernon whose work on the influence of Naturalism in *Absalom, Absalom!* provides the foundation for my assertion that place is the determining factor in the fate of Faulkner’s characters. Together, these critics demonstrate the relationship between the idea of place, the influence of determinism, and Faulkner’s relationship with the land in understanding and interpreting *Absalom, Absalom!* While the structure of the novel lays out the process by which *Absalom, Absalom!* must be read and comprehended, it is the ideas of Faulkner’s land ethic and the concept of place that provide the tools to make meaning of the novel.
Before I explain the connections between these various critics and their contributions to making meaning of the novel, it is necessary to define the terms that I rely on throughout this paper and that influence both the reading of the novel and the reading of the novel’s critics. To begin I want to define broadly the term place, although I will revisit the definition in chapter four through its application to the novel. It is difficult to define place because it is so ubiquitous and dynamic in its use across literary styles and genres, but it can be understood to function by putting “the reader where the writer intends him or her to be mentally, and this information gives the reader some insight into the history, the terrain, the people, the customs of a community, and so forth” (Jeremiah 3). The core of my analysis rests in the idea that Faulkner writes about the South as a place and that this place takes on the function of defining for the reader how and why the events of his novels occur. Faulkner’s novels could not take place anywhere other than the South and therefore the reader must understand the function of the South in order to understand Faulkner’s novels. Specifically, what is essential to understand about the idea of place is that it encompasses both the geography and the physical aspects of the land as while as the historical and cultural forces acting on the land and its people.

Building on the definition of place, it is important to understand where the term land ethic comes from and how it is applied to Faulkner in this paper. The concept of a land ethic first appeared in Aldo Leopold’s 1949 essay “The Land Ethic” in which he proposed that the concept of ethics could be extended to encompass nonhuman members of the biological community including the land itself. In Go Down, Moses, Faulkner lays out a philosophy responding to both the conservation of wilderness and the ownership of land. Through Ike McCaslin, Faulkner demonstrates a moral awakening in response to the disappearing wilderness that leads Ike to forsake his right to property and live with
only what he needs. This extension of ethics reflects what Leopold fully articulated in his essay and suggests that we can frame Faulkner’s philosophy of the land with the idea of a land ethic. Throughout this essay the term land ethic is used in reference to Faulkner’s ideas about the land as they are presented throughout his novels, but in *Go Down, Moses* in particular. I am borrowing the term not because it aligns with Leopold’s ethic as it was laid out in *A Sand County Almanac*, but rather because it provides a convenient and accurate phrase in reference to Faulkner’s demonstrated beliefs about the land.

In addition to the term land ethic, the phrase “curse of the South” is used extensively in this paper in reference to the idea that the South as a place in Faulkner’s novels is controlled by external forces. My argument is that Faulkner shaped his narrative through the philosophy of determinism and that the determining force in the novel is place. The term curse of the South comes directly from *Absalom, Absalom!* both literally and in implication. I have borrowed this phrase in order to reference the claim that Faulkner believes the South dooms his characters because of the violations committed to both the land and the slaves. This idea will be explained more fully in the fourth chapter, but it is necessary to mention here because the idea is essential to my construction of this paper. Now that I have explained how the concepts that are comprised by my structure are to be defined and understood, the relationship between the critics that I have identified becomes clearer—in particular, how the philosophy of determinism shapes the structure of the novel and relies on place to convey its meaning. Faulkner’s exploration of what is real and imagined, and how these properties allow us to construct meaning through storytelling, is grounded in the idea that the South is a place that exists both physically and as a historical and cultural entity imposed on the physical landscape.
Lutwack’s comments on place are perhaps the most essential for understanding both my analysis of the novel and my interpretation of the criticism regarding the novel. Lutwack defines place as both dynamic and evolving, but cautions that it is a foundational characteristic of literature. This means that although writers may not intentionally evoke the concept of place in their analysis of a piece of literature, they are most certainly aware of the concept and how it permeates nearly every aspect of a novel. Lutwack’s explanation of place is drawn on, knowingly or not, by Breaden in his analysis of Yoknapatawpha’s geography. Breaden states that “William Faulkner, apparently with deliberate intent, is vitally aware of the land question, and in this awareness one detects a relation of his ideas to those philosophers of the past whose concepts were dependent upon a belief in natural law and natural rights” (344). Breaden goes on to argue that Faulkner’s interest in property is grounded in the idea that man does not have a natural right to land ownership when that ownership is inherently tied to the violation of natural rights committed in the act of slavery. Here emerges a concrete relationship between the idea of a land ethic and Faulkner’s perceived curse of the South. Matthew Sivils builds on this idea by further demonstrating the relationship between the ecological violation of the land and the moral violation of the institute of slavery in the South. Both critics rely on the idea of place, as both a physical and cultural entity, in their analysis of Faulkner’s relationship to the land. This suggests that Faulkner’s interest in land extends beyond his philosophy as it is laid out in Go Down, Moses, and is tied inextricably to his relationship with the South as a fixed place.

Here enters Vernon, who demonstrates the inheritance of Naturalism in Absalom, Absalom! Vernon’s article emphasizes the stretches on genre in Faulkner’s novel. Decades prior, Olga Vickery explored the implications of genre in her book The Novels
of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation. Vickery suggests that each narrator in Absalom, Absalom! represents the influence of a different literary genre spanning from gothic to realism. Vernon’s point on the inheritance of Naturalism points us towards the importance of determinism in interpreting the novel, but Vickery’s criticism establishes the importance of the novel’s structure in decoding Faulkner’s work. Together, these critics are engaging in a dialogue first and foremost on the influence of various literary techniques in Faulkner’s work, but they also identify a gap in the criticism with regards to the significance of Naturalism. Both Vernon and Vickery identify the importance of perspective and structure in understanding why Faulkner chose to arrange his narrative in the way that he does, but neither critic touches on the significance of where the narrative takes place and how this influences the synthesis of genre and the process of meaning making. Leaning on Lutwack’s definition of place and Breaden and Sivils’s explanation of its significance to understanding Faulkner’s novels, it is clear that Faulkner’s inheritance of determinism should be given closer attention because it is the only element that transcends narrative structure.

The synthesis of criticism here reveals the connection between the idea of place and the significance of structure, but without Pilkington’s observations in The Heart of Yoknapatawpha, the reason for the relationship between place and structure would remain elusive. Pilkington suggests that “if there is any general agreement upon even the broadest implications of this novel, it is that Faulkner has written a study of the process of arriving at historical truth, and perhaps, the meaning of history itself” (169). This meaning, as Vernon suggests, is guided by the inheritance of Naturalism. In the novel the meaning of history is in its implications for the present and in Faulkner’s eyes, these implications stem from the abuse of land and slaves that has cursed the South.
One important note on my analysis of the novel is that there is a noticeable absence of literature cited concerning Faulkner and race. In claiming that slavery and the system of slavery that destroyed the Southern wilderness is the driving force in the fate of the novel’s characters, it is clear that I have made the assumption that Faulkner is in stark opposition to the idea of slavery and that he is actively opposing the practice in his novels. What I chose not to explore in this paper is the expression of this idea in the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* and the critics’ responses to the novel. This omission is intentional—not because the subject matter is not important—but because it has been addressed quite exhaustively elsewhere. My main concern in this paper is extending the ideas related to Faulkner’s moral opposition to slavery to encompass his moral opposition to the destruction of the land. In referencing slavery throughout this paper, I will focus more on the economic system of oppression that forced the use of slaves to maintain an aggressive system of agriculture at the expense of the slaves. I will not expand my analysis to include the repercussions of race in the South as they took shape in *Absalom, Absalom!* as well as Faulkner’s other novels. This is not to suggest that my analysis is of greater importance or that there is nothing left to say in response to Faulkner and his treatment of race and race relations in the South, but rather that I have observed a lack of attention being given to Faulkner and his philosophy concerning the relationship between his personal land ethic and the practice of slavery. My focus in this paper will be to clarify the influence of slavery as a complicating dimension of Faulkner’s land ethic. In other words, I am interested in the relationship between the acts of violation committed against both land and people by the Southern plantation culture, but there is a noticeable absence of discussion concerning the repercussions of these acts and how they differ from each other.
In summation, I am setting out to demonstrate how the structure of Faulkner’s novel lends itself to the study of place in literature and how this study of place reveals the influence of determinism in shaping Faulkner’s narrative. The influence of determinism is guided by Faulkner’s interest in and love for the land and his relationship to the South as both a physical and cultural space in history and in the present. My contribution to the dialogue exploring Faulkner’s analysis of history as a force both real and imagined is the extension of this argument to include the concept of place. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner frames the idea of place as a determining force in the fate of his characters. Through his narrative structure, the creation of Yoknapatawpha County, and his inheritance of the determinist philosophy Faulkner demonstrates how place functions both as an imaginative landscape imposed on the land through history and culture, and as a real force that directly impacts an individual. This concept is expressed through the twofold curse of the South that brings together the act of violation committed on the land and the abuse of people that came about as a result of this violation.
Chapter II: Plot Analysis

Despite the abundance of scholarship published on *Absalom, Absalom!* readers continue to be challenged by the unpredictable and sometimes incomprehensible unveiling of the story. The novel does not lend itself to a clean and concise summarization, nor does it provide a stable foundation for analysis. The reader’s attention must constantly be divided between tracking the development of the plot and considering the implications of the narrative structure. The crucial information of the story is revealed gradually and at times is withheld altogether. Although there is some resolution with the conclusion of the novel, the reader is forced to synthesize the facts presented with the interpretations of the narrators, and must therefore develop his or her own understanding of the story and its significance. At a lecture to students at the University of Virginia, Faulkner likened the structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) to Wallace Stevens’ poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1954). In clarifying the search for truth in the novel, he suggests “that when the reader has read all thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth” (Pilkington, 169). It is clear that Faulkner is experimenting not just with the elements of storytelling, but with the process by which a story is transmitted to the reader.

Through the novel’s structure, Faulkner is attempting to convey the way that we perceive history. Two qualities of the narrative, the act of storytelling and the act of recreation, emerge above all others in their significance to our reading of the novel. In order to make sense of the novel, it is necessary to consider not only the trajectory of the plot, but the ways in which the narrative structure influences the outcome of events. By this I mean that both the plot and the narrative structure should be considered individually
before attempting to explore their relationship. The difficulty in this is that in order to understand the plot, the reader must be aware of the narrative structure, and in order to understand the narrative structure, the reader must have a basic understanding of the plot. In order to combat some of this confusion, I will begin by providing a brief description of the story as it is told first through the recollections of Rosa Coldfield and Jason Compson, and then through the imaginative interpretations of Jason’s son, Quentin, and Quentin’s college roommate Shreve McCannon. I will then examine the relationship between the narrators and the story being told, attempting to make sense of why Faulkner chose to structure his novel in this way and how the novel’s structure influences the story itself. From there, I will step back and consider how the novel fits into the larger landscape of the Yoknapatawpha mythology.

The story itself is centered around the life of Thomas Sutpen who emerges onto the Yoknapatawpha landscape in 1833 with a band of “wild slaves,” a French architect, and no known past. After acquiring one hundred square miles of land, he begins to erect a plantation. Rosa claims that he “came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land” (5). Quentin imagines that he can see Sutpen “overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating Sutpen’s Hundred, the Be Sutpen’s Hundred like the oldentime Be Light” (4). Through his introduction to the reader, Sutpen takes on a mythical quality both in the mystery surrounding his past, which neither the reader nor the people of Jefferson were aware of at this point in the novel, and in the one hundred square miles of land which is both larger than any typical plantation and eerily perfect in its numerical conception. Rosa tells us that Sutpen quickly earns the distrust of the
Jefferson natives, possibly because no one knows what his motives are for moving into the area or because no one knew how he came to acquire his land or the wealth to build a plantation. To some extent he is able to reconcile this distrust by inviting the town’s men to his half-built home to hunt and drink, but when he decides to take a wife the discomfort becomes palpable.

It is unclear exactly how Thomas Sutpen came to marry Ellen Coldfield. From what Mr. Compson can remember, one day he simply walked into the town’s Methodist church and “laid deliberate siege to the one man in town with whom he could have nothing in common” and in a matter of months was engaged to his daughter (32). Mr. Compson speculates that on that day in the Methodist church Sutpen struck a deal with Ellen’s father, Goodhue Coldfield, although he can’t quite piece together the details. All he knows for certain is that after that day in the church Sutpen took a prolonged absence, from which he returned with wagons full of fancy furniture and chandeliers that could only have been acquired through some sort of felony. It was later revealed that Ellen’s father provided Sutpen with the wagons, suggesting that he was somehow involved in the endeavor, but this theory is never confirmed. Despite being arrested the on suspicion of shady business dealings, Sutpen secures his engagement to Ellen and they begin to plan their wedding. Ellen’s aunt determines to force the ordeal into a spectacle which culminates with Ellen, on her wedding day, being hit by a chunk of dirt thrown from a mob of reluctant onlookers. Following the incident, which signified to both Sutpen and Ellen that their union was not welcome in Jefferson Township, the couple moved out to the plantation to begin their life together.

It is not until Chapter 7 that the reader learns of Sutpen’s past and his “design” in descending upon Jefferson and establishing the plantation. From the story told to
Quentin's grandfather by Sutpen and then to Mr. Compson by his father and finally to Quentin by Mr. Compson, we learn that Sutpen claims to have been born in the mountains of West Virginia where he lived until the age of ten. After that his family moved to Tidewater, Virginia where Sutpen experienced for the first time the plantation culture of the Old South. After being insulted by the Black house servant of a wealthy plantation owner, young Sutpen decided that in order to exact his revenge he must acquire all of the qualities possessed by the plantation owner. In his book *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha*, Faulkner scholar John Pilkington suggests that “as a result of this experience, Sutpen formulates a design to acquire, take, seize, by whatever means possible, the possessions that will prevent him from ever being humiliated again and give him the same or greater place in society than that held by the wealthy plantation owner” (172). Thus, Sutpen sets out to acquire first money, then land and slaves, and finally a wife with whom he can create his dynasty.

Ellen bears two children during her lifetime, Henry and Judith. Sutpen also has a daughter named Clytie, whose origins are a mystery apart from the fact that she is half-black and that she is permitted to live among the family. We know very little about the early lives of the Sutpen children save for a scene in which Sutpen fights his slaves in some kind of grotesque competition. We are told that Henry vomits at the sight of his father wrestling with the scarcely clad black men while Judith looks on with what appears to be detached amusement. Their story doesn’t pick up again until we are introduced to the character of Charles Bon, whom Henry meets in college and Judith falls in love with. Here is where the overlap between narrative structure and plot development becomes almost too difficult to separate. In Chapter 1 Rosa tells us that Henry is “vanished and doomed to be a murderer” while Judith was “doomed to be a widow before she had even
been a bride” (15). On page 6 of the novel Rosa tells us (and Quentin) that Henry has shot and killed his sister's fiancé, which by this point in the story the reader can deduce is Charles Bon. The remainder of the narrative is centered around discovering why Henry murders Bon and how this action is connected to Thomas Sutpen.

While the first half of the novel takes place in Yoknapatawpha, in the home of Rosa Coldfield and on the Compson’s front porch, the second half of the novel is set in Quentin’s Harvard dorm room. This portion of the novel is essentially a reimagining of the story as it was transmitted first to Quentin by Rosa and his father, and then to Shreve by Quentin. At this point in the novel we know that Judith met Bon during his visit to Sutpen’s Hundred with Henry, but the details of their engagement are unknown to both Rosa and Mr. Compson. We know that Sutpen takes a trip to New Orleans in 1860, presumably to investigate Bon. We know that Henry and Bon enlisted in the war together, and we know that in 1865 Bon wrote a letter to Judith confirming their engagement. Beyond these facts, the remainder of the narrative is invented by Quentin and Shreve in their Harvard dorm room almost sixty years after the events have taken place. The boys piece together that Bon had a mixed race wife and child living in New Orleans, but they reason that this is not enough for Henry to condemn Bon to death. Instead, they speculate that while in New Orleans, Sutpen discovered that Bon was his son from a previous marriage, making him the half-brother of Judith and Henry. The boys conclude that Sutpen must have passed on this information to Henry. Although the threat of incest was enough for him to forbid the marriage between Bon and Judith, after four years in the war Henry finally comes to accept the idea and permits Bon to write Judith a letter proposing marriage. But once he and Bon return to Jefferson, Sutpen must have informed Henry that Bon carries Negro blood from his mother’s side. This information,
or perhaps a combination of all that he has learned, prompts Henry to shoot Bon at the
gates of Sutpen’s Hundred.

Bon’s death and Henry’s subsequent disappearance mark the end of the Sutpen line. Attempting to restore his immortality, Sutpen first proposes marriage to Rosa Coldfield, the sister of his dead wife Ellen. But upon his suggestion that the couple first attempt to have a son together before getting married, Rosa leaves and returns to the house of her dead father. He then seduces the grand-daughter of Wash Jones, a poor white whom he allows to live in the run down fishing shack on his property. When she produces a daughter, Sutpen insults her by suggesting that if she had been a mare she could have been given “a decent stall in the stable” (229). This crass rejection of the granddaughter drives Jones to murder Sutpen and slit the throats of his granddaughter and her newborn baby. Meanwhile, we learn that Judith has located Bon’s former wife and child, and has invited them to Sutpen’s Hundred. After taking in the son, both he and Judith become ill with yellow fever and she dies in 1884. In the final scenes of the novel, Rosa and Quentin visit the plantation and discover that Henry has returned to Sutpen’s Hundred to die. In an attempt to save Henry from being prosecuted for his crime, Clytie burns down the house, leaving Jim Bond, the idiot grandson of Charles Bon, the only living relative of Thomas Sutpen.

The novel ends not with Sutpen’s death, nor with the final unveiling of Henry’s whereabouts, but in the cold Harvard dorm room in which Shreve asks Quentin why he hates the South, to which he can only respond “I don’t. I don’t! I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!” (303). The ending of the novel is the first and only deviation from the story of Thomas Sutpen, but it bears heavily on our interpretation of the events. The myth of Sutpen the demon and the tragedy of the Henry–Bon–Judith relationship could easily be
romanticized, and it is to a certain extent by Shreve’s amused and detached narration, but for Quentin there is something more at stake than the determination of what did or did not happen at the gates of Sutpen's Hundred in the year 1865. For Quentin, the drama of the Sutpen story unveils the realities of his experience in the South and challenges his conception of his own position in time and space. As part of the generations succeeding the Civil War Quentin has inherited the moral culpability for enslaving an entire race of people, but still carries the pride of a Southern gentleman. This reveals Faulkner’s intention in distorting the historical reality of the novel through the acts of storytelling and recreation in order to challenge the reader’s conception of history.

In a letter to Harrison Smith in 1934, Faulkner explains that he chose Quentin as the primary narrator of the novel because “it is just before he is to commit suicide because of his sister, and I use his bitterness which he has projected on the South in the form of hatred of it and its people to get more out of the story itself than a historical novel would be” (Pilkington, 157). This just about summarizes Faulkner’s intent in structuring the novel as he does, but the relationship between the unfolding of the plot and the narrative structure still warrants careful consideration. If Faulkner simply wanted to tell the story of the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, why does he employ the detached narrative of characters once or even twice removed from the actual events? Why does he invent a conclusion based on the imagination of a Canadian college student? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to revisit the identity of each of the narrators, their relationship to Sutpen, and their motivations in telling his story.

But before we do that it is important to consider Sutpen’s role in the narrative. Although he is the primary subject in the novel, we rarely hear his voice rise above those who are telling his story. Because Faulkner has framed Sutpen’s story through the act of
storytelling, we have to consider the symbolic function of his character in order to understand why Faulkner chose to structure his novel in this way. In his essay “Collapse of Dynasty: The Thematic Center of *Absalom, Absalom!*” Ralph Behrens suggests that there are at least four possible theories “to account for the failure of Sutpen’s design and the collapse of his dynastic dreams” (24). The first is the function of innocence and its relationship to the society in which the events take place. This innocence stems from Sutpen’s childhood growing up in the mountains and his descent into the corrupting culture of the Old South. Behrens argues that “by the time Sutpen had arrived in Jefferson, he had had enough experience in the ways of the plantation system to gain some knowledge of its values and shibboleths” (25). While he qualifies that the innocence theory is “at least partially tenable and may serve as a fairly acceptable explanation for the failure of Sutpen’s dream of dynasty,” he suggests that the most plausible reading of the novel is through biblical analogy. He expounds on the story from Genesis from which the novel’s title is taken, drawing parallels between the characters of the novel and the characters of the Old Testament. He suggests that “to see the mythic import of the story in relation to the Old Testament...is to lend universal and timeless significance to Sutpen’s story” (31).

Behrens also touches on Mr. Compson and his proclivity for Greek tragedy. He suggests that “there are enough references to Greek tragic and mythical figures in Faulkner’s novel to lend credence to the feeling that Faulkner himself, or at least other characters in the novel, saw Sutpen as analogous in some ways to the ancient Greek heroes” (26). Furthermore, he identifies “a strong inclination in the novel that fate plays a considerable hand in Sutpen’s downfall, as it did in the lives of Greek heroes” (26). The only shortcoming with this reading appears to be that Sutpen never realizes he has fallen
and that in the absence of self-recognition he cannot rise to the statues of a tragic hero.

The final and most alluring theory posed by Behrens is the function of Sutpen’s story as an allegory for the rise and fall of the Old South. Behrens suggests that this theory seems “at first glance, to be the easiest of all to accept, since the general twentieth-century view is that slavery was wrong and that the medieval social structure of the Southern plantation system could not help but fall because of what is now considered its morally erroneous foundation” (26). While this hold true, as Faulkner scholar Cleanth Brooks points out, “the novel Absalom, Absalom! does not merely tell the story of Thomas Sutpen, but dramatizes the process by which two young men of the twentieth century construct the character Thomas Sutpen” (31).

Quentin’s inheritance of the story and his own process of meaning-making demonstrate how historical truth can be distorted to make sense of the present, and how the present influences our understanding of historical events. The relationship between Sutpen’s story and Quentin’s story reveals a link between them in their identity as Southerners. Quentin is not only synthesizing the facts of Sutpen’s life into his own world view, he is attempting to understand how the symbolism of Sutpen’s story influences his identity. This is aided by the act of recreation participated in jointly by Quentin and Shreve. In her essay “The Fictions of Absalom, Absalom!” Margaret Uroff claims that, “Shreve is an important character because he is the only non-Southerner in Faulkner’s novels to whom Faulkner assigns the task of making sense out of the South and its history” (443). While Quentin transmits the course of events as he has pieced them together, Shreve builds on the facts of the story by vocalizing his assumptions and beliefs about the actors and their motivations. As Olga Vickery correctly acknowledges, “only Shreve recognizes that the story they have jointly created is only poetically true and
that its function is the symbolic one of embodying love, courage, and loyalty in a single form without exhausting them” (92). Because Shreve has no personal investment in the outcome of events, he is able to extract from the story only those elements which bear on the present. As he tells Quentin:

I just want to understand it if I can and I don’t know how to say it better. Because it’s something my people haven’t got. Or if we have got it, it all happened long ago across the water and so now there aint anything to look at every day to remind us of it. We don’t live among defeated grandfathers and freed slaves (or have I got it backwards and it was your folks that are free and the niggers that lost?) and bullets in the dining room table and such, to be always reminding us to never forgot. (289).

In his quest to understand the South and its people, Shreve relies on the universal themes of love, courage, and loyalty to explain why Henry had to kill Bon to protect Judith. This interpretation of events appeals to the reader because it clarifies not only how the story ends, but why it is significant to the present. However, it is not the end of the narration that gives the story significance, but rather the culmination of narratives and their bearing on the novel’s meaning.

In her analysis of Faulkner’s novels, Olga Vickery suggests that each narrator can be read through the lens of genre. The first narrator to whom we are introduced is Rosa Coldfield, the sister-in-law and almost-wife of Thomas Sutpen. She has asked Quentin to her home under the pretext that, as a Harvard student, he may want to write about these events one day. She tells him that “perhaps you will even remember kindly the old woman who made you spend a whole afternoon sitting indoors and listening while she talked about people and events you were fortunate enough to escape yourself when you wanted to be out among young friends of your own age” (5). But Quentin suspects that she is telling him the story “because she wants it told” not because it will be of any value to him (5). Rosa’s motivations for sharing with Quentin the details of her relationship
with Sutpen are complex and, much like the plot, they unfold over the course of the novel. The reader’s first reaction is that her motivation is to clarify why she accepted Sutpen’s proposal of marriage as this moment clearly haunts her, but her persistent demonizing of Sutpen suggests that she is interested only in revenge—with scorning him just as he scorned her. But when it is finally revealed that Rosa took Quentin out to Sutpen’s Hundred because she had a suspicion that someone or something was living in the house, it is possible that her intention all along was to secure for herself a partner in venturing out to the old plantation and uncovering whatever final secrets remained on the property.

Vickery suggests that “though Rosa knew Sutpen most intimately, her account of him is the most distorted, revealing only her own obsession, the narrowness of her experience, and the grim inflexibility of her responses” (87). As the opening voice of the novel, Rosa provides the crucial information of the story and creates the suspense necessary to project the events into the present. Vickery advances the theory that Rosa’s narrative is of the gothic tradition, “rank with melodrama” and “distorted phantoms” (88). She imposes on her narrative the evils she perceived as emanating from Sutpen and the curse she designed for herself as the heroine of her own story. Thus her narrative mythologizes Sutpen’s character and reveals how reality can be influenced by personal perception and the desire to present a set of events in the light that best reflects one’s understanding of the experience. For Rosa, the dramatizing of events helps her to make sense of her own experience and justifies her need to not only share her story with Quentin, but to see it through to its final dramatic conclusion.

The next narrator we meet is Mr. Compson who shares with Quentin his father’s stories about Sutpen and what he remembers of the town gossip. The function of Mr.
Compson’s narrative is to clarify Rosa’s interpretation of events and to provide a sturdy foundation of facts for Quentin and Shreve to develop their story. While prone to speculation, he is the most level-headed of the novel’s narrators. Vickery describes him as “the antithesis and antidote to Rosa’s hallucinatory view of Sutpen,” claiming that “his age, experience, and temperament make him more aware of the characters in relation to society and time” (89). However, she also points out the abundance of allusions to classic Greek Tragedy, including Mr. Compson’s identification of Clytie as a Cassandra, multiple references to the idea of fate, and the characterization of Sutpen as “the stage manager” of his design (Faulkner, 57). While Rosa’s narrative is meant to evoke the gothic style, Vickery suggests that Mr. Compson’s version of the story casts Sutpen as a hero out of Greek Tragedy.

The significance of Mr. Compson’s narrative is the emphasis placed on the inevitability of the family’s doom. He tells Quentin

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 the point where man looks about at his companions disaster and thinks When will I stop trying to save them and save only myself? [Faulkner’s Italics] (58)

Like Rosa’s idea of a curse, Mr. Compson relies on the imaginative function of storytelling to make sense of a set of events that in reality do not make very much sense at all. Both Rosa and Mr. Compson are unable to describe what exactly caused Sutpen’s downfall, but both narrators perceive a set of external forces that guided his fate after descending upon Yoknapatawpha County. While Rosa relies on gothic imagery to make sense of her experience, Mr. Compson turns to the genre of tragedy to make sense of the
events as he relates them to Quentin. Both of their stories are colored by their interpretations of the events, but they are restricted to the events that actually took place. In attempting to understand the significance of the story, Quentin and Shreve engage in an imaginative reconstruction of the events that shifts the focus away from the facts of the story to the emotional implications of the story’s outcome.

In her essay “The Fictions of Absalom, Absalom!” Margaret Uroff claims that, “In commenting on the novel, [Faulkner] claimed that he has used not Quentin but Shreve as ‘the commentator that held the thing to something of reality’ as ‘a solvent to keep it real, keep it believable, credible, otherwise it would have vanished into smoke and fury’” (431). This suggests that the significance of the novel lies not in the symbolic implications of the plot, but rather in the relationship between the storytellers and the story being told. While Shreve is able to walk away from the narrative unscathed and arguably gains a richer and deeper understanding of both the world and himself, Quentin must carry with him the burden of his Southern heritage as it is embodied through Sutpen’s story. Quentin’s role extends beyond the pages of Absalom, Absalom! and intersects with Faulkner’s highly acclaimed, earlier novel The Sound and The Fury. In that novel, Quentin becomes obsessed with his sister Caddy and her promiscuity. He believes that in order to save the honor of his family he must kill Dalton Ames, the man who takes Caddy’s virginity and leaves her unwed and pregnant. Quentin attempts to take responsibility for the pregnancy, implying to his father that he has committed incest, but Mr. Compson dismisses the confession and Quentin is left the burden of restoring his sister’s honor.

Quentin sets out to kill Dalton, but finds that he is unable to follow through with the act and ends up committing suicide less than a year after the events of Absalom,
Absalom! Cleanth Brooks suggests that “the problem of incest would have fascinated [Quentin] and made him peculiarly sensitive to Henry’s torment” (318). The boys imagine Henry forcing himself to reconcile with the idea of Judith unknowingly committing incest saying “but kings have done it! Even dukes! There was that Lorraine duke name John something that married his sister. The Pope excommunicated him but it didn’t hurt! It didn’t hurt! They were still alive. They still loved!” (273). But Shreve concludes that in the end Henry had to kill Bon because Judith’s honor was a stake. Whether it was the fact that Bon had a mistress, the fact that he was Judith’s half-brother, or the revelation that he carried Negro blood, Henry simply couldn’t allow his sister to marry the man that he too loved so much. For Quentin, this surely imposed on him the value of honor and its particular position in the landscape of the Southern aristocratic family.

The Sound and the Fury traces the fall of a prominent Southern family and explores the implications of South’s history on perpetuating this downfall. By positioning Quentin as both the conscious interpreter of the events of Sutpen’s life and the unconscious vessel through which the influence of history and narrative flow through, Faulkner is demonstrating the influence of story in shaping both history and the present. While working through the story with Shreve, Quentin reflects

Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished. Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical water-cord to the next pool which the first pool feeds, has fed, did feed, let this second pool contain a different temperature of water, a different molecularity of having seen, felt, remembered, reflect in a different tone the infinite unchanging sky, it doesn’t matter: the pebble’s watery echo whose fall it did not even see moves across its surface too at the original ripple-space, to the old ineradicable rhythm (210).
This analysis lends itself to the broader implications of historical narrative and demonstrates the ways in which imaginative literature interacts with and shapes reality. Faulkner is interested not just in how the process of storytelling shapes his characters, but how his own creation of story influences his readers. The juxtaposition of Quentin and Shreve as shared narrators reveals the relationship between the act of storytelling as a process for identifying universal values such as love, courage, and loyalty with the meaning making process of extracting from events the forces that shape present and future actions. Although Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson provide all of the material from which the story of Thomas Sutpen is constructed, it is the imaginative recreation of events by Quentin and Shreve that reveals the story’s significance.

As Joseph Reed suggests, *Absalom, Absalom!* is “a narrative about narrative” (147). In order to understand the novel the reader must strive to “accept the book’s process, to move beyond what may seem to be the centers of the book—a hero, a story, a dream, a myth, a tragedy—into the process of narrative itself by which these apparent centers are revealed” (146). Arthur L. Scott claims that “surely one aesthetic aim of *Absalom, Absalom!* is to portray the interaction of past and present, to demonstrate the powerful effect of the old upon the new (especially upon Quentin), and to prove that the Sutpen tragedy is still charged with spiritual dynamite, even though its great protagonist had mouldered to dust” (217). Scott makes an important point in suggesting that the narrative structure of the novel forces readers to step out of chronological time to witness the unfolding of events that have already happened. Despite the fact that Rosa reveals the climax of the novel within the first few pages, we are compelled to follow to story to its constructed conclusion not because we want to see how it ends, but because we are engaged by the process in which the story is transmitted.
Faulkner intentionally wove together the lives of his characters in a greater mythology of the South, encompassed in the Yoknapatawpha novels and stories. He was aware that this layering of myth, legend, and created reality challenged his readers and as a result he has included maps, genealogies, and timelines in many of his novels to build a convincing reality of how these stories fit together and how they are able to stand on their own. One does not need to be an expert on Faulkner in order to appreciate the beauty of his prose or his innovation of style, but it is important to be aware that Faulkner was engaging in a process of creating a landscape that extends beyond the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner’s creation of Jefferson and Yoknapatawpha as the setting for his drama to unfold is significant not only because it mirrors Faulkner’s own home, but because it provides an imagined landscape in which Faulkner is able to experiment with story from a variety of perspectives that extend beyond the novel and test the very reality within which the author himself must function.

By creating this reality, Faulkner is able to build characters whose lives extend well beyond the pages of his novel. This element of Faulkner’s storytelling gives him the power to present each character’s perspective as both earnest and incomplete. The true mark of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not its fantastic presentation of Southern history, but the labor the reader must endure to achieve comprehension of both the plot and its significance. As John Pilkington points out in his study of the Yoknapatawpha stories, “if there is any general agreement upon even the broadest implications of this novel, it is that Faulkner has written a study of the process of arriving at historical truth, and perhaps, the meaning of history itself” (169). In the context of Faulkner’s other novels, *Absalom, Absalom!* challenges the reader’s assumptions about what is real, what is imagined, what is created, and what is significant. This is achieved through both the layering of
perspectives and the bold experimentation with style and theme that forces the reader to question the very process by which the information of the novel is transmitted. This process defines not only what the novel is about, but why it was written in the first place.
Chapter III: Faulkner and the South

Faulkner’s narrative structure reveals an interest in the transmission of information and how this shapes and distorts historical fact, but Faulkner’s narrators reveal a set of external forces that are guiding the fate of the novel’s characters. Both Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson describe Sutpen’s life as being cursed or doomed and, as we learn in The Sound and the Fury, Quentin too is fated to die under tragic circumstances. The process by which Sutpen’s story is inherited by Quentin suggests that close attention should be given to how Sutpen’s story influences Quentin’s conception of his identity. Because Sutpen’s story mirrors the rise and fall of the old South, Quentin’s understanding of these events bears on how he views and copes with his heritage.

This chapter will focus on Faulkner’s relationship with the South and his intention in creating the fictional Yoknapatawpha County. In his novels, Faulkner demonstrates an interest in both the physical qualities of the land and the culture that is imposed on that landscape. Because Faulkner chose to set his stories in the South and because the South plays such a significant role in his novels, it is necessary to consider how the South shapes the narrative structure of Absalom, Absalom! and, in particular, how the South factors into the set of external forces determining the characters’ fates. I will begin by describing the geography of Faulkner’s County in an attempt to determine to what extent the landscape is based in reality. I will then explore Faulkner’s land ethic and how his philosophy on the right to own property suggests that Faulkner views the South as cursed because the plantation elite of the antebellum period violated both land and people through the acts of ownership and abuse. This will be followed by a consideration of the cultural and ecological forces that shaped
Faulkner’s creation of the County and how this translates to the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* In conclusion, I will pose the argument that Yoknapatawpha is intended to be read as a microcosm of the Deep South and that through this lens we can begin to understand the external forces guiding the fate of Faulkner’s characters.

**Geography**

It is widely accepted by scholars and readers alike that Yoknapatawpha is based on Faulkner’s own home in Lafayette County, Mississippi. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Faulkner’s creation of Yoknapatawpha County allows him to experiment with fiction by imposing on a real place an imagined landscape in which his characters can move about in reality while still creating their own stories. While Yoknapatawpha may not appear on any map, it is a geographic reality. In the article “Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County: Geographical Fact into Fiction,” Charles Aiken points out that “throughout his fiction Faulkner leaves no doubt as to the exact location of Yoknapatawpha County. Like Lafayette, it is in the loess region of northwestern Mississippi east of the Yazoo Delta and approximately eighty miles south of Memphis” (10). A quick comparison between the geography of Yoknapatawpha as Faulkner described it and Lafayette as it existed during Faulkner’s lifetime confirms their relationship.
Above is a map of Lafayette County (Figure 1). As Aiken identified, it is located in the northwestern region of Mississippi. Some notable geographical features include the Tallahatchie River to the North, the central location of the County seat (Oxford), a railway running through the center of town, and the Yocona River to the South. During his lifetime, Faulkner created two maps of Yoknapatawpha. One for the appendix of Absalom, Absalom! and the other in Malcolm Cowley's Portable Faulkner (Figures 2 and 3).
Figure 2: Map of Yoknapatawpha in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Source: University of Virginia
Like Lafayette, both maps show the northern boundary of Yoknapatawpha as the Tallahatchie River. To the South, the Yoknapatawpha River closely resembles the Yocona, and the shared etymology of the words is unmistakable. Jefferson, like Oxford is in the center of the county with a railway running through the town. Two notable differences between the maps is that unlike Lafayette, Yoknapatawpha has no defined borders and on the Yoknapatawpha maps Faulkner has imposed important details from
the plots of his novels. This reveals two key facts. The first is that Faulkner undoubtedly based Yoknapatawpha on Lafayette. The second is that while Faulkner based his imagined county on a real place, he conceptualized Yoknapatawpha as fictitious in its nature.

In his essay “Faulkner’s Geography and Topography” Calvin Brown poses the question of “what we mean when we say that Faulkner’s Jefferson ‘is’ Oxford” (652). He suggests that “in a literal sense, of course, such a statement is a patent absurdity. Jefferson is a fictitious town inhabited by people of Faulkner’s creation, no matter how much raw material local scenes and characters may have supplied to his imagination” (652). So while it is clear that Faulkner used Lafayette as the template for his imagined landscape, it would be wrong to consider Faulkner’s characters as moving about in the reality of Lafayette. The imposition of important plot details such as the “Church which Thomas Sutpen rode fast to” of the 1963 edition and “Compson’s mile for which Jason I swapped Ikkemotubbe a racehorse & the last fragment of which Jason IV sold in order to become free” on the later version, onto the maps of Yoknapatawpha indicates that Faulkner wanted his readers to think of Yoknapatawpha as a fictional location. This leads to the conclusions that, over the course of his career Faulkner created the reality of Yoknapatawpha in order to say something more broadly about Southern history and culture then could be achieved through the presentation of fact alone.

**Faulkner’s Land Ethic**

Faulkner’s fascination with the South is inherently linked to his love for the wilderness. As an avid hunter Faulkner learned to know the Tallahatchie river bottomland in the way that one might know a close friend or family member. He spent
hours roaming through the forest becoming acquainted with the physical environment on which he would impose his fictional stories, but he was always keenly aware of the land’s history. Faulkner historian Dale Breaden suggests that:

Faulkner is, of course, a Southerner, and he possesses a deep feeling for the soil, a recognition of the land’s importance and the effects it can have upon men who put their lives into it, who fertilize it with their blood and water it with their sweat. It would be impossible, generally, for a Southerner to ignore the land, as impossible as it would be for him to ignore Negroes or the Civil War, for the land is the basis of Southern life and economy, and upon it the legend of the South has been painfully and gloriously constructed (344)

As a Southerner, Faulkner’s love for the wilderness is balanced by a disdain for the plantation culture of the antebellum South that destroyed the forests and laid the foundation for an economy dependent on the exploitation of people and natural resources. The term land ethic comes from Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, but is applied here to describe the philosophy Faulkner developed concerning the land and its value. In his fiction, Faulkner expresses very clear feelings about how the land should treated and what consequences will follow for those who misuse or abuse the land.

In fact, Faulkner’s entire body of work explores the repercussions of the South’s mistreatment of the land. In *Go Down, Moses* Faulkner deals explicitly with the issue of land and land ownership. On the first page of the collection he lays out his philosophy through his introduction of Isaac McCaslin. Faulkner tells his reader:

his was the name in which the title to the land had first been granted from Indian patent and which some of the descendants of his father’s slaves still bore in the land. But Isaac was not one of these: — a widower these twenty years, who in all his life had owned but one object more than he could wear and carry in his pockets and his hands at one time, and this was the narrow iron cot and the stained lean mattress which he used camping in the woods for deer and bear or for fishing or simply because he loved the woods; who owned no property
and never desired to since the earth was no man’s but all men’s, as light
and air and weather were (5)

This essentially summarizes the trilogy of stories—including “The Old People,” “The
Bear,” and “Delta Autumn”—in which Isaac learns how to hunt, refuses his
inheritance of the McCaslin plantation, and watches the disappearance of the Delta
wilderness. As the central figure of the trilogy, Isaac embodies Faulkner’s land ethic.
His experience in the big woods of the Tallahatchie river bottom reveals Faulkner’s
perspective on the negative repercussions of land ownership and the fate of the
Southern wilderness.

This passage also details Ike McCaslin’s rejection of property. In his essay
“William Faulkner and the Land” Dale Breaden makes the case that Faulkner is
propounding the idea that the land rightfully belongs to all people. Specifically he
suggests that “those who claim they can sell the land, those who claim they can own
the land, are cursed; for to own the land upon which a man must labor is to own the
man himself, and man cannot own man, for this, too, is a violation of natural rights”
(356). It is interesting that Breaden uses the word curse as this is the word Rosa
chooses to describe the fatality of the South and specifically to explain Sutpen’s doom.
Breaden claims that from Faulkner’s fiction “evolves...a philosophy or concept of land,
its ownership and its fundamental character that is brilliant and humanitarian in its
vastness of scope and its depth of understanding” (344). Essentially, Braeden's
argument rests in the idea that man is given certain rights at birth, but that these rights
do not include the ownership or people or the land. This argument is important because
through the development of Go Down, Moses Faulkner reveals a theory that the South
is cursed because both the land and the slaves who worked the land were abused by
Southern plantation owners.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen embodies the Southern plantation owner and symbolizes how the fall of the South connects to the mistreatment of the land and the slaves. In his introduction to “The Big Woods” Faulkner states:

> It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document:— of white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it had been his to convey; bigger than Major de Spain and the scrap he pretended to, knowing better; older than old Thomas Sutpen of whom than old Ikkemotubbe, the Chickasaw chief, of whom old Sutpen had had it and who knew better in his turn. (181)

Bringing up Thomas Sutpen in the context is significant because it connects him to the system of abuse that has been inflicted on the land by the plantation culture in the South. Sutpen both swindled his land from a Chickasaw chief and then proceeded to defile it by erecting Yoknapatawpha’s largest cotton plantation. This destruction of wilderness is touched on again in the short story “Delta Autumn” in which Isaac returns to the big woods. Remembering the wilderness he knew as a young boy, Isaac reflects:

> Most of that was gone now. Now a man drove two hundred miles from Jefferson before he found wilderness to hunt in. Now the land lay open from the cradling hills on the East to the rampart of levee on the West, standing horseman-tall with cotton for the world’s looms—the rich black land, imponderable and vast, fecund up to the very doorstep of the negroes who worked it and of the white men who owned it; while exhausted the hunting life of a dog in one year, the working life of a mule in five and of a man in twenty (324)

This suggests both a grief for the loss of land and an animosity towards the growth of plantation culture. Simply stated, Faulkner’s land ethic rejects the concept of property on the grounds that man has no more of a right to own land than he does to own people.
Faulkner links the idea of ownership as it is expressed through the institution of slavery and ownership as it is expressed through private property in section four of “The Bear.” In this section Faulkner details how Ike’s discovery of the family’s ledgers, which describe the relationship between Ike’s grandfather and his slaves including an incestual relationship with his own daughter, contribute to Ike’s decision to refuse his inheritance. In a conversation with his cousin, Ike expresses a combination of Biblical ideas, Native American beliefs, and personal philosophy that have led him to the conclusion that owning land is wrong and that through the act of ownership the South has become cursed. Ike traces this curse all the way back to the Native American’s claiming of the land as their own through the clearing of the land by African American slaves. He explains, “granted that my people brought the curse onto the land: maybe for that reason their descendants alone can—not resist it, not combat it—maybe just endure and outlast it until the curse is lifted” (265). He goes on to suggest that it is man’s responsibility to free both the slaves and the land from ownership. By refusing the inheritance of his grandfather’s property, Ike is also refusing to inherit his family’s legacy as slaveholders. This demonstrates how the enslavement of the African Americans is linked to Ike’s ideas about property, and illuminates the significance of land in the conception of Faulkner’s curse.

**The Cultural and Ecological Context of Absalom, Absalom!**

Faulkner recognizes that land, as a physical entity, possess rights distinguishable from the value imposed on the land by people. In order to understand the origins of Faulkner’s curse, it is important to recognize that in Absalom, Absalom! the land exists independent from what it is worth to humans. Faulkner loved the wilderness and possessed a deep respect for South as a physical place, but during his lifetime he was
burdened by the repercussions of the culture in the South and this burden is one of the central themes running through his entire body of work. The cultural and ecological context in which the events of Absalom, Absalom! unfold reveal how Faulkner’s identity as an author in the South shaped his understanding and interpretation of the South’s history.

A culture of exploitation took hold of the South during the antebellum period as plantation owners sought to increase their wealth by planting as much cotton as their land could bear to produce and then by employing the labor of slaves to harvest the cotton and maintain the plantation. The consequences of this culture were felt directly by Faulkner. In his novels, he deals explicitly with the issue of race and he wrestles with the idea of what it means to be from the South. He traces how the culture of the South changed after the Civil War and the struggle of the new generation faced in coming to terms with the implications of their Southern identity. Faulkner is a harsh critic of the institution of slavery and his novels demonstrate not only the evils of imposing ownership on another human being, but the persistent racism that existed in the South even decades after the Civil War. In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner implies that Henry murders Bon because the fear of miscegenation outweighs even incest. He also implies that Quentin, who was born roughly twenty-five years after the end of the War, readily accepts this theory and doesn’t stop to question the moral implications of this scenario. However, Faulkner also demonstrates through The Sound and the Fury how Quentin’s shame and his inability to cope with the legacy of his ancestors contributes to his suicide. This suggests that the culture of the South is inherently tainted by the system of abuse perpetrated by slavery, and that this culture negatively impacts both Blacks and Whites in the South.
Faulkner also traces the destruction of the wilderness and how this destruction fundamentally changed the South as a geographic location. In Faulkner’s own words Absalom, Absalom! is about “a man who outraged the land, and the land then turned and destroyed the man’s family” (Selected Letters 79). In the novel, Faulkner gives the land agency in influencing the outcome of events. This can be traced to the ecological consequences the South faced in the aftermath of the plantation culture. The process of developing Sutpen’s plantation is described as “overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth” from which Sutpen drags “house and formal gardens violently out of Nothing” (4). Faulkner clearly recognizes that Sutpen is building his plantation with the resources from his land, but in describing the act of imposing on the land a plantation, he claims that this plantation was torn violently from “Nothing.” This idea of nothing suggests that through the act of destroying the natural landscape for the purpose of creating an artificial landscape, the land itself loses its quality of being. It is no longer “tranquil” and “astonished,” it is merely Sutpen’s Hundred. Because Sutpen fails to recognize that the land possesses qualities apart from its usefulness to him, he fails to take into account the transience of his artificial landscape. After the war, Sutpen is no longer able to maintain his plantation and the land eventually goes to ruin.

This ruined landscape was a reality for Faulkner who, during his lifetime, witnessed both the ecological repercussions of a cotton monoculture and the further destruction of wilderness to build up industry to replace agriculture in the Southern economy. The South was literally stripped of the quality that made it unique as a physical location because the land was violated and mistreated by the plantation owners of the antebellum. In his article “Faulkner’s Ecological Disturbances,”
Matthew Sivils suggests that “place is never simply ‘place’ in Southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape...and these disturbances illustrate a strong connection between environmental abuse and human suffering” (487). Expanding on Breaden's argument that Faulkner’s land ethic relies on a violation of natural rights through the ownership of land, Sivils suggests that the relationship between the violation of the land and the oppression of people is connected not only morally, but in an ecological context. The South relied on slavery because the nature of cotton plantations during the antebellum period required a massive labor force and the availability of this labor force permitted the success of plantations. By this I mean that the ecological consequences of cotton plantations were made possible by the existence of slavery and the existence of slavery was rendered necessary by the cotton plantations.

In Absalom, Absalom! Faulkner implies that the South is cursed because the rights of both the land and the African American people have been egregiously violated. This origin of this curse is not explicitly expressed in part because Faulkner’s narrators are neither aware of the destruction of the land nor do they care about the mistreatment of Sutpen’s slaves. However, as I mentioned before, Absalom, Absalom! challenges readers to participate alongside the novel’s characters in the process of making meaning that reveals how the destruction of the wilderness and the abuse of slaves has cursed the South. The cultural and ecological context of the novel helps the reader to understand that Sutpen is cursed because he has violated the rights of both the land and his slaves.

It is important to mention that although I have linked the violation of the land with the violation of human rights through the institution of slavery using the
overarching idea of ownership as the demonstration of this violation, the abuse suffered by the land and the abuse suffered by the slaves are not one in the same and the repercussions of slavery are far more pronounced than the repercussions suffered by the land. The remnants of slavery in the South have persisted through social and institutionalized racism which linger to this day. The land can regenerate itself and can be used responsibly whereas there is no form of ethical enslavement practiced through the ownership of people. By this, I mean that there are responsible ways to own and use land but there is no responsible system of slavery. Although there are ecological repercussions that have resulted from the cotton monoculture, the cultural repercussions of slavery are far more severe.

A Microcosm of the South

The question of what Faulkner is saying about land and about the South in Absalom, Absalom! must be raised in order to understand the implications of his curse. As I stated previously, Faulkner’s curse can be understood as a broad criticism of plantation culture and the legacy it left in the South. This leads us to question of what his intention is in structuring the novel around the transmission of Sutpen’s story to Quentin. Quentin’s role in the novel suggest Faulkner is not trying to make a sweeping statement about Southern history, but rather is exploring the impact of the antebellum South’s legacy on the later generations. Quentin inherits the curse of the South and through this inheritance, Faulkner demonstrates how Sutpen’s story reverberates through history to the present. In interpreting Faulkner’s geography and the influence of his land ethic in Absalom, Absalom! it is necessary to consider how Yoknapatawpha functions symbolically as a microcosm of the South. Because Sutpen’s story functions as an allegory for the rise and fall of the Old South, we have to consider how Quentin’s
story functions as a crises of Southern identity.

It is important to clarify that Yoknapatawpha is not a representation of the whole South, but rather the Deep South in particular. In his essay “Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County: A Place in the American South,” Charles Aiken suggests that readers identify Yoknapatawpha as a microcosm of the South because within the boundaries of the imagined landscape Faulkner presents the history of the South and the implications of this history on Southern society. But, as Aiken points out, “much evidence refutes the idea that Faulkner looked upon and presented Yoknapatawpha as the South in miniature and, rather, supports the contention that he regarded his county as a place within the South” (331). The distinction between these ideas is subtle. Reading Yoknapatawpha as the South in miniature suggests that the county as a metaphor for the entire region, whereas if Yoknapatawpha is meant to be understood as a place within the South, our reading of Faulkner’s novels should be restricted to the reality that he creates. Aiken attempts to prove that Yoknapatawpha cannot be considered the South in miniature because the geography of the South is divided between the Upland region to North and the Deep South. Specifically he sets out to demonstrate that Yoknapatawpha is a place within the South through a process of “examining the small-scale setting of the fictional county in relation to the Upland and Lowland South” (332). He claims that “to anyone encountering the boundary and acquainted with persons from both sides of it, the concept of the two Souths is very real” (333). Aiken argues that the Upland South, the mountainous regions to the north, is not represented to the same extent as the plantation culture of the Deep South.

To this extent, it would be fair to say that Faulkner’s County does not encompass the whole South, but it would be naive to assume that Faulkner didn’t intend to explore
the boundaries of Southern culture and history with the invention of Yoknapatawpha. In Absalom, Absalom! the significance of Yoknapatawpha being a microcosm of the South is best understood through Quentin's inheritance of the curse brought on the South by the plantation culture. But in order to understand the process of inheritance, it is necessary to explore Sutpen’s personal history. Born in the mountains of West Virginia, Sutpen grew up in a place where “he had never even heard of, never imagined, a place, a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men” (179). He then moves to Tidewater, Virginia, where he encounters for the first time the plantation culture of the Deep South and the concept of owning both land and people for personal gain. In his book Faulkner’s County, historian Dan Doyle makes the claim that “we may better understand Faulkner—and Southern history—if we see Thomas Sutpen instead as an exaggerated version of the typical rather than an anomaly” (55). Specifically, he argues that “early Mississippi had a strong attraction to men on the make, and Sutpen seems only an extreme example” (55).

Sutpen’s encounter with the Black house servant at the house of a wealthy plantation owner inspires him to become the image of a Southern gentleman. His “design” entails that he acquire all of the qualities possessed by the plantation owner so that he never again has to experience the feeling of inferiority he felt being told to use the back door by a house servant. After this Sutpen goes to work on a plantation in Haiti where he meets and marries his first wife, produces a son, and learns the ins and outs of running a plantation. Describing Sutpen’s backstory, Quentin claims that “where he lived the land belonged to anybody and everybody and so the man who would go to the trouble and work to fence off a piece of it and say ‘This is mine’ was crazy” (179). It is important to note that West Virginia did not become a State until
1863, which means that Sutpen actually grew up in the territory that was to become West Virginia. This means that the population was mostly poor whites and that the culture was transient. The Upland region of the South was not an adequate landscape for agriculture and it had none of the promises of the Western United States at the time. Growing up in a place where property was not a shared knowledge, Sutpen’s childhood taught him to view the land as a resource for survival. Moving to the Deep South, he realized that the land could be exploited for more than just what was necessary to live. He discovered that from the land he could reap wealth, respectability, and power.

It is significant that Sutpen’s understanding of ownership and of the plantation culture in the Deep South were shaped outside the boundaries of Yoknapatawpha County. This means that in acquiring Sutpen’s Hundred and establishing a plantation Sutpen is acting out the process by which the Southern economy came to depend on cotton and slaves. This suggests that in *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen represents the origin of Faulkner’s curse. Quentin’s inheritance of this curse reveals how the legacy of the plantation culture dooms not only those who participated in the culture of exploitation, but the generations born after the fall of the Old South. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, one reading of this novel suggests that Sutpen’s story can be understood as an allegory for the rise and fall of the Old South. Quentin’s inheritance of this story and its implications in shaping his identity speaks to the experience of Southerners born after the Civil War in coming to terms with their heritage.

Quentin’s identity as a Southerner is brought to our attention by his Canadian roommate. Shreve perceives the South as a single unit and appears unable to distinguish Quentin’s identity outside of his inheritance of the Southern legacy. During one of his outbursts he reflects “Jesus, the South is fine isn’t it. It’s better than the theater 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” (176). This fascination with the South as the stage in which the drama of the Civil War played out seems to be the only South Shreve knows and it is remarkably different than the South Faulkner describes for the reader. While Rosa and Mr. Compson are transmitting Sutpen’s story to Quentin, Faulkner comments extensively on the sunlight, the wisteria flowers, and the sweet smell of cigar smoke. The atmosphere in Yoknapatawpha is warm and comfortable whereas Quentin's Harvard dorm room is cold and bare.

Shreve later asks Quentin:

What is it? something you live and breathe in like air? a kind of vacuum filled with wraithlike and indomitable anger and pride and glory at and in happening that occurred and ceased fifty years ago? a kind of entitled birthright father and son and father and son never forgiving General Sherman, so that forever more as long as your children’s children produce children you won’t be anything but a descendant of a long line of colonels killed in Pickett’s charge are Manassa? (289)

This suggests that Shreve views the South as a single, indistinguishable region, and the Southerner as a product of the entire South, not just a place within the South. Quentin agrees with Shreve to a certain extent, but he acknowledges his legacy as a Southerner and tells Shreve “you wouldn’t understand it. You would have to be born there” (289). But Quentin's guilt and his hatred of the South are not defined by his identity as a Southerner. As Faulkner readily admitted, he chose Quentin as his narrator because it was just before Quentin was to commit suicide. This brings the attention of the novel away from Sutpen’s rise and fall, and homes in on the consequences or the aftermath of Sutpen’s tragedy.

Quentin in not only inheriting the guilt of his Southern ancestors, he is
inheriting the legacy of the Henry–Bon–Judith love triangle. Quentin’s character faces his own challenges with incest in *The Sound and the Fury* but his incompetency prevents him from defending his sister’s honor. This need to defend his family’s honor is rooted in the values of the Southern gentleman which Sutpen so desperately wanted to mimic. This suggests that while Sutpen is doomed as a result of his actions, Quentin’s fate is the one being guided by a set of external forces. Rosa and Quentin’s father project these forces on Sutpen because they are attempting to explain not only why Sutpen failed, but why the culture of the Old South failed. What they fail to realize is that Sutpen represents the origin of a curse that is playing out across history. Quentin’s inability to come to terms with his identity at the end of the novel suggests that this curse is the force determining the fate of Faulkner’s characters.
Chapter IV: The Function of Place in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Thus far I have explored Faulkner’s narrative structure and how the acts of storytelling and re-creation create meaning in the novel and how Faulkner’s relationship with the South has shaped the events in *Absalom, Absalom!* As a representation of the Deep South, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County takes on a special significance as a place in literature. Because Faulkner’s curse is rooted in both the physical landscape of the South and the culture imposed on that landscape, the term place can be used encompass the external forces determining the fate of Faulkner’s characters. Critics of Faulkner have suggested that *Absalom, Absalom!* is an exploration of the extent to which history is both real and imagined. In this chapter I will argue that that Faulkner is also exploring the extent to which place is both real and imagined.

Faulkner’s theory of a cursed South reveals an inheritance of the idea of determinism from the naturalist movement of the late 19th century. As a modernist writer, Faulkner expands on this idea and considers how the external forces guiding our fate shape our concept of identity. The concept of place encompasses the relationship between the forces we cannot control and those that we have the influence to change. Quentin could not control where he was born and thus he has no power to
change his identity, but Sutpen made the choice to commit acts of violence against the land and against his slaves in an attempt to assume the identity of a Southern gentleman. The inheritance of Sutpen’s story by Quentin reveals a relationship between choice and fate that demonstrates the significance of place in literature. Place is both a very real concept rooted in the indisputable existence of land and an imagined conception of what it means to live on that land. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner explores how the idea of place shapes our identity, but gives us the power to either reject the legacy of our ancestor or to be doomed by the consequences of their actions.

I will begin by defining the concept of place and how it is expressed in literature. I will then explore the influence of Naturalism on Faulkner’s work and the implications of determinism as a lens for understanding the meaning of his novels. To conclude, I will demonstrate how Faulkner creates a sense of place in *Absalom, Absalom!* and how this sense of place shapes the meaning of the novel. I will argue that place is the only consistent force in *Absalom, Absalom!* that acts as a determining force in the fate of the characters. Specifically, I will illustrate how Faulkner’s land ethic and his interest in Southern history and culture join forces to give body to the ambiguous “curse of the South” that haunts so many of his novels.

**The Function of Place in Literature**

The term place, as defined by Leonard Lutwack in his comprehensive study *The Role of Place in Literature*, refers to “the very stuff of literature” (27). Lutwack claims that “it is up to the writer to manipulate the wide range of effects places may have. The physical qualities of place are expressive only as they are assimilated to the over-all
This suggests that place in literature is a combination of the novel’s setting and effects of this setting on the novel’s characters. Before I move ahead in explaining the relationship between Faulkner and place, there are a few terms that need to be clarified. As I mentioned, “place” is defined by Lutwack as, “the most elemental orientation of a reader to a narrative text,” meaning the physical qualities of the narrative that gives the reader a sense of where the events are unfolding (27). The difficulty in defining place in literature is that terms like landscape, scene, setting, and geography are often used interchangeably to describe the location of the novel. But, as Lutwack points out, “to represent the class of phenomena under investigation, the term place seems more satisfactory than any other. It is more comprehensive than scene, setting, or landscape; and it is more appropriate than space, a category of philosophical and scientific inquiry that is too far removed from sensory and imaginative experience to be of much value in literary studies” (27).

In Absalom, Absalom! it would be fair to say that the setting of the novel is both Yoknapatawpha County and Quentin’s Harvard dorm room. This is where most of the action takes place, but it does not encompass the relationship between the places of the present and the places of the past. The novel traces the story of Thomas Sutpen from the mountains of Western Virginia, to a plantation in Haiti, and finally to Sutpen’s Hundred. None of these locations qualify as the setting of the novel, but they are no less important. Place accounts for the influence of regions outside of where the novel is located, so when we think about place in Absalom, Absalom! we are not strictly limited to the actual location of the novel.

Lutwack suggests that “all places, whether drawn from geographical reality or fantasy, from literature or actual life, serve figurative ends and thereby sacrifice part of
their concreteness as they cater to some human desire or craving beyond present reality” (32). This suggests that place functions both as the physical location of the novel and the symbolic implications of this location. In other words, place is concerned with both the landscape of the novel and how this landscape contributes to the novel's meaning. For Faulkner the imagined landscape of Yoknapatawpha, based on the very real Lafayette County in Mississippi, is where the events of the novel take place, but the symbolic representation of the South in microcosm is how this location functions symbolically.

While it is true that Faulkner based his imagined landscape on his home in Mississippi, it is also true that he used Yoknapatawpha as a symbolic representation of the Deep South. The geography of *Absalom, Absalom!* grounds the narrative and makes the reader feel as though he or she could walk the same streets as Quentin, giving the novel a realistic quality that is further enhanced by the inclusion of historical events such as the Civil War. This makes it seems as though the events in the novel really did take place, and to a certain extent they did, but only in a symbolic sense. Thomas Sutpen is not a real person, nor is he based on one and neither is Quentin. Their actions as individuals are at times unbelievable, but in the context of their symbolic function they make perfect sense. Take for instance the act of dragging from virgin swamp a massive plantation only to spite a house servant who will never know of Sutpen’s success. This act is hard to believe especially given the mystery surrounding Sutpen for the first half of the novel, but when we consider Sutpen as a representative of a South that sought to distinguish itself through the rampant abuse of the land and of people, it makes perfect sense that Sutpen would erect a large plantation with the intent of acquiring wife and family to carry on his lineage. This makes the analysis of place in *Absalom, Absalom!* difficult because it requires a
consideration of how the real and the imagined meet to produce a symbolic yet realistic representation of the South.

Landscape is a prevalent force in *Absalom, Absalom!* because it works in conjunction with the cultural and historical elements of the text to determine the fate of the characters. While Sutpen and Quentin are not literally whipped out by a natural force such as a flood or fire, they are subject to the ecological consequences of their ancestors’ actions and as a result are forced to contend with what happens to the land that had been abused. For Sutpen, this is encompassed in his inability to restore his plantation and family to what it was prior to the war and for Quentin this is demonstrated in *The Sound and the Fury* when his family decides to sell off their land to send him to Harvard. In each case, the character’s relationship with the land has a profound influence on the trajectory of their lives. But while the land itself plays a crucial role in the novel, it is so deeply entangled in the cultural and historical reality of the South that it is nearly impossible to separate the two.

**The Inheritance of Naturalism**

Before I go any further in my analysis of the novel, it is necessary to pause and consider the forces shaping Faulkner’s writing. In the last chapter I described how Faulkner’s land ethic and his relationship with the South influenced the structure and meaning of the novel. In Faulkner’s novels the South and its people are cursed, doomed to suffer as a result of their mistreatment of the land and their abuse of the slaves. But this idea of doom was not sprung entirely from personal experience. William Faulkner wrote during the 20th century and therefore the literary conventions of the time and those inherited from previous generations heavily influenced the quality of his work. Although Faulkner was a pioneer in the stream of consciousness technique and one of
the earliest modern writers, the influence of Naturalism and of the idea of determinism is present throughout his work.

Naturalism is a literary movement that took form in the late nineteenth century. This movement was largely influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution and the philosophical concept of determinism. In her essay “Naturalism in American Literature” Donna Campbell concisely states that Naturalist authors “used a version of the scientific method to write their novels; they studied human being governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which their characters’ lives were governed by forces of heredity and environment” (1). Responding to the idealism of the Romantic Movement, Naturalism is a form of hyper-realism that seeks to uncover the ways family inheritance and social environment shape human character. First formulated through the works of French author Emile Zola, the movement can be thought of as a type of literary experimentation in which the author sets up a set of circumstances and then attempts to objectively observe the outcome of events. Zola’s twenty book collection Les Rougon-Macquart traces the lives of two French families through the mid-1800s and seeks to understand the relationship between inheritance, social conditions, and free-will.

The naturalist movement implies that each of us is concerned first and foremost with our own survival and that when our survival is threatened, we revert to primitive and often violent behavior. This process is referred to as devolution and suggests that man is no more sophisticated than beast when faced with his own doom. In addition to the process of devolution, writers of the naturalist tradition often explore the influence of external forces in determining the fate of their characters. The philosophical concept of determinism suggests that the course of human life is predetermined by a set of
forces, including God or some kind of Supreme Being, fate or destiny, history, or an individual's genetic inheritance. There is a struggle underlying the naturalist novel that explores the relationship between free-will and determinism, but ultimately determinism wins out. Although we have the power to freely choose our actions, these actions are ultimately guided by Darwinian principles.

Faulkner is generally considered a modern author of the Southern gothic tradition, but his emphasis on families, history, and the struggle for survival clearly demonstrate the influence of Naturalism in his work. Although he does not employ the scientific method in the construction of his novels, he does demonstrate an interest in the external forces that guide our fate. Alex Vernon explores the naturalistic themes in Absalom, Absalom! in his article “Narrative Miscegenation: Absalom, Absalom! As Naturalist Novel, Auto/Biography, and African-American Oral Story.” Specifically he considers “how the novel employs Darwinian language; how it builds evolutionary theory into its very structure; how it participates in post-Darwin Victorian culture and literature; how it brings together issues of memory, narrative, evolution, adaptation, and auto/biographical constructions of the self; and how its narrative miscegenation ultimately unsettles the South’s erroneous yet fundamental insistence on strict black-white speciation” (156). As an example, he cites Sutpen’s devolution in the eyes of Rosa to a “man-horse-demon.” However the convention of male characters regressing into their inner beast is challenged by Sutpen’s composure in maintaining his design. While Rosa may have perceived him as beastlike, there is little evidence in the novel to suggest that Sutpen was regressing to a primitive state. For instance when he proposes to Rosa his needs may have been primitive, but he was never overpowered by these needs and continued to adhere to social conventions such as marriage. When she turned down
his offer, he merely sought out another eligible young girl. There is a clear moral decay in his actions as he moves from marrying Ellen to seducing a poor sixteen year old, but even after Milly produces a daughter instead of a son he never reverts to violence.

This illustrates how and why it is necessary to be careful interpreting Faulkner’s novels through the lens of Naturalism. Not all elements of the novel will fit into the conventions of the movement because Faulkner did not belong to the naturalist movement, rather he is inheriting the ideas and he is adapting them to fit a modern vision. That being said, Vernon does make a convincing argument in his analysis of chance and chance events in the narrative of *Absalom, Absalom!* He claims that “natural chance, not volitional control, determines survival” but in the naturalist novel “chance events couldn’t occur because ‘all causes were knowable’” (157). Thus, Sutpen's obsession with chance and its potential to ruin his design “reveals both the limits of his will and the limits of naturalism” (158). By this Vernon is suggesting that although Sutpen is governed by a set of external forces, he still possesses some agency in determining his future. Chance in this context refers to the repercussions of an action. If Sutpen had never set out to destroy the land and enslave innocent human beings, he never would have brought on the curse that spells out his doom.

Vernon points to the character of the French architect to suggest that Faulkner may have knowingly been testing the limits of Naturalism. He claims that “Faulkner may be making a literary joke as well, associating Sutpen with the father and architect of European literary Naturalism, the Frenchman Emile Zola, who aesthetic treated characters as explicable and predictable products of heredity and environment, as test subjects to be observed in the laboratory of narrative art” (158). While Faulkner certainly believed that his characters were influenced by inheritance and environment,
he did not view them as test subjects. As Vernon points out, Quentin is “the character most caught in naturalism’s trap” (162). He is doomed because the South is cursed and this curse demonstrates Faulkner’s embrace of the naturalist philosophy of determinism. Vernon concludes that “Quentin fails to to thrive because he cannot adapt to his Southern heritage” (162). This connects the idea of determinism directly to Faulkner’s theory of a cursed South.

The Influence of Determinism

Faulkner was far more interested in the interior of his characters than their actions in the exterior world. He did not treat his narratives as an experiment in evolution and he was certainly not an objective observer in the outcome of his characters’ lives, but he was interested in the forces that led to these outcomes. Determinism is the philosophical concept that life is predestined by outside forces. Some common examples of these forces include God, fate, destiny, social environment, history, and genetics. In her essay “Unquiet Ghosts: Memory and Determinism in Faulkner,” Lee Anne Fennell expands the concept of determinism to include the determining power of memory. Fennell argues that “it is memory, the subjective and selective construction of a private past, that ultimately dooms Faulkner’s character to fates that in retrospect appear unavoidable” (35). She specifically makes the case that in Faulkner’s novel memory dictates the flow of time and appropriates the past, giving it the power to doom those of the South who carry with them the memory of a better time and the burden of being incapable of retrieving that time. Fennell claims that Faulkner’s characters “appear as pawns moved by a cosmic Player, debtors called to account by a ruthless Creditor, or helpless subjects waiting for their destinies to be tumbled out by an indifferent diceman” (40). The deviance in Fennell’s argument is that the fate of
Faulkner’s characters come from an “inner fatality” rather than an external force (41). The forces commonly evoked in determinism, although not necessarily tangible, tend to be oriented outside of the individual. Genetics of course alludes to an internal flaw, but ultimately they are passed down to the individual from his or her parents and the individual in question has no power to control or change their inheritance. Memory on the other hand is capable of being manipulated, as Faulkner so aptly demonstrates in his novels.

Fennell’s analysis of memory sets an important precedent for the interpretation of determinism in Faulkner’s novels, but she is wrong in suggesting that memory is the only external force guiding the fate of Faulkner’s characters. She makes a convincing argument, but Faulkner’s characters are far too diverse to all be subject to the constraints imposed by memory. Take for instance the divide between Sutpen and Quentin. Although they are both doomed, or cursed by the South, they are not tormented by the same issues. Sutpen is an outsider to the Deep South driven by a desire to be accepted into the Southern community and culture whereas Quentin is a Southern native desperately trying to escape his history. Both are doomed to fail, but they are not both doomed in the same way. While Fennell’s argument may apply to Quentin, it has little to no bearing on Sutpen. Quentin is haunted by his heritage and it drives him to commit suicide, but Sutpen is doomed as a direct result of his actions.

However, Fennell’s analysis does offer an important opportunity in the expansion of our discussion of determinism. She demonstrates that forces outside of those traditionally associated with the concept can act as determining forces in the fate of literary characters. In *Absalom, Absalom!* the Deep South as it is embodied in Yoknapatawpha County functions as the external force determining the fate of the
characters. This is demonstrated through Faulkner’s theory of a cursed South that plays out through the doom of both Sutpen and Quentin. Because Sutpen is doomed as a result of his actions and Quetin through the inheritance of this curse as a Southerner struggling to come to terms with his identity, the only applicable term to describe the determining force in the novel is place which, as I suggested, encompasses both the physical reality of the novel as while as the cultural and historical influences. In order to understand how place acts as a determining force, it is necessary to step back and re-examine Faulkner’s relationship with the South.

In his article, Vernon suggests that *Absalom, Absalom!* can be read as both a naturalist novel and as an auto/biography. This suggests that Faulkner is attempting to tell his story through Quentin, but the process is attempting to uncover the forces at work in shaping his own life. Vesgo suggest that “the creation of the imaginary South coincides here with the creation of Yoknapatawpha County, an imaginary piece of the South itself, which only goes to show that Faulkner himself, while engaged in a summoning of his historical heritage, is also caught in the act of creating a fictitious version of that heritage” (627). So whereas in the naturalist movement in which the author is scientist and the reader observer, both Faulkner and his readers are actively engaged in a process of making meaning that effectively separates Faulkner from the naturalist tradition, but demonstrates the inheritance of the movement’s ideas and concerns.

**The Curse of the South**

I have already spoken extensively on Faulkner’s theory of the South’s curse, but it is necessary to revisit here because the curse demonstrates how Faulkner’s
inheritance of the determinist philosophy gives shape and significance to the idea of place in *Absalom, Absalom!* In his article “Faulkner and the South” Warren Beck observes that “no matter how detached and judiciously critical Faulkner’s Southerners become, most of them are still bound by their instinctive and habitual filial piety, and are not inclined to disown their infirm, corrupt mother” (85). He makes the claim that “the whole of Faulkner’s work, far from idealizing the old South and its lingering legend, seems to suggest the thesis that the sin of human slavery was so great as to require for its expiation nothing less than a wiping the slate clean, by a complete reversal to primitivism among a people who, whatever their pretension to a culture, were never really just and sound enough to bequeath a working tradition” (92). Beck cites Benji Compson and Jim Bond as examples of the hereditary de-volution of the Southern family. Benji is the last character whose perspective is featured in *The Sound and the Fury* and Jim Bond is the only living relative of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* In Beck’s analysis the determining force in the fate of the characters is not their inability to adapt or survive, but the curse of their slave owning ancestors.

Malcolm Cowley makes a similar argument in his paper “William Faulkner’s Legend of the South.” He suggests that Faulkner lays out a legend of the Old South in *Absalom, Absalom!* through the story of Thomas Sutpen. Similar to the idea that Sutpen’s story is an allegory for the rise and fall of the old South, Cowley argues that Sutpen’s story functions symbolically as a representation of Southern history. He suggest that Faulkner’s legend of the South as told through Sutpen emphasizes “the idea that the Southern nation (like most of his own fictional heroes) was defeated from within” (351). Like Beck, Cowley points to the racism and oppression of a lost generation as the cause for the South’s curse and for the doom of Faulkner’s
This interpretation of Faulkner’s curse, as it is laid out by both Beck and Cowley, fails to take into account Faulkner’s love for the land. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the relationship between the abuse of the land and the abuse of slaves is deeply rooted in Southern culture and history and Faulkner’s passion for the wilderness and his hatred of property ownership would have surely led him to the same conclusion. When asked what the novel was about, Faulkner did not say that it was a story of Southern history destroying the lives of his characters, but rather that it was a story of the land turning against its abuser. What can be ascertained from Faulkner's relationship with the land, his interest in Southern history and culture, and his inheritance of the naturalist philosophy of determinism is that in *Absalom, Absalom!* it is the South itself that is determining the fate of the characters. Beck and Cowley are not wrong in asserting that the sins of slavery and the inheritance of guilt are active forces in determining the fate of the characters, but they fail to attach this force to the physical setting of the novel.

The scene in which Sutpen’s slaves are building the plantation house demonstrates the dual nature of Faulkner’s curse. Faulkner describes the mansion as being “carried plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp where the clay and timber waited—the bearded white man and the twenty black ones and all stark naked beneath the croaching and pervading mud” (28). This illustrates how Sutpen was responsible for both the enslavement of human beings and the destruction of a once pristine wilderness. It is interesting that Sutpen is described as laboring alongside his slaves, but from what we know of his experience in Haiti this is most likely a tactic for preventing a revolt. This demonstrates the origin of Faulkner’s curse, but it is Quentin’s
inheritance of the curse that reveals the influence of determinism in the novel. Quentin ultimately commits suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* because he is unable to come to terms with his Southern heritage. Because the legacy of this heritage pertains to both a violation of the land and the moral disgrace of slavery, the curse of Faulkner’s South can be encompassed by the determining force of place.

**Place in *Absalom, Absalom!***

Place is established in *Absalom, Absalom!* through the use of sensory description. Faulkner wants us to understand both the conceptual framework for the doomed South and to experience first-hand what it is like to be a Southerner. On the very first page of the novel Faulkner describes the “long still hot weary dead September afternoon” of Yoknapatawpha (3). This is then sharply juxtaposed with the description of Quentin’s New England dorm room. The opening of chapter six places both regions in close proximity. In the following passage Faulkner clearly emphasizes the distinction between the temperatures of the two climates:

There was snow on Shreve’s overcoat sleeve, his ungloved blond square hand red and raw with cold, vanishing. Then on the table before Quentin, lying on the open text book beneath the lamp, the white oblong envelope, the familiar blurred mechanical Jefferson Jan 10 1910 Miss and then, opened, the My dear son in his father’s sloped fine hand out of that dead dusty summer where he had prepared for Harvard so that his father’s hand could lie on a strange lamplit table in Cambridge, that dead summer twilight—the wisteria, the cigar-smell, the fireflies—attenuated up from Mississippi and into this strange room, across this strange iron New England snow (217)

In his introduction to the South Faulkner uses not one, but five descriptors for the September afternoon—all of which imply the heavy heat associated with the deep South, the kind that is both comforting in its warm embrace and tiring in its intensity. The
North on the other hand is so cold that Shreve’s hand is raw. Notice the emphasis on the word strange in the passage from chapter six. The table is strange, the room is strange, all of New England and its snow is strange. Whereas the handwriting on the letter from Quentin’s father is “familiar” and evokes memories of sweet smelling wisteria and cigar-smoke, twilight in the summer, and fireflies.

The symbols of wisteria and the dusty summer are repeated numerous times throughout the book, but they too appear on the first page. In his description of Rosa’s house Quentin tells us that “there was a wisteria vine blooming for the second time that summer on a wooden trellis before one window, into which sparrows came now and then in random gusts making a dry vivid dusty sound before going away” (3). The description of a “dry vivid dusty sound” stands out because sounds are rarely described as “vivid” alongside a physical quality. How can a sound be dusty? What makes it dry? The fact that Faulkner would choose to emphasize this quality suggests its importance and this is reinforced by the repetition of these two symbols throughout the novel. Thus Faulkner establishes wisteria, the quality of being dusty, and the distinctly Southern heat as symbols of home for Quentin. The fact that in comparison New England is “strange” and deathly cold creates a sensation for the reader that favors the South. This is perhaps why Faulkner chose to set his section in the South during the pleasant transition between Summer and Fall whereas the section in New England takes place in the dead of winter. Faulkner is crafting for his readers an image of the South as he views it, an image that feels like home. This quality is essential to understanding the novel because it draws attention to the idea that an individual is shaped by the place where they live.

Take for instance the passage comparing Quentin and Shreve. Sitting in the
“tomblike room” the boys are described as

Shreve, the Canadian, the child of blizzards and of cold in a bathrobe with an overcoat above it, the collar turned up about his ears; Quentin, the Southern, the morose and delicate offspring of rain and steamy heat brought from Mississippi, his overcoat (as thin and vain for what it was as the suit) lying on the floor where he had not even bothered to raise it

(276)

There is a lot going on in this passage. It is important to notice that Faulkner is defining his characters based on where they come from. Shreve is associated with a level of preparedness and a bravery in the face of adverse conditions as he snuggles into his bathrobe, whereas Quentin is described as “delicate” and “morose” and seems entirely out of place sitting in the cold room without his overcoat. The second thing to pay close attention to in the passage is the attitude of the boys. It seems contradictory that the child of blizzards would be so cold he needs to wrap himself up to the ears while the delicate offspring of the South sits uncovered, but this points to the mindset of the two boys as they engage in their imaginative recreation. Shreve is along for ride, enjoying the story, but he is in no way invested in the meaning and therefore his concerns are rooted in the present and in the act of keeping warm, whereas Quentin is heavily invested in the story and preoccupied by its implications. This suggests that for Faulkner, the idea of place shapes who are as individuals and determines who we will be even if we relocate ourselves. This inability to escape one’s heritage is embodied by the idea of the South as a cursed land, one that follows Quentin all the way to Harvard.

So what Faulkner is doing with the idea of place in Absalom, Absalom! is creating a sensation for the reader that gives him a sense of what it feels like to call the South and home, and then he is playing on this sensation to demonstrate how the place where you call home can determine your entire future. Place in Absalom, Absalom! is
established through sensory detail, but it is defined by Faulkner’s imaginary landscape of Yoknapatawpha. I have already given a description of the geography and the significance of Faulkner’s fictional County so I will not repeat myself here, but I will emphasize the role of Faulkner’s land ethic and his interest in Southern history and culture as they are associated with the creation of Yoknapatawpha County. Together, these forces culminated to create the Southern plantation culture from which sprung certain customs and ideals about what it means to be from the South.

Sutpen’s doom is not orchestrated by his place of his birth, but by his symbolic function as an allegory for the Old South. Coming into the Deep South as an outsider, Sutpen brings the curse of the South upon himself. Quentin on the other hand, whom we know is destined to commit suicide because he cannot live up to the standards of Southern honor, is doomed because he was born in the South and cannot escape his identity as a Southerner. This realization comes in chapter 7, during the middle of the retelling of Sutpen’s story. Shreve encourages Quentin to “just go on” with his story, but Quentin pauses. Faulkner reflects:

The two of them were not moving except to breath, both young, both born within the same year: the one in Alberta, the other in Mississippi; born half a continent apart yet joined, connected after a fashion in a sort of geographical transubstantiation by that Continental Trough, the River which runs not only through the physical land of which it is the geologic umbilical, not only runs through the spiritual lives of the beings within its scope, but is very Environment itself which laughs at degrees of latitude and temperature, though some of this beings, like Shreve, have never seen it—the two of them who four months ago had never laid eyes on one another yet who since had slept in the same room and eaten side by side of the same food and used the same books from which to prepare to recite in the same freshman courses, facing one another across the lamplit table on which lay the fragile pandora’s box of scrawled paper which had filled with violent and unratiocinative
This suggests that Faulkner recognizes that Quentin and Shreve have the potential to meet the same fate. They are together at Harvard making the same preparations for their future, and yet it is Quentin who dies tragically while Shreve presumably goes on to live a successful life. Just as Quentin's life extends beyond the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* Shreve too makes an appearance in *The Sound and the Fury*. Although the character’s name in *The Sound and the Fury* is Shreve MacKenzie he exhibits all of the same qualities as Shreve McCannon. They are both from Canada, they both attended Harvard with Quentin, they share a distinct sense of humor and serve to relieve some of the tension generated in the novel, and both characters offer an outsider's opinion on the dichotomy between the North and South.

It is unclear why Faulkner chose to change Shreve’s last name between his appearance in *The Sound and the Fury* and his reappearance in *Absalom, Absalom!* But it is clear that both characters serve a similar function and so for our purposes can be thought of as the same person. In *The Sound and the Fury* Shreve attempts to protect Quentin from being wrangled into the society of Gerald Bland, a symbol of the new Southern elite. In *Absalom, Absalom!* he helps Quentin to imaginatively recreate Sutpen’s story providing the bulk of the imagination as Quentin builds its factual frame. The distinction between the two is that Quentin is from the South while Shreve is from the North. As Quentin tells Shreve, he will never be able to understand the South because he was not born there. Thus, despite the fact that the two boys share everything including their potential for a bright future, Quentin is doomed by the curse of the
South to die tragically by his own hand.

Unlike Sutpen, Quentin is not destroyed through his direct abuse of the land and of its people, but by the inheritance of guilt associated with this abuse. Unable to commit the murder of Dalton Ames and restore honor to his family whose status has fallen with the rise of the new South, Quentin’s death is a symbol of the influence of place in shaping the fate of an individual. Sutpen’s death represents the physical quality of place, the literal overthrowing of the individual by the land and its people, but Quentin’s death is representative of the symbolic or existential quality of place that shapes and defines a person. Quentin is not killed by the land nor as a result of abusive actions, but he dies because he was born into a region that so heavily shaped his perception of the world, he was unable to ever escape its implications. Faulkner made it very clear throughout his career that he viewed the South as cursed and that he saw this curse being played out across generations. In order to make sense of what was happening in the South during his lifetime, Faulkner needed a space in which he could act out the story of the South in order to understand the trajectory of its history.

Yoknapatawpha County is the space in which the acting out of the story occurs and what Faulkner’s finds in *Absalom, Absalom!* is that the South itself is the force determining the fate of his characters. In order to glean from Faulkner’s work the deepest implications of his ideas, it is necessary to consider the way place, embodied in the creation of Yoknapatawpha County and brought to life through the story of Thomas Sutpen, functions both symbolically and as a reality.

Faulkner is using the concept of place to illustrate how the abuse of the land and the culture associated with slavery function in tandem to determine the fate of the South. In other words, Faulkner is exploring how these two forces, the abuse of the
land and the abuse of people, cursed Faulkner’s fictional South and doomed its inhabitants. Place is the only literary concept that readily embodies both the physical qualities of the land and the culture connotations of a region. Because the infamous “curse of the South” spans generations, it is not felt in the same way for Sutpen as it is for Quentin. Sutpen is doomed directly because he is the abuser of both land and slaves. He rips his plantation violently from virgin swamp and then sets his slaves to building that plantation brick by brick. After the war he returns to his land and attempts to restore Sutpen’s Hundred to its former glory, but finds that he is unable to. In his last desperate attempt to complete his design, Sutpen incites the revenge of Wash Jones and dies by the blade of a scythe. The symbolism behind this final act is clear. Jones is acting on behalf of both the land and of the people Sutpen abused in his pursuit of Southern glory. The choice of a scythe as his murder weapon, a tool commonly used in agriculture, links Jones’s act with Sutpen’s exploitative plantation practices while his motive, revenge for Sutpen’s cruel treatment of his granddaughter, is the act of an enslaved man revolting against his master. Living on Sutpen’s Hundred, Jones has become a part of Sutpen’s property. The murder of Sutpen is a symbolic representation of Sutpen’s property, both land and slaves, destroying the Old South as it is embodied by Sutpen.

For Faulkner, the blending of art and life took on a new meaning in his laborious prose and challenging structure. The literary concept of place offered him an opportunity to create an imagined landscape in which the real and the fictional could interact freely and without restraint to demonstrate what it means to be from the South and why this experience is significant for all people, not just Southerners. Despite its regional quality Faulkner’s work is universal and deals with universal themes. By
designating the determining force at work in *Absalom, Absalom!* as place, it becomes possible to understand how all of these elements come together to create meaning in the novel. It is important to mention that *Absalom, Absalom!* is not solely a novel about place, nor is it confined to the lens of determinism. But in tandem with what we know about Faulkner and his writing, this reading of the novel illuminates an otherwise unseen quality of the story. By coming to terms with fact that place is acting as a determining force in Faulkner’s work, the implications of this fact can be used to make sense of his treatment of the region, its people, the culture, and the landscape. This has far reaching ramifications for furthering the scholarship on Faulkner and for broadening our analysis of his work and its significance to the modern reader. Because place is so ubiquitous in our lives, the study of place in literature and how it influences the meaning of a work can help us better understand our own place in world and our relationship to the written word.
Works Cited

Chapter I


Chapter II


**Chapter III**


<http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/FAULKNER/09mapsf.html>

Chapter IV


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