

**FAULKNER'S ABSALOM ABSALOM
UNCERTAINTY IN DIXIE**

JOHN P. ANDERSON

Faulkner's Absalom Absalom: Uncertainty in Dixie

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Contact the author at pat@greencafe.com

From the Heart of the South

Away down south in de land ob cotton
Old times dur am not forgotten
Look away! Look away!
Look away! Dixie land.

Lines from song “Dixie’s Land”

By Daniel Decatur Emmett

Scarlet O’Hara from *Gone with the Wind*

You can’t be a lady unless you are rich.

Niels Bohr

Black body radiation requires one to conclude that God plays dice

Acknowledgements

To my guerilla girl, for her steadfast loyalty and support

Onward and Upward

Table of Contents

Debts and Protocol	7
Introduction	8
Personal Heat	9
Future Possibilities	12
Random House	13
The Story	13
The Old South, Slavery and This Novel	16
Dead Society's Poet	19
Miscegenation and Incest	20
Mythical Coordinates	22
Primal Horde	23
Noah	24
Tower of Babel	25
King David	30
The Uncertainty Principle, Planck's Constant and the Nazis	33
Art Concepts of James Joyce	39
Structure and Meaning	43
Narrators	47
Control of the Future—Dynastic Immortality to Christmas Gift	49
Sutpen	51
Coldfield	52
The Bill of Lading	54
Spiritual Accounting and Gaming	56
Horizontal and Vertical Imagery	57
Writings—The Letters	58
Marriage	63
Art and the Architect	64
Questions	64
First Part	66

Chapter 1	66
Chapter 2	83
Chapter 3	89
Chapter 4	100
Chapter 5	118
Second Part	135
Chapter 6	136
Chapter 7	154
Chapter 8	172
Chapter 9	185
Speculation	190

Debts and Protocol

For convenience, Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* is sometimes referred to as TSF, *Light in August* as LIA and this novel as Absalom. Page numbers from Absalom are from the Vintage International corrected text.

In reading and understanding Absalom, I used the following sources with confidence:

Cates' *The Rise and Fall of King Nimrod*
Carpenter and Borsten's *A Loving Gentleman The Love Story of William Faulkner and Meta Carpenter*
Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews*
Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy*
Irwin's *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge*
Karl's *William Faulkner American Writer*
McKenzie's *King David A Biography*
Pulaski's *Understanding Piaget*
Ragan's *Annotations to William Faulkner's Absalom Absalom* and
Ragan's *Critical Study*.

For an understanding of the role of incest in the 19th century Southern family, I used Chabrier's *Faulkner's Families A Southern Saga*. The quotes from Faulkner himself are from *Faulkner at the University*.

In referring to the powers that be, I indiscriminately refer to God, god, Gods, gods, Yahweh etc. All references to she include he unless the context requires otherwise.

Editorial material within quoted passages is in square brackets [like this]. Faulkner spells wisteria as wistaria but my machine likes wisteria.

Introduction

Absalom is one of Faulkner's three crown jewels. If *The Sound and the Fury* is his uncut diamond and *Light in August* his fire opal, *Absalom* is his cool pearl, his most subtle and graceful novel. All three were new experiments in literary form, particularly *Absalom*. For his achievements in extending the range and power of form in American literature, Faulkner received the Nobel Prize.

Absalom receives a wide range of compliments. College English professors teach it, probably because it generates a strong need on the part of the students for the help of their professors. In addition, it is featured in Christian on-line bookstores, a testament to its powerful portrayal of the human spirit.

Absalom is first and foremost an engrossing story. Built on war, love, and father hunger, it has soap opera glitz. The main episode could be called "Love in the Time of War." The artistic form or delivery vehicle for the soap opera is a commanding art object in and of itself. Only a few authors are powerful enough to speak through form as well as content.

The main issue in the novel is a fundamental in human experience—the relationship of the individual to the uncertainty of the future. In old language, this is the relationship of humans to the powers that be. The angel of death hovers over the novel; it decided who came home and who bled to death on the Civil War battlefield. The angel of death brought uncertainty to Dixie, the antebellum home of slavery and hereditary aristocracy, the pre-War guarantors that old times would not be forgotten.

From his "lumber room" of materials, Faulkner pulled biblical stories, concepts from modern physics and James Joyce's theories of art. From the bible Faulkner uses the Noah, Tower of Babel and King David stories. These stories give this novel Old Testament gravity and a heavy dose of the alpha male based

primal horde. The use of the uncertainty principle from modern quantum physics increases the general sense of uncertainty in the novel and fills critical scenes with a fluid sense of possibilities. The use of James Joyce's theories of art in shaping the concluding chapters magnifies the scope and impact of the novel. Using Joyce's techniques Faulkner reaches an epiphany, an epiphany of empathy. These tools are explored below in some depth so that you can enjoy fully this novel's subtleties.

For this story Faulkner fashioned characters who struggle against the uncertain and try to control the future. They strive to achieve some kind of immortality and thereby avoid oblivion, apparently the choicest morsels of the gods. Faulkner's choices for the characters reflected his own personal marital problems at the time, problems that became the reactor core for this novel, its

Personal Heat

The creative fuel for *Absalom* was an intense experience in Faulkner's personal life. He wanted to divorce his wife Estelle and marry his Hollywood hardbody sweetheart Meta Carpenter. He had met Meta while working in Hollywood between novels, having left the family at home. In those the days of fault divorce, Estelle refused to give him an agreed divorce and threatened in a contested one to take him for all he was worth and then some.

Faulkner told Meta that in order to pay what Estelle would demand, he would have to work in Hollywood most or all of the time. There he could make more money writing screen plays but would not have energy to write novels. He could choose between writing more forgettable screenplays as Meta's lover and husband or writing more immortal novels as Estelle's slave and husband. He viewed this as a choice between love and immortality: Meta was his love and his future novels were his claim on immortality. Love came with oblivion, immortality with slavery.

Here is how Meta put the matter in her own version of events many years later in her book about Faulkner *A Loving Gentleman*:

It must have been that weekend that Bill Faulkner found the courage to broach the subject of final separation and divorce to Estelle and to tell her that he wanted custody of Jill if she would agree. She must realize, as he did, that their life together was empty, meaningless and without substance.

[Then the scene when he tells Meta]

“It’s Jill, isn’t it?” I guessed. “Estelle won’t let you have Jill.”

“I expected she’d give me a fight over Jill. That I was braced for. What I didn’t expect is that she would want to take everything. I didn’t dream she’d go that far.”

“But, Bill, she knows you’re still in debt.”

“Estelle doesn’t understand what that is. Doesn’t want to. Never has wanted to.”

William Faulkner in extremity might gamble on Jill’s being somehow able to survive in her alcoholic mother’s custody. Backed against the wall, he might even give me up. He would not, however, permit Estelle to wipe out the years of serious writing that were left to him, abort the novels and short stories repositied within him, slaughter the Southerners, black and white, who fought with one another for hegemony in his battered mind. To pay that price was unthinkable. He would have to become a movie studio hack, grinding out treatments and screenplays, rewriting the work of his colleagues, hardening himself to the trivialization of his scripts by

producers and directors and other writers, and in the end, lose the sacred power that was his gift

So Bill flung the bane that would have rendered him impotent into his wife's face and preserved himself and Yoknapatawpha and the gallery of men and women that he was create.

“Promise me,” Estelle insisted, “that you will never see your Miss Carpenter again.”

“No, I will not promise you that,” Bill said firmly. “I love her and I will see her.”

[Estelle] “This is the twentieth century. You may have Miss Carpenter, but I shall keep your name until the day I die.” [182-85]

In a fault divorce proceeding, a spouse wronged by adultery could seek more than half of the property. The courts generally were sympathetic to a wronged spouse. Estelle in effect blackmailed Bill in revenge for his devotion to his Hollywood sweetheart.

Estelle would keep what she could, exclusive legal possession if not his heart. She would at all costs keep his name and control his future, regardless of the reality of their emotional relationship. For his part, Faulkner had to give up love in order to control his own future, to be able to write more immortal novels. Both had to sacrifice love to control the future.

Given this personal heat, Faulkner installed as fuel rods in this novel the perils of trying to control the future. The characters who try to control the future inevitably melt down. Regardless of their efforts, uncertainty prevails. Their guiding frame of reference for certainty in life turns out to be a false compass reading, and their removal from reality leaves them lost in their quest.

Uncertainty punishes their illusory frames of reference. In the process of trying to control the future they inevitably destroy any love in their lives. This was the message from Mr. to Mrs. Faulkner. I doubt that she was listening.

The title Absalom Absalom comes from the story of King David in the Old Testament. David had to give up his love for his son Absalom in order to secure the future of his dynastic kingdom in Israel. He needed control of

Future Possibilities

The plot spring for this novel is the tension between control of the future and love. This tension plays out in the universe of future possibilities. Control restricts possibilities while love must have more. More possibilities mean uncertainty. Love thrives in uncertainty.

In the human realm, control of the future necessarily involves a restriction on individuality, which like love can prosper only in manifold possibilities. A father who controls his son's life reduces the son's possibilities as an individual. The ultimate in control of the future and individuality is slavery. Slaves have few possibilities. They don't own their own futures or even their own children. They are property, totally controlled property. No love for slaves.

Love on the other hand allows maximum possibilities to the loved one. Loving fathers keep the options open to allow their sons to develop their own individuality, to follow their bliss. Love of humanity frees slaves. Love means freedom. That is why control of the future must be coupled with destruction of love.

The plot in Absalom feeds off the Civil War. During the War a random selection process governed who survived and who didn't. The loss of the War forced greater possibilities on the

South—freedom for the slaves and broader economic opportunity for everyone.

In Faulkner's final analysis the future remains the exclusive province of the powers that be. God in the final analysis is more possibilities. Yahweh's name translates as "I will be what I will be."

Random House

Living in a future complicated by the random and uncertain is the deep background for this novel. And this is the first Faulkner novel published by **Random House**, which survived as his permanent publisher. As this novel was originally titled *Dark House*, Random House turned out *Dark House*. Whether you like it or not, the house of life is permanently random and cannot be controlled or determined by the past.

The Story

Before going any further, I need to give you some of the story.

While the only "objective" version of the Sutpen story is contained in the bare bones Chronology and Genealogy at the end of the novel, here is a version from *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English*:

The story, which centres on the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen, begins in 1833 when Sutpen arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, having left his home state of West Virginia and settled in Haiti where he married a planter's daughter, Eulalia Bon. By Eulalia he had a son, Charles Bon, but on his discovering Eulalia's black ancestry both she and the son were abandoned. Sutpen begins to

establish himself in Jefferson, acquires an estate, builds a mansion (designed by a French architect), marries the daughter of a respectable Southern family, by whom he has two children, Judith and Henry, and is made a Colonel in Jefferson's regiment during the Civil War. He returns from the war to find his plantation in ruins and to discover that Charles Bon has been murdered by his half-brother, Henry, who has sought to prevent the miscegenation that would ensue were Charles to marry Judith, as had been his intention. Henry disappears and Sutpen, who still seeks an heir, seduces Milly Jones, the granddaughter of Wash Jones, a squatter on his land. Milly bears him a daughter, but not a son, and when Sutpen disowns both Milly and his illegitimate daughter Wash Jones murders him. Sutpen's estate is left to Clytie (Clytemnestra), his daughter by a mulatto slave, and it is she who, at the end of the novel, sets fire to Sutpen's house, killing both herself and Sutpen's son Henry and thus bringing the tragedy to its end; all that remains of the Sutpen dynasty is Jim Bond, an idiot, Sutpen's only living descendant, howling in the ashes of the burned house.

One important note. This novel is full of deliberate uncertainties, all of which are overlooked in the foregoing summary.

In reading this story, please keep in mind the then current conditions in the early 1800s when the Sutpen story begins. There is no telephone, no TV, no VCR, no movie and no newspaper. Jefferson is a small village in a rural area most of which is not cultivated. Large tracts of land can be had from the Indians for a nominal price. The use of slaves is the rule. Communication has to be personal. Social communication is rumor. Anything big or sensational that happens is the stuff of legends. With that as background, let's round out the characters:

The **Coldfields**: father Goodhue, daughters Ellen and Rosa, and an unnamed aunt. Ellen is much older than Rosa. Mother Coldfield dies in Rosa's childbirth. The aunt raises Rosa according to high Southern moral principles, that is until the aunt runs off with a horse trader.

Coldfield daughter Ellen marries Thomas Sutpen and they have two children Henry and Judith. Ellen dies during the War. Post-War Sutpen proposes to Coldfield daughter Rosa but on the condition that she produce a male offspring first. This insult feeds Rosa's life long desire for revenge against the Sutpens.

Father Goodhue Coldfield is a staunch Methodist steward and is frugal for frugality and heaven's sake. He adds up his credit balance in righteousness and "goods" in his small store. He never smokes or drinks or gambles, and allows his slaves to buy their freedom with their work. He refuses to fight in or support the Civil War effort of the South. He eventually hides in his attic from Confederate conscription and commits suicide by not eating. He leaves his daughter Rosa all alone during the War.

The **Sutpens**: Thomas Sutpen is raised in the mountains of West Virginia. His mother dies early, his brothers leave home at the earliest opportunity and his father practices incest with his daughters. The family moves east to the coast and then south to work on a plantation as white trash. Sutpen is denied the front door at the plantation mansion and that experience sets off his design for life. He decides to found a dynasty in plantation-based wealth in order to carry his name in fame for posterity.

Sutpen learns in a few months of school about Haiti as the land of opportunity and goes there to become rich. Based on ability he becomes the overseer of a sugar plantation, and almost single-handedly he fends off a rebellion of the local black workers. He is rewarded with marriage to the planter's daughter Eulalia and a part of the plantation. They have a son Charles Bon. Upon discovering black blood in his wife, Sutpen trades the land and

some of the slaves he acquired in the marriage for his marital release.

Left with some slaves and some Spanish gold coin, Sutpen comes to Jefferson. He acquires from an Indian chief 100 square miles of land near Jefferson. He marries Ellen Coldfield, but Sutpen is cold and ruthless and has no love for his wife or children. Only his design matters.

Judith Sutpen is Sutpen's real son. She has the right stuff to continue a dynasty—discipline, strength and intelligence. But she is a daughter and given Sutpen's adoption of community standards, she can not be the foundation of Sutpen's claim on posterity.

Judith's less fortified brother Henry attends the University of Mississippi. There, perhaps not by chance, he meets Charles Bon, Sutpen's son from Haiti. Charles is 28 at the time, a very old freshman.

The Old South, Slavery and This Novel

The story of Thomas Sutpen exposes slave based plantation society as inhumanity in the service of greed. A major point of the novel is that after the War and without slaves Sutpen's plantation does not work as an economic proposition.

The image of the planter as elegant, honorable and a generous aristocrat is fractured by the portrait of Thomas Sutpen, who as it turns out was typical for northern Mississippi at this time—1820s and 30s. He is ruthless and opportunistic. Planters like Sutpen were known as the “cotton snobs,” newly rich ruthless opportunists in search of social status. As *Scarlet O'Hara* said, you can't be a lady unless you are rich.

The plantation society in Mississippi claimed to be a benign system that pursued aristocratic values, generosity and the

finer things in life. Whereas, in fact, as described by Louis D. Rubin, Jr:

For as historians know very well, antebellum Mississippi settlement and development was not a matter of the slow evolution, over several centuries, of an ordered plantation society. It happened almost at once. When the Indian lands were opened up in the 1810s, 1820s and 1830s, men came pouring in from the older South to seize the chance to raise cotton and grow rich. There are numerous instances of planters from Virginia and South Carolina transporting their entire establishments from the exhausted soil of the east to the new land, and setting up not merely farms and homes but ornate mansions in the cleared wilderness. More often the newcomers were not established planters seeking greater advantage, but men on the make, middle-class farmers and others who coveted in the new land to the west the opportunities denied them in the more settled seaboard South, and emigrated to the Mississippi country with the definite purpose of acquiring land, buying slaves, raising cotton, and becoming gentlemen-planters. The older aristocracy of the east called them “cotton snobs,” the planter equivalent for newly-rich opportunists in search of social status. Surely there was an important element of preconceived design, of abstraction, in the way in which the old Southwest [Mississippi compared to the more northeastern Virginia] was transformed almost overnight from wilderness to a society of white-columned mansions, plantation lords and ladies, broad acres of cotton worked by hundreds of slaves. And just as surely it was the ownership and exploitation of human beings as property which made such a life possible, and ultimately brought down to defeat

and ruin when the war came. And if so, is not Thomas Sutpen, in what he was and what he exemplified, only an intensified delineation of the potentialities within the society itself?

Sutpen is usual in that he is on the make. He also shares the fundamental weakness of the Cotton snobs; they live for respect of others, not for self-respect. He may be unusual in that he does not treat blacks as objects of disrespect. Like King David who danced with his slaves, Sutpen even fights in the ring with his slaves to show that he is the alpha on terms they all respect—physical prowess. But Sutpen does treat slaves as tools to be used for his ends. But like tools, they are to be properly maintained, not abused. He does use his female slaves for sex and has a child [Clytie] by one.

The conservative economic and political system in the Old South was designed to produce certainty, to keep things as they were. Old times they were not to be forgotten. The weakness of this system was its inability to adjust. This weakness came home to roost starting in the Civil War because the Southern officers were initially chosen by inherited status in the community, not ability to command. After the War many could not adapt to the new economic realities. Instead of working with the new realities, they rode around in anonymous white robes creating havoc.

The Sutpen struggle is interwoven on the same loom with the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era. Like the Old South, Sutpen couldn't adjust to the new economic realities. His old frames of reference didn't work.

Dead Society's Poet

In this novel the Old South is a dead society. Its life force is gone leaving behind only the brittle residue of hardened traditions and rigid social mores, the death rattle for a society.

Rosa Coldfield is the poet of this dead society. She has written thousands of short poems, each one dedicated to a deceased Confederate soldier, whose bravery was the last gasp of the life force of the Old South.

As summarized by Andrew Lytle, the novelist:

Now the South was a mixed society, and it was a defeated society and the defeated are self-conscious. They hold to the traditional ways, since these ways not only tell them what they are but . . . [give them] a fresh sense of themselves. Only defeat can do this. It is the self-consciousness which makes for the sharpened contemplation of self . . . But it stopped action. The very heightening of self-awareness made for a sudden withdrawal of the life force. What was left of it remained in the surface forms. The forms were shattered, but because of this force they held their shape briefly. The shed skin for a while shines with life, but the force of life is already on its night sea journey. [from the *The Working Novelist* in 88 *Daedalus*]

Faulkner portrays Rosa as self-aware in egocentricity, to the point of being childish. Her remaining life force is wrapped up in a yearning for revenge. As she finally achieves revenge, her skin turns deadly pale.

The Old South in its death throes is the controlling image in this novel. Faulkner generalizes the image beyond particular place and time to death in life. Rosa kills her life possibilities by

living chained to the past. Sutpen kills his by living chained to a vision of the future. Both are products of the Old South, and neither lives in the present, which always IS. Judith Sutpen and Charles Bon have a chance to move within this life enhancer through love, but in the Sutpen force field it is not to be.

Miscegenation and Incest

The ultimate point about race is hidden in the creases of the novel. The point is that your brother is black and the black is your brother. If the black is your brother, can he also be your brother-in-law? Would you let your sister marry one?

Faulkner told his publishers that in one word this novel was about miscegenation. The plot turns on that taboo. As a taboo it denies a possibility in life, a possibility that in this instance held great promise. The taboo was designed to keep the white women pure as bearers of the future of the race. Perhaps it is enough to say that at the time this novel was written a similar ideology of blood was being developed in the Third Reich.

Thomas Sutpen uses his son Henry like a tool to kill his half-brother Charles Bon because Charles was believed to carry some Negro blood. Henry had initially become reconciled to the marriage of his sister to her half-brother. However, he subsequently learns about the possibility of black blood and kills to prevent the marriage.

Henry could not handle the threatened marriage even though he literally worshipped his half-brother before he found out that Charles supposedly had Negro blood. Based on native ability and talent Charles Bon was more than acceptable and would have added to the strength of the Sutpen gene pool. In this case the miscegenation taboo is shown to be in conflict with reality, a false frame of reference. Enforcing the taboo leads the Sutpen dynasty off course and to disaster.

Like miscegenation, the incest taboo is a social control on copulation based on the make up of the parties. Both taboos are justified morally in terms of the children such coupling would or could produce—mixed breeds and idiots.

The miscegenation and incest taboos exist side by side in this novel. The irony is that incest, which was potentially far worse in terms of the offspring damage, was in the Old South more acceptable than miscegenation. In fact incest was quite common and in this story Henry decides that incest should not bar the marriage of Charles and Judith. In the Sutpen story miscegenation produces the idiot.

Incest was not tabooed in the nineteenth century South, particularly in isolated rural areas where sexual partner selection was limited. Importantly for the themes of this novel, incest was preferred when the dangers of consanguinity were outweighed by the need for protection from the unfamiliar and threatening. Often incest was used to keep possessions in the family and avoid dilution of wealth. Incest was so prevalent in the rural areas as to be described by academics of the period as “common.”

Based in protection and possession, incest is a kind of “blood greed.” The Catholic philosopher St. Thomas Aquinas analyzed it as a kind of avarice, keeping love of family members away from others, keeping it all in the family. Incest was a magnified version of the general problem faced by the South. Incest was part of an effort to avoid dealing with the outside world and the necessity for change and adaptation. It was part of an effort to keep the old frame of reference. The fear of outsiders increased after the War, particularly as carpetbaggers invaded the South. Incest is a refusal to engage in the present, in the stresses of society and relationships with unrelated persons who carry the potential for the unexpected. Incest is control of the future.

As Chabrier put it:

The traditional, perceptive Southerner, burned by equivocation and culpability, must also face the dehumanized South of the mercantile Snopeses [amoral post-War Faulkner characters]; filled with a consequent sense of failure, of impotence, he turns inward and toward his family. This introversion is his ultimate means of self-protection in a world that is alien and incomprehensible to him. He must function in a universe in which both he and his accompanying value system are outmoded. With the inevitable loss of his frame of reference, he frequently finds himself without an identity.

These are the larger cultural coordinates within which Sutpen struggles. Before the War he is a successful planter with slaves, is very much in control and the biggest man in the county. He was well on his way to making a mark in immortality for posterity. After the War he is reduced to an unsuccessful small time merchant. In this reduced capacity he is not even in control of the price of items for sale in his store; he has to haggle with the black and poor white trash customers over nickel and dime prices. Bereft of his bearings, he has no identity to rest on and turns inward to his family. He does not encourage his children to find their own lives but keeps them as support staff for himself.

Mythical Coordinates

The mythical coordinates for this novel are the stories in the Old Testament of

1. Triple X rated Noah and his sons, featuring drunkenness, sexual perversion and slavery.

2. The Tower of Babel revolt against god, featuring men who are like hard baked bricks, and
3. King David and his sons, featuring Absalom of the title.

Faulkner teases out of these myths human efforts to avoid Yahweh's future, and how these early human efforts to control the future led to disaster. Faulkner's plot line derives archetypal force from these myths.

The Primal Horde is the common denominator of these three bible stories. The primal horde is the form of organization that Darwin and Freud thought characterized earliest humanity and for certain has and still does characterize the organization of many mammal societies.

In this form of organization, the one alpha male has exclusive sexual privileges with all the females in the survival group, including and especially his own daughters. The sons are either castrated or driven off in order to avoid competition with the alpha. Eventually a younger male deposes the aging or wounded alpha. The original alpha tries to control the future but is not able to do so. Neither can the next one.

According to Freud, memory of this experience survives in the Oedipus complex and the castration complex, powerful forces in many Faulkner novels. It supplied eunuchs for King David's temples and, according to some, is also hiding in the ancient practice of circumcision.

The modern human unconscious carries repressed embers of the primal horde experience. This troubling memory can be revisited in the shielded zone of myth, in the stories of Noah, Babel and King David. Faulkner picked these stories from our biblical heritage to accompany his story of the revolt of Charles Bon against Thomas Sutpen because they are powerful examples

of the revolt of sons against their fathers. These revolts produce uncertainty in the nest, where certainty is needed most.

Noah had a wife and three sons—Ham, Shem and Japheth. Having been blessed by Yahweh, they and their unnamed wives were the only survivors of the Flood. After the Flood receded, the Noah clan came down from the mountains to the plain and Shinar.

Apparently at ease in idleness, Noah cultivated the vine and became a drunkard. One time while drunk he took to the “tent of his wife” but passed out. Ham happened along and given the opportunity either tried or did castrate his father and/or have sex with his mother. When Ham laughed at his prostrate and perhaps castrated father, the two good sons Shem and Japheth backed into the tent with a blanket and covered their father.

For this deed, this challenge to his alpha status, Noah cursed Ham’s offspring to be the slaves of the offspring of the other two sons. They were cursed to have misshapen lips, twisted curly hair and to go about naked. Formerly among the blessed, the sons of Ham suffered slavery. They went from blessed to cursed in one generation.

The ravages of the Noah story are sexual perversion and slavery, both elements of the primal horde and the clan. Faulkner reminds us of a modern manifestation of these ravages, the plantation owner ordering his favorite underage slave girl into the trees.

The Sutpen family story follows the outlines of the Noah story. Originally the Suptens lived in the mountains in the East. Later they descended to the plain of Tidewater, a name that suggests memory of the flood. The journey was marked by the continual drunkenness of the father and the pregnancy of the daughters without the presence of males other than the father. The family finally arrived at a plantation worked by slaves and white trash and owned by an idle white man. Here Sutpen experiences

his epiphany of the way things are with men. Later he is to experience the way things are with women.

Tower of Babel. The city and tower of Babel were built under the direction of Nimrod, the Babylonian tyrant. His name suggests rebellion, and he is first described in the bible as a “mighty hunter before god.” In the anti-hunting Jewish culture, this description translates as a rebellious user of snares who was in god’s face. Using false ideas, he snared the Babels into the city and into building the tower in defiance of god, in god’s face.

The purpose of the tower was to provide a safety zone in the case of another flood. While Yahweh had promised never to do genocide again and sent the rainbow as a special covenant for this purpose, the Babel group was not willing to trust Yahweh’s promises as to the future. They believed in the past, not the new future promised by Yahweh. They wanted to control the future through their own efforts. They wanted to eliminate uncertainty through their self-reliance. They wanted flood insurance.

Here is the story in Genesis 11, in the rather bland King James version. This story follows the flood and the curse put by Noah on the descendants of Ham:

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech [more like one mind]. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there.

And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime [bitumen] had they for mortar.

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name. Lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.