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*Like Father. Like Children:
The Father's Poisonous Legacy
in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!*

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In *Absalom, Absalom!*,² the main character, Thomas Sutpen is only made alive through the other protagonists who, in the light of psychoanalysis, often appear to be his doubles. The present study attempts to sharpen our knowledge of the father through the analysis of the children and see what Sutpen's faults as a father actually consist in.

There is no questioning that "between Henry and Judith there had been a relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of a brother and sister even" (96). Now that ambiguous complicity, tinged with sexual desire, extends to Charles Bon:

Perhaps this is the pure and perfect incest: the brother realizing that the sister's virginity must be destroyed in order to have existed at all, taking that virginity in the person of the brother-in-law, the man whom he would be if he could become, metamorphose into, the lover, the husband. (119)

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². William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

Indeed, Henry's desire for his sister clearly parallels Bon's, though it is undeniable that "incestuous yearning is much more powerful in Henry."³ The scandal is also expressed in a reversed form in Henry's fantasies under the cover of his identification with Judith: "[Bon was the man] by whom he would be despoiled, choose for despoiler, if he could become, metamorphose into the sister, the mistress, the bride" (119). However, Henry is not the only male character seen as a woman figure. Charles Bon himself is sometimes depicted like an ambiguous individual whose feminine features⁴ left marks on Henry.

Henry was learning from him how to lounge about a bedroom in a gown and slippers such as women wore, in a faint though unmistakable effluvium of scent such as women used, smoking a cigar almost as a woman might smoke it. (396)

That criss-cross identification indicates that Henry's love for Bon just hides the narcissistic nature of their relationship, which sheds some light on Henry's commitment in a love affair that should rather concern Bon and Judith than himself. We understand now why Henry actually acts as if *he* were under the pangs of love or jealousy, whereas Bon remains paradoxically aloof and unruffled.

It can be noticed also that their ambiguous friendship has developed under the spell of mutual envy: Henry is Thomas Sutpen's unquestionable son, an acknowledged position that is fervently coveted by Charles Bon, whereas Bon embodies seductiveness and ease in the high society, two skills that Henry is desperately trying to acquire. Moreover, through the filter of identification, Henry can keep his unconscious incestuous feelings for Judith alive, whereas Bon has seized the opportunity to approach his father through Henry and his sister. As a result, both of them are caught in the snares of crossidentification. As for Judith, the manifest object of their respective wishes, she makes the development of an unconscious homosexual bind between the two brothers possible, which is clearly attested by Charles Bon: "Perhaps in his fatalism he loved Henry the better of the two, seeing perhaps in the sister merely the shadow, the woman vessel with which to consummate the love whose actual object was the youth" (133). As a matter of fact, Judith is not only a substitutive object but she also gives a name to a relation which otherwise should have remained on a purely imaginary level.

³ Christine de Montauzon, *Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Interpretability: the Inexplicable Unseen* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1985), p. 185.

⁴ His ambiguous attitude makes him play the part of the seducer: "He seduced [Henry] as surely as he seduced Judith" (79).

She was just the blank shape, the empty vessel in which each of them strove to preserve, not the illusion of himself nor his illusion of the other but what each conceived the other to believe him to be — the man and the youth, seducer and seduced, who had known one another, seduced and been seduced, victimized in turn each by the other, conquered vanquished in turn each by the other, conquered vanquished by his own strength, vanquished conquering by his own weakness, before Judith came into their joint lives even by so much as girlname. (148)

By acting as a symbolic separating agent, her name allows the two brothers to escape the traps of fusion. Judith, who "came into their joint lives," parallels the father whose role is to introduce the social world through language by tearing out the child from the imaginary pre-verbal world of the early times of life. Indeed, the interpretation matches the plot when, in his quest for a father, Bon focuses his efforts on Judith.

However, the father can only play his part efficiently when acknowledged by the mother. Now it seems that Sutpen is betrayed on this ground, for Ellen, far from discouraging her daughter's matrimonial plans, participates in their preparation and reveals, by "engineering that courtship" (128), her deep commitment in the matter: "[she and Judith bought] the trousseau for that wedding whose formal engagement existed no where yet save in Ellen's mind" (126-27). Obviously, Ellen's future son-in-law is nothing but a screen on which she projects her own wishes. Indeed, she never sees him as a real person but as "a myth, a phantom: something which they engendered and created whole themselves; some effluvium of Sutpen blood and character, as though as a man he did not exist at all" (128). Moreover, Judith, cloaked with her mother's wishes, doesn't actually look more real than her suitor:

[Judith was that] young girl dreaming, not living, in her complete detachment and imperviousness to actuality almost like physical deafness . . . who slept waking in some suspension so completely physical as to resemble the state before birth. (84)

In this unreal couple, the groom is a ghost and the bride is not born yet! Their shadowy existence indicates that they are not to be taken here as full characters but as psychic representatives whose repressed counterparts can be easily identified. Judith obviously incarnates her mother's desire, so that from that perspective, the Judith-Bon pair can be seen as the shadow of the imaginary Ellen-Bon pair. Now the Judith-Bon couple is clearly a screen for the incestuous wishes of Henry and Judith. Thus, as Judith is Ellen's double and Charles Bon is Henry's, analysis shows that the ultimate repressed pair is Ellen-Henry. These

substitutive pairs reveal that the incestuous wishes between brother and sister eventually hide, her again, oedipal desires.

The series of substitutions can even be completed with the Henry-Bon pair, based on homosexual incestuous wishes. It is well-known that such tendencies are due to an unconscious denial of castration and to a fantasy of sexual submission to the father. Here is an episode of Henry's childhood which may have determined his latent homosexuality:

Ellen seeing not the two black beasts she had expected to see but instead a white one and a black one, both naked to the waist and gouging at one another's eyes . . . her husband and the father of her children standing there naked and panting and bloody to the waist and the negro just fallen evidently, lying at his feet and bloody too save that in the negro it merely looked like grease or sweat. (31)

Strangely enough, the whole scene is told as if it were seen through Ellen's eyes only, as though Henry, too young to assimilate what he witnessed, left it to his mother to interpret what was actually happening. Faulkner's style illustrates here the process of early identification, according to which the baby does not look at the scene itself to estimate its significance but at its mother's face, so that it adopts her emotions as if they were its own. Henry's response to the trauma — he vomited — is relevant of his symbolic rejection of the father's physical domination, as he was undoubtedly fancying himself in the submissive position of the black slave: "it occurred to one spectator to say 'It's a horse' then 'It's a woman' then 'My God, it's a child'" (31). The "horse-woman-child" series clearly reveals the mechanism of young Henry's phantasm in which he identified with a woman dominated by his father and ridden like a horse. The unconscious value of the scene, reinforced by its traumatizing violent aspect, has probably been a determining agent in the fixation of Henry's future homosexual tendencies that remained dormant until he met Charles Bon. That puzzling insistence of incestuous cravings among the Sutpen children overemphasizes the failure of Thomas Sutpen as a father.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* the father comes under fire as soon as he is confronted with Charles Bon. The latter probably never plans to enter the Sutpen family *as a son-in-law*. On the contrary, his dearest wish is to be turned down by Sutpen whose open opposition to his incestuous marriage would implicitly mean that he acknowledges Bon as his son. One word from him would free Bon from his torment, but Sutpen won't — or can't — pronounce it. Henry's troubles are of a

different nature. He is not tortured by some particular words or the absence of them, but by images and fantasies. Like Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury*,⁵ he desires his sister and through her his mother, but his wishes are burdened with a heavy sense of guilt, revealing the pressure of the father's banning of incest on him. But what brings him to kill Bon, who was nothing but another himself? Paradoxically, Henry decides to take action when he eventually seems to accept Bon's incestuous design. Then, realizing that his father won't oppose it and that nobody or nothing could now prevent this outrageous marriage, he decides to put an end to the scandal himself. What is intolerable for Henry is the possibility for his fantasy to become true, even by proxy; the unbearable pressure of reality makes him replace the defaulting father.

Now, how come Sutpen has been reduced to settling his problems through his children? The failure of his great "design," which he attributes to some "mistake which he believed was the sole cause of his problem" (338) and whose nature remains mysterious to him, is beyond question. Sutpen wishes above all to found a genealogy. But his uncertain origins seriously hamper his ambition in a world where a man's ancestors are his only roots. Even Sutpen's younger years lack reliable landmarks. Maybe this handicap engendered his craving for respectability which appeared after a trivial episode of his childhood. As he was bringing a message to the planter his father used to work for, young Sutpen was turned out of the main entrance of the planter's house by a black servant who contemptuously invited him to use the back door. The following day, he left his father's house and sailed for Haiti.

What fascinated him then was not only the "biggest house he had ever seen" (284) but above all the enjoyable sight of the man who possessed it, who was fanned by a black slave and "not only had shoes in summertime too, but didn't even have to wear them" (284). In the light of psychoanalysis, the unconscious meaning of this reminiscence can be analyzed like a screen-memory; the big plantation, associated with the notion of fertility, is an obvious mother symbol, whereas the planter himself who *possesses* it represents the father. It is precisely the father's power on the mother which puzzles young Sutpen, a domination metaphorically expressed in terms of sexual pleasure; the shoe, that the planter can wear only if he wants to, represents the sex of the mother, in which the father, symbolically, can slip on his foot. But unfortunately, the young voyeur⁶ has no

5. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

6. "He told how he would creep among the tangled shrubbery of the lawn and lie hidden and watch the man" (187).

precise idea of what sexual relationships really mean: "he still didn't know exactly just what his father did, what work (or maybe supposed to do) the old man had in relation to the plantation" (286). Sutpen's basic ignorance is allegorically reflected by his incapacity to deliver his father's message: "he didn't remember (or did not say) what the message was" (286). This recollection obviously conceals a strong desire to replace the father, but the boy is apparently unable to understand what is prohibited in it. He is "innocent" because he doesn't know what is evil in his voyeurism, for nobody has ever instructed him about it. The planter, like his father, remains dumb, whereas the only character who says something is the black slave, but his words are denied any value by young Sutpen: "it was the nigger [who] told him, even before he had had time to say what he came for, never to come to that front door again but to go around to the back" (290). In his eyes, this "monkey-dressed nigger" (288) is nothing more than a fool who has no right to enact any rule. He only sees the black man as a contemptible submissive person, with whom he paradoxically identifies.

Probably he would have liked for his father to have a broadcloth monkey to hand him the jug and to carry the wood and water into the cabin for his sisters to wash and cook with and keep the house warm so that he himself would not have to do it. (285)

However, the black man is an ambiguous figure for he is also represented in a dominant position when he once runs symbolically over the very body of Sutpen's sister:

One afternoon when he and his sister were walking along the road and he heard the carriage coming up behind them and stepped off the road and then realized that his sister was not going to give way to it, that she still walked in the middle of the road . . . knowing now, while the monkey-dressed nigger butler kept the door barred with his body while he spoke, that it had not been the nigger coachman that he threw at at all. (288)

The paradox vanishes if one considers that the black blood represents the untamed part of Sutpen's soul, a symbol of the psychic wilderness preceding civilization, embodied by the naked slaves he likes to wrestle with, as if he needed to master the uncivilized monster in him.

Seen from a psychoanalytical point of view, Sutpen's father is a three-headed character. His *real* father, a pale irresponsible dumb figure, is unable to initiate his son to the mechanisms of desire. The planter is just an *imaginary* father figure who only appears in a silent dreamlike scene. As for the *symbolic*

father, whose explicit word should put an end to the Oedipus complex, he is derogatorily represented by the black slave, whose words are worthless. That structural psychic weakness determines Sutpen's future as a father; deprived of the symbolic notion of fatherhood, he can only stick to an idealized father image by accumulating the objects of the imaginary father — a gun, physical strength, land, respectability — but all these accessories fail to make a genuine father out of him. Here is the very nature of the *malediction* which weighs on the Sutpens; deprived of his father's legacy, Thomas Sutpen proves unable to transmit his word to his progeny.

However, young Sutpen tried to imagine what this word could have been: "if it was to tell him that the stable, the house, was on fire" (296). Now, this implicit wish becomes true some ninety years later when a fire destroys Sutpen's Hundred: we can guess that, in Sutpen's imagination, the fire is a metaphor in which he fancies his mother *burning* for love. However, the "innocence which he had never lost" (300) keeps him out of the field of castration and the Oedipus complex: Sutpen remains unsullied by sin, but out of all lineage, for one cannot be a father and stay untouched.



But Sutpen's malediction does not end with his death. As a matter of fact, one of his chief aims has always been to possess a house like the planter's, which he considered an indispensable step on his way to fatherhood and respectability: "Sutpen did not need to borrow money with which to complete the house, supply what it lacked, because he intended to marry it" (33). His mansion outlives him, imprisoning the last victims of the anathema until the intervention of Quentin Compson and Rosa Coldfield, when the two of them make a perilous descent into Sutpen's *dusty* past: "[Quentin] could hear the dry plaint of the light wheels in the weightless permeant dust and he seemed to feel the dust itself move sluggish and dry across his sweating flesh" (452). Carried by the whirling dust of the past, caught in the eddies of time, Sutpen's ghost is still haunting the premises:

It seemed to him that if he stopped the buggy and listened, he might even hear the galloping hooves; might even see at any moment now the black stallion and the rider rush across the road before them and gallop on. (452-53)

Here we learn more about the nature of the curse that weighs on the sons. The maternal symbolism of Sutpen's Hundred throws some light on Henry's fratricide

and explains why he waited until Bon went through the gate to press the trigger. This is precisely what Quentin is thinking about when he enters the estate some forty-five years later:

He looked at the two huge rotting gate posts in the starlight, between which no gate swing now, wondering from what direction Bon and Henry had ridden up that day, wondering what had cast the shadow which Bon was not to pass alive. (454)

The different elements of the scene can be easily interpreted: Sutpen's Hundred's entrance, a symbol of the mother's genitals, delimited with two symbolical legs — "two huge rotting gate posts" — is now suggestively open — "no gate swing now." Quentin's associations of ideas confirm this interpretation: "[He was] wishing that Henry were there now to stop Miss Coldfield and turn them back" (454). Quentin feels unconsciously guilty about Charles Bon's incestuous plans, as though he had fomented them himself. The episode is logically told in a very oneiric mode, reinforced by the atmosphere of the night and the personification of the house described in organic terms: "The dead furnace-breath of air in which they moved seemed to reek in slow and protracted violence with a smell of desolation and decay as if the wood of which it was built were flesh" (456-57).

Though she initiates the undertaking, Miss Rosa still needs Quentin's help: "I will have to take your arm" (455). As a matter of fact, she fancies a weapon in Quentin's arm — a hatchet — which, like the other objects she has brought with her — an umbrella and a torch — has an unmistakable phallic connotation. This is convincing evidence that Quentin and Miss Rosa sexually attack the mother's body, which Quentin's reaction symbolically corroborates:

He still ran, up the stairs and into his room and began to undress, fast, sweating, breathing fast. 'I ought to bathe,' swabbing his body steadily with the discarded shirt, sweating still, panting. (306)

Unquestionably, Quentin is here nothing less than Thomas Sutpen's posthumous representative. Somehow or other, he must have penetrated the Sutpen family's intimacy more than he would admit for not only did he hear Miss Rosa's confession but he also read Bon's letter to Judith. We know that this letter, "without date or salutation or signature" (160) was the release mechanism of Henry's fratricide, though its content seems paradoxically of little importance: "'Yes,' Judith said. 'Or destroy it. As you like. Read it if you like or dont read it if you like'" (157). Indeed, its value comes more from its function in the plot than

from the lines it contains. As the very symbol of the father's failure, Bon's missive, like Poe's "Purloined Letter," *possesses* those who detain it even temporarily: Bon who writes it, Henry who reads it, Judith who receives it, and last but not least, Quentin who finds in it an echo of his own incestuous tendencies.⁷

Unlike the legendary phoenix, Sutpen's Hundred cannot rise alive from the ashes; as it constitutes "the setting for the major actions of the Sutpen story,"⁸ Clytie's desperate incendiary act is perfectly appropriate to put an end to the malediction. After Quentin and Rosa have eventually entered the dark house,⁹ Clytie tries to prevent them to go upstairs: "Don't you go up there, Rosie" (460). Those are the very words she pronounced after Charles Bon's death, when Rosa attempted to see the deceased (172). The similarity of Clytie's attitude makes Henry's last hours mirror Charles Bon's death. Indeed, Henry Sutpen, ghostly double of his victim, is hardly more alive: "the wasted yellow face with closed, almost transparent eyelids on the pillow, the wasted hands crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse" (464).

The scholars have observed that "the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children because the children, too, ironically and in their innocence, display the same blindness."¹⁰ Sutpen's fate is still darker than Oedipus' for he "died morally blind . . . unaware of the reasons for his failure."¹¹ As for Clytie, like another sphinx of Thebes, she covers the scandal and she must be defeated before the tragedy can be resolved. Her "sphinx face" (169) makes her the immanent guardian of Sutpen's doom:

The Sutpen face not approaching, not swimming up out of the gloom, but already there, rocklike and firm and antedating time and house and doom and all, waiting there (oh yes, he chose well; he bettered choosing, who created in his own image the cold Cerberus of his private hell). (169)

7. See Alain Geoffroy, "Le pouvoir à la lettre dans *Absalom, Absalom!* de William Faulkner," *Alizés*, n° 2/3 (Université de La Réunion, Décembre 1991 / Janvier 1992), pp. 47-56.

8. John Pilkington, *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), p. 162.

9. Working on *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner wrote to Harrison Smith: "The [novel] I am writing now will be called *DARK HOUSE* or something of that nature." February 1934, *Selected Letters of William Faulkner*, ed. by Joseph Blotner (New York: Vintage, 1977).

10. Dorothy Tuck, *Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner* (New York: Thomas Crowell Company, 1964), p. 65.

11. Tuck, *ibid*, p. 63.

Clytie, like a chimerical creature, half-white half-black, half-woman half-savage, not only "appears as the embodiment of the house,"¹² but of the whole drama, carrying on her shoulders her father's misfortune, her very blood emblematically mixed, burned by a vengeance which is not even hers, and lastly by the blaze she lit herself to ward off the malediction. Like her eponymous ancestor, she is both the symbol of the curse and the victim of the liberating sacrifice. Timeless like the unconscious, she is eventually forced to unlock the chains of the fettered truth: "[She] merely came with a bunch of enormous old-fashioned iron keys, as if she had known all the time that this hour must come and that it could not be resisted" (460).



It is interesting at this point to notice that Sutpen's legacy is not only psychological; his descendants share with him distinctive physical features. Looking at his half-brother, Henry notices that he had "[his] brow [his] skull [his] jaw [his] hands" (392) and "this flesh and bone and spirit which stemmed from the same source that [his] did" (397). The same disturbing comparison was made by Charles Bon when he met his father on the battlefield: "[he] looked at the expressionless and rocklike face, at the pale boring eyes in which there was no flicker, nothing, the face in which he saw his own features" (435). The daughters also are physically marked by their father's morphology: Clytie's face looks like her father's (169) as well as Judith's who is "not thin now but gaunt, the Sutpen skull showing indeed now through the worn, the Coldfield flesh" (157). Sutpen's morphological heritage is here clearly expressed: what he bequeathed is a skeleton, a skull, *bones*. Bones are no doubt suitable symbols of the curse which hangs over the Sutpens: the word "bone," reappears hardly truncated in the name Bon, then in Bond, the extra "d" sounding like the relevant initial of "doomed" or "damned."



¹². Deborah L. Clarke, "Familiar and Fantastic: Women in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *The Faulkner Journal* (Fall 1986), p. 67.