IMPRESSIONS OF MORALITY IN ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

by

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Thesis directed by Professor Rex Burns

ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates that Absalom, Absalom! is a novel dense with impressionistic elements that lead to a moral conclusion. The introduction, or first chapter, states the thesis and outlines the discussion to follow. The second chapter delineates several impressionistic qualities present in Absalom. The method by which this is done is primarily through a chronological study of the novel's first chapter, which depicts the psychological process of Quentin Compson's mind. Concepts discussed include: the primacy of perception of a central consciousness; inductive reasoning; the idea of sensation over reason; oxymoron, synesthesia, and repetition; how imagination and memory affect perception; stream of consciousness; and the gestalt-induced shock of recognition. The third chapter builds on the second by explaining the phenomenological aspects of Absalom's impressionistic message. Basically, the chapter shows that through an expanding awareness of the Sutpen legacy, the reader approaches but never fully attains a complete understanding of the Sutpen drama. This way of knowing, it is noted, reflects reality: multiple perceptions of the same event increase awareness; memory is an everpresent advisor to conscious thought; the convergence of multiple perceptions and memory can lead to an epiphany; and so on. The fourth chapter explains how the impressionistic structure of Absalom leads to a moral conclusion. Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes the essay.
by asserting that literary impressionism deserves more critical attention, and that *Absalom* deserves to be understood as an impressionistic novel.

This abstract accurately represents the content of the candidate's thesis. I recommend its publication.

Signed [Name]

Rex Burns
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, who taught me to honor intelligence, creativity, and perseverance.
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I would like to acknowledge Dr. Rex Burns for his patience, Dr. Richard Dillon for his meticulous attention to detail, and Dr. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky for his exuberance. Discussing the works of Faulkner with each of them has been a privilege that I shall always remember.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The essence of "literary impressionism" is as elusive as it is beguiling. Maria Elisabeth Kronegger, for example, opens the first chapter of her book Literary Impressionism by admitting that the modern critic must "demonstrate the need for redefining the concept of impressionism in artistic creation" (23). The remainder of her discussion is largely an attempt to interpret impressionism in postmodern terms. In Literary Impressionism, James and Chekhov, H. Peter Stowell admits to the "checkered critical history" of the subject. In turn, he applies gestalt and existential theory to impressionistic literature (5). James Nagel devotes the first thirty-five pages of his book Stephen Crane and Literary Impressionism to definition, then classifies six different narrative methods as impressionistic. This representative sample shows that critics of literary impressionism seem to be unsure of their terminology. They offer
multiple interpretations of the concept and then redefine impressionistic theory in a variety of ways.

The issue is significant because writers as diverse as Crane, Conrad, Flaubert, James, and Chekhov have all, at one time or another, been categorized as impressionists, have all been considered participants in this vaguely defined literary movement. Connections do exist. At the most basic level, they can all be classified as writers who present materials "as they appear to an individual temperament at a precise moment and from a particular vantage point rather than as they are presumed to be in actuality" (Holman 244). This working definition underscores the importance of the primacy of perception. To the impressionist, a subjective impression of an objective reality means as much as objective reality itself. A host of intriguing literary assumptions follows. The impressionist shifts from describing concrete reality to rendering the perceived mood and atmosphere surrounding that reality. Each moment is "comprehended after the sensation has been modulated by consciousness and arrested by time" (Ilie 77). Because sensation
precedes comprehension, knowledge is acquired through the process of induction; flashes of frozen time become information bytes of phenomenological meaning. These frozen moments are then depicted as either a matrix of increasingly complex psychological states or a cluster of multiple viewpoints. In both cases, since memory is everpresent in thought, memories color each new sense impression; what is perceived is affected by what is remembered, and knowledge grows through a sustained act of the imagination or a ratiocination, either of which leads to a way of knowing quite unlike the well-ordered epistemology of deductive reasoning.

Given these characteristics, one wonders why the writings of William Faulkner have been largely ignored by critics who study impressionism. Although masterpieces like *Absalom, Absalom!* are distinguished by each of the structural qualities just mentioned, Kronegger, Stowell, and Nagel barely allude to Faulkner in their books on literary impressionism. The most plausible reason for this neglect has to do with a general critical indifference toward impressionism. Nagel admits that he
was astonished to discover that *The Literary History of the United States*, Fourth Edition, does not even mention the term, implying that despite the enormous impact of Impressionism on painting and music, the movement had no influence on American literature whatever. (ix)

In fact, some go so far as to suggest that impressionism be dropped from the critical lexicon, citing that “separate fleeting impressions can not be built up into an organic whole of sufficient size, nor can a single fleeting impression be maintained and developed long enough to produce a major work” (Brown 81). While this facile assumption reduces literary impressionism’s “dynamic vision of a changing world into mere pictorialism,” as Stowell puts it (14), it explains much: the idea of Faulkner as impressionist has been largely ignored because the idea of literary impressionism has been largely ignored. Today, only a small group of critics are willing to discuss the impressionistic tendencies of a large group of writers.

It is also true that some critics of literary impressionism tend to take their arguments to phenomenological extremes that emphasize the fragmentation and instability of modern society.
One of Kronegger’s claims illustrates this tendency with remarkable succinctness:

Detached from traditional values, all artistic impressionist creations become autonomous entities, reflecting a detachment of social, political, religious and sacred events. Impressionist writers have lost contact with the historical and mythological worlds of classical antiquity as well as with the religious world of Scripture. (21)

So much for Absalom having anything to do with impressionism, assuming we accept Kronegger’s proclamation as gospel. But we do not because her approach borders on being as incautious as the antipodal viewpoint that overemphasizes and then dismisses “separate fleeting impressions.” To be an impressionist is not necessarily to be a postmodernist.

Insofar as critics who study literary impressionism run the risk of becoming an endangered species, then, it would be wise to give one of Kronegger’s more catholic interpretations equal attention: “Impressionist creations in various countries are different expressions of the same basic idea, and may be recognized as being merely different symptoms in the same general syndrome” (33). This “same basic idea,” this same “general syndrome,” is merely a healthy respect for the primacy
of perception. With impressionism comes the understanding that each subjective impression owes its existence to an objective reality that can be understood in empirical terms. Accordingly, Faulkner's impressionistic vision does not signify an atomization of meaning, nor does it represent a loss of contact with the "historical and mythological worlds of classical antiquity as well as with the religious world of Scripture." To the contrary, his "separate fleeting impressions" coalesce into a gestalt of phenomenological meaning which, in turn, is framed by a moral statement. By design, Faulkner uses an impressionistic approach in order to advance larger statements on the human condition. It is time to delineate the impressionistic elements so prevalent in his fiction and clarify the ends to which they lead.
CHAPTER 2

IMPRESSIONISM AS PSYCHOLOGY IN THE NOVEL

Some of the currents of impressionism in Faulkner's fiction run very near the surface. In Absalom, Mr. Compson describes New Orleans as a "city foreign and paradoxical, with its atmosphere at once fatal and languorous, at once feminine and steel-hard" (86). Abstractions like "paradoxical," "languorous," "feminine," and "steel-hard," represent subjective impressions of an objective reality. They create an atmospheric effect of mystery, sensuality, and foreboding. Later in the same passage Mr. Compson labels Henry Sutpen a "grim humorless yokel out of a granite heritage where even the houses, let alone clothing and conduct, are built in the image of a jealous and sadistic Jehovah" (86). Mr. Compson's account characterizes Henry's psyche in a way that a conventional historical interpretation cannot. His descriptions suggest an awareness more intuitive than intellectual, yet as compelling as the sedulous grind of logic. The reader senses--not reasons--that Henry's visit to the "foreign," "fatal" alleys of ante-bellum New
Orleans might have initiated an inexorable chain of events that could spell disaster for the Sutpen clan.

But what of the deeper impressionistic currents in *Absalom* that seem to lead toward chaos? What of the "separate fleeting impressions" that swirl about in so many directions? The entire novel gives the impression of shadowy, nightmarish uncertainty as Quentin Compson tries unravelling a tale that has reached him from a baker's dozen of incomplete sources, many of which either contradict each other or are inconclusive where the informants' knowledge failed. Indeed, Quentin is the novel's key listener and interpreter. It is his duty to invest the Sutpen family saga with an order that brings together these "separate fleeting impressions," to make sense of the legend as best he can by bringing into focus the myriad impressions given him by the novel's principal characters, as well as by interpreting his own imperfect impressions of reality. Faulkner's letter to his publisher during the writing of *Absalom* clarifies his method: "Quentin Compson, of *The Sound and the Fury*, tells it, or ties it together, he is the protagonist so that it is not complete
apocrypha" (Williamson 244). In short, Quentin is the lens through which the disparate elements of the Sutpen legacy come into focus.

The only way Quentin can hope to make sense of the fragments of information given him is through inductive reasoning, which is the logical foundation upon which impressionism rests. Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines the essence of this epistemology:

Psychology does not provide its explanations by identifying among a collection of facts, the invariable and unconditional antecedent. It conceives or comprehends facts in exactly the same way as physical induction, not content to rate empirical sequences, creates notions capable of coordinating facts. . . . Since explanation is not discovered but created, it is never given with the fact, but is always simply a probable interpretation. (115)

The “coordinating facts” that lead to “probable interpretations” in Absalom all exist in thought and usually in the domain of the unconscious. Reality begins with each perceiving consciousness, not with a third-person narrator delineating a chronological, omniscient account. Every explanation that Quentin seeks is “created,” or generated, from someone’s impression and then filtered through Quentin’s own impression-generating
imagination. For instance, he must interpret the words of: Rosa, the injured Southern belle who remembers Sutpen as a gothic horror story; his father, who reinvents the Sutpen legacy in the grand, tragic tradition; and Shreve, a teller of tall tales who creates a story of revenge featuring Charles Bon, Bon's mother, and their conniving lawyer. It is in this unpleasant subliminal world of the imagination, or in Faulkner's words, this "shadowy miasmic region" (54), this "quicksand of nightmare" (113-14), where sense impression meets memory and metacognition, the result being an impression of reality created through the inner play of the mind. In essence, the novel is a paradoxical but organic blend of impressionistic induction which leads toward, but never to, complete objective comprehension.

A study of the difficult first chapter shows that Absalom contains each of the previously mentioned impressionistic elements, beginning with Quentin's inductive reasoning. The first two-and-a-half pages take the reader on a compulsory stroll through the involute corridors of Quentin's mind. A third-person narrator serves as tour guide by invoking three separate but
interwoven centers of consciousness: the disembodied, foreboding narration itself; Rosa Coldfield's mind, illuminated by her archaic and bitter recountings; and Quentin's psyche, which evolves through four levels of expanding awareness. These four levels are his sense impressions of his immediate physical surroundings, his reanimation of Thomas Sutpen's ghost, his personalized reconstruction of Miss Rosa's tale, and the application of the legend to his own condition.

When the reader first enters Quentin's mind, Quentin seems little more than a slave to sensation, lulled into a lethean funk by his surreal environment. In impressionistic terms, his mental state might be characterized as "not simple and well ordered, but an indistinct and obscure picture made up of an irresistible flood of confused and ever changing sense impressions" (Overland 241). In a "dim hot airless room with blinds all closed and fastened," Miss Rosa's "grim haggard amazed voice" seduces him until "at last listening would renege and hearing-sense self-confound" (3). The wisteria wafting through the room is "coffin-smelling gloom sweet" (4). Miss Rosa
emanates "the rank smell of female old flesh" (4). Because Quentin's conscious perception of reality is arrested by the otherness of these bizarre surroundings, mood overwhelms objectivity and he becomes more inclined to feel than think. Isolated from the familiar, transported into the past, and bombarded by symbols of decay, his reason, or "hearing-sense," gives way to sensory impression (4). James Nagel summarizes this impressionistic narrative method as

the objective presentation of the sensory and interpretive experiences of a character at the primary level with minimal compensatory correction by the narrator. The effect is one of psychological immediacy, of sharp sensory detail uncluttered by expository intrusions. (50)

Nagel considers the third-person, limited narrative mode "the natural expression of Literary Impressionism" because fictive data should be rendered primarily "as originating from within the fiction itself and as having been perceived by the narrator or one or more of the characters. The author records what the center of intelligence experiences and thinks and nothing else" (43). In Absalom, the reader-as-spectator is denied an omniscient narrative viewpoint presented sequentially in units of
chronological time. From the start, Quentin and the reader share a limited, unreliable, and distorted power of perception that repeatedly reduces plot to a series of moment-to-moment instants of consciousness.

Likewise, the lexicon of the narration challenges the reader to approach the text from an impressionistic perspective. Unorthodox configurations like "grim haggard amazed" (3), "quiet thunderclap," "gloom sweet," and "cloudy flutter" (4) shock and bewilder the reader into thinking in emotional, not logical, terms. How, one wonders, can a voice be simultaneously "grim" and "amazed?" What, exactly, does a "quiet thunderclap" sound like? And does a coffin smell "gloom sweet?" The language itself forces the reader to pause and puzzle over several contradictory word-clusters. Throughout the novel, oxymoron, synesthesia, and repetition pack each sentence tight with ambiguous meaning: Clytie is described as "perverse inscrutable" (126); youthful passion is characterized as all "hushed wild importunate blood and light hands hungry for touching" (251); Quentin's interrogation
of Henry Sutpen is a numbing repetition of questions that leaves off where it begins:

    And you are----?
    Henry Sutpen.
    And you have been here----?
    Four years.
    And you came home----?
    To die. Yes.
    To die?
    Yes. To die.
    And you have been here----?
    Four years.
    And you are----?
    Henry Sutpen. (298)

Each anomalous word combination, phrase, or passage represents a breakdown of the rational order. In the first chapter, these breakdowns mirror the mood attributed to Quentin. In a meta-reality inhabited by a “nothusband,” a crone who resembles “a crucified child,” “the soundless Nothing,” “notpeople,” and “notlanguage,” Rosa’s voice becomes the ever-changing currency of meaning, “not ceasing but vanishing into and then out of the long intervals like a stream” (4). Language is “understood less as thought and concept, and more as sensation and sound image” (Kronegger 17). Like Quentin, the reader is given a lexicon of
impressionistic imagery that tends to overwhelm the senses rather than clarify issues germane to the Sutpen history.

While "sharp sensory detail" and "psychological immediacy" are the building blocks of impressionistic narrative, they represent only an incipient influence on impressionistic literature. In *Absalom*, Quentin's sense impressions transmute into more compelling images as psychological immediacy defers to imagination and memory. The funereal sights, sounds, and smells of Rosa's room bombard him until his fertile imagination, which is now wedded to Rosa's voice, conjures up a protean impression of Sutpen's ghost. At first, Sutpen's apparition is presented as a benign and reluctant spirit:

The long-dead object of her impotent yet indomitable frustration would appear, as though by outraged recapitulation evoked, quiet inattentive and harmless, out of the biding and dreamy and victorious dust. . . . [The] ghost mused with shadowy docility as if it were the voice which he haunted where a more fortunate one would have had a house. (3-4)

Indeed, this ghost is a fragment of memory housed in Rosa's psyche and released only through her "grim haggard amazed voice." But as her account increases in velocity and vehemence,
Sutpen's persona assumes Biblical proportions to the romantic Quentin. Transmogrified into a "man-horse-demon," Sutpen intrudes "upon a scene peaceful and decorous as a schoolprize watercolor" (4). In "the long unmaze" of Quentin's imagination he watches Sutpen's horde "overrun suddenly the hundred miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing," creating "the Be Sutpen's Hundred like the olden time Be Light" (4).

In the same "long unmaze" of his imagination, Quentin the subject creates an image of Sutpen the mutable object through Rosa's faulty recollection to form a relationship in keeping with the aesthetic of impressionism. Stowell aptly describes this aesthetic as "an integrated juxtaposition," or "subjective objectivism," where

the perceiver superimposes on an object actual physical qualities based upon his own memory, mood, and perspective; the object takes on and reflects the physical properties of the surrounding environment; the object and its reflections--the entire mise-en-scène--simultaneously infuse the perceiver's own set of physical and psychological characteristics. . . . There is one reality, the perceived consciousness of things continually changing. (32)
Rosa superimposes a demonic, superhuman image upon Sutpen, this image is transmitted to Quentin, Quentin manufactures his own *dramatis personae*, and the reader is left to work with the remaining reality, the "perceived consciousness" of "continually changing" historical events. In the absence of a more even-handed historical account of the Sutpen legacy, memory becomes impression, a process which represents the inception of meaning. Rosa's idiosyncratic pattern of thinking can be understood by Quentin and the reader only in terms of a psychological impression that paints Thomas Sutpen's portrait in ominous shades. As a result, the visceral impact of her testimony carries considerable force, and Sutpen appears before Quentin as a creature of epic proportions.

Quentin's appropriation of the Sutpen image and subsequent application of the image to his own circumstances represents a more complex impressionistic depiction having to do with stream of consciousness and the manipulation of time. Stowell notes that literary impressionists depend "on simultaneity through the cross-cutting of scenes, the fragmentation of image complexes,
and the sensory fusion of past and present," all of which lead to a
"privileged moment" of awareness (35). Quentin's psychomachia
embodies this principle. Once he awakens from his daydream, his
"hearing" reconciles the unreal quality of Rosa's monologue, and in
a state of mild schizophrenia, he seems to "listen to two separate
Quentins now" (4). The first Quentin is a Harvard student who,
despite his revulsion, must listen to "garrulous outraged baffled
ghosts . . . to one of the ghosts [Rosa] which had refused to lie
still even longer than most had, telling him about old ghost
times" (4). This fragment of Quentin's unconscious denial equates
Rosa with the ghost of Sutpen and, at a broader level, with the
ghostly spectre of the entire antebellum South. The second
Quentin is a young man "too young to deserve yet to be a ghost"
yet must still be one "for all of that," since, like Rosa, he is "born
and bred in the deep South" (4). In effect, an uncomfortable
relationship between Quentin's unconscious perception of past
and present breaks into open conflict.

The following passage shows how Faulkner's stream of
consciousness writing can prove to be intrinsically
impressionistic. A third-person narrator presents Quentin's schism as a pair of "notpeople" speaking a subconscious "notlanguage," or a dialogue once removed from conscious thought, but because Quentin must consciously process the notpeople's dialogue, he momentarily surfaces to consciousness in an effort to confront and then comprehend the reality of his situation.

Throughout the passage, which Faulkner set in italics to indicate a replication of the stream of consciousness of Quentin's inner voice, we see Quentin's notpeople interpreting Miss Rosa's monologue loosely and then correcting themselves with closer facsimiles of her actual words:

*It seems that this demon--his name was Sutpen--(Colonel Sutpen)--Colonel Sutpen. Who came out of nowhere and without warning upon the land with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation--(Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)--tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and daughter which--(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)--without gentleness. Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age, only--(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)--and died. Without regret, Miss Coldfield says--(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson. (5)*
Nagel points out that "stream of consciousness is the logical extension of Impressionistic modes of narration. As the process of recording sensational responses gives way to rendering mental activity, the fictional presentation of passages of thought seems the next likely step" (77). In this particular passage of thought, the first italicized voice—"it seems that this demon--his name was Sutpen"—is notperson number one, or the Quentin from Harvard who must lend an ear to living ghosts recounting ghost tales. This voice is marked by a distinctly colloquial tone: "Who came out of nowhere . . . with a band of strange niggers and built a plantation." The initial parenthetical lines—"(Colonel Sutpen), (Tore violently a plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says), (Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)"—on the other hand, represent the corrective ghost-voice of Miss Rosa, or our second notperson.

However, a shift in narratorial voice occurs with "Which should have been the jewels of his pride and the shield and comfort of his old age." Notice that this fragment is not in quotations, yet it is characterized by Rosa's poetic and elevated
diction, quite unlike the quotidian voice of the earlier unparenthetical lines. A reversal of identity has taken place among Quentin's notpeople. Rosa's persona now enters the text in a position that would have been inhabited previously by Quentin's. Likewise, the next parenthetical passage--"(Only they destroyed him or something or he destroyed them or something. And died)"--sounds like the voice of our first notperson, the young Harvard student, Quentin.

This structural juxtaposition represents a gestalt, or phenomenological synthesis of seemingly disparate elements, that binds Quentin's rent persona. He is still the youth who dreads the ghosts from his past, but now he begins to realize that he, too, is one of these ghosts. Suddenly, he has become aware of a heretofore dormant segment of his personality. The final lines suggest a furthering of Quentin's and Rosa's psychological integration with a net effect of remorse: "Without regret, Miss Rosa Coldfield says--(Save by her) Yes, save by her. (And by Quentin Compson) Yes. And by Quentin Compson" (5). While it is likely that the pronoun "her" refers to Rosa, we can no longer tell
with absolute certainty which statements apply to whom or what. What we can infer, however, is that the rational Quentin, his subconscious notpeople, and Rosa's identity are synthesized into a single entity, which represents an unsettling epiphany for Quentin. The quarrel that haunts him, the anguish that he cannot reconcile with his here-and-now, makes it virtually impossible for him to avoid suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*; he despises the loss of a heritage (and a sister) far less idyllic in reality than in his imagination, and yet he knows that he is inextricably linked to the same heritage (and lineage). Judith Lockyer offers a nearly identical argument, stating that in *Absalom*, Quentin "participates completely in the creation of the story of one man that grows into his own story. Finally, in *The Sound and the Fury*, we witness the desintegration of his ability to live in the paradox" (51-52). Translated in broader terms, Rosa's and Quentin's unison of regret is a reflection of the Zeitgeist of the post-war South.

The shattered fragments of Quentin's past synthesize with Rosa's memory of despair to form a new way of seeing similar to
the experience defined by Henry James as a "suddenly-determined absolute of perception." James describes the experience as follows:

[The] whole cluster of items forming the image is on these occasions born at once; the parts are not pieced together, they conspire and interdepend; but what it comes to, no doubt, is that at a simple touch an old latent and dormant impression, a buried germ, implanted by experience and then forgotten flashes to the surface as a fish, with a single 'squirm,' rises to the baited hook, and there meets instantly the vivifying ray. (151)

But regarding Absalom, swamps, snakes, and impenetrable fog would be more suitable metaphors for latent impressions than flashing fish and vivifying rays. Quentin's interior quagmire represents a sense of loss rendered through the passage of time and a sense of despair inflicted through the recapture of the past in the immediacy of the present. In effect, he observes but fails to come to terms with his condition. His overwhelming melancholy precludes him from enjoying the present and anticipating a promising future. This is one of the most integral designs in Absalom. Through a masterful impressionistic narration that explores the microcosm of Quentin's mind, Faulkner
has illustrated a young man's perplexity at having to cope with suppressed emotions that portend his solipsistic demise.
CHAPTER 3
IMPRESSIONISM AND MEANING IN THE NOVEL

The impressionistic elements of *Absalom* indicate that on one level the novel can be understood only in phenomenological terms that transcend reason. An expanding matrix of impressions represents a form of ambiguous meaning that can never be fully comprehended, cannot therefore be told, but can only be suggested through images whose import must in great part be intuited inductively, not known in the scientific way. The "total picture" becomes "the sum of infinite touches and sense impressions, and must be focused anew at each step or turn of the process: it is the characteristic manner of impressionistic rendering" (P erosa 80). When Charles Bon leaves for college, he is on an inductive search for phenomenological meaning:

[He was] almost touching the answer, aware of the jigsaw puzzle . . . just beyond his reach, inextricable, jumbled, and unrecognizable yet on the point of falling into pattern which would reveal to him at once, like a flash of light, the meaning of his whole life. (250)
The puzzle pieces never fall completely into place for Bon, or for anyone else in the novel. Of all the characters in *Absalom*, Mr. Compson is the one who most clearly articulates an awareness of this inability to understand the mystery of existence. Upon finally intuiting that his interpretation of why Henry puts Bon on "probation" is spurious, Mr. Compson notes that "it just does not explain," and that "something is missing." Puzzled, he describes memory in cryptic terms:

We have a few old mouth-to-mouth tales; we exhume from old trunks and boxes ... letters without salutation or signature, in which men and women who once lived and breathed are now merely initials or nicknames out of some now incomprehensible affectation ... we see dimly people ... in this shadowy attenuation of time ... performing their acts of simple passion and simple violence, impervious to time and inexplicable. (80)

What can only be remembered, he implies, lacks immediate experience and must remain a troubling speculation, while the forms of knowledge most worth knowing usually exist beyond the limits of human comprehension. Hence, while there is a certain kind of unity and cohesion to *Absalom*, in many ways the novel remains unsolvable because in Faulkner's world, existence is unsolvable.
Joel Williamson has noticed that this Faulknerian "worldview" of unsolvability corresponds to Platonic idealism (355). The "Allegory of the Cave" posits that man is a prisoner chained in a cave for life, his only view the cave's far wall. Above and behind him there is a walkway upon which various forms move about. A source of light shines in through the mouth of the cave, passes around the forms on the walkway, and makes shadows on the far wall. All that the man sees are these shadows, and so he mistakenly assumes that they are the whole of reality when in actuality they are merely manifestations. In fact, reality, or truth, exists in the forms on the walkway and the light that shines from beyond the cave. While the shadows serve man as clues to reality, they should not be mistaken for the essence. Hence, man can understand reality only as the idea of the thing, not as the thing itself.

Williamson rightly uses the "Allegory of the Cave" to underscore the tension that exists between realism and idealism in Faulkner's writing. Plato's allegory correlates closely with literary impressionism, for it shows that "the human heart in
conflict with itself" can never fully understand its condition or fate. None of the characters in *Absalom* manage to escape themselves or their circumstances, try as they might to make sense of a world beyond their control and comprehension. The idea of the thing becomes a composite of minds that wax, wane, and interpret one another within an enclosed, entropic system. Life is reduced to a montage of phenomenological impressions with each impression of the same object differing, as if two people sitting in Plato's cave glean two wholly different meanings from the same shadow that flickers before them on the far wall.

To Rosa, Thomas Sutpen is an infuriating and everpresent recollection, a "*certain segment of rotten mud*" (138) who walked in but never fully out of her life, a "*walking shadow. He was the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment cast by the fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath the earth's crust*" (139). Lodged in Rosa's memory as the incarnation of masculine injustice, Sutpen's image seems to be more real to Rosa than the very real physical presence of Quentin next to her. She wages war with a memory while using Quentin indifferently in her benighted
quest for a form of redemption that she will neither attain nor comprehend. Yet to Quentin's grandfather, Sutpen was a man worthy of occasional admiration and intimacy, a man who could sit by a fire with a peer and recall his own youthful innocence, with "his eyes quiet and sort of bright . . . and Grandfather said it was the only time he ever knew him to say anything quiet and simple: 'On this night I am speaking of (and until my first marriage, I might add) I was still a virgin'" (200). Quentin's father attributes a machine-like quality to the man who, with a "grim and unflagging fury . . . erected that shell of a house and laid out his fields, then for three years he had remained completely static, as if he were run by electricity and someone had come along and removed, dismantled the wiring or the dynamo" (31-32).

On the other hand, despite the fact that a complete picture of Sutpen can never be fully realized, it is also true that the perception of plot and character increases with the progressive awareness of the perceiver; both fictional character and reader grow in awareness "as their ability to perceive the connections
among fragments expands" (Stowell 17). With each additional narrative, with each additional piece of information, the reason for Sutpen's inability to sustain a dynasty becomes increasingly apparent. Undoubtedly, the sum total of Quentin's psychological progression throws into relief the impressionistic theory that the "gradual unfolding of meaning coincides with the slow process of perception" (Perosa 80). While his early fantasy of Sutpen differs significantly from General Compson's informed remembrance, his way of knowing seems to be a very real and familiar extention of the reasoning process. As the novel progresses, his ongoing ratiocination deserves cautionary approval when he and Shreve speculate on and then clarify Henry's possible motivations for killing Bon, for instance. Or in detailing the failure of Thomas Sutpen's grand design, Quentin offers this speculation about Sutpen:

His trouble was innocence. All of a sudden he discovered, not what he wanted to do but what he just had to do. . . . And that at the very moment when he discovered what it was, he found out that this was the last thing in the world he was equipped to do. . . . Because he was born in West Virginia, in the mountains. (179)
Through “the melodic structure of perceiving consciousnesses, and the rhythms of phenomenological time” (Stowell 59), Quentin reconstructs historical material as would any individual in reality—piecemeal, through surmise and speculation. He is confronted by a story whose characters he guesses at, and his deliberate exploration of these characters and events results in an expanded awareness of his own condition.

Some critics fail to notice any ratiocinative connections and argue that Absalom’s message is primarily chaotic. Walter Slatoff points out that at the end of Absalom there are four commentaries on the meaning of the Sutpen story, each commentary offering the reader a different impression (171). The first is provided by the image of the idiot Jim Bond. The remaining link to the Sutpen legend, Bond howls like an animal until he is driven away like one. The second is provided by the end of Mr. Compson’s letter, which offers a half-hearted and pathetic "hope" that Sutpen is punished while Miss Rosa receives the commiseration that she deserves. The third commentary belongs to Shreve the Northerner who summarizes the story with a
ruthless absurdity and taunts Quentin with a cruel: "Now I want you to tell me just one more thing. Why do you hate the South?"

Then there is Quentin's final commentary of "I don't! I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!" (303). Slatoff is correct in assuming that "on a cognitive level" there is "no resolution" to the ending of the novel and that Quentin's bitter repetition is "a psychological oxymoron of simultaneous love and hate, with internal conflict and self-contradiction."

The conflicting and self-contradicting machinery of Quentin's mind has been delimited. Accordingly, Slatoff's skepticism is understandable. By the end of Absalom, the only thing the reader can say with absolute certainty is that Quentin and Shreve "create a harrowing tale of revenge, incest, miscegenation, and fratricide out of the few details he garners from Rosa and Mr. Compson" (Young 322).

It would be incautious, however, to interpret Faulkner's impressionistic epistemology in cognitive terms alone. For example, when Absalom is reduced to the bare elements of plot, action, and chronology, it becomes little more than a morality tale indicting monomania, violence, and racism. But to the
literary impressionist, depicting time chronologically runs contrary to psychological realism. As Leon Edel points out, the "mind cannot accomodate itself to chronological or mechanical time, but is constantly moving blocks of time from past-to-present-to-past, and without regard for logical sequence" (100). This certainly holds true for Quentin, whose obsession with the past is of central concern to the meaning of Absalom. In Faulkner's own words, "Life is motion, and motion is concerned with what makes man move. . . . The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed," which Faulkner does faithfully in his literature (Stein 49). Faulkner also explains that "time is a fluid condition which has no existence except in the momentary avatars of individual people. There is no such thing as was--only is. If was existed, there would be no grief or sorrow" (Stein 132).

Faulkner is saying that was, or memory, is always with us, and since it is ever present in thought, it ceases to be an object of the past. Furthermore, time exists only in the here-and-now of our "momentary avatars" which, as we have seen, can be reduced
to phenomenological shards of impression and thought. As Jean-Paul Sarte has shown, Faulkner "decapitates time" in his novels because his heroes "never foresee: the car takes them away, as they look back" (74). This violation of chronological sequence is in imitation of the human consciousness itself; throughout Faulkner's stories, "blocks of time" glide untethered through the text like disembodied spirits. In the absence of a palatable here-and-now, hope surrenders to "that might-have-been which is the single rock we cling to above the maelstrom of unbearable reality" (120), consciousness becomes mostly memory, and impressions of the past are held suspended in and given the texture of the present. As Quentin "looks back" obsessively, he closes off his future, and his "psychological oxymoron," which is a symptom of his unresolved conflict with this everpresent past, manifests itself in the shock he feels when he meets the ghost-person of Henry Sutpen, who has finally come home to die. In the end, Henry the ghost-person, the physical manifestation of the past, catalyzes in Quentin a phenomenological change that even
Quentin seems to have perceived and comprehended during a lucid moment of ratiocination:

Maybe happen is never once but like ripples maybe on the water after the pebble sinks, the ripples moving on, spreading, the pool attached by a narrow umbilical watercord 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. (210)

Yet the “narrow umbilical watercord” is only a temporary link between separate realities, separate moments, in the unconscious mind’s domain of guilt, regret, lust, and revenge. Quentin’s shock of recognition is merely another addition to an ever-expanding pattern of phenomenological meaning.

To use another analogy, if we view the ending of the novel as we would a Monet painting, we detect a paradoxical resolution. When one studies a Monet painting from three feet, he is likely to see little more than a blur of soft-toned red, blue, yellow and green hues, yet when he removes to a distance of, say, fifteen feet, before him sprawls a tranquil lily pond, a surrounding forest, and a boat carrying two reposed lovers. When considered metaphorically as a literary painting of Sutpen, Absalom is a tragic masterpiece
with each allusive character and chain of events representing an amorphous color that gains distinctive shape and form only when the canvas is viewed from the proper distance. Jim Bond, Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, Shreve, and Quentin all shade the Sutpen portrait in an impressionistic blend of human emotion, and their fatalistic composite produces an artificial re-creation of reality which, by its very ambiguity, its very unknowability, approaches verisimilitude, approaches what Kronegger describes as "the flickering, unstable semi-transparent moment-to-moment being of consciousness" (61) that, with other flickering moments, coalesces into a coherent but mysterious image. And what are we to make of Miss Rosa's mysticism? No clue is presented in the novel to explain how she "knows" that "something" is in the Sutpen mansion. It seems that a Cassandralike intuition and unshakable faith justify her actions. As Hyatt Waggoner points out in his essay "Past as Present: Absalom, Absalom!:

Considered as an integral symbol the form of Absalom says that reality is unknowable in Sutpen's way, by weighing, measuring, and calculating. It says that without an "unscientific" act of imagination and even faith—like Shreve's and Quentin's faith in Bon—we cannot know the things which are most worth knowing. (183)
Ultimately, the unknowability of Sutpen’s way, combined with Shreve’s and Quentin’s acts of imagination, reveals the impossible and yet exhilarating task Faulkner has set for himself in advancing his epistemology. The truth is that he tries to elucidate the experience of the ineffable even though the structure of *Absalom* leads the reader to conclude that one might never perceive enough to obtain definite knowledge of the human soul. At best, understanding “truths of the heart” in Faulkner’s impressionistic fiction “consists of perceiving and knowing one’s fluid relationship to the ever-changing world” (Stowell 45).
CHAPTER 4

IMPRESSIONISM AND MORALITY IN THE NOVEL

Some critics believe that impressionism signifies the desintegration of meaning. At impressionism's extreme boundary, they assume, stability and coherence dissolve completely and take on the character of the fragmentary. As we recall, Kronegger is convinced that "impressionist creations become autonomous entities, reflecting a detachment of social, political, religious and sacred events," and that impressionistic writers have separated themselves from "the historical and mythological worlds of classical antiquity as well as with the religious world of scripture" (21). Julia Van Gunsteren claims that "reality is illusory" to the literary impressionist (53). Flaubert says that the ideal book is one "about nothing, a book with no exterior attachment . . . a book which would have almost no subject, or whose subject at least would be almost invisible, if that is possible" (Steegmuller 228-29).
They misunderstand the essence of literary impressionism. In truth, an impressionistic novel can have a very visible subject, and it can present a compelling depiction of reality. Faulkner, it should be noted, is a heuristic writer. It seems to be in his nature to combine impressionism with issues of morality, which is what he does in *Absalom*. Our discussion has already demonstrated how psychological and philosophical meaning can proceed from an impressionistic rendering. Now we must analyze the "social," "religious," "historical and mythological" imagery imbedded in *Absalom*’s unusual narrative and show how the impressionistic structure of *Absalom* leads to an overwhelming moral conclusion.

Here some key ideas need to be reintroduced. First, in Faulkner’s own words, without Quentin the novel becomes "complete apocrypha." Next, Waggoner notes that the form of *Absalom* should be considered as "an integral symbol" and that within this symbolic realm, "reality is unknowable in Sutpen’s way." Finally, Stowell’s theory of "subjective objectivity" sensibly acknowledges the importance of the object in impressionism’s subject/object relationship. The combination of
these concepts corresponds with Faulkner’s impressionistic understanding of human existence. In *Absalom*, Quentin represents a central consciousness that interprets a surrounding organic reality in terms of an interactive subject/object relationship. Included in *Absalom*’s organic reality are religious, moral, historical, and mythological elements. These elements exercise a considerable influence on the subject/object relationship, which is, in turn, a fundamental aspect of impressionism. Therefore, it is naive to assume that any impressionistic work can be entirely “about nothing, a book with no exterior attachment,” because it is impossible to separate subject from object in an impressionistic work. *Absalom* is no exception. It is a novel that demonstrates an unusual pattern of meaning derived from an ever-growing collection of subjective responses to certain “exterior attachments.”

These subjective responses are interpreted not only by Quentin, but by the reader as well, and this raises another important point. *Absalom* is structured in the form of multiple narratives, with each narrative offering varying degrees of
information. Through an accumulation of data gathered from each successive passage, the reader develops a knowledge considerably broader than the knowledge gained by any of the characters in the novel. In effect, he becomes the primary center of consciousness. He observes the limitations of each character's mind, which allows him to avoid the same errors in reasoning. For example, from beginning to end, Rosa never seems to realize that Bon had a mistress, much less a half-sister named Judith Sutpen. To her vindictive way of thinking, Sutpen is an "ogre" who rejects the marriage of his daughter for reasons that appear purely evil. On the other hand, in Chapter IV, Mr. Compson confesses a knowledge of Bon's Creole mistress, yet initially he is unaware of the blood relationship between Judith and Bon. Representing a still greater source of knowledge is Quentin, who has been told by his grand-father that Bon and Judith were indeed related. Yet Quentin is not aware of Bon's mixed blood until after his meeting with Henry. The reader, too, is teased into searching for motives that do not become evident until late in the novel. Most notably, although Bon's murder is cited as fact in Chapter 1, the circumstances are
not provided until a stockpile of information has been gathered by Chapter VIII.

As the individual with the most information, the reader is also the one most qualified to make informed conclusions regarding the Sutpen fiasco. This point was well brought out in an exchange during one of Faulkner's class discussions at the University of Virginia:

Q: Mr. Faulkner, in Absalom, Absalom! does any one of the people who talks about Sutpen have the right view, or is it more or less a case of thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird with none of them right?

A: That's it exactly. I think that no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. So these are true as far as Miss Rosa and as Quentin saw it. Quentin's father saw what he believed was truth, that was all he saw. But the old man was himself a little too big for people no greater in stature than Quentin and Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson to see all at once. . . . It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth. (Gwynn 273-74)

Each way "of looking at the blackbird" is, in fact, another narrative design that adds to the reader's growing understanding
of events. Stowell classifies this structure of multiplicity as decidedly impressionistic and applies it to his theory of "subjective objectivity." Through multiple viewpoints, he says,

the world becomes objectified by the mere fact that one point of view acts as a check on the other. This allows us to believe we are experiencing a balanced reality, that we are privy to both the inside and the outside world, the subject and the object. (222)

We have already seen how the inside world of the subject is not so easily explained or understood. However, through multiple narrations that lead to an expanding awareness of outside, or objective, events, more obvious conclusions can be reached. Absalom is "a narrative about narrative" that lends itself to ratiocination (Reed 147). Joseph Reed considers the most important narrative design in the story "a perfect arrangement" between "Quentin the Teller and Shreve the Hearer" (168). Lynn Gartrell Levins detects four narrative forms in the novel--Rosa's Gothic, Mr. Compson's Greek tragedy, Quentin's chivalric romance, and Shreve's tall tale--which leads her to conclude that "not one figure of Thomas Sutpen emerges by the end of the novel, but
four" (9). Cleanth Brooks sees Quentin as the sleuth in "a wonderful detective story" (Faulkner 311).

While each of these critics interprets the design of Absalom uniquely, it is difficult to deny that the narrative voices conspiring to form Faulkner's "fourteenth" way of looking at the blackbird equal a tragic vision that condemns the horrors of racism and slavery. As we recall, the perceiving consciousness draws impression from the unconscious, or through "an 'unscientific' act of imagination or even faith." This idea underscores the importance of the impressionistic influence in Absalom because feeling, not reason, springs from the unconscious. To acknowledge feeling, to "hear it in the deep heart's core," as Yeats puts it, (39), is as much a part of the novel's essence as is Sutpen's way of "weighing, measuring, and calculating." Insofar as a feeling simply is, some phenomena are capable of appearing absolutely and unconditionally wrong. This, the crucial link between impressionism and morality in Absalom, requires acceptance of a pronounced authorial intrusion. Like his fictional character Quentin, or the reader who represents the
fourteenth way of looking at the blackbird, William Faulkner the narrator must also be regarded as a perceiving consciousness that exists within the organic reality of his novel. Using "subjective objectivity" as his model, Faulkner the creator expresses the subjective impression, or feeling, that Thomas Sutpen's grand design and the roots of the Southern tradition are all wrong. Williamson ably articulates Faulkner's attitude toward his home and heritage:

Faulkner argued that the modern Southern order was not natural or harmonious, either in slave times or since. Values had been diminished, obscured, and all but lost: sex roles, race roles, and--to use a convenient term he wisely never used--"class" roles had been misconstrued. Institutions had been created (religious, economic, social, and political) that were incongruent with or even hostile to the "eternal verities." The result was that individual Southerners often found themselves off balance and at war within themselves between their concern for what Is and what Ought To Be. Faulkner neatly caught the essence of those struggles when he said, in his Nobel Prize speech, that the true story of man was that of "the human heart in conflict with itself." (359)

Faulkner chooses to express this feeling symbolically in Absalom. Hence, there is yet another form of resolution supported by the novel's impressionistic structure and inspired by
Faulkner's sense of morality that needs to be discussed. Essentially, racism produces tragic results. By establishing a tragic tone and maintaining it throughout, Faulkner elevates a tale that two thousand years ago would not have passed for tragedy. Undeniably, Thomas Sutpen is not wholly tragic in the classical sense. Far from being a high-born figure who falls from a lofty height, Sutpen is poor white trash from the hills of West Virginia who learns nothing from his hubris. His last words of “Don’t you touch me. . . . Stand back, Wash” (231) indicate no signs of repentance or revelation. His death is pathetic—he is hacked to pieces by Wash Jones, a sycophant land squatter and Sutpen's business partner. However, other Sutpen qualities conform to the classical definition: He possesses an imposing stature: the townspeople of Jefferson believe that "given the occasion and the need, this man can and will do anything" (35). He is a man "not liked . . . but feared" (57), willing to fight his slaves man-to-man, which no other plantation owner in Jefferson would dare attempt. He is awarded for his martial prowess in the Civil War and rises to the rank of Colonel. A moral blindspot
contributes to his demise--his innocence of the nuances intrinsic to Southern society, combined with his ruthless disposition, lead to the collapse of his grand design. The mere fact that he pursues a grand design and fails is in the tragic tradition.

Faulkner uses mythological and Biblical allusions to intensify the novel's impressionistic message. Sutpen the "demon" has a face like "the mask in a Greek tragedy" (49). He is Jefferson's favorite spectator sport. The community chants a chorus "in steady strophe and anti-strophe: Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen" (24). (Nagel describes the use of hypnotic repetition in literature as an impressionistic device which engenders a "narrative evocation of mood, of the budding romance and its possibilities" [80].) In Sutpen's later years, he becomes an "ancient, stiff-jointed Pyramus" (144). Rosa speaks with "an air Cassandralike and humorless and profoundly and sternly prophetic" (15). Begging Rosa to "at least save Judith" from doom (15), Ellen is portrayed as "Niobe without tears" (8). Like Antigone, Judith requires that her brother receive a proper burial. Clytemnestra, or "Clytie," is Sutpen's harbinger of disaster:
"presiding aloof upon the new, she deliberately remained to represent ... the threatful portent of the old" (126). Sutpen is an inverted image of King David, whom God promised an eternal kingdom, hence the ironical title *Absalom*, with Henry and Bon playing the roles of Absalom and Amnon waging mortal combat over a defiled sister.

The novel’s ongoing ratiocination culminates with the revelation that Bon’s "mother was part negro" (283). Brooks speculates that Henry might be the person who informs Quentin of Bon’s ancestry: "Presumably, it was from Henry Sutpen that Quentin learned the crucial facts. Or did he? Here again Faulkner may seem to the reader either teasingly reticent or, upon reflection, brilliantly skillful" (*History* 199), but Brooks’ claim sounds more like a cautious guess than a confident statement of fact. The careful reader of *Absalom* knows that with every plot twist there is the likelihood of being told another "old mouth-to-mouth" tale, of being given another subjective impression of an objective reality. Nevertheless, the impression we do finally accept as real is the one in which Thomas Sutpen’s fear of
miscegenation ruins him. Sutpen's phobia creates a ripple effect of disaster that begins with his family and reaches to the depths of Southern society. Ellen is emotionally ruined when Sutpen breaks his children's engagement. Judith is doomed to be "the same as a widow without ever having been a bride" (167). She dies as a result of nursing the intractable and bitter Charles Etienne Bon. Henry becomes a dispossessed fugitive for murdering his half-brother. Clytie, because of her morganatic ancestry to Sutpen, refuses to live as a member of Black society yet is precluded from the racist environment of Southern white society. The idiot Jim Bond, "the scion, the last of his race" (300), watches the ramshackled Sutpen mansion burn to cinders until someone comes and drives him off.

Henry's murder epitomizes the tragedy in greater scope. Unlike his father who approaches life with a cruel logic, Henry (Quentin and Shreve infer) is a sensitive man who loves Bon, rescues him in battle, apes his manners, and is willing even to accept an incestuous marriage between Bon and Judith. Yet when Henry finds out that Bon is part Black, his ingrained prejudice
overpowers his compassion and he shoots Bon at the Sutpen gate. How Henry, who as a little boy vomits at the sight of his father fighting a slave, assumes such a proud and insecure disposition is a mystery. His conduct is a paradox in keeping with Absalom's impressionistic design.

It seems likely that through the Sutpen tragedy, Faulkner is intimating the decline of the Southern tradition. In the same way that the bleak, battle-scarred terrain of the Deep South correlates to the degenerating Sutpen family, Thomas Sutpen's grand design is flawed identically to the tradition he embraces. Both Sutpen and the South are punished for the moral violation of slavery, "as if nature held a balance and kept a book and offered recompense for the torn limbs and outraged hearts even if man did not" (202). The repeated failure of Sutpen's grand design illustrates the power of retributive justice. His mechanical logic, will to power, and lack of compassion deal him a fate similar to that of the plantation owner who once commanded a Black servant to turn the fourteen-year-old Sutpen away. Indeed, the owner of Sutpen's Hundred turns Wash Jones away as casually as he might
swat a fly. Yet years after the war, a swollen, profligate Sutpen struggles with Wash to run a meager store in the heart of a once-fertile country inhabited by men

who risked and lost everything, suffered beyond endurance and had returned now to the ruined land, not the same men who had marched away but transformed... into the likeness of that man who abuses from very despair and pity the beloved wife or mistress who in his absence has been raped. (126)

Finally, four decades after Sutpen's death, the Sutpen mansion, the last substantial testament to his prowess, perishes in flames. Perished, too, has the notion that an author's impressionistic message cannot lead to a moral conclusion. By studying a fusion of subjective, multiple viewpoints, the careful reader perceives Faulkner's unequivocal message.
Absalom is an impressionistic tour-de-force. It is an exemplum that champions the primacy of perception. It is a lesson on how subjective impressions of an objective reality can lead to an awareness more intuitive than logical. It is a testament to the inductive complexity of psychological realism, to the power of everpresent memory. It is a model of the ratiocinative process that often leads to an irresistible conclusion. It is one of the most important novels that, until now, has never been interpreted extensively in impressionistic terms.

The school of literary impressionism deserves resuscitation for two main reasons. First, it formally introduced the idea that individual perception can be as important to the structure and meaning of a novel as the development of plot. This idea exposed writers to more literary possibilities than can be described in this summary, but to our second point, impressionism advanced the cause of the psychological novel, and
what, if nothing else, is *Absalom* but a psychological novel? As our discussion has shown, impressionism and psychology are virtually synonymous aspects of *Absalom*’s difficult message. More to the point, the impressionistic structure of the story represents a depiction of the mind and its perceived surroundings that should be considered more realistic than the ones offered by the vast majority of novels that are limited by conventional narrative structures.

It should be emphasized, too, that if writing reflects the mind of its writer, then Faulkner was neither a champion of Saussurean linguistics, nor an inventor of postmodern theories that emphasize the instability of language. He was as much a moralist as he was a writer of psychological novels, and he was a very didactic moralist at that. Hence, *Absalom*’s impressionistic narrative design proceeds toward, and not away from, a meaningful social, historical, and psychological statement. The Sutpen legacy cannot be reduced to one letter and a few gravestones. Therefore, Faulkner’s fiction offers us a new way of interpreting the impressionistic novel. Insofar as a healthy
perception of reality depends upon new perspectives, perhaps this fresh reading of Absalom will come to represent literary impressionism's fourteenth way of looking at a blackbird.
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