

**THE UNPARDONABLE SIN MOTIF IN MOBY-DICK
AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM!**

DENISE ANN KANNAWIN

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN MOTIF IN
MOBY-DICK AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

An Abstract
Presented to
The Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Denise Ann Kannawin
September 1976

ABSTRACT

In The American Notebooks Hawthorne describes the Unpardonable

Sin:

The Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into its dark depths . . . from a cold philosophical curiosity,--content that it should be wicked in whatever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out. Would not this, in other words, be the separation of the intellect from the heart?¹

The course of the Unpardonable Sinner begins idealistically, but the investigation necessarily requires a lack of consideration which is then aggravated until the intellect is foreign to the heart. The Head-Heart psychology, so central to Hawthorne's works, is a principal element in the author's depiction of the Unpardonable Sin and recapitulates the basic hero-chorus conflict of classical tragedy. This concept and several other themes give form to the Unpardonable Sin motif and are examined here for comparison to Melville's and Faulkner's use in Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom! respectively.

Hawthorne's conception of the violation of the human soul as classically tragic provides the thematic structure for his Unpardonable Sin motif. Thus, the tragic implications of this motif have prompted a number of critics, notably Richard Chase, John Lewis Longley, and Cleanth Brooks, to interpret Ahab and Sutpen as tragic figures. What

¹The American Notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne, ed. Randall Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), p. 106.

has largely been ignored is the function of the Unpardonable Sin in their stories. This essay does not purport to be a study of Hawthorne's influence on Melville and Faulkner; it seeks to identify how they modify Hawthorne's concept of the Unpardonable Sin by giving flesh and blood expression to their sinners. Thus foreshadowed by Hawthorne's allegorical sinners, Ahab anticipates and Sutpen epitomizes the egocentric modern hero, a figure thoroughly human but without a sense of humanity.

Chapter One examines the mood of the nineteenth century that altered the writers' concept of the role of man in relation to his environment. For the most part, this change dissolves the responsibilities once felt by the classical figure and thus reshapes the career of the modern hero, who is neither a descendant of the gods nor of royalty. A discussion of Hawthorne's concept of the Unpardonable Sin introduces the possibility of tragic action occurring without a tragic hero. James E. Miller's notion of the "Adamic dreamer" as the first phase of the Unpardonable Sin recalls R.W.B. Lewis's thesis that the predominant image in the intellectual mid-nineteenth century was that of the American as Adam. Implicit in the Adamic characterization is innocence seeking knowledge and inexperience resulting in distorted perception. Misdirected by his own lack of perspective, the Adamic dreamer reacts in the manner of the acute paranoiac with unswerving dedication to a single course of action. Ahab's "quest" and Sutpen's "design" are such courses of action--both are obsessed by the mania, both sin unpardonably in the pursuit of the dream.

Chapters Two and Three examine the Unpardonable Sinner motif in Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom! respectively. The discussion identifies classically tragic patterns and indicates how the modern variations alter

the depiction of the hero.

Chapter Four concludes the essay by restating the thesis and recapitulating the major points. Lack of remorse and reconciliation are identified as disqualifying the careers of Ahab and Sutpen as tragic. However, the tragic cycle continues beyond the death of the hero in the ambivalent life-in-death of the chorus, which must suffer for the lack of catharsis.

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN MOTIF IN
MOBY-DICK AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Denise Ann Kannawin
September 1976

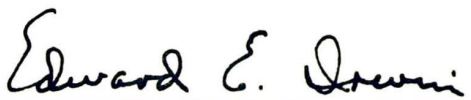
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Denise Ann Kannawin entitled "The Unpardonable Sin Motif in Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom!." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

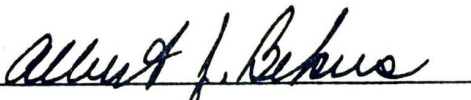


Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:



Second Committee Member



Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Council:



Dean of the Graduate School

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. <u>MOBY-DICK</u>	9
III. <u>ABSALOM, ABSALOM!</u>	24
IV. CONCLUSION	39

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As contemporaries, Hawthorne and Melville can be seen as having experienced the same "New England Conscience." However, the tradition of treating Hawthorne and Melville as "literary siamese twins" tends to obscure their diverse personalities. Seymour Gross objects to this "twinning" and cites the cultural and philosophic climate of their heritage and environment as responsible for fashioning Hawthorne and Melville as writers of a certain type of fiction. While English, French, and Russian writers of the same era experimented with traditional European forms, American writers had not established a serious fiction. Hawthorne and Melville, Gross contends, were "forced" to become writers of romances.² Themes of innocence and initiation, associated with Romantic fiction, appear in both and are of particular importance in the characterization of the Unpardonable Sinner.³

A few critics, notably Malcolm Cowley and Randall Stewart, have offered comparisons of Hawthorne and Faulkner. The initial linking is found in the first serious criticism of Faulkner in 1939 with George

²Seymour L. Gross, "Hawthorne versus Melville," Bucknell Review, Dec. 1966, p. 89.

³Because Ahab's dismemberment occurs prior to Ishmael's narrative, themes of innocence and initiation do not become principal parts of his characterization. However, Ahab believes his wounding to be a revelation of evil. The initiation destroys his acceptance of the natural world and banishes his human sympathies.

Marion O'Donnell's "Faulkner's Mythology." In one instance O'Donnell makes the comparison: "The only close parallel in American literature is the better works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whom Mr. Faulkner resembles in a great many ways."⁴

Some twenty years later, Randall Stewart published "Hawthorne and Faulkner" to "extend to a few pages what has usually gotten only a few sentences."⁵ Citing the obvious stylistic contrasts of Hawthorne's normal narrative procedure and authorial omniscience with Faulkner's complicated time arrangements and Stream-of-Consciousness, Stewart notes that the reticence of Hawthorne and the frankness of Faulkner are extensions of each author's environment. The Puritan chill of Hawthorne's experience is mirrored in the neoclassical gravity and objectivity of his works. What Stewart identifies as Faulkner's "dithyrambic utterances" proves a reflection of the passionate South.

The differences are as significant as the similarities. The historical and social backdrop most often used in comparing Hawthorne and Melville proves equally facile in comparing Hawthorne and Faulkner. Mr. Stewart examines the reactions of Hawthorne and Faulkner to their respective regions and discovers that both the reactions and the regions are similar. Faulkner's South and Hawthorne's New England experienced the impact of industrialism on an agrarian economy and on a traditional social structure. The encroachment of "progress" engendered in each writer a strong attachment to the past. Faulkner's reliving of the Civil War compares to Hawthorne's obsession with the Salem witchcraft

⁴George Marion O'Donnell, "Faulkner's Mythology," Kenyon Review, 1 (Summer 1936), p. 292.

⁵Randall Stewart, "Hawthorne and Faulkner," College English, 22 (Nov. 1960), p. 128.

trials. Both wrote with the knowledge that their predecessors played significant roles in these events. And both were aware of the misadventures and the "sins of the fathers." Yet each was a patriot, an inheritor of an inescapable past, and a loyal son. Characteristics of the New England individual resemble those of the pre- and post-Civil War Southerner--a suspicion of outsiders and a curious attraction to and repulsion from their histories. Inheritors of the two cultures bear the stigma of their predecessors' sins; yet they also embrace the legacy, curious of its commission.

Strangely enough, the "palpable presence of the past" that generates the mythic expansiveness of Faulkner's work is the same element that limits Hawthorne to less exotic workmanship. Most of Hawthorne's characters, particularly his Unpardonable Sinners, are less than worldly, less than realistic, as a result of the author's romantic mystifying. An oppressive past bears heavily on Hawthorne's sinners and figures strongly in what is, for the most part, the production of allegory.

Key articles on the similarities between Ahab and Sutpen are not to be found. Critics generally dispense with the topic in a sentence by mentioning the two characters' maddened rushes toward self-destruction. It is shown here that the characterizations of Ahab and Sutpen give human significance to the Unpardonable Sinner motif and represent the modern shift away from the classical scheme of tragedy, away from the prescriptions of allegory.

The transition has as its basis, in both nineteenth-century New England and the Civil War South, the deterioration of traditional patterns with the rise of industrialism. When a growing worldliness

brought on by scientific advancements revealed that man need not be determined by the social standard into which he was born, society became more flexible and less religious. In both eras, the shifting social structure offered hope along with uncertainty. The flux which allowed for new identities actually burdened many with the loss of identity. For viewers of Sophocles and Shakespeare, nobility and commonness were fixed at birth; one was born into his station. Modern audiences can assume no single vision of greatness or commonness; the concept of a unified reaction shatters with the fragmenting force of social and economic mobility.

Grecian heroes, honor-bound by eons of royal standards, attained tragic stature in the struggle to maintain the integrity of the state and the exclusive family. In the abstract, the maintenance of these traditions represents the conservation of a harmonious world order. The decline of these loyalties and the impact of self-reliance in the Emersonian age ushered in the fatalistic world order of Naturalism. Ahab and Sutpen, as considered modern heroes, have been identified by various critics as tragic when, in fact, they are exemplary figures of the anti-hero at odds with a Naturalistic universe.

Tragic action abounds in both Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom!; but, in the classic sense, a tragic hero is absent. The curious mix is the result of the Unpardonable Sinner motif. The perceptive handling of this motif by Melville and Faulkner demonstrates the significant break from classical and Elizabethan patterns with the depiction of the hero as egomaniac. The process of Unpardonably Sinning is both generally destructive and self-destructive. While the expressed goals of Ahab and Sutpen--to abolish evil in the world in the one case and to estab-

lish a dynasty in the other--are not unlike classical ambitions, the means to these ends are inglorious and unpardonable.

In "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," James E. Miller describes the course by which Adamic dreamers dissolve into Unpardonable Sinners: "Once consumed with a passionate desire to set the world aright, to correct the vast imperfections of the universe, Hawthorne's men of little vision start down that byway to the pit, a byway whose route is marked by a number of clearly defined stages."⁶ A review of Miller's stages provides a means of identifying various Unpardonable Sinners in Hawthorne's works as well as outlining the tragic action of Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom!.

Hawthorne's Head-Heart conflict is the primary step in the process--the protagonist as Adamic dreamer seeks to elevate his intellect at the expense of his humanism.⁷ Once humanistic values are sacrificed, an overriding mania sets in as a consuming passion and gradually transmutes to a pride that erodes all human sympathies. Thus isolated from humanity, the Unpardonable Sinner is moved to impose his alien will on others and

⁶James E. Miller, "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," PMLA, 70 (March 1955), p. 101.

⁷R.W.B. Lewis's supposition that the image of the American as Adam figured predominantly in mid-nineteenth century intellectual life can be supported by reference to the recurrent initiation theme used by Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner to dramatize the Unpardonable Sin motif. Predicated upon movement from innocence to damnation, the motif illustrates the archetypal scheme of the Original Sin. "The figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history," is tempted by a figurative Tree of Knowledge and is compelled to span the distance between him and God by seeking the forbidden fruit. However, implicit in the scheme of a paradise is the anticipation of a degeneration and a fall. [See R.W.B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 1.] In the works of Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner the Unpardonable Sinner proves an interesting creature: he is Adam, God, and Satan.

to disregard the sanctity of the human heart. Frequently at this stage the Unpardonable Sinner reveals his allegiance to evil--the monomaniac continues to usurp the role of God as he forcefully shapes the lives of those within his sphere.

This brief overview omits the complexities inherent in the act of Unpardonably Sinning. Hawthorne's Head-Heart motif alone is wrought with endless possibilities. In "Hawthorne's Psychology of the Head and Heart," Ringe sees the egocentric quality of intellectualism as destructive of any means of achieving remorse or insight through human understanding. However, he continues theorizing, "Hawthorne seems to say, if one wishes to rise above the common level of humanity, he must divorce himself from men and deliberately court the sin of isolation."⁸ Intellectualization is the willful expansion of the ego. Intellectually to rise above the common level of humanity places one beyond those who exist in the balance of the head and heart. The ascent engenders isolation which can be enriching; or the ascent can be debilitating, plaguing the questor with an inscrutable universe. Once ignited, the ego is fired until white-hot, until it is no longer malleable.

Within the stages Miller outlines, one can note a gradual narrowing of perspective. Upon the inception of the mania, the Unpardonable Sinner begins to limit his vision. As he cultivates his egocentricity, the view of his original scheme is concentrated and his attentions are directed to the end of the tunnel, a pin-point. The protagonist, upon contemplation of the unhappy predicament of mankind, fires a mania; and the once-hopeful idealist becomes "too much obsessed with the ills of

⁸Donald L. Ringe, "Hawthorne's Psychology of the Head and Heart," PMLA, 65 (March 1950), p. 122.

the present."⁹ Miller explains that the Unpardonable Sinner is "blind to eternity, which also exists in the present."¹⁰ The Sinner's vision is obscured because he attempts to perceive with the imbalanced intellect what can only be perceived with the heart.

Unfortunately, the incongruities afforded by such a restricted viewpoint enrage the questor and suggest to him that what cannot be perceived by his intellect is thus non-existent. Recognizing only his intellect as supreme, the Sinner chooses himself, his design, as divine. D.E.S. Maxwell has noted this process, hypothesizing that the American habit of mind evidences a "dissatisfaction with an infantile rather than a saintly innocence."¹¹ It is a discomfort, a lack of knowledge, rather than a lack of faith, that drives Adam to the fall and that continues to compel latter-day Adamic figures to discover the secrets of unrevealed Nature. In this way, then, Unpardonably Sinning is linked with the human limitation of lack of insight. The Unpardonable Sinner compounds the circumstance by narrowing his perspective and denying any potential understanding to be found within heart-felt faith.

This lop-sided development banishes the notion of faith in a force beyond the intellect and thus stymies any acceptance of the inconsistencies present in a Naturalistic world. Acquiescence to the world order, by a faith that the Omnipotent has intentionally designed such a system for a grand purpose, offers the believer a hope, a calmness. The Unpardonable Sinner sees such a course of action as submission to the

⁹Miller, p. 92.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹D.E.S. Maxwell, American Fiction: The Intellectual Background (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 148.

irrational and unpredictable whims of a capricious divinity. While the human heart can abide inconsistencies, the total intellect abhors the apparent lack of design. To offset what appears to be a mismanaged world, the Unpardonable Sinner seeks refuge in the unwavering absolute of egocentricity.

CHAPTER II

MOBY-DICK

Melville's Moby-Dick offers the super-structure of tragic action without a tragic hero; specifically, the inherent tragic implications of Unpardonably Sinning fail to culminate in a tragic characterization. While Ahab's grand manner closely parallels classical patterns, his rabid ego precludes our interpreting him as a tragic hero. His efforts to annihilate evil are impelled not by a compassion for humankind but by a desire for personal revenge. So magnified is Ahab's self-concept that his purpose exaggerates accordingly. The mortals who inhabit Ahab's death-ship are enveloped in a drama made tragic by the villainous abuse of human souls.

In terms of tragic action, commission of the Unpardonable Sin is a grievous offense by any philosophy. Design of a setting capable of supporting the production of such tragedy depends primarily on the depiction of the Unpardonable Sinner. Unlike Ahab and Sutpen, Hawthorne's prototypical Sinners fall short of the aspect of the "grand criminal." Their nonauthoritative roles do not address the grave responsibilities and penalties of the aggressive ego.

Stewart asks, "Does Hawthorne ever quite show us man under the aspect of magnificence? Do his important actors ever quite tower?"¹²

¹²Stewart, p. 132.

As the act of Unpardonably Sinning progresses, Hawthorne's heroes tend to cave inward and to avoid an active confrontation with the world order. Hawthorne's characters lack a "Shakespearean super-structure" characteristic of Faulkner's heroes.¹³ In this chapter it is shown that Ahab's grievance and his lust for vengeance represent a profound ego, more fundamental than Young Goodman Brown's passive bitterness or the petty contests of the men in Beatrice's garden. The faint glimmers of unobtainable knowledge which entice Parson Hooper, Aylmer, and Digby remain glimmers.

Only Ethan Brand and Owen Warland approach the universality of Ahab in their searches for an absolute in the realm of the immortal. They differ from other Hawthorne characters in their initially unselfish intentions. For Brand the quest itself gradually requires an unholy prying into the souls of others, and in this way he Sins Unpardonably. For the Artist of the Beautiful, the search harms no one, and Warland is able to reunite with humanity. Both tales record the commission of the Unpardonable Sin, but each lacks the tragic action of Moby-Dick. Hawthorne's failure to specify Brand's actions while he roams the world contrasts sharply with Melville's exhaustive depiction of a more tangible "Brand" in the form of Ahab. Warland's obsession, paradoxically selfless, falls short of the tragic in that its goal is realized. Once the artist achieves the beautiful his quest ends, fulfilled without enraging the gods and without generating the "tragic qualm." While Brand and Warland remain the closest candidates for tragic characters, they become domestic examples, more akin to the Rachel's captain and to Starbuck than to the exotic Ahab. Transmuting their vision of the absolute to cowardly

¹³Stewart, p. 132.

ashes in a kiln and to a smashed mechanical butterfly belies the magnificence inherent in the Unpardonable Sin.

A discussion of the similarities between classic paranoia and Unpardonably Sinning reveals one reason why Hawthorne's Sinners lack the dimension of Ahab. The paranoid "persecution complex" compares to the Unpardonable Sinner's quest for knowledge denied mortals. When such a quest begets a tragic awareness that a Naturalistic order has the capacity to belittle the role of man in the universe, the Unpardonable Sinner senses a persecution and vows retribution. To prepare himself for the battle against the fatalistic forces, he becomes isolated; and without interpersonal contact, he becomes estranged from humanistic concerns. The aggrandizement of the intellect at the expense of such humanism shrinks perspective; and the Sinner, like the paranoiac, nurtures a distorted vision. Paranoid delusions focus on a major theme until "with time, more and more of the environment is integrated into his delusional system as each additional experience is misconstrued and interpreted in light of his delusional ideas."¹⁴ Similarly, the Unpardonable Sinner's diminished perspective prompts him to judge his surroundings and circumstances within the restrictions of his monomaniacal design. Often, "delusions of grandeur" develop to satisfy the paranoiac's belief that a "mission presents itself to one so equipped with superior abilities. Such exalted impressions are the basis of the Unpardonable Sinner's twisted logic that the world is at his disposal in order that he may achieve his goal. Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life, a standard text, warns that extremist paranoiacs assume

¹⁴James C. Coleman and William E. Brown, Jr., Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life, 4th ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), p. 312.

a tireless crusade with which there is always "the chance that they will decide to take matters into their own hands and deal with their enemies in the only way that seems effective."¹⁵ Unpardonable Sinners also conduct exhaustive careers and commit the Sin by violating the souls of those who obstruct their chosen means of obtaining their ends.

In this brief consideration of paranoia, it can be seen that the expanse between neurotic paranoia and full-blown psychosis delineates a basic difference between Hawthorne's Sinners and Ahab. Hawthorne's Sinners, in the manner of neurotics, remain in contact with reality, while the psychosis of Ahab erodes his rationality until the rift between his egomania and reality becomes insuperable.

In other regards it can be seen that the Romantic genre influencing Hawthorne's characterizations produces a different design in Melville. The subjective moralizing found in Hawthorne's works is absent in Melville's Moby-Dick because of the particular use of first-person narration. As foil to the protagonist, Ishmael reveals more of Ahab's madness in his unabashed wonderment and fear of the Captain than might possibly be revealed by Ahab's disclosed thoughts. The rational, unworldly Ishmael functions as the norm, reacting to the dynamic abnormality of the extraordinary egomaniac. As antithesis to Ahab, Ishmael represents the chorus in the tragic design wrought by the Captain's monstrous transgressions.

Melville's characterization of Ahab develops the motif of the Unpardonable Sinner as monomaniac and depicts the modern hero operating in a Naturalistic world. Creation of a mortal hero with immortal pursuits involves a narrative technique and expansion of the Unpardon-

¹⁵Coleman, p. 314.

able Sinner motif that Hawthorne never seems able to achieve. Dramatizing "madness maddened," Melville designs a super-structure to support the tragic capacities of maniacal egotism. It must be noted that the capacity for tragedy of the extraordinary man represents a vital element in the depiction of the maniac. It is the unrealized potential for the tragic, the failure to improve the moral order, that imparts a certain viciousness to Ahab's character and labels him an Unpardonable Sinner.

An Adamic and idealistic Ahab is blinded--blighted physically, morally, and psychologically by the onslaught of what he perceives to be the abstraction of evil, the White Whale:

. . . all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.¹⁶

As Unpardonable Sinner, Ahab's ideals darken with ever-diminishing insight until his being is possessed with the single cause. He is "gnawed within and scorched without, with the infixed unrelenting fangs of some incurable idea" (p. 162). The isolation and ultimate blasphemy Miller predicts occur within Ahab as he evidences paranoiac delusions. However, Ahab as Sinner differs radically from Hawthorne's portrayal of the type. Melville's distillation of madness and attendant tragic implications surpasses Hawthorne's moralism.

Ahab, not Melville, sees Moby Dick as the abstraction of evil; similarly, Ahab considers himself an abstraction--the sole instrument of

¹⁶Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), p. 160. All subsequent quotations from *Moby-Dick* are from this edition and will be referred to by page numbers within the text.

righteousness. Rejecting all religion, Ahab is the Greek-like "monstrosity of virtue."¹⁷ This "ungodly god-like man" is reputed to have spit in the chalice at the altar of the Santa Catholic Church, and Stubb remarks: "I never yet saw him kneel" (p. 197). In these ways he resembles the Greek tragic heroes who sanctioned personal vendettas against what they perceived as obstructing the moral good. The Greek dramatist recognized the danger and vastness in setting the hero against the gods, and therefore sought to portray this relationship rather than to develop human interrelationships.¹⁸

This is also the case in Moby-Dick. Ahab severs all relationships with his family and denies himself any brotherhood aboard ship. He is an "isolato" bent solely on his confrontation with Evil. Ahab's lack of perception does not permit him to see beyond the destruction of the whale. The revenge is both his immediate and ultimate aim. The comparison can be made with Orestes, whose revenge is not directed against any trespass upon family honor, but against what Arthur Miller would label a "wound of dignity."¹⁹ The transition from the classical family loyalty to personal revenge as the catalyst for the tragic indicates a major change in the characterization of the hero. The more pressure to conform, the more perverse the course to maintain individual dignity. The modern

¹⁷A.C. Bradley, "The Substance of Tragedy," in Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism, ed. Richard Levin, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960, p. 155.

¹⁸H.D.F. Kitto, "Greek and Elizabethan Tragedy," in Form and Meaning in Drama (Alva, Great Britain: Robert Cunningham & Sons Ltd., 1955), p. 58.

¹⁹Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism, p. 171.

hero, then, is invested with an egocentric drive to avenge a "wound of dignity," and as such represents a perversion of classical endeavors.

Ahab received his wound, both physical and spiritual, prior to Ishmael's narrative. No pain-crazed fever could have seared Ahab's brain as devastatingly as his own consciousness of evil in the universe. Ahab's recognition of the possibility, indeed the actuality, of an affront to his pride transmutes him to a vessel of dignity that becomes misguided by a demonic tenacity to remain undefiled.

Infused with a terrific pride, Ahab takes on the impotent wrath of lesser man, and refining his own outrage, sets out after the whale. Thus Ahab's classic hubris manifests itself after the fall, after he is shaken from the security of his self-perceived image. His over-weening pride distinguishes him in his refusal to remain passive in view of his discovery that the nature of the world has the capacity to degrade him:

"If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (p. 144).

For Ahab, then, an imperfect tragic wisdom appears simultaneously with the inception of the mania. This interpretation accounts for wisdom prior to any question of guilt or any suffering of remorse, and thus departs from Kitto's emphasis on tragic knowledge as a product of recognition, remorse, and suffering.²⁰

Ahab travels classical paths as the embodiment of vindictive righteousness. Indeed, he becomes a divinity as captain of the Pequod,

²⁰Kitto, p. 62.

for he rules a microcosm peopled by an international crew of heathens and God-fearing Quakers. Ahab's resolute unwillingness to depend on anything other than himself institutes him as his own omnipotent sovereignty: "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (p. 144). His total absorption with self is equally evident in the "Doubloon" Chapter. The three summits of the gold doubloon appear to Ahab as manifestations of himself: "the firm tower," "the volcano," and the "courageous . . . fowl." This egotism contrasts sharply with Starbuck's humility in his interpretation of the three peaks as signifying the Trinity.

Ahab has no patience with elements outside of himself and his quest. He mocks human science by smashing the quadrant and then fashioning his own. Ahab imagines that he suffers beyond the limits of mere human grief and feels he can no longer be pacified by human comforts, as seen in his abandoning of his pipe. In *Moby-Dick* the pipe-smoking of the cheerful Stubb and the shared pipe of Ishmael and Queequeg symbolize both contentment and brotherhood. Rejecting such an outlet, the soured and isolated Ahab declares himself outside the human community.

Just as his grieving cannot be allayed by human diversion, so it cannot be expressed in common prose. Ahab's soliloquies are free-standing poetry amidst pedestrian conversation. Note the powerful near-versification of the following passage in which Ahab reproaches the silent whale for what he perceives is the smugness of an indifferent and all-pervading Evil:

"Speak, thou vast and venerable head," muttered Ahab, "which, though ungarnished with a beard, yet here and there lookest hoary with mosses; speak, mighty head, and tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world's foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. Thou has been where bell or diver never went; has slept by many a sailor's side, where sleepless mothers would give their lives to lay them down. Thou saw'st the locked lovers when leaping from their flaming ship; heart to heart they sank beneath the exulting wave; true to each other, when heaven seemed false to them. Thou saw'st the murdered mate when tossed by pirates from the midnight deck; for hours he fell into the deeper midnight of the insatiate maw; and his murderers still sailed on unharmed--while swift lightnings shivered the neighboring ship that would have borne a righteous husband to outstretched, longing arms. O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine" (p. 264).

Rivalling the poetry of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, this passage is quoted extensively here to demonstrate Ahab's magnificent dementia. The compelling speech reveals Ahab's distorted vision that recognizes Moby Dick as the vigilant overlord of an evil universe. As his obsession becomes more intense, Ahab's perspective diminishes until he is unable to observe the world as a whole, choosing instead to view the sea as universal. Ahab's sweeping condemnation of Moby Dick carries with it his conviction that he must destroy the instrument of evil and thereby avenge his pride. He fears but two events: that a chance harpooner, with no sense of the whale's significance, should slay Moby Dick before he can, and that he should die before he can complete the task. Ahab's description of a sunset discloses the fear that his burden, proving too immense, might exhaust him:

"Yonder, by the ever-brimming goblet's rim, the warm waves blush like wine. The gold brow plumbs the blue. The diver sun--slow dived from noon,--goes down; my soul mounts up! she wearies with her endless hill. Is, then, the crown too heavy that I wear" (p. 147).

The western sun, symbolizing death, joins here with Ahab's allusion to Henry IV to indicate how responsible a role he considers himself accountable for.

However, to reduce to a finite crusade the elimination of evil from the world outreaches God's province and blasphemously limits the Infinite. This delusion exemplifies a classic symptom of paranoia as well as typifies the psyche of the Unpardonable Sinner. Scattered reports of Moby Dick's most recent violences fuel the Captain's belief that it is this particular whale that sanctions a perverse world. Ahab's righteous conviction that Evil "tasks" him, beckons him to a contest between equals, is a travesty of Christ's Temptation and indicates the magnitude of Ahab's profane usurpation of Christ's role.

The arrogation represents the Aristotelian concept of a pitiful and fearful incident and structures the basic tragic action of the hero opposed by the chorus. The chorus traditionally represents the common emotions and intellect, while the hero evidences a higher ethical code. When Ahab refuses to accept human limitations, when he refuses to endure his "wound of dignity," he then transcends the ordinary value system and lands squarely in the uncharted region of new values.²¹ In his urge to restrain his demented captain, Ishmael upholds the Christian virtues of brotherhood and forgiveness, and functions as the chorus of Greek tragedy:

²¹Both Karl Jaspers and Max Scheler discuss this value flux in essays included in Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Laurance Michel and Micheal B. Sewell (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 19 and p. 41.

But what is worship?--to do the will of God--that is worship. And what is the will of God?--to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man do to me--that is the will of God (p. 54).

Ahab repudiates the Golden Rule and formulates a new religion in the awesome baptismal ritual of the famous "Forge" Chapter:

Fashioned at last into an arrowy shape, and welded by Perth to a shank, the steel soon pointed the end of the iron; and as the blacksmith was about giving the barbs their final heat, prior to tempering them, he cried to Ahab to place the water-cask near.

"No, no--no water for that; I want it of the true death-temper. Ahoy, there! Tashtego, Queequeg, Daggoo! What say ye, pagans! Will ye give me as much blood as will cover this barb?" holding it high up. A cluster of dark nods replied, Yes. Three punctures were made in the heathen flesh, and the White Whale's barbs were then tempered.

"Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!" deliriously howled Ahab, as the malignant iron scorchingly devoured the baptismal blood (p. 404).

In his delirium Ahab becomes an "ungodly god-like" priest, brandishing a blasphemously christened harpoon to wreak vengeance on Moby Dick. Ishmael, earlier mesmerized by Ahab's demonic individualism, has by this time grown to fear Ahab's demented creed. Jaspers explains this transition as characteristic of the tragic cycle:

Tragic heroes embody the new idea, purely and uncompromisingly. They arise in sunlike splendor. Their real significance goes unnoticed at first, until the old way of life senses it danger and gathers all its forces to destroy the new in the form of its outstanding representative.²²

Typically, then, Ishmael as chorus rejects the "new idea" and adheres to the old way of life:

I forgot all about our horrible oath; in the inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it; . . . I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed . . . and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers' hands . . . and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much to say,--oh; my dear fellow beings (pp. 348-49).

²²Jaspers, in "The Tragic: Awareness; Basic Characteristics; Fundamental Interpretations," from Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism, p. 19.

At this point it can be seen that while the basic hero-chorus conflict structures the tragic action of Moby-Dick, Ahab differs significantly from classical heroes. The Unpardonable Sinner's credo, the fierce preservation of ego, is analogous to the "new idea" of tragic heroes in its intensity, but is a mockery of classical ethics in its purpose. In this regard, Richard Chase has noted that Ahab is a "false Prometheus," storming the gods not for a gift for man but purely to avenge himself.²³ Classically, the abstraction of the tragic hero enforces an isolation from the norm, the chorus; but the action inevitably resolves in the reunion of the hero with a society bettered by his endeavors. The Unpardonable Sinner, however, dedicated to a selfish course, trespasses the souls of those he encounters and irrevocably isolates himself from humanity.

The isolation warps Ahab's responsibility as Captain and instills that "certain sultanism" of the brain which compels him to negate the laws of both land and sea. Ahab symbolically severs all lines of community by refusing to participate in the seafaring tradition of "gamming." Divorced from humanistic concerns, Ahab comes into conflict with Ishmael's "Golden Rule" in a pivotal scene with the captain of the Rachel, who begs Ahab to give up chasing the whale long enough to recover his lost son:

"I will not go," said the stranger, "till you say aye to me. Do to me as you would have me do to you in the like case. For you too have a boy, Captain Ahab--though but a child, and nestling safely at home now--a child of your old age too--Yes, yes, you relent; I see it--run, run, men, now, and stand by to square in the yards."

"Avast," cried Ahab, "touch not a rope-yarn;" then in

²³Richard Chase, Herman Melville: A Critical Study (New York: Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 54.

a voice that prolongingly moulded every word--"Captain Gardiner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Good bye, good bye. God bless ye, man, and may I forgive myself, but I must go" (p. 435).

Ahab's denial is terrifyingly inhuman and blasphemous, for he does not call on God to forgive him, but himself. But to the deranged Ahab a greater purpose looms: to kill the force that indifferently strikes the sinner and the innocent. The abstract cannot stop for the particular. This the crux of the Unpardonable Sin motif, and the damnation of the monomaniac.

Soon after his refusal to aid Captain Gardiner, Ahab meets his adversary, Moby Dick. Three chases lead to the novel's climax, when Ahab recognizes the futility of his pursuit and invites destruction:

"Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in my topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear" (p. 468).

Ahab Sins Unpardonably even at the instant of death. Unable to see beyond his own importance, Ahab mistakenly views his death as "lonely" while, in fact, he condemns his crew to a similar fate. Ahab's vengeful gestures appear ineffectual even to him as he attempts to slay Moby Dick. Overwhelmed by what is in truth only the physical immensity of the whale, Ahab gives over to what he perceives as the infinite power of evil. The tunnel vision that plagues the Unpardonable Sinner obstructs Ahab's recognition that Moby Dick is but a product of a morally-neutral, natural world. The Captain dies thinking that his "topmost greatness" must yield to the

one force he considers larger than himself, the omnipresence of Evil. That his great purpose cannot translate to a final, personal justice, is his "topmost grief."

Of the crew, only Ishmael escapes Ahab's destruction. Ronald Mason, in The Spirit Above the Dust, hints that the real tragedy of Moby-Dick is not Ahab's violent death but the living death of Ishmael.²⁴ Richard Sewell seconds this contention in The Vision of Tragedy, noting that Ishmael moves toward a tragic truth and as such represents the chorus.²⁵ In classical tragedy it is only the chorus which survives with all its old values intact and the world order restored. The "tragic qualm" is allayed in the return to order. Both reader and chorus react together, just as Nietzsche records in The Birth of Tragedy:

I believe the cultured Greek felt himself absorbed into the satyr chorus . . . in fact all that separated man from man gave way before an overwhelming sense of unity which led back into the heart of nature. The metaphysical solace . . . that, despite every phenomenal change, life is at bottom indestructibly joyful and powerful was expressed concretely in the chorus of satyrs, nature beings who dwell behind all civilizations and preserve their identity through every change of generations and historical movements.²⁶

In the face of the irritant, foreign element of Ahab, an audience can once again assume an identity comparable to Greek and Elizabethan audiences. Its identity is all qualities that fall short of Ahab's excesses. His exaggeration blocks any empathy evoked by compassion for a great or common man suffering a plausible injustice. Ahab's great

²⁴Ronald Mason, The Spirit Above the Dust (London: John Lehmann, 1951), p. 205.

²⁵Richard B. Sewell, "Moby-Dick," in The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 104.

²⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956), p. 50.

purpose is insane. It is so terribly intense it creates a distance.

The mask works both ways: his obsession alienates the audience of men made common by its lack of Ahab's vigor, and it closes Ahab off from the distractions of the common man. In this way Ahab anticipates the isolated modern hero, The Unpardonable Sinner. Ahab Sinning Unpardonably is the absolute existing outside the particular, rather than the particular overwhelmed by the absolute as is the case with Hawthorne's characters.

CHAPTER III

ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

Like Ahab, Sutpen is guilty of violations of an inevitable nature as part of the grander scheme of tragedy. Sutpen's "innocence" resembles Ahab's "madness maddened" in that each flaw isolates the character from humanity and thus begins the cycle of the Unpardonable Sinner. The depiction of Sutpen's mania, his design, incorporates Hawthorne's notion of the Unpardonable Sin in much the same manner as Melville's portrayal of Ahab as megalomaniac. Faulkner's reverence for the "Central I-Am" compares to Hawthorne's concern for the inviolate soul and represents the fully-developed aspect of egocentricity in the characterization of the modern hero.

Unique not only in prose style but in structure, Absalom, Absalom! recounts Sutpen's history through several narrators of varying degrees of sympathy. The narrative scheme is further complicated by the classical ambivalence of tragic action which isolates the self-destructive hero from his passive witnesses, the chorus and audience. As commentators and moralizers, the narrators of Absalom, Absalom! represent the classical chorus which counterpoints the hero. It is the chorus of classical tragedy that by comparison enhances the hero's stature by assuming the passive role of observer. Intentionally or inadvertently, the narrators create an ambivalence in the reader as Sutpen's character emerges as alternately sympathetic and heinous. Readers must unravel

convoluted narrations, judiciously weigh biased accounts, and arrive at a definition of Sutpen. Various narrations leave one feeling Sutpen has been misjudged; however, Rosa then tells of his brutalities, and again his egocentric nature draws one to reconsider his iniquitous conduct.

When asked by an interviewer if the narrations of Absalom, Absalom! were but thirteen erroneous ways of looking at a blackbird, Faulkner replied:

"That's it exactly, I think that no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw though nobody saw the truth intact. . . . the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth."²⁷

As the individual recollections and assumptions of the narrators are aired, modified, and even discarded, the reader collects an assemblage that in the end is larger than the sum of the separate pieces. Lewis Leary, in the Introduction to Tuck's Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner, develops this idea with an insistence that "man's absorption in the continuum of time" makes for tragic action. Leary quotes Jean-Paul Sartre's expression of such time-in-space:

Faulkner's vision of the world can be compared to that of a man sitting in a convertible looking backward. At every moment shadows emerge on his right, and on his left flickering and quavering points of light, which become trees, men, and cars only when they are seen in perspective.²⁸

This perspective, then, so lacking in the character of Sutpen as Unpardonable Sinner, exists for the narrators of Absalom, Absalom! in differing degrees of acuteness. For the tragic hero, the perception of

²⁷Quoted from an interview during a class discussion at the University of Virginia. See Michael Millgate, The Achievement of William Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 152.

²⁸Dorothy Tuck, Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964), p. xiv.

self and the recognition of one's role in the world order is the end significance of the classical formula. In a discussion of The Unvanquished, John Longley, perhaps the best critic of Faulkner's tragic mode, emphasizes the importance of reversal and recognition as exemplified by the characterization of Colonel John Sartoris:

Ideally, perhaps, the moment of reversal and recognition should come all at once, as it does for Oedipus or Othello. But with Colonel Sartoris, the process is gradual. Somewhere in that process he has realized his own hollowness, his complete corruption . . . To state it another way, the classic tragic protagonist such as Oedipus, Hamlet, or Macbeth rejoices in an existence that allows him a superb scope of action in which to achieve self-realization, including self-knowledge.²⁹

Yet Longley maintains that Faulkner's most "profound tragic creation" is Sutpen: "He has all the tragic virtues with the exception of humanity, self-knowledge, and reconciliation."³⁰ It should be clear that while the Unpardonable Sinner motif evidences many tragic qualities,³¹ it is these three exceptions that characterize the Unpardonable Sinner and, as such, preclude a tragic interpretation.

Critics most often mistake the tragic action of Absalom, Absalom! as necessarily including Sutpen as a tragic hero. Longley, reviewing this body of criticism, admits that Faulkner's choice of the nineteenth century as the setting for both Absalom, Absalom! and The Unvanquished lends a certain aspect of tragedy to the heroes of these novels:

²⁹John Lewis Longley, Jr., The Tragic Mask (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), p. 195.

³⁰Ibid., p. 234.

³¹It should be noted that although there are characteristics of tragedy in Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner is more concerned with presenting Sutpen as an Unpardonable Sinner than as a tragic hero.

Sutpen and John Sartoris, especially when viewed in their dynastic patterns, are tragic heroes in the grand and completely tragic mold, partly because, of course, they are located in a remote and more "heroic" time, when presumably there existed that scope of action and choice large enough for heroic gestures.³²

While Sutpen's egocentric motives and utter lack of remorse are antithetical to an interpretation of his character as tragic, there is an unmistakable parallel between the tragic atmosphere of Absalom, Absalom! and Sutpen's personification of the South.

Sutpen's early life mirrors both the Edenic myth and the genesis of the South. His "innocence" compares to Adam's perfect state before the fall and to the frontier South in its virgin, wooded state. Impoverished, and yet aware that riches exist elsewhere, Sutpen nonetheless is not covetous:

. . . he was interested and would have liked to see the places once, but without envy or regret, because he just thought that some people were spawned in one place and some in another, some spawned rich (lucky, he may have called it) and some not, and that (so he told Grandfather) the men themselves had little to do with the choosing and less of the regret because it had never once occurred to him that any man should take any such blind accident as that as authority or warrant to look down at others, any others.³³

This mountaineer ethic is analogous to Adam's compliance with the disparity that denied the Tree of Knowledge to humans. Like Adam, Sutpen accepts the world "innocently," at face value, and is not cognizant of any inequities in the world order. Therefore, when confronted with the liveried servant and the shoeless man in the hammock, Sutpen responds as a mountaineer would to an equal who chooses to battle. Later, when

³²Longley, p. 192.

³³William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), p. 222. All subsequent quotations from Absalom, Absalom! are from this edition and will be referred to by page numbers within the text.

faced with the recognition of inequality, of "things he had forgotten he had even remembered," Sutpen must struggle to assimilate this rift in frontier morality. When he is turned away by the "monkey nigger," Sutpen is forced to reconcile this experience with his only known basis for measuring value, the rifle:

He no more envied the man than he would have envied a mountain man who happened to own a fine rifle. He would have coveted the rifle, but he would himself have supported and confirmed the owner's pride and pleasure in its ownership because he could not have conceived of the owner taking such crass advantage of the luck which gave the rifle to him rather than to another as to say to the other man: Because I own this rifle, my arms and legs and blood and bones are superior to yours except as the victorious outcome of a fight with rifles" (p. 228-29).

The leveling plane of victory and defeat for evenly-matched contestants exists for the mountaineer and suggests the honor-bound tradition of dueling. Sutpen discovers that another class of people operates outside his code and to them accrue out-weighting advantages. Challenged, Sutpen reacts according to his code: "But I can shoot him." His most recent experience, however, renders powerless his former belief in even contests. Aware of the world's capacity to degrade him, Sutpen, like Ahab, is infused with an imperfect tragic wisdom that to overcome the inequality, he must even the odds. Sutpen revises his mountaineer ethic in terms of his "rifle analogy":

If you were fixing to combat them that had the fine rifles, the first thing you would do would be to get yourself the nearest thing to a fine rifle you could borrow or steal or make, wouldn't it (p. 238).

This remark typically understates the violent nature of Sutpen's mania, violence further disclosed by the narrators in the reconstruction of the events leading to Sutpen's death. The "fine rifle" and means of obtaining such becomes Sutpen's design. The determination to attain a

higher level coalesces with a knowledge of evil and suggests the Adamic temptation and fall. Sutpen runs from the scene, finding himself in a cave unravelling the events. Symbolically and literally, he hammers out his design in the dark. The lack of perception that curses the Unpardonable Sinner follows the denial of Sutpen's "Central I-Am" and ironically arranges for his trespassing of others' souls. This irony is the nucleus of the Unpardonable Sinner motif.

When Sutpen emerges from the cave he sheds his bitter confusion and reacts "innocently" to his wounded dignity. Grandfather Compson recalls Sutpen's impression:

It was like that, he said, like an explosion--a bright glare that vanished and left nothing, no ashes nor refuse; just a limitless flat plain with the severe shape of his intact innocence rising from it like a monument . . . (p. 238).

The reaction is innocent in the sense that he does not seek an active revenge against those who "take such crass advantage of their luck." Rather, his design becomes a consuming mania to even the odds and to restore the competitive grace of equals. In this manner he resembles the Pre-Civil War South, which tirelessly fought for state sovereignty that would prevent domination by the industrial North.

As he methodically pursues his course, Sutpen differs from Ahab in that he lacks the malevolent spirit of the Captain. Absent from his actions is the brash, fanatical madness of Ahab. Yet Sutpen shares a comparable psychosis: the unswerving dedication to a reasonable end by purely irrational means. Ahab misjudges his own intentions, admitting instead: "All my means are sane, my motive and my object mad."³⁴ What is apparent in Ahab's quest is the same which is misunderstood of Sutpen's: "If he was mad, it was only his compelling dream which was insane and not

³⁴Melville, p. 162.

his methods" (p. 166). The Unpardonable Sinner's initial motive appears idealistic: for Ahab, to kill a maurading whale; for Sutpen, to establish a dynasty. But the hero and his object become exaggerated. Just as Ahab attributes universal evil to a single whale, so Sutpen dominates four generations on the basis of a single incident. As his purpose becomes distorted, an accompanying impairment of perception isolates the hero and destroys his humanism.

Grandfather Compson, recognizing Sutpen's innocence as his flaw, pinpoints the break from humanity as that moment Sutpen abstracts his experience at the rich man's house:

. . . that innocence instructing him . . . using his own rifle analogy to do it with, and when it said them in place of he or him, it meant more than all the human puny mortals under the sun that might lie in hammocks all afternoon with their shoes of . . . (p. 238).

In the manner of the Unpardonable Sinner, the gap between Sutpen and the existence he once embraced widens. Henceforth Sutpen systematically analyzes all events in view of his limited perception. Increasingly, his diminished insight fosters a distorted concept of the role of man in the world order. Leaving the cave and returning home, Sutpen is overwhelmed by an acute sense of futility, evidenced most strikingly in the scene of his sister at the pump. Faulkner, like Hawthorne, presents his character as dominated by his head rather than his heart, so that Sutpen views his sister without sympathy. He alternately sees her as a machine, rhythmically pumping and amorphous, and as an animal:

. . . the very labor she was doing brutish and stupidly out of proportion to its reward: the very primary essence of labor, toil, reduced to its crude absolute which only a beast could and would endure . . . (p. 236).

The contrasting images of his toiling sister and of the wealthy loungeur generate for Sutpen, not sibling compassion, but a wave of indignation

and impotence. When his father never inquires about the outcome of the errand that precipitated the visit to the house, futility again undermines Sutpen's "Central I-Am":

. . . I not only wasn't doing any good to him by telling it or any harm to him by not telling it, there aint any good or harm either in the living world that I can do to him (p. 238).

Sutpen adopts the Naturalistic philosophy that has already schooled him in futility and which now demands his self-reliance. His warped perception suggests that a lack of any apparent universal morality confers upon him responsibility to assume authority and devise a moral code. Again, Grandfather Compson explains that innocence was Sutpen's "trouble," as he suddenly discovered that willing or not he must complete the design, that he must "fix things right so that he would be able to look in the face of not only the old dead ones but the living ones that would come after him when he would be one of the dead" (p. 220). Sutpen leaves home with this idealistic, albeit deterministic, notion. He represents the fallen Adam leaving Paradise, cursed with a marred innocence and yet hopeful that the future will redeem futility and shame. Grandfather Compson recognizes this idealism as "trouble" because Sutpen never matures beyond this point. Sutpen can be likened to an apple knocked from a limb before ripening, only to lie beneath the tree to rot. His self-imposed alienation is as irrevocable as the break from the limb and his fate as certain. He could easily understand Ahab's reflection: "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run."³⁵

Sutpen's personal motive triggers his self-righteous mission and as such represents a treacherous mix of idealism and rationalization:

³⁵Melville, p. 149.

. . . because if he did not do it he knew that he could never live with himself for the rest of his life, never live with what all the men and women that had died to make him had left inside of him for him to pass on (p. 220).

The Unpardonable Sinner, misled by his deluded sense of justice, fails to recognize his rampant egotism as a force more ruinous than the original offense.

Sutpen, like Adam, leaves his paradise to establish a dynasty. It has been suggested earlier that the Unpardonable Sinner motif blends Satanic and God-like elements with the Adamic. Variouslly calling him "Beelzebub" and an "ancient, varicose demon," Rosa describes Sutpen as having a "faint-sulphur-reek in his hair, clothes, and beard." At the news of Sutpen's death, she exclaims, "Dead? You? You lie; you're not dead; heaven cannot, and hell dare not, have you" (p. 172). The ambivalence of a Satanic Adam is further complicated by the numerous allusions to Sutpen's God-like presence. The novel's opening description of Sutpen is as a "man-horse-demon" appearing out of a thunderclap. Master of a band of half-tamed blacks, he rules by an "ascendency of forbearance rather than by brute fear" (p. 37). In Rosa's narrative, Sutpen is revealed to Quentin as some blasphemous Creator overseeing as the house and formal gardens are dragged "violently out of the soundless Nothing . . . creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the Be Sutpen's Hundred like the oldtime Be Light" (p. 8-9). Appearing as having no past, and omnipresent even in death, Sutpen is a Jehovah-figure with no discernible beginning or end.

The Paradisiacal scheme of God-Adam-Satan occurs within Sutpen in much the same manner as within Ahab. Each incurs terrific responsibilities in his role as lord of a microcosm, the Hundred on one hand and the Pequod on the other. This accountability is matched only by their

extreme negligence. Were they to be tempered by the "eternal verities,"³⁶ the Adamic traits of naivety and vulnerability could mature to tragic significance; however, the egotism of Ahab and Sutpen obscures all but the private avenging and admits no balance of Head and Heart.

Obsessed by a single idea, Sutpen narrows his perspective and is limited to one judgment: whether or not a circumstance fits into his design. This naive simplicity is the basis for the materialistic rifle analogy as well as the "cake-pie" analogy that governs his moral code:

. . . it was that innocence again, that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of a pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out (p. 263).

The specific formulae of his material and moral codes do not account for the element of fate or for even a margin of error. Sutpen's innocence instructs that the acquisition of a given list of essential "ingredients" will successfully complete his design. The measuring, balancing, and mixing of these ingredients involve compromises between his dream and his ambition which Mr. Compson compares to riding a horse across country, "which you control only through your ability to keep the animal from realizing that actually you cannot, that actually it is the stronger" (p. 53).

³⁶The "eternal verities," those qualities that will inspire man to endure and prevail, are best summarized by Faulkner within his Stockholm Address:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of the past (Stockholm Address, December 10, 1950).

When the "cake-into-the-oven" theory repeatedly miscarries, Sutpen considers the possibility of fate's interference, instead of his consuming ambition. He represents that aspect of the Civil War Southerner who reckoned on a quick and easy victory, and was mystified by his losses and eventual defeat.

A virgin by his own specifications, Sutpen begins his design in Haiti, where he acquires a wife. Because he gives a full disclosure of his origin, Sutpen expects, although never demands, a similar accounting by his bride-to-be. Early in the marriage, when Sutpen discovers her Negro bloodlines, he systematically rejects her and Bon, his son by her, from the design: "'I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind'" (p. 240). Denying her as brutally as the servant denied him at fourteen, he assures himself that any injustice to her will be rectified by his provisions for her maintenance. But the stakes are higher, the emotional investment and responsibility more dear. He considers that fate has been averted and that a more cautious approach should be undertaken for the second try.

Sutpen arrives in Jefferson and builds his house over a five-year period, time long enough to be acquainted with village gossip and thus to avoid another miscalculation. He is described as coming to town to find a wife as if he were in the Memphis market to buy livestock. The intent is the same, to choose a breeder with pure bloodlines. He selects Ellen Coldfield on the basis that her father is known for his undeviating Puritanism and appears to Sutpen to be a good risk. Her death, after twenty-four years of marriage and bearing two children, is of no serious consequence to Sutpen, since he has secured what he needed most--a male heir.

Years later, Bon's appearance and graceful patience tax the limits of Sutpen's ambition. He considers compromising his dream and calling it fate:

. . . I did all that I set out to do and I could stop here if I wanted to and no man to chide me with sloth, not even myself--and maybe this the instant Fate always picks out to blackjack you (p. 240).

Grandfather Compson imagines that Sutpen shrugged off the notion of fate because even irony has boundaries beyond which all such appearances were either "just vicious but not fatal horseplay or harmless coincidence" (p. 266-67).

The intervening war offers the possibility that Bon could be killed in battle, thus rectifying the mistake. Sutpen rationalizes that whatever threat Bon presents to the design, it is the result of an old mistake, not "moral retribution." He delays any action on the matter, because until he can discover what that mistake had been he does not intend to make another. He hesitates because he lacks the perspective that could allow some sort of latitude in his inflexible code. Instead, he is "fog-bound by his own private embattlement of personal morality: that picayune splitting of hairs while . . . Rome vanished and Jerico crumbled" (p. 271).

His design withers with his own touch because his moral code of courage and shrewdness admits but one set of rules. He could destroy his design by his own hand by playing his "trump card" and revealing Bon's history. Or by remaining silent and allowing Bon and Judith to marry, the design would appear outwardly successful, but Sutpen would know it as a "mockery and a betrayal of that little boy" (p. 274). The ironic paternalism of the latter becomes the strategy to affect the former, to play the trump. It is a dynastic absurdity that sacrifices

the souls of offspring to redress one's wronged ego.

Bon, too, has been infected with the Unpardonable Sin. By treating Judith and Henry as mere tools to pressure Sutpen's recognition, Bon sins as his father. The design works through Henry as well. It is noxious bait that directs Henry to New Orleans to confirm Sutpen's allegations. And it is a curious love that authors Bon's murder. Willing to condone incest but not miscegenation, Henry kills Bon and in doing so affirms Sutpen's dogma.

For Sutpen the war on two fronts ends. Defeated and in ruins, the South is mirrored in Sutpen, who is now but a "shell of a man." Sutpen urges his neighbors to forget and to rebuild as he is, and "the country will take care of itself." The remark is a two-fold allusion to the restoration of the Hundred and to the reactivation of his original design, replete with the innocent logic that a given formula will invariably yield the desired effect.

With his only male heir in self-exile, Sutpen nonetheless is confident that he can start for a third time. He, like Ahab, is concerned only that he might not have enough time. Like Ahab, Sutpen considers that he has only one chance, "one last shot," to beget a male heir. But Sutpen and the South are doomed. Rosa, embittered by Sutpen's outrageous proposition to use her as an incubator, in turn, resents her ancestors' choice of the South for settlement. She feels it is a "land primed for fatality and already cursed with it" (p. 21). Mr. Coldfield bitterly rejects the South, insisting that it was destined to fail since it was built "not on the stern rock of morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (p. 260). Both could easily be speaking of the Sutpen curse. Both predict the South's fall and hint at what will

be that region's life-in-death. It is the gothic element of a land "peopled with garrulous outraged baffled ghosts" that both fascinates and repels Quentin.

This ambivalence suggests the true nature of the tragedy in Absalom, Absalom! and recalls Ronald Mason's observation of Ishmael's "living death" as the real tragedy of Moby-Dick. The Yoknapatawpha mythology is rich for Faulkner's same ambivalence and is an answer to the ancient question of why evil should exist in a divine creation: because evil eventually consumes itself with its own destructiveness while those distinguished by the "eternal verities" of courage, honor, and love endure and prevail.

Wash painfully learns how it had been possible for the North to defeat the South--"the gallant, the proud, the brave." Until his realization, Wash feels he has no right to doubt the man that "General Lee himself said in a hand-wrote ticket . . . was brave" (p. 290). Even after the war, Wash continually assures Sutpen, "they kilt us but they aint whupped us yit" (p. 278). His unquestioning faith in the design prompts Wash to accept Sutpen's use of Milly as a breeder, maintaining, "I know that whatever your hands tech, whether hit's a regiment of men or a ignorant gal or just a hound dog, that you will make hit right" (p. 284). With the birth of a girl, Sutpen calmly retires from his life-long quest to heal his injured "Central I-Am." His final act is to deny Milly even the simplest of courtesies, with more kindness shown to his just-foaled mare. It is the cold and central irony of the Unpardonable Sin that a wounded dignity inspires an idealism that warps to madness and injures others even more grievously than the original brutality.

An unrepentant, truly Unpardonable Sinner goads Wash into becoming an executioner. That "old, impotent logic and morality" which "had never yet failed to fail him" again prevents the classical recognition and reconciliation with the world order. Sutpen dies without a tragic self-knowledge, and with his death an era passes.

Only the ghosts, the live ones and dead ones, remain. Wash lives only for a short time after his tragic awareness of the Sutpen-South implication and the bleak destiny it promises the survivors:

. . . Better if his kind and mine too had never drawn the breath of life on this earth. Better that all who remain be blasted from the face of it than that another Wash Jones should see his whole life shredded from him and shrivel away like a dried shuck thrown onto the fire (p. 290-91).

Quentin, as survivor, is "weak from the fever yet free of the disease and not even aware that the freedom was that of impotence" (p. 12). The "scope of action and choice large enough for heroic gestures" is past, but both principled and infamous mores remain in the South as ambivalent relics. Quentin, an "empty hall echoing with sonorous defeated names," must listen and retell the tradition and hope for a purgation left unsatisfied in the absence of a completed tragic cycle resolved by remorse and reconciliation.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom!, the complex scheme of the Unpardonable Sinner as Adam-God-Satan so nearly completes the classic cycle that critics have hailed these novels as American tragedies. The Adamic figure is an impressionable novice, who when introduced to evil learns of it but is never educated by it. A lack of perspective limits the world vision of Ahab and Sutpen, whose developments are arrested before they acquire a rational approach to the question of evil. The Unpardonable Sinner motif defines the consequence of the union of Adamic naivety and God-like power. As overlords of the Pequod and the Hundred, Ahab and Sutpen incur tremendous responsibilities in their authoritative positions. But their idealism, untempered by a matured philosophy, transmutes to a travesty the original intent and represents the Satanic element of the Unpardonable Sinner motif.

The aspect of magnificence in ruin leads many critics to interpret the careers of Ahab and Sutpen as approaching the tradition of tragedy. However, the conspicuous lack of humanity, remorse, and reconciliation can only disbar such interpretations and, instead, redefine their roles in light of a modern emphasis on individualism. It is excessive individualism, the aggrandizement of the ego, that replaces the earlier distinction of the propertied or royal hero.

While tragic action structures both Moby-Dick and Absalom, Absalom!,

the protagonists react less in the tragic vein and more in that of the egotistical. Ahab and Sutpen receive psychic wounds that forever poison their humanism. In their dedication to a single cause, both become exaggerated by their isolation from mankind. Neither adheres to communal rules, choosing instead his own moral code, and forcing those around him to observe the same. Because the Unpardonable Sinner has stunted a panoramic vision, he perceives his private suffering and personal revenge as the center of the universe.

The classic isolation of the national tragic hero parallels the isolation of the nineteenth-century self-reliant protagonist. However, the difference between the two is evident in the reaction of the nationalist and the individualist to the isolation. The universal plane of isolation-cum-abstraction is an essential element in tragic action and forces the protagonist to assume unique responsibilities. The implied higher moral risks of operating outside the norm offers two possibilities. Does the hero seek improvement for the moral order or does he seek vengeance for himself? The classic tragic hero, ignoring the chorus representing the old order, defies the gods and begins a new order of improvement. The modern hero, suffering personal indignity, sets himself against naturalistic fate and demands retribution. The egocentricity of the latter denotes the Unpardonable Sinner.

The tragic action, which exists in the despoiling of a supreme entity, fashions the classical formula of avenging either the family or the state. In the modern formula, the supreme entity to be guarded is the ego. The Unpardonable Sin motif details such safekeeping of the ego; however, the course engenders the defiling of the souls of others and authors more heinous transgressions than the original offense.

Herein lies modern tragedy. It is the chorus, surviving such transgressions, that becomes privy to the tragic wisdom inaccessible for the hero. Ishmael and the narrators of Absalom, Absalom! live in the aftermath of the heroes' destructiveness and complete the cycle. Their horror must substitute for the heroes' remorselessness. Because the deaths of Ahab and Sutpen fail to achieve a cathartic effect, Ishmael and Quentin suffer a life-in-death for the lack of such purgation.

Consequently, Ishmael feels he is driven to return to the sea as a suicidal man is driven to his "pistol and ball." Quentin is compelled to reveal the moral degeneracy of his South in hopes that the telling will purge the crimes. But both Ishmael and Quentin fail to escape the ambivalence of tragic action unresolved by reconciliation with the world order. Thus, when Shreve asks Quentin, "Why do you hate the South?" Quentin's anguished reply is, "I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!" The extraordinary egotism of Ahab and Sutpen personifies the modern hero and confuses the chorus both attracted to and repulsed by the magnificence of individualism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- The American Notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Ed. Randall Stewart. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932.
- Bradley, A.C. "The Substance of Tragedy." Shakespearean Tragedy. New York: Meridian Books, 1955. Reprinted in Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism, ed. Richard Levin, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960.
- Chase, Richard. Herman Melville: A Critical Study. New York: Macmillan Company, 1949.
- Coleman, James C. and William E. Brown, Jr. Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life. 4th ed. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1972.
- Faulkner, William. Absalom, Absalom! New York: The Modern Library, 1936.
- Gross, Seymour L. "Hawthorne versus Melville." Bucknell Review, Dec. 1966.
- Kitto, H.D.F. "Greek and Elizabethan Tragedy." Form and Meaning in Drama. Alva, Great Britain: Robert Cunningham & Sons Ltd., 1955.
- Lewis, R.W.B. The American Adam. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- Longley, John Lewis. The Tragic Mask. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.
- Mason, Ronald. The Spirit Above the Dust. London: John Lehmann, 1951.
- Maxwell, D.E.S. American Fiction: The Intellectual Background. New York: Columbia University Press, 1963.
- Melville, Herman. Moby-Dick. The Norton Critical Edition, Ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1967.
- Michel, Laurence and Michael B. Sewell, eds. Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963.

- Miller, Arthur. "Tragedy and the Common Man." New York Times, February 1949, Section II. Reprinted in Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism, ed. Richard Levin, New York: Harcourt Brace & World, Inc., 1960.
- Miller, James E. "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin." PMLA, 70 March 1955.
- Millgate, Michael. The Achievement of William Faulkner. New York: Random House, 1963.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1956.
- O'Donnell, George Marion. "Faulkner's Mythology." Kenyon Review, 1 Summer 1936.
- Ringe, Donald L. "Hawthorne's Psychology of the Head and Heart." PMLA, 65 March 1950.
- Sewell, Richard B. "Moby Dick." The Vision of Tragedy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.
- Stewart, Randall. "Hawthorne and Faulkner." College English, 22 Nov. 1960.
- Tuck, Dorothy. Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1964.