

Masterpieces of World Literature

*Edited by
Frank N. Magill*



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PREFACE

Masterpieces of World Literature revives a publishing tradition. Following the publication of *Masterplots* in 1949 by Salem Press, Harper & Row released a trade reference edition titled *Masterpieces of World Literature*. The success of this publication led to three additional series and other related reference works which found their way into homes nationwide. Now, forty years later, a new generation of Americans, many of whom grew up with the original summaries and essays, will take the opportunity to have just such a reference in their home libraries for their own use and as an enhancement to their children's education.

The current *Masterpieces* presents standard essays on 270 classic works of world literature, arranged alphabetically by their best known English titles. Designed primarily for reference, the format is stylized and standardized to afford maximum information in the quickest time. For the 204 works which tell a story—novels, stories, plays, epic poems—the plot-summary format is employed. Each plot digest is preceded by carefully checked reference data that furnish at a glance the type of work, author, type of plot, time of plot, locale, and first publication date. Next, a brief summary of the narrative appears, which can be used either separately or in conjunction with the fuller treatment that follows. The first major section of each essay introduces to the reader the story's principal characters. In addition to a brief description of each character and his or her relationship to the other characters, a phonetic guide to the pronunciation of difficult names is presented. The text itself is divided into two sections. "The Story," a well-rounded synopsis of approximately 1,000 words, orients the new reader to the novel, story, play, or poem, and refreshes the memory of the reader who is reviewing a book read long ago. Immediately following the plot summary, the "Critical Evaluation" discusses, in some 1,000 words, the major critical and analytical approaches to the work, setting the course for formal or informal study.

The remaining 66 works, those that do not tell a story but impart important thoughts in prose or verse, are presented in the essay-review format. Following the ready-reference data (type of work, author, and publication date), a 2,000-word essay identifies the primary ideas and integrates them with a discussion of the literary merits of the work in a clear, expository style, making accessible to readers many of the ideas that form the foundation of Western thought.

Each of the 270 essays in this edition has been written to assure currency of the ideas presented, requiring an enormous amount of assistance from a carefully selected staff that included scores of English faculty members from universities and colleges throughout the United States. All of these contributors deserve recognition; in particular, we would like to acknowledge: Patrick Adcock, Raymond M. Archer, Stanley Archer, Jean Ashton, Bryan Aubrey, Melissa E. Barth, Wm. S. Brockington, Jr., Rebecca R. Butler, Joan E. Carr, John J. Conlon, Robert P. Ellis, David Marc Fisher, Dana Gerhardt, Daniel Guillory, Terry Heller, Richard Kelly, Eugene S. Larson, Leon Lewis, Robert A. Morace, Robert H. O'Connor, Robert M. Otten, William Pemberton, Betty Richardson, Joseph Rosenblum, Murray Sachs, Marjorie Smelstor, Gilbert G. Smith, James T. Sullivan, Roy Arthur Swanson, Eileen Tess Tyler, and Michael Witkoski.

The volume concludes with two indexes to aid the user in locating all works by author (author index) or title, including alternate titles (title index).

Some readers will find in the pages of *Masterpieces* a pleasant renewal of an old acquaintance, a chance meeting with an almost forgotten literary friend. Others may wish to pursue further an interest encountered here for the first time. The first instance would please me, but the second would please me even more.

FRANK N. MAGILL

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Ulysses by James Joyce (Random House, Inc., and Nora Joseph Joyce, 1914, 1918, 1942, 1946).
Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett (Grove Press, Inc., 1954).
The Waves by Virginia Woolf (Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., 1933).

KEY TO PRONUNCIATION

â	pare, stair	ö	book, push
ă	man, rang	ō	moor, move
ā	ale, fate	ou	loud, round
ä	calm, father	p	put, stop
b	bed, rub	r	red, try
ch	chin, reach	s	see, pass
d	day, bad	t	to, bit
ě	ten, ebb	th	thin, path
ē	equal, meat	th	then, mother
è	fern, bird	ü	up, dove
f	fill, off	ū	use, cube
g	go, rug	û	surge, burn
h	hot, hear	v	vast, above
ī	if, hit	w	will, away
ī	ice, right	y	yet, yam
j	joy, hedge	z	zest, amaze
k	keep, take	zh	azure, seizure
l	let, ball	ə	is a vowel occurring in an unaccented syllable, as
l	man, him	a	<i>in</i> above
n	now, ton	e	<i>in</i> chapel
ng	ring, English	i	<i>in</i> veracity
ō	lot, box	o	<i>in</i> connect
ō	old, over	u	<i>in</i> crocus
ô	order, shorn		
oi	boy, oil		

FOREIGN SOUNDS

á	pronounced as in the French <i>ami</i>
ll	usually pronounced like <i>y</i> in <i>yes</i> in Spanish America; in Spain like the <i>ll</i> in <i>million</i>
ñ	a nasal <i>n</i> pronounced as in the French <i>bon</i>
ñ	pronounced like the <i>ny</i> in <i>canyon</i>
œ	pronounced as in the French <i>feu</i> or the German <i>böse</i>
rr	pronounced as in the Spanish <i>barranco</i>
ü	pronounced as in the French <i>du</i> or the German <i>grün</i>

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ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

Type of work: Novel

Author: William Faulkner (1897–1962)

Type of plot: Psychological realism

Time of plot: Nineteenth century

Locale: Mississippi

First published: 1936

Instead of his usual sustained interior monologue technique, Faulkner here uses the device of three narrators, each of whom relates the family saga of Thomas Sutpen from his or her unique point of view. This device imparts to Absalom, Absalom!, which is a metaphor for the rich and chaotic Southern experience, a complexity, a depth of psychological insight, and an emotional intensity which might have been lost in a narrative of more traditional format.

Principal Characters

Thomas Sutpen, the owner of Sutpen's Hundred in Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi. Born of a poor white family in the mountains of Western Virginia, he grows up to become an ambitious man of implacable will. After his arrival in Mississippi he thinks he can win his neighbors' respect by building a huge mansion and marrying the daughter of a respectable merchant. When he is not driving his wild African slaves and a kidnapped French architect to finish construction of his magnificent house, he seeks relaxation by fighting his most powerful slaves. Wishing to found a family dynasty, he wants, more than anything else, to have a male heir. When one son is killed and the other disappears, Sutpen, now aging, fathers a child by Milly, the granddaughter of Wash Jones, one of his tenants. After learning that the child is a girl, he rejects and insults Milly. Because of his callous rejection old Wash Jones kills him.

Ellen Coldfield, the wife chosen by Thomas Sutpen because he believes she is "adjunctive" to his design of founding a plantation family. A meek, helpless woman, she is completely dominated by her husband.

Henry Sutpen, the son born to Thomas and Ellen Sutpen. Unlike his sister Judith, he faints when he sees his father fighting with slaves. At first, not knowing that Charles Bon is also Sutpen's son, impressionable Henry idolizes and imitates that suave young man. Later he learns Bon's true identity and kills him, after their return from the Civil War, to keep Judith from marrying her half brother, who is part black.

Charles Bon, Thomas Sutpen's unacknowledged son by his earlier marriage in Haiti. A polished man of the world, he forms a close friendship with the more provincial Henry, whom he meets at college, and he becomes engaged to Judith Sutpen. When the two return from the Civil War, Bon's charming manner does not prevent his being killed by Henry, who has learned that his friend and sister's suitor is part black.

Judith Sutpen, Thomas Sutpen's daughter. After

Charles Bon has been killed and Henry flees, she vows never to marry. She dies of smallpox contracted while nursing Charles Bon's black wife.

Goodhue Coldfield, a middle-class storekeeper in the town of Jefferson, the father of Ellen and Rosa Coldfield. When the Civil War begins, he locks himself in his attic and disdainfully refuses to have any part in the conflict. Fed by Rosa, who sends him food that he pulls up in a basket, he dies alone in the attic.

Wash Jones, a squatter on Thomas Sutpen's land and, after the Civil War, his drinking companion. While his employer is away during the Civil War, Wash looks after the plantation. Ignorant, unwashed, but more vigorous than others of his type, he serves Sutpen well until the latter rejects Milly and her child by declaring that if she were a mare with a foal he could give her a stall in his stable. Picking up a scythe, a symbol of time and change, Wash beheads Sutpen.

Rosa Coldfield, Goodhue Coldfield's younger daughter. She is an old woman when she tells Quentin Compson that Sutpen, whom she calls a ruthless demon, brought terror and tragedy to all who had dealings with him. A strait-laced person, she recalls the abrupt, insulting fashion in which Sutpen had proposed to her in the hope that she would be able to bear him a son after his wife's death. Never married, she is obsessed by memories of her brother-in-law.

Clytemnestra Sutpen, called **Clytie**, the daughter of Thomas Sutpen's former slave, who hides Henry Sutpen in the mansion when he returns, old and sick, years after the murder he committed. Fearing that he will be arrested, she sets fire to the house and burns herself and Henry in the conflagration which destroys that dilapidated monument to Thomas Sutpen's pride and folly.

Milly Jones, the granddaughter of Wash Jones. She and her child are killed by Wash after Sutpen's murder.

Charles Etienne de Saint Velery Bon, the son of Charles Bon and his octoroon mistress. He dies of small-

pox at Sutpen's Hundred.

Jim Bond (Bon), the half-witted son of Charles Etienne de Saint Velery Bon and a full-blooded black woman. He is the only survivor of Sutpen's family.

Quentin Compson, the anguished son of a decaying Southern family. Moody and morose, he tells the story of the Sutpens to his uncomprehending roommate at Harvard. Driven by personal guilt, he is later to commit

suicide. Before leaving for Harvard he learns about Thomas Sutpen from Rosa Coldfield.

Shrevlin McCannon, called **Shreve**, a Canadian student at Harvard and Quentin Compson's roommate. With great curiosity but without much understanding, he listens to Quentin's strange tale of Southern passions and tragedy leading to decay and ruin.

The Story

In the summer of 1909, when Quentin Compson was preparing to go to Harvard, old Rosa Coldfield insisted upon telling him the whole infamous story of Thomas Sutpen, whom she called a demon. According to Miss Rosa, he had brought terror and tragedy to all who had dealings with him.

In 1833, Thomas Sutpen had come to Jefferson, Mississippi, with a fine horse and two pistols and no known past. He had lived mysteriously for a while among people at the hotel, and after a short time, he had disappeared from the area. He had purchased one hundred square miles of uncleared land from the Chickasaws and had had it recorded at the land office.

When he returned with a wagon load of wild-looking blacks, a French architect, and a few tools and wagons, he was as uncommunicative as ever. At once, he set about clearing land and building a mansion. For two years he labored, and during all that time he rarely saw or visited his acquaintances in Jefferson. People wondered about the source of his money. Some claimed that he had stolen it somewhere in his mysterious comings and goings. Then, for three years, his house remained unfinished, without windowpanes or furnishings, while Thomas Sutpen busied himself with his crops. Occasionally he invited Jefferson men to his plantation to hunt, entertaining them with liquor, cards, and savage combats between his giant slaves—combats in which he himself sometimes joined for the sport.

At last, he disappeared once more, and when he returned, he had furniture and furnishings elaborate and fine enough to make his great house a splendid show-place. Because of his mysterious actions, sentiment in the village turned against him. This hostility, however, subsided somewhat when Sutpen married Ellen Coldfield, daughter of the highly respected Goodhue Coldfield.

Miss Rosa and Quentin's father shared some of Sutpen's revelations. Because Quentin was away in college, many of the things he knew about Sutpen's Hundred had come to him in letters from home. Other details he had learned during talks with his father. He learned of Ellen Sutpen's life as mistress of the strange mansion in the wilderness. He learned how she discovered her husband fighting savagely with one of his slaves. Young Henry Sutpen fainted, but Judith, the daughter, watched from

the haymow with interest and delight. Ellen thereafter refused to reveal her true feelings and ignored the village gossip about Sutpen's Hundred.

The children grew up. Young Henry, so unlike his father, attended the university at Oxford, Mississippi, and there he met Charles Bon, a rich planter's grandson. Unknown to Henry, Charles was his half brother, Sutpen's son by his first marriage. Unknown to all of Jefferson, Sutpen had gotten his money as the dowry of his earlier marriage to Charles Bon's West Indian mother, a wife he discarded when he learned she was part black.

Charles Bon became engaged to Judith Sutpen. The engagement was suddenly broken off for a probation period of four years. In the meantime, the Civil War began. Charles and Henry served together. Thomas Sutpen became a colonel.

Goodhue Coldfield took a disdainful stand against the war. He barricaded himself in his attic and his daughter, Rosa, was forced to put his food in a basket let down by a long rope. His store was looted by Confederate soldiers. One night, alone in his attic, he died.

Judith, in the meantime, had waited patiently for her lover. She carried his letter, written at the end of the four-year period, to Quentin's grandmother. Sometime later on Wash Jones, a tenant on the Sutpen plantation, came to Miss Rosa's door with the crude announcement that Charles Bon was dead, killed at the gate of the plantation by his half brother and former friend. Henry fled. Judith buried her lover in the Sutpen family plot on the plantation. Rosa, whose mother had died when she was born, went to Sutpen's Hundred to live with her niece. Ellen was already dead. It was Rosa's conviction that she could help Judith.

Colonel Thomas Sutpen returned. His slaves had been taken away, and he was burdened with new taxes on his overrun land and ruined buildings. He planned to marry Rosa Coldfield, more than ever desiring an heir now that Judith had vowed spinsterhood and Henry had become a fugitive. His son, Charles Bon, whom he might, in desperation, have permitted to marry his daughter, was dead.

Rosa, insulted when she understood the true nature of his proposal, returned to her father's ruined house in the village. She was to spend the rest of her miserable life pondering the fearful intensity of Thomas Sutpen, whose

nature, in her outraged belief, seemed to partake of the devil himself.

Quentin, during his last vacation, had learned more of the Sutpen tragedy. He now revealed much of the story to Shreve McCannon, his roommate, who listened with all of a Northerner's misunderstanding and indifference.

Quentin and his father had visited the Sutpen graveyard, where they saw a little path and a hole leading into Ellen Sutpen's grave. Generations of opossums lived there. Over her tomb and that of her husband stood a marble monument from Italy. Sutpen himself had died in 1869. In 1867, he had taken young Milly Jones, Wash Jones's granddaughter. After she bore a child, a girl, Wash Jones had killed Thomas Sutpen.

Judith and Charles Bon's son, his child by an octoroon woman who had brought her child to Sutpen's Hundred when he was eleven years old, died in 1884 of smallpox. Before he died, the boy had married a black woman, and they had had an idiot son, James Bond. Rosa Coldfield had placed headstones on their graves, and on Judith's gravestone she had caused to be inscribed a fearful message.

In the summer of 1910, Rosa Coldfield confided to Quentin that she felt there was still someone living at

Sutpen's Hundred. Together the two had gone out there at night and had discovered Clytie, the aged daughter of Thomas Sutpen and a slave. More important, they discovered Henry Sutpen himself hiding in the ruined old house. He had returned, he told them, four years before; he had come back to die. The idiot, James Bond, watched Rosa and Quentin as they departed. Rosa returned to her home, and Quentin went back to college.

Quentin's father wrote to tell him the tragic ending of the Sutpen story. Months later, Rosa sent an ambulance out to the ruined plantation house, for she had finally determined to bring her nephew, Henry, into the village to live with her so that he could get decent care. Clytie, seeing the ambulance, was afraid that Henry was to be arrested for the murder of Charles Bon many years before. In desperation she set fire to the old house, burning herself and Henry Sutpen to death. Only the idiot, James Bond, the last surviving descendant of Thomas Sutpen, escaped. No one knew where he went, for he was never seen again. Miss Rosa took to her bed and died soon afterward, in the winter of 1910.

Quentin told the story to his roommate because it seemed to him, somehow, to be the story of the whole South, a tale of deep passions, tragedy, ruin, and decay.

Critical Evaluation

Absalom, Absalom! is the most involved of William Faulkner's works, for the narrative is revealed by recollections years after the events described have taken place. Experience is related at its fullest expression; its initial import is recollected, and its significance years thereafter is faithfully recorded. The conventional method of storytelling has been discarded. Through his special method, Faulkner is able to re-create human action and human emotion in its own setting. Sensory impressions gained at the moment, family traditions as powerful stimuli, the tragic impulses—these focus truly in the reader's mind so that a tremendous picture of the nineteenth century South, vivid down to the most minute detail, grows slowly in the reader's imagination.

This novel is Faulkner's most comprehensive attempt to come to terms with the full implications of the Southern experience. The structure of the novel, itself an attempt by its various narrators to make some sense of the seemingly chaotic past, is indicative of the multifaceted complexity of that experience, and the various narrators' relationship to the material suggests the difficulty that making order of the past entails. Each narrator has, to begin with, only part of the total picture—and some parts of that hearsay or conjecture—at his disposal, and each of their responses is conditioned by their individual experiences and backgrounds. Thus, Miss Rosa's idea of Sutpen depends equally upon her Calvinist background and her failure to guess why Henry Sutpen killed Charles Bon.

Quentin's father responds with an ironic detachment, conditioned by his insistence upon viewing the fall of the South as the result of the workings of an inevitable Fate, as in Greek drama. Like Quentin and Shreve, the reader must attempt to coordinate these partial views of the Sutpen history into a meaningful whole—with the added irony that he must also deal with Quentin's romanticism. In effect, the reader becomes yet another investigator, but one whose concern is with the entire scope of the novel rather than only with the Sutpen family.

At the very heart of the novel is Thomas Sutpen and his grand design, and the reader's comprehension of the meaning of the work depends upon the discovery of the implications of this design. Unlike the chaos of history the narrators perceive, Sutpen's design would, by its very nature, reduce human history and experience to a mechanical and passionless process which he could control. The irony of Sutpen's failure lies in the fact that he could not achieve the design precisely because he was unable to exclude such human elements as Charles Bon's need for his father's love and recognition. Faulkner, however, gains more than this irony from his metaphor of design. In effect, Sutpen's design is based upon a formula of the antebellum South which reduces it to essentials. It encompasses the plantation, the slaves, the wife and family—all the external trappings of the plantation aristocracy Sutpen, as a small boy from the mountains, saw in his first encounter with this foreign world. Sutpen,