# *ACKNOWLEDGING THE INTERFERENCE BETWEEN REALISM AND MYTH IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S "ABSALOM, ABSALOM!"*

**Daniela DURALIA**[*]

***Abstract:*** *This paper is the result of a research study involving second-year Montreal college students. It reveals that William Faulkner's novel, "Absalom, Absalom!", although already much discussed and analysed, requires further investigation into the multitude of literary techniques the author employs in his creation of the fictional world of Yoknapatawpha. This pedagogical step aims at getting students better acquainted with the interface between realism and myth, and with the effects of their fusion, ensuring a better understanding of the abstract meaning created throughout the novel. Faulkner's work includes an awareness of the Southern American situation before and after the Civil War, the author's life and vision, and the novel's structure and plot. This background information together with the reader's metacognitive awareness of the events presented in the novel (linking complex ideas in the novel, aspects, and facts, and manipulating the knowledge previously acquired) represent the foundation of a thorough understanding of the writer's intentions. Acknowledging Faulkner's use of time in the weaving of myth and realism leads to a mental representation of the effects and ideas conveyed.*

***Keywords:*** *realism, myth, time, background.*

## Introduction

The constructivist pedagogical model applied during a thorough study of the novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, from narrative techniques, such as shifting viewpoints, disrupting chronology, the use of characters, particular language and style, and particular voice, to references to other cultures, such as religion, classical Roman and Greek stories, allowed the teacher to notice the students' confusion about Faulkner's use of the past concept, such as past events in the story or Southern historical events and situation revolving around Civil War, as well as distinguishing between the mythical world and reality in the novel.

The current study continues in the same constructive pedagogical environment, based on the interaction among students and the teacher's guidance and lecturing. In order for the students to better observe Faulkner's use of past in the novel and distinguish between the two above-mentioned themes, the teacher has students recall the Southern American situation before and after the Civil War. The teacher also includes stories recounted by the characters to convey the necessary background information to students, while also trying to create a mental representation of the effects Faulkner creates using time, such as present and past as well as myth and reality encoded in the text.

An interactive class environment is a mandatory condition for students to discover meaning beyond the text. Even if they possessed historical knowledge and understood the

[*] West University of Timişoara, Romania, d_duralia@yahoo.com



BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)

narrative, students became confused about Faulkner's use of past time. The teacher's questions such as how Faulkner uses the concept of past, help students to create a mental representation of how he treats historical events in the novel, the characters' perceptions about the protagonist's life, and the author's reference to other cultures to create symbolic meaning. Exchanging ideas and trying to clarify the novel's meaning facilitates class discussion, all of which is supported and lead by the teacher's analysis of critical passages. Once a mental representation of the time dimensions used, students can see and talk about the flow of time in Faulkner's work.

**Circularity of Time**

Biljana Oklopcic notes Faulkner's references to all three phases of the Southern history: Old South, the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the New South with certain intentions. Didi-Ionel Cenuşer reminds the reader of Faulkner's definition of literature saying that "literature is useful for drawing our attention to the real situation it has abstracted, codified, and what it deals with is not as much conventional as what underlines real situations and real human beings" (61).

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Civil War is marked not only by Southern military defeat, but also by its consequences, such as the destruction of the principles that formed the "Golden Age" of Southern society. The harsh post War conditions transformed hospitality, religious devotion, respect for women, and courtesy among humans into a need to survive most of the times not by ethical means. Oklopcic mentions Faulkner's great regret for the changes the Old South underwent reminding Miller's, the writer's, description as being characterized by "moral order—a code of personal dignity, courage, honor and integrity" (6). During the Reconstruction period, marked by the fallout of the war, Southern American society had adopted immoral human behaviours, such as violence and prejudice.

On the one hand, the novel presupposes knowledge about Southern historical facts that the reader is responsible to buy for the sake of the context. On the other, the past is referred to as the reality or truth of facts happened during Sutpen's lifetime that the other characters try to reconstitute. Faulkner uses present and past time to contrast the changes that have occurred after the war. In doing so, he sets in contrast these periods of time: the past, "when peace and manners reigned, when romances flourished in jasmine-scented gardens, and every woman was a lady and every man a gentleman committed to the highest standards of chivalry", and the decadent present (Muhlenfeld 38).

By using elements from other historical and cultural periods, such as biblical references, Greek mythology, and old literature, Faulkner takes the reader back and forth in time intending to incite for the interpretation of the concealed meaning in the text. In addition to that, Tobin thinks that Thomas Sutpen's mansion, called Sutpen's Hundred, "a zone, for the mythical consciousness, of absolute reality", is placed in the past as "the transformation of the profane into transcendent space… [as] also that of concrete time into mythical time" (Eliade qtd. in Tobin 113).

According to critics such as Wilfred L. Guerin, Erle Labor, Lee Morgan and John Willingham, immortality is a fundamental motif in myth (Guerin L. W. et al. 174). Time is defiled to keep certain things unchanged, so as to be transmitted to other generations.



BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)

Faulkner states in his interview with John Stein for the Paris Review, that "the aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life." Similarly, in *Absalom, Absalom!,* Miss Rosa hopes that by entrusting her life experience to Quentin, who is a descendant of Sutpen's best friend whom she suspects knows the truth, her tale will prevail in time, and future generations will believe her story. Judith rails against the lapse of time which is so implacable that the human remembrances of others falter, saying that, "after a while they don't even remember the name and what the scratches were trying to tell, and it doesn't matter" (Faulkner 127). Judith sets up a tombstone to immortalize Charles Bon, her then dead husband, and gives his last letter- addressed to her - to General Compson's wife so that others remember him as well

> […] it would be something just because it would have happened, be remembered even if only from passing from one hand to another, one mind to another, and it would be at least a scratch, something, something that might make a mark on something that was once for the reason that it can die someday, while the block of stone cant be *is* because it never can become *was* because it cant ever die or perish (Faulkner 127-128).

Faulkner recreates a new space where imagination can order everything according to interest and taste, by obscuring boundaries between childhood and adulthood or life and death, and thus, engendering fusion of all ages as well as the flowing of time between the realm of myth and realistic facts encoded in the text, be them historical or past events recounted by the narrators. The shift between time periods can be interpreted as an end to disorder, allowing for the reordering of the society.

The force of doom took revenge against Sutpen's stopping its natural flow. Because Sutpen, Henry, and Judith tried at any cost to keep their family free of African blood, Judith lives with the pain of regret, of being too late to repair the damage done to Charles Etienne, saying, "I was wrong. I admit it. I believed that there were things which still mattered just because they had mattered once. But I was wrong. Nothing matters but breath, breathing, to know and to be alive" (Faulkner 207). As Charles Etienne gets yellow fever and dies, no time is left for him to enjoy his newfound acceptance by others, mixed ancestry, and all. Time's irreversibility means that characters are subject to the consequences of their own actions.

Olga Vickery points out that Faulkner's use of time is psychological and is abstract as it hovers beyond all things. "This kind of time can be grasped intuitively as that vital impulse behind all things, […] Faulkner uses it to provide a focus for a range of possible human reactions and attitudes as well as basis or judging them" (255).

Elizabeth Kerr's explanation of the impact of characters' dream aspects of life and time, used then as a tool for interlacing other narrative elements, illustrate Faulkner's use of time in the text as an interweaving of other literary techniques and cultural elements. "Both Miss Rosa and Sutpen were dreamers, whose dreams - Rosa's of past and Sutpen's of the future - shut them off from the present reality and the lives of others. Rosa's sister Ellen as Sutpen's wife escaped from reality into a dream world and finally into death" (34).



BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)

**Realism vs. Myth**

It is essential that readers become aware of both the realistic and mythical components of Faulkner's text, whose fusion expresses his intended meaning. Faulkner expresses his judgments about the historical American South out of the mouths of his fictional characters. In *Absalom, Absalom!,* destructive events, such as the Civil War, symbolize the curse that God sends over the South as a consequence of their sinful and dishonest nature. As the South "erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and moral brigandage" (Faulkner 260), Sutpen also "outraged the land, and the land then turned and destroyed the man's family" (Blotner 327). Mr. Compson foresees "that day when the South would realize" all this reality (Faulkner 206).

The judgment on the actual history is encoded into the text of the novel. By its embedding, Faulkner creates both a realistic realm and an imaginary one. Realism presents the picture of the present and past. In *Absalom, Absalom!,* Faulkner envisages the South enduring the consequences of war whose chaos also affects the social institutions that function to regulate social life, class organization, and forms of labor. Faulkner gives the imaginative realm mythical characteristics through the heroic qualities that he attributes to his characters, and through the morally "desolate" atmosphere that pervades the novel (Mihăieş 491).

Faulkner presents the reactions of the characters, as representatives of his society towards the social institutions. For example, Miss Rosa's strict upbringing by her father, who respects the doctrine of the Methodist church, learns to be dramatic in her way of thinking, which is a projection of her intense profound feelings of frustration and apparent hatred. This way of thinking drives her to isolate herself for forty-three years. Furthermore, Sutpen's realization of an external reality, namely the societal one makes him decide to reorganize his knowledge and feeling about life and invent a plan which he thinks could offer security to him and his descendants. Sutpen gradually immerses himself in a materialistic world without dignity or lasting value, and it is a world that makes a mockery of the cultural values of the past. Faulkner uses mythic narrative in order to protect himself as a man, preferring to remain just the artist. As Robert Hamblin puts it, "Faulkner's views on the divinity of the author and the immortality of art properly belong to the realm of myth" (24).

Faulkner created the imaginary Yoknapatawpha to envision a ruined society whose values he strongly condemned. Tobin reminds of Mircea Eliade's explanation of myth as narration.

> a sacred history: it relates an event that took place in primordial Time a fabled time of the 'beginnings.' In other words, myth tells how through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence […] Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to be (113).

To better illustrate the society of Yoknapatawpha, the first copy of *Absalom, Absalom!* came with a map of the county, pointing out the places where certain events in the novel took place. When asked in one of his statements about *Absalom, Absalom!,* Faulkner says, that



BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)

"every time any character gets into a book, no matter how minor, he's actually telling his biography - that's all anyone ever does, he tells his own biography, talking about himself, in a thousand different terms, but himself" (qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner 71). The largest part of the novel is seen through Quentin's eyes. Even if Faulkner says that Quentin is kept at the surface of reality by Shreve, most of the protagonist's telling is not very reliable. In doing so, Shreve uses the story of Quentin Compson to express his hatred of the bad qualities found in his beloved South. The centre of Yoknapatawpha in this novel is represented by Sutpen's Hundred- a mythic place that "contains all the 'glories' and 'curses' of the imperial space" (Hagood 175).

In this novel, moral guilt is represented by the exploitation of African-Americans. In *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha*, John Pilkington quotes Cowley that "Sutpen's curse is the result of his relations with the Negroes" (160). According to Mircea Eliade, suffering comes because of some fault and malevolence, "but there is always a fault at the bottom of it, or at the very least a cause, recognized in the will of the forgotten Supreme God, to whom man is finally forced to address himself. In each case the suffering becomes intelligible and hence tolerable" (98).

Sutpen's lack of humanity is the cause of his downfall, and his suffering is not intelligible therefore intolerable. Both Sutpen's empire and family burn in the flames of his mansion. Louise Westling thinks that Sutpen "draws his strength" from the soil and from the violent physical fights with the "wild" local black men (128). When he separates from them, his empire collapses. Sutpen sins not only by hurting those living around him, on his road to achieving his goals, but also by exploiting his slaves, misusing the land that God entrusted him to oversee. Consequently, to express such vision, Faulkner wished to envision his cosmos through the use of a variety of symbols.

Sutpen's movement from West Virginia to Tidewater in Jefferson illustrates his fall towards destruction. He came from a "land [which] belonged to anybody and everybody," and moved into "a land divided neatly up and actually owned by men who did nothing but ride over it on fine horses or sit in fine clothes on the galleries of big houses while other people worked for them" (Faulkner 221). In talking about man's immortality, Faulkner pledged his strong belief "[…] 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, sacrifice and endurance" (O'Connor 147-48). Sutpen's Hundred reminds one of sacred temples, such as Mecca, the symbol of life, immortality or eternity. Sutpen considers his experience in Haiti to be finished, and he tries to set up a new and happy life. The building of the mansion stands for Sutpen's strongest desire. According to Eliade, "[…] every territory occupied for the purpose of being inhabited or utilized as a *Lebensraum* is, first of all, transformed from chaos into cosmos" (11). Sutpen wishes to transform that space from "chaos" to his own "cosmos". Like Faulkner who signed on the map of Yoknawpatawpha as its "sole owner and proprietor", Sutpen also considered himself Sutpen Hundred's only king. It seems that, once he achieves his goal, Sutpen will reach the "centre" of his own being. However, his pilgrimage goes from the sacred to the profane, from life to death, from God to sin because he failed to repent.



BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)

In his creation of Yoknawpatawpha as *mimesis,* an imitation of reality, Faulkner's intention in creating his imaginary world is to focus and magnify human problems. Faulkner's use of characters' intuitions of reality merges with Faulkner's imagination itself resulting into a mythic realm. Faulkner uses the protagonists' points of view as an indirect way of expressing his own views about the suffering of the South. Part of the mythical world of Yoknapatawpha is shown through Miss Rosa's childhood impressions, the experience of war, the suffering of the South, as well as through her forty-three years of anger and her Biblical idea of the curse over the place and its generations. According to Brylowski, when Miss. Rosa dies, the spiritual reality ends as well; the curse had been lifted. Cenuşer argues that Faulkner imitates the reality of that time, creating another world as "'a new pattern with a bulge that will take this bulge of the imagination which insists that it's true, it must be"' (10).

In the novel, the Civil War consequences are reflected by the characters' identity problems when recounting the Sutpen's story. In *Faulkner's Subject: A Cosmos No One Owns*, Weinstein points out the process of "becoming oneself" at the core of Faulkner's works. For example, in *Absalom, Absalom!,* the characters identify themselves with other characters in the novel. Miss Rosa finds herself with Judith and Charles in their courtship. In his turn, Sutpen identifies himself with Wash Jones, and Quentin and Shreve with Henry and Charles. The world Faulkner lived in, with its traditions and people animating it left an important imprint on his mind and constituted the main sources of inspiration to such an extent that Faulkner developed "a sense of his world as blessed and himself as virtually omnipotent" (Minter xi) naming himself "sole owner and proprietor" and at the same time alluding to the divine creation.

**Conclusion**

Having carried out this study, I realized that certain pedagogical imperatives were effective in fostering students' learning success:

- Despite students' possession of much background information, they had to find strategies to select the pertinent information necessary to their interpretation.
- By monitoring and questioning the students, the teacher could detect confusion and guide them.
- Getting involved in group discussions, students developed an ability for interesting and intelligent conversations. Finally, they could synthesize the knowledge acquired.
- During the open class discussions, following interactive group activities and lecturing when needed, students could autonomously talk about the effects resulted from Faulkner's fusion of the two realms: myth and reality

By ensuring a consistent contextual knowledge about the historical situation before and after the American Civil War, as well as their becoming aware of Faulkner's use of time, was crucial to their delineating between the mythical and the realistic realms encoded in the text. My scaffolding questions, as well as my prompt feedback, helped my students progress towards mentally visualizing and understanding time's decisive organization of all the



BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)

information Faulkner chaotically wrote. All throughout the study of *Absalom, Absalom!*, students shared different ways of thinking and developed their learning abilities. This study also guided and taught them to follow the time flow in context to distinguish the mythical realm and the realistic one.

Through the support of their peers and teacher, students grew increasingly more motivated. At the beginning of the study, students were disoriented and discouraged. Only within an interactive learning environment in which they are guided by their instructor to make links between their historical knowledge and the story can they thrive. The findings at the end of the study show that the constructive pedagogical approach applied helped students distinguish and discuss the mythical and realistic realms woven into the text by means of time (see annexes).

**References**


Blotner, Joseph. *A Biography*. University Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 2005. Print.

Brylowski, Walter. *Faulkner's Olympian Laugh. Myth in the Novels*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968. Print.

Cenuser, D. Ionel. 2005. *Faulkner's Larger Meanings. The Greek Conception*. Saeculum. Sibiu, 2005.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Princeton University Press.2005. Print.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!.* New York: Random House, 1964. Print.

---. *Faulkner in the University.* Ed. F. Gwynn & J. Blotner. New York: Vintage Books, 1959. Print.

Guerin L. W. et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature.* Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. 1979. Print.

Hagood, Taylor. 2008. *Faulkner's Imperialism.* Louisiana State University Press, 2008.

Hamblin, Robert."Mythic and Archetypal Criticism." *A Companion to Faulkner Studies.* Ed. Charles A. Peek and Robert Hamblin.London: Greenwood Press, 2004. Print.

Kerr, Elizabeth. *William Faulkner's Gothic Domain*. New York: Kennikat Press, 1979. Print.

Mihăieş, Mircea. *Ce rămâne. William Faulkner si misterele Ţinutului Yoknapatawpha.* Iaşi si Bucureşti: Ed. Polirom, 2012. Print.

Minter, David. *William Faulkner. His Life and Work.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. Print.

Muhlenfeld, Elizabeth. *William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!: A Critical Casebook.* New York: Garland Publishing, 1984. Print.

O'Connor, William Van. The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner. New York: Gordian Press, 1968. Print.

Oklopcic, Biljana. *Faulkner and the Native Keystone*. Springer, 2014. Print.

Pilkington, John. *The Heart of Yoknapatawpha.* University Press of Mississippi. Jackson, 1981. Print.

Tobin, Patricia D. *Time and the Novel.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978. Print.

Vickery, Olga W. *The Novels of William Faulkner. A Critical Interpretation.* Louisiana State University Press, 1964. Print.

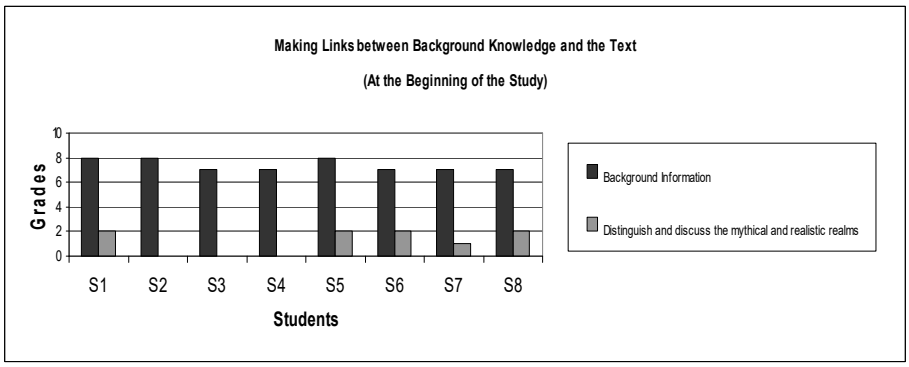
Weinstein, M. Philip. *Faulkner's Subject. A Cosmos No One Owns*. Cambridge University Press, 1992. Print.

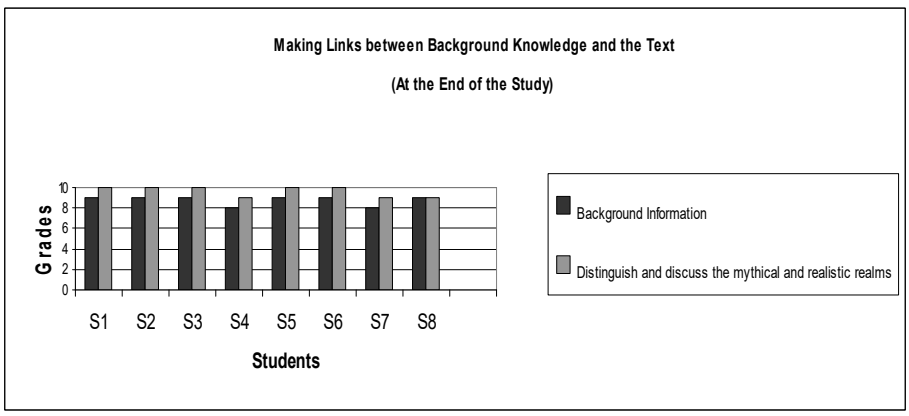
Westling, Louise. "Thomas Sutpen's Marriage to the Dark Body of the Land." *Faulkner and the Natural World.* Ed. Donald Kartiganer and Ann Abadie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996. Print.




**BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Piteşti**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)**

## Annexes






BDD-A30018 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:51:43 UTC)