

# **WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!***



**Samuel Postell  
Clemson University**

**Thursdays, 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET  
Oct. 8, 15, 22 & 29**

**Humanities at Hertog  
Syllabus | Fall 2026**

## HERTOG FALL 2026 HUMANITIES SEMINAR

### WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *ABSALOM, ABSALOM!*

Samuel Postell, Clemson University

*"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 his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."*

William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) is the American epic of the South, yet it remains relatively neglected. This is because it is a demanding work of fiction. The great Faulkner scholar, Cleanth Brooks, considers it his favorite Faulkner work and Faulkner's best work; others find it impenetrable. Both evaluations of the work capture something essential about it, and about Faulkner, as a writer: In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner seamlessly integrates themes from antiquity and modernity—the work spans the culture and philosophy of Rome, Greece, and Christendom—into the American Southern experience. America, the American South, and the leading families of Faulkner's fictional Yoknapatawpha County rise to epic proportions; their actions define the South's future, and the character of the people and their choices seal and explain the South's fate in the American Civil War. What emerges is a complex portrait of America's "peculiar institution" and the effect it has on the regime and the human soul.

Set at center stage of Faulkner's epic is Thomas Sutpen, described at the outset of the novel as a "man horse demon." Faulkner creates various storytellers of Sutpen's life, some treating him as protagonist and some as antagonist. He is a force of nature who arrives in Yoknapatawpha with no clear backstory. He purchases a massive tract of land from Native Americans. In the very first chapter, Quentin, who hears different perspectives on the legend of Thomas Sutpen, is enraptured by the history of his hometown, so much so that "in the long unamaze Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the Be Sutpen's Hundred like the oldentime Be Light." The story of Thomas Sutpen takes on Biblical proportions: He is the American Adam who aims to become the God of the South, or at least of his own plantation. Quentin, who hears the legend of Thomas Sutpen from both his father (the sympathetic storyteller) and Miss Rosa (the "Cassandra-like" unsympathetic storyteller), must reckon with his self-understanding, his heritage, and the history of his hometown. The basis of his reckoning is the tension between loyalty and morality. This is the same question that plagued men like Robert E. Lee when they considered their duty and service in the American Civil War, but Faulkner shows that it persists among 20th-century college students such as Quentin Compson.

Faulkner was considered the American Shakespeare. Faulkner's prose is just as beautiful and demanding as the story itself. The novel includes a sentence that once held the record for

longest in the *Guinness Book of World Records* (unlike those that have broken Faulkner's record, his sentence is precise and grammatically correct). The novel evokes the feeling of sitting on a Southern porch, post-Civil War, and reckoning with the section's fate with one who lived in the Old South, but it also takes on the dimensions of epic poetry. Faulkner suggests that the Southern people possess a high and noble culture, but ultimately, he asks, "at what cost?" Related to the cost is the South's inescapable "fate." That fate also bears on the human soul. The question of loyalty and morality, tied inextricably to the tension between legend and truth, is precisely the question that haunts Quentin Compson, one of Faulkner's most tragic characters. We are invited to consider, alongside Quentin, whether we "hate" the South. More importantly, we must ask ourselves why and investigate the legitimacy of our hatred or love.

### Course Materials:

- William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (Modern Library Hardcover Edition)

**Response Papers:** Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1-2 pages, single-spaced). **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5:00 p.m. ET.** Please provide page numbers for textual citations. They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper writers should be ready to briefly present and defend their ideas during the seminar.

The essay prompt for each seminar paper will be the same: "What is the most important or interesting thing we learn about Thomas Sutpen in Chapter X? Why is this interesting? What quality, virtue, or vice is revealed? What does it tell us about who Thomas Sutpen is at his moral core? What does this tell us about the American South?"

Your discussion paper should aim at presenting an interesting argument about the chapter that is all your own. Try to present something unique in your paper. The best papers seize upon details that are overlooked by other readers and teach your classmates something interesting that they may have overlooked.

Obviously, use of artificial intelligence to write your seminar papers will carry consequences for your standing in the course.

**Discussion Questions:** I have listed discussion questions below each assigned reading. These may or may not be the questions or passages we discuss. I may choose different key passages and adjust based on the interests of the students in the seminar.

**However, I will always ask the first three questions: What is your reaction? What has happened within the plot? What do you think of Thomas Sutpen (and what do we learn about him through these readings)?**

**Recommended Listening:** I have recommended two different kinds of music that might supplement your reading experience for each set of readings. The first 2-3 recommendations are mostly instrumental or minimally vocal ambient and soundtrack music. These albums, scores, and individual tracks convey the mood of the reading. The final 2-3 recommended items are good examples of Delta blues. I tried to choose blues selections that also conveyed the mood of the text.

This seminar will meet online weekly on Thursdays from 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET on October 8, 15, 22, and 29, 2026.

Thursday, October 8, 2026

8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET

Session I: Chapters 1–4

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**Assigned Reading:**

- Chapters 1–4

**Required Viewing:**

- YouTube playlist: [Required Viewing](#)
  - [William Faulkner reading from \*As I Lay Dying\*](#) – This recording gives a sense of Faulkner’s cadence and the oral quality of his prose. I recommend reading at least part of the novel aloud.
  - [William Faulkner, Nobel Prize Banquet Speech, 1950](#)

**Recommended Listening:**

- YouTube playlists: [Core listening](#) | [Extended listening](#)
  - The Caretaker, *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*
  - Earth, *The Bees Made Honey in the Lion’s Skull*
  - Timber Timbre, *Creep On Creepin’ On*
  - Skip James, “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues”
  - Son House & J. D. Short, *Blues from the Mississippi Delta*

**Discussion Questions:**

**Overarching Questions:**

1. What are your gut reactions?
2. What has happened thus far?
3. What do you think about Thomas Sutpen?
4. What do you think about Rosa?
5. Close reading/reaction to the first 4 pages of the text

**Chapter 1**

1. *“Why should not Quentin be the one to hear it? ... perhaps he will enter the literary profession... perhaps she wanted simply a younger person to listen... perhaps because she had to tell it, or because it would have to be told again.”* (pp. 4–6)  
Miss Rosa, Mr. Compson, and the narrator all speculate about why Quentin has been chosen. Which explanation seems most persuasive? Does Quentin merely hear the story, or is he already becoming part of it?
2. *“...that commonwealth which is a child... to whom ninety years was but a little while...”* (p. 6) *“...he himself was not a being, an entity, he was a commonwealth....”* (p. 6)  
*“...partly responsible for it by being born at all...”* (pp. 8–10)  
Why does Faulkner describe Quentin as a “commonwealth” rather than simply a young man? What is the “disease” Quentin inherits? Should anyone feel “partly responsible” for the past merely through birth?
3. *“We must just stay awake and see evil done for a little while, being powerless to hinder it... then clean ourselves of it afterward in whatever peaceful way we can...”* (pp. 14–15)  
*“...Heaven saw fit to let us lose...”* (p. 15)  
Miss Rosa insists that the South deserved defeat. Why does she think this? Is this a statement about slavery, human pride, providence, or something else? Does Rosa condemn the South or attempt to redeem it?

4. *"I was born too late..."* (pp. 17–18)  
Why does Rosa repeatedly insist that she was "born too late"? Too late for what? Heroism? Love? The Old South? Is this nostalgia, self-pity, or genuine tragedy?

## Chapter 2

1. *"The wistaria, hardy, fecund, and ubiquitous..."* (p. 27)  
Both Chapters 1 and 2 begin with wisteria. Why does Faulkner return to this image? How does it prepare us for a novel concerned with memory, decay, and the persistence of the past?
2. *"...that man whom he had never seen before... riding with the furious abruptness of a man with a secret destination..."* (pp. 28–35) *"...he could be patient now..."* (p. 35)  
Our introduction to Sutpen changes dramatically in this chapter. Why does Faulkner emphasize both Sutpen's violent energy and his remarkable patience? What does this reveal about "Sutpen's design"?
3. *"...the town began to realise that this was no ordinary adventurer..."* (pp. 41–45)  
Why does Jefferson finally intervene? Are its objections moral, social, economic, or simply rooted in fear of an outsider? Is the town right to resist Sutpen?
4. *"...perhaps they are not even events at all... perhaps memory believes before knowing remembers..."* (discussion throughout Chapter 2)  
How do Chapters 1 and 2 suggest memory actually works? Is Faulkner interested in recovering history, or showing why history can never be fully recovered?

## Chapter 3

1. *"...growing up in that closed masonry of females with that quality of furious indomitable faith... with the blind and irrational fury of a shedding snake..."* (pp. 57–58)  
Is this account of Rosa's childhood convincing? Is this explanation of her character convincing?
2. *"...the mask in Greek tragedy interchangeable not only from scene to scene but from actor to actor..."* (pp. 60–61)  
What does this tell us about Sutpen?
3. *"...at war with his own flesh... though he did not know it..."* (pp. 62–63)  
What war is Sutpen actually fighting? Against society? Against his origins? Against history? Against fate?
4. *"...Sutpen was acting his role too... perhaps not even he knew who the stage manager was."* (p. 71)  
Who is the "stage manager"? Providence? History? Slavery? Human pride? To what extent is Sutpen free?

## Chapter 4

1. *"I will believe. I will. I will."* (p. 91)  
What exactly must Henry choose to believe? Why does belief—not evidence—become so central in this chapter?
2. *"...he inspired not envy but despair..."* (pp. 97–98) *"...Bon had usurped Henry..."* (pp. 98–101)  
Why does Bon inspire "despair" rather than envy? In what sense has Bon "usurped"

Henry? Is Bon truly heroic, or merely fascinating?

3. "...perhaps he was simply too successful..." (p. 105)  
Why does Mr. Compson argue that Sutpen was "too successful"? How can success itself become tragic?
4. "...the doom of the South... the doom of that family... almost the same doom..." (pp. 118–22)  
Mr. Compson compares the destiny of the United States with the destiny of the Sutpen family. Why? In what ways does the family become a symbol of the nation?

**Thursday, October 15, 2026**

**8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET**

**Session II: Chapters 5–6**

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**Assigned Reading:**

- Chapters 5–6

**Recommended Listening:**

- YouTube playlists: [Core listening](#) | [Extended listening](#)
  - Jonny Greenwood, *There Will Be Blood*
  - Max Richter, *The Leftovers: Music from the HBO Series*
  - Mica Levi, *Under the Skin*
  - Blind Willie Johnson, "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground"
  - Geeshie Wiley, *Presenting Geeshie Wiley*

**Discussion Questions:**

**Overarching Questions:**

1. What is your gut reaction to the reading?
2. What has happened?
3. What do you think about Thomas Sutpen?

**Chapter 5**

1. "'Rosa.' She called me Rosa..." (pp. 143–44)  
Why does Rosa react so violently when Clytie addresses her by her first name?
2. "...the dream... the long dream from which there remained only the waking..." (pp. 145–54)  
What is Rosa's "dream"? Why does she finally long to awaken from it? What does this suggest about memory and love?
3. "...he merely began again..." (pp. 164–70) "...the analogy..." (p. 168)  
Why does Sutpen believe he can simply begin again after catastrophe? Is his confidence admirable, delusional, or both?
4. "...that walking shadow..." (pp. 173–74) "...I was the sun which slew him..." (p. 174)  
Rosa describes Sutpen as a "walking shadow," yet also claims that she herself was the "sun" that destroyed him. What does this mean? How did she "slay" him? How reliable is this interpretation? Is Rosa telling the truth about Sutpen—or about herself?

## Chapter 6

1. *"She was no kin to you. No kin to you at all."* (p. 181)  
Why does Shreve insist upon this distinction? Why does kinship matter so much in this novel? In what way does it matter? Should it matter?
2. *"Perhaps nothing is ever finished... perhaps it was not fixed at all..."* (pp. 184–85)  
Does Faulkner present history as something fixed or something continually reconstructed? What role do Quentin and Shreve play in shaping the story?
3. *"Wait for what must be."* (p. 207) *"...that mirror..."* (p. 208) *"...that brooding fierce unflagging jealous care..."* (p. 208)  
How do the cemetery scene, the mirror, and Clytie's devotion deepen the novel's understanding of memory, death, and fate? What is everyone waiting for?
4. *"You were not listening... because you knew it already."* (p. 222)  
How can Quentin "know" a story before hearing it? What does this suggest about inheritance, memory, and the burden of Southern history?

**Thursday, October 22, 2026**

**8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET**

**Session III: Chapter 7**

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### Assigned Reading:

- Chapter 7

### Recommended Listening:

- YouTube playlists: [Core listening](#) | [Extended listening](#)
  - Bruckner, Symphony no. 9 in D Minor Bobby Krlic, *Midsommar*
  - Nick Cave & Warren Ellis, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*
  - Robert Johnson, *King of the Delta Blues Singers*
  - Robert Johnson, "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day," in particular
  - Charley Patton, *Presenting Charley Patton*

### Discussion Questions:

### Overarching Questions:

1. What is your gut reaction to the reading?
2. What has happened?
3. What do you think about Thomas Sutpen?

## Chapter 7

1. *"He did not need courage... he needed only a design."* *"He did not need courage. He did not need kindness or pity either. He needed only a design."*  
Throughout the novel, Sutpen has often appeared almost superhuman in his determination. Does Chapter 7 confirm that impression, or complicate it? What exactly is Sutpen's "design"? Is it simply ambition, or is it an attempt to overcome the humiliation of his childhood? At what point does a legitimate desire for dignity become moral corruption?
2. *"You are poor... then you will have to learn the difference between white men and black ones."* *"The man said, 'Never come to the front door again. Never come to a front door*

*but that one. Go around to the back. ... You are poor, are you? Then you will have to learn the difference between white men and black ones.”*

This is arguably the most important scene in the novel. Why does this encounter become the defining moment of Sutpen’s life? What lesson does the boy Sutpen actually learn? Should he have learned a different lesson? Does Faulkner suggest that Southern society—not simply Sutpen—is responsible for the tragedy that follows?

3. *“He found that he had been betrayed by innocence.” “He discovered that the innocence in which he had believed had betrayed him.”*

Sutpen is repeatedly presented as someone who acted from innocence rather than malice. How is he innocent? Is this persuasive? To what extent is he a victim of the society that formed him? At what point does he become responsible for perpetuating the very system that humiliated him?

4. *“So he merely corrected the mistake.” “He merely saw where he had failed, corrected the mistake, and proceeded with the design.”*

One of the most chilling aspects of Sutpen’s character is his tendency to think of human relationships as problems to be solved. Why does he describe marriage, children, and even people themselves as “mistakes” or “ingredients”? Is Sutpen incapable of love, or has his ambition displaced every other human affection?

5. *“The design.” “He had only one purpose: to acquire the land, the house, the wife, and the son.”*

By the end of this chapter, we understand exactly what Sutpen hopes to accomplish. Why are these particular “ingredients” so important? Is Sutpen attempting to create a family, or merely the appearance of one? What is missing from his design? How does the episode with Wash relate to Sutpen’s “design”?

6. Quentin remarks that Sutpen “never looked back.” Throughout the chapter, Sutpen insists on moving relentlessly forward, refusing to dwell on regret or remorse. How does this contrast with Quentin, Rosa, and Mr. Compson, who seem unable to escape the past? Which attitude is more destructive: Sutpen’s refusal to remember, or Quentin’s inability to forget? Does Faulkner suggest that either approach offers genuine freedom?

7. *“It wasn’t Sutpen’s story anymore.”*

By the end of Chapter 7, Quentin and Shreve begin piecing together Sutpen’s life for themselves, imagining conversations and motives that no narrator could actually know. As readers, how much confidence should we place in their reconstruction? Does Faulkner believe history can ever be recovered objectively, or is every historical account inevitably shaped by imagination? Why does Faulkner allow Quentin and Shreve to become co-authors of Sutpen’s story rather than simply its audience?

**Thursday, October 29, 2026**

**8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ET**

**Session IV: Chapters 8–9**

**Assigned Reading:**

- Chapters 8–9

**Recommended Listening:**

- YouTube playlists: [Core listening](#) | [Extended listening](#)
  - Krzysztof Penderecki, “Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima”
  - Abul Mogard, *Above All Dreams*



- Blind Willie McTell, *Presenting Blind Willie McTell*
- Mississippi John Hurt, *1928 Sessions*
- Jason Isbell, “Decoration Day”

### Discussion Questions:

### Overarching Questions:

1. What are your gut reactions?
2. What has happened?
3. What do you think about Thomas Sutpen?

### Chapter 8

1. “*So it was Charles Bon...*”  
Why does the revelation of Bon’s identity explain everything and yet leave so much unresolved? Why is Henry ultimately unable to accept Bon? Is race, incest, honor, or something else the decisive issue?
2. “*He must not marry Judith.*”  
Why does Sutpen forbid the marriage only after Bon returns? Was there ever a morally acceptable solution available to him? How does every possible choice seem destined to produce tragedy?
3. “*Perhaps they invented it between them.*”  
Throughout the novel Quentin and Shreve increasingly reconstruct scenes neither of them witnessed. Where is the line between historical reconstruction and fiction? Does Faulkner believe historical truth can ever be fully known?
4. “*Maybe nothing ever happens once and is finished.*”  
This idea first appeared near the beginning of the novel but seems to govern its ending. How has your understanding of this statement changed? What does Faulkner suggest about memory and history?

### Chapter 9

1. “*Why do you hate the South?*” “*I don’t hate it! I don’t hate it!*”  
The novel ends with Quentin’s famous denial. Why does Shreve ask the question? Why must Quentin repeat his answer? Does he convince you—or himself? What does this exchange reveal about Quentin’s relationship to Southern history?
2. “*They are still there.*”  
The novel repeatedly insists that the past remains present. What, by the end of the novel, is still “there”? Sutpen? Slavery? Memory? Guilt? Is the past something that can ever truly disappear?
3. “*Maybe this is all anybody ever can know about anybody.*”  
After nine chapters of conflicting narrators and reconstructed scenes, what confidence should readers place in the story they have received? Is Faulkner suggesting that historical truth is impossible—or that it can only be approached through many competing voices?
4. “*Absalom, Absalom!*”  
The novel’s title comes from King David’s lament over his dead son. Why does Faulkner choose this Biblical cry as the title of the novel? Who is David? Who is Absalom? Is the novel finally about fathers and sons, the South itself, or the universal tragedy of

inheritance? Does the novel fit within the Christian tradition, the Greek epic tradition, both, or neither? Does the South fit within the Christian tradition, the Greek epic tradition, both, or neither? Does America fit within the Christian tradition, the Greek epic tradition, both, or neither?

5. Is Thomas Sutpen a hero or a villain? If villain, does he possess any virtues? If a hero, what are the virtues or vices that render him tragic?