The Threats of the Present: Reading William Faulkner’s Light in August and Absalom, Absalom! As Representations of American Issues in the 1920s and 1930s

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The Threats of the Present: Reading William Faulkner's *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* As Representations of American Issues in the 1920s and 1930s

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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The Threats of the Present: Reading William Faulkner's *Light in August* and

*Absalom, Absalom!* As Representations of American Issues in the 1920s and 1930s

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Abstract

As one of the most well-known modern American authors, William Faulkner is no stranger to the world of critical interpretation. His works are often discussed and analyzed in academic circles, and these analyses have taken on, over time, a quite traditional interpretation. With *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, interpretation has traditionally focused on themes of history and race. There is no doubt that Faulkner had a rather distinct preoccupation with these two themes; his works are full of references to the issues of the past and of race in relation to the Civil War and "the Old South." It is not surprising, either, that it has been the standard that critical interpretations, from early critics like Cleanth Brooks and Olga Vickery to more contemporary critics like Lisa Nelson and Thomas Argiro, have focused on racial tensions and the representation of the past in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* What is often overlooked in critical interpretations of these novels is the influence of the present on Faulkner's works as well. When read in the context of the time period when Faulkner was writing and publishing, the critical interpretations of *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* focus on themes different from the more traditional interpretations. This new approach, using a more "historical present" critical lens for interpretation, shows how the issues plaguing the United States in the 1920s and 1930s—the threat of the "other," in the forms of immigration and differing socio-political affiliations—are reflected in these two Faulkner novels.
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Introduction

As one of the most famous authors of his generation, William Faulkner is also one of the most critically discussed and academically analyzed as well. While *The Sound and the Fury* might be the most recognizable and oft-discussed of Faulkner’s works, for scholars of the entire Faulkner canon there are two particular novels that are just as often critically and academically discussed: *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. The standard critical interpretation of these two novels focuses on one or both of two particular themes: an obsession with the past and the related issues of racial tensions tied to that past, both which precipitate directly from an inability for the Old South to move past the outcome of the Civil War. While these interpretations of both novels are completely valid and applicable, they have in essence become the defining analyses of the texts, and very few critical analyses stray from these interpretations. When studying Faulkner in depth, it is impossible to escape the importance of history and race to both the author and his interpreters, especially in relation to the two novels in question. However, we often—readers and critics alike—focus so intently on Faulkner’s preoccupations with the past that we neglect to remember that Faulkner was also very much a man of the present. So much of the analysis of Faulkner’s works is focused on this preoccupation with the past that little effort has been spent looking at the current events and influences that shaped his novels. Because these two novels are so often read with these particular interpretive lenses in mind, there seemed to be an opportunity and the potential to study the novels
from a different perspective. And, when *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are read with this interpretive lens, we can see how the circumstances and issues of Faulkner’s present—the period in time when Faulkner was actually writing and publishing his novels—greatly influenced these two works. When each novel is read in the context of American history, clear parallels emerge between issues apparent in Faulkner’s works and the issues plaguing American society at the time.

In the more standard and traditional analyses, *Light in August* is typically interpreted with a focus on the racial tension presented in the novel, particularly to the behaviors of whites versus blacks and how both issues manifest in the life and death of Joe Christmas. These traditional analyses, as posed by leading Faulkner critics like Cleanth Brooks and Olga Vickery, focus on the issues of race in the novel: Christmas’s supposed “blackness,” the racial motivation of his alleged murder of Joanna Burden, and the reaction of the Jefferson community to both. These analyses tend to read *Light in August* as a discussion of the racial tensions in a Southern society still wrapped up in issues left over from slavery and the Civil War, with Jefferson and its resident representative of “white society” and Christmas representative of the sentiments held over from the slave South, like the perceived depravity of the black race that would lead him to murder. While these traditional analyses are completely valid and obviously relevant, the focus on race as the only theme in the novel sells Faulkner as a master of commentary quite short. While race was certainly still an issue in the United States of the early 1930s, it was a much more complex place than
a country obsessed with *only* issues of race. There were many other issues, on top of racial tensions, plaguing the United States during the time that *Light in August* was published.

When read in context of the time period in which it was written, the issues presented in *Light in August* mirror the real-life issues taking place in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The issues of immigration and the rise of Socialist forces had become a matter of great concern to the American public. The Immigration Acts of the 1920s intended to curb the influx of "undesirables" into the United States, based on the notion that immigrants were inferior to Americans in a number of ways. Many Americans considered immigrants to have inferior moral and social values, and to make things more complicated, many immigrants were considered "nonwhite." The consideration that immigrants were not white only added to the racial tensions that were still present in the nation, particularly in the South, including the segregation and miscegenation laws still upheld to maintain black American inferiority. And, to further complicate matters, with the growing support of Communist ideologies in a struggling American society, many Americans feared that immigrants were supporters of Socialist political views and were bringing these undemocratic values with them into the country. With all of these concerns about immigration and socio-political forces that ran counter to democracy, Americans were extremely concerned with the threat of the other, a problem that is thoroughly displayed in *Light in August* through the representation of the numerous characters.
living in the periphery of the Jefferson community. In Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Gail Hightower, and Joanna Burden, we find characters excluded from the Jefferson community because of their differences from the established order, whether in their different values, beliefs, or behaviors. Percy Grimm becomes the representation of violent vigilantism, comparable to a Nazi Storm Trooper, in his pursuit and killing of Christmas. And Christmas becomes the embodiment of how race and foreignness were perceived as threatening to the community, specifically in the possibility of murder. With all of these characters, the threat of the other that was occurring in American society manifests itself in the novel, and these characters become a testament about the state of the United States at the time.

Similarly, standard critical interpretation of *Absalom, Absalom!* also focus on racial issues, such as Charles Bon’s heritage and the Sutpen succession. But the novel also focuses on an obsession with the past: in Sutpen’s reverence of and adherence to the traditions of the Old South and the southern aristocracy; in both Rosa’s inability to forget the past and her need to pass the story of Sutpen on; and in Quentin’s subsequent preoccupation with the story after it has been passed on to him. In traditional analyses, one or both of these two issues—race and history—are normally the focus of the discussion. One only has to look at a collection of essays like *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!: A Casebook* to see the range of critical interpretations that focus on these issues: Cleanth Brooks’s essay “History and the Sense of the Tragic”; Thadious Davis’s “The Signifying Abstraction: Reading ‘the Negro’ in
Absalom, Absalom!"; or Barbara Ladd's "The Direction of the Howling': Nationalism and the Color Line in Absalom, Absalom!." With these standard responses to Absalom, Absalom! so prevalent, it is easy to read the novel with these issues automatically in focus. And while, as with Light in August, these interpretations are both valid and relevant, they are also constrictive. There are other issues at play within the novel, issues that parallel things that were currently going on in the United States of the 1930s.

Published four years after Light in August, Absalom, Absalom! builds off the changes that had occurred in American society with the passage of time. Race was still a matter of concern, but now concern had shifted toward fear of black advancement. Shifting Northern sentiments, growing support of the NAACP, and various New Deal programs attempted to give black Americans equality on par with their white American counterparts. Eugenics, popular with the new growing socio-political force known as the Nazi Party, attempted to control procreation of "undesirables" which included anyone considered "nonwhite," such as blacks and immigrants. The rise of the Nazi party as a new socio-political force and the support of its leader, Adolf Hitler, was just another possible threat to the established order of American society. In Absalom, Absalom!, these issues are represented through the characters of Jim Bond and Thomas Sutpen. Jim Bond represents the inevitability of black advancement, despite the efforts that were made to maintain black inferiority. Bond also represents the futility of eugenics, as the sole heir to a dynasty built by a
man who tried to prevent his own bloodline from being tainted with "undesirable" blood. That man, Thomas Sutpen, comes to represent a Hitler-figure, with his charismatic characteristics, his dictator-like behaviors, and his adherence to a grand plan that intended to create a pure Sutpen dynasty. With these characters, the threat of the other that was taking place in the real-life United States readily comes to life on the pages of Faulkner's novel.

These characters of *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* and their representations of very real and current American concerns shows that interpretation of the novels surpasses these standard analyses of Faulkner's works. While these other critical interpretations cannot be discounted, since Faulkner's preoccupation with race and the past are incontrovertible, it is also apparent that Faulkner was just as concerned with matters that were currently taking place in the United States. This added layer of complexity—that Faulkner's novels can be read and interpreted with all of these themes of race and history and current events in mind—only further solidifies Faulkner as one of the most prolific and profound authors of modern literature. With these new insights into *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, the works of William Faulkner can be viewed not only as a commentary on the United States of Faulkner's past, but on the present, current-day United States as well.
Chapter I: “Something dark and outlandish and threatful”: Race, Immigration, and the Threat of the Other in *Light in August*.

With *Light in August*, published in 1932, Faulkner crafted a story that took on two issues that emerged in the years leading up to its publication: the lingering problems of race and the related fear of the “other.” Faulkner comments on both these issues through many of the novel’s characters, but with one character specifically: Joe Christmas. In *Light in August*, Christmas is not only the manifest embodiment of the perceived social and moral inferiority of blacks; he is also the representation of the threat of the “other,” especially the fear of the foreign as it was emerging in American sentiment concerning immigration. In *Light in August*, the fear of intrusion that appears is usually attributed to issues of race, which can be seen in the treatment of Christmas as “black.” The fear of intrusion, however, is not solely concerned with issues of race alone and involves more characters than just Christmas. The numerous characters that are represented as “others” in *Light in August* beg a deeper analysis that cannot be explained only as an issue of racial tension. Too many characters of differing backgrounds – men and women, black and white, religious and agnostic – are excluded from the Jefferson community. These characters are not peripheral characters, either – it is the protagonists of the novel who are being excluded from the community.

In addition to the issue of race, Faulkner presents in *Light in August* the fear of intrusion that was appearing within American society in the early decades of the
twentieth century, with Jefferson serving as the literary embodiment of the American community. Central characters like Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Gail Hightower, Joanna Burden, Percy Grimm and especially Christmas become societal outcasts and are excluded from the Jefferson community. The people of Jefferson fear and condemn these others without knowing much about them, based ultimately on the prejudices they hold against them because they are different from the accepted majority of the community. This exclusion transcends the issue of black versus white and has much more to do with the fear of things threatening—of any person who might potentially be different from the norm, whether because of race, culture, social status or political affiliation. The excluded characters represent the perceived threats to the boundaries of American society during the 1920s and '30s.

Christmas, the primary character of the novel, is the recipient of the brunt of the alienation and exclusion, and he receives it doubly: he is persecuted by the residents of Jefferson not only because of his "blackness," but also because of his "otherness." The problem of Christmas’s race cannot be escaped in the novel, and it should not be discounted. In the early 1930s, when *Light in August* was written and published, the issue of race was of particular significance in relation to civil rights and social status. Though the Civil War had ended slavery decades before, the United States government and the American public were unwilling to give the former slave race any kind of social status or recognition. Jim Crow laws were still followed and maintained the inferiority of blacks with "separate but equal" mandates, which really
did not create any kind of true equality. Blacks were still denied citizenship and the rights given to citizens, like the right to vote. Miscegenation laws, like the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 (in Virginia) still outlawed interracial marriages, and any kind of interracial relationship was severely frowned upon. The old sentiments about the inferiority of blacks that had enabled whites to enslave them in the first place were still present, especially in the South. Christmas becomes a character of interest to Jefferson only when it is discovered that he is possibly black, and then all of the prejudices still held and judgments still made about the black race become apparent within the boundaries of the Jefferson community.

The issue of Christmas’s “blackness” has been the focus of many critical interpretations concerning Light in August, from Cleanth Brooks to Eric Sundquist, to a more contemporary critic Lisa Nelson, and it is not my intention to retread ground that has already been trampled. It is obvious, to anyone who reads the novel, that Christmas’s race and his actions are the central focus and most important theme. Christmas’s race is problematic not because he appears black, but because he associates with “blackness” and therefore acts like he is black. As Nelson points out, “it is precisely the performative nature of race...that Faulkner represents as in crisis. One is not black or white, but one acts black or white, for race is not a biological fact but a social performance.” She goes on to say,

From the outset, Christmas’s race is located at precisely that loop of sight and belief: the children at the orphanage call him “nigger” and
he is thus perceived as black. When he arrives in Jefferson, because the citizens believe him to be white, they see him as white. Even after he takes a ‘negro’s job at the mill’ and ‘is living in a tumble down negro cabin’ no one suspects he is anything other than white (Light in August 36). Clearly living as a black man, Christmas is taken as white, that is until the body of Joanna Burden turns up dead and her murder is attributed to him. (59)

Once it has been established that Christmas is the murderer, things start to become more and more complicated, especially when it comes to the perception that Christmas’s actions are a “result” of his race. Once Lucas Burch/Joe Brown tells the policemen that Christmas is black and that information begins to circulate throughout the town, the people begin to look back upon Christmas’s life in the community and start to notice—or at least start to create—instances when Christmas’s “blackness” appears through his actions. All of Christmas’s actions are re-interpreted as manifestations of his race. The marshal, just after Burch/Brown has revealed that Christmas is black, responds by saying “A nigger...I always thought there was something funny about that fellow” (99). As the news starts to circulate, the collective voice of Jefferson says, “He dont look anymore like a nigger than I do. But it must have been the nigger blood in him” that led him to his actions (349). And finally, to explain why Christmas’s actions and his passing, both before and after murdering Joanna are so offensive to the community, it is simply because
He never denied it [his name]. He never did anything. He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad. For him to be walking the town like he dared them to touch him, when he ought to have been skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running. It was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too. (350)

And, as Sundquist so aptly puts it, “Finally, Christmas does ‘act like a nigger’ and allows himself to be beaten and jailed, as though in brief anticipation of allowing himself to be shot and castrated, an act in which Gavin Stevens...would have us believe ‘defied the black blood for the last time’” (73). Based on the treatment of black criminals at the time, especially those who murdered white women as Christmas had, Stevens’s statement attests to the defiance of Christmas’s black blood. If Christmas had been true to his “black blood” even in death, he would have allowed himself to be lynched in Mottstown instead of running. As all of these critics agree (and there are many that have been left out for the sake of time), it is obvious that Christmas as a character represents the numerous issues surrounding race in the 1930s. However, by focusing on a critical interpretation of *Light in August* using only the themes of race that are present, as so many critics previously have, there has yet to be significant interpretations of the novel that focus on other themes that are present.

What is most problematic in reading race as the sole reason for Christmas’s exclusion is the apocryphal nature of his “blackness.” As Frederick Karl believes, “it
does not ultimately matter whether or not Christmas has Negro blood—as people in the novel assume, and as many critics have taken for granted. There is no firm proof he does, for the novel deliberately blurs that point" (448). While there are numerous instances where Christmas is referred to, by himself and others, as black, there is no factual evidence given that he actually is. His actual racial background is of complete speculation to almost all involved. The root of the problem lies in the fact that Christmas does not look black: his skin is described as being “parchment color” (34) and as Cleanth Brooks notes, “easily passes as white” (177). Joe’s appearance as white poses a problem when the community preemptively condemns Christmas based on race alone. Andre Bleikasten writes that “Christmas is not a black man pitted against the white community; he probably is not even a mulatto. There is no factual evidence for his mixed blood: his being partly black is sheer conjecture” (83).

Whether or not Christmas is actually black is nearly impossible to prove. After all, the only “proof” of his race is Doc Hines’s testament that Christmas’s father was black, and even that is at the most speculation. In the end, it is not Christmas’s race that makes the townspeople fear and ostracize him, because they do not truly know nor ever will know what his exact racial status is. Critic Helen Lynne Sugarman believes that Christmas’s ambiguous race causes the people to question everything they knew about race in the first place. She points out that, “the town becomes progressively more fearful and hateful as it becomes more strongly convinced that Christmas is indeed black—suggesting once again their fear that Christmas’s unclear identity may
reflect their own equally unclear status” (53). By showing us how Christmas is
generally unknown and excluded because of his "blackness" but giving us the knowledge that
Christmas's race is actually of an ambiguous nature, Faulkner forces us to think that
Christmas might be persecuted and excluded for another reason.

What happens to Christmas within Jefferson is based on his possible black
race, but it is bigger than blackness alone. The problem at the heart of *Light in August*
is what Andre Bleikasten calls "divisions and exclusions.” Bleikasten posits that “A
society founded on rigid divisions and arbitrary exclusions can only be a *closed*
society... identities are defined and distributed according to the prevalent codes:
everyone must be tied to a class, a race, a gender” (96-7). These codes must be
followed to exactness, and “any sign of ambiguity, any swerve from the straight path
of conformity; should be interpreted as *a potential threat to the established order*” (97
my emphasis). Using this argument, Christmas is a threat because he does not fit into
a specific category of race, and therefore does not conform to the codes of Jefferson
society. In essence, by being neither black nor white, Christmas is actually an
“other,” and a threatening “other” at that. Bleikasten supposes that, “If a black man
can look and act like a white man, if appearances fail to match and conform essences,
whiteness and blackness alike become shady notions, and once the white/black
opposition has broken down, the whole social structure threatens to crumble” (98).
Christmas’s status as an outsider becomes a prevalent threat to the community,
because it breaks down the clear-cut codes that Jefferson so habitually relies on. If
Christmas can co-exist with the people of Jefferson for as long as he does, a potentially black man living under the pretenses of a white man, then any person can be doing the same thing. The people who are known and trusted might not be who they say they are. That the outsider could come into Jefferson and completely turn the values and codes of that town on its head is not only frightening, but frighteningly possible. That Christmas did so – and flew under the radar for as long as he did – only proves how vulnerable any society is to the intrusion of others. The people of Jefferson feared Christmas because he was the product of the “outside,” of a world that the townspeople did not want to become a part of or have infiltrating their safe little community. Jefferson had already established boundaries to protect the community from any sort of infiltration with racially divided sections of the town. The white members of the Jefferson community live in the town proper, at the hub of Jefferson activity. Blacks were relegated to the outskirts of town, with their run-down negro cabins scattered throughout the woods and in uncomfortable and undesirable areas, like near the railroad tracks outside of town. Certainly the physical distance of these sub-communities demarcates the town into specifically black and white areas, which prevents co-mingling and infiltration from occurring on a regular basis, or at all.

The threat that an outsider might break down the established order as it has been created by the community is directly related to the fear and animosity that was prevalent in the United States around the time that Faulkner was writing Light in
August. The years leading up to, during, and after World War I were a time of great immigrant influx into the United States. Most of these immigrants were European, a fair amount of the total from Eastern Europe. Americans and the United States government immediately feared the type of immigrants that were streaming into the United States. According to historian Monte Finkelstein, the overwhelming issue for Americans was that they “considered these immigrants to be racially inferior, morally deficient, and impossible to acculturate” (39). Fear of the threatening intrusion of “others” was increasing rapidly in American society. As Finkelstein explains,

Postwar... immigrants came to an America in which the political scene was dominated by rampant nativism, extreme nationalism, and fear of foreign influences. They and the other new arrivals, the majority of whom came from southern and eastern Europe, seemed to represent all that Americans feared and resented, and Americans reacted by calling for laws restricting the flow of these “inferior” groups. (38)

Because of growing concerns about immigrants, large-scale efforts were made by the United States government to find and eliminate possible threats to American democracy. A series of immigration acts in the early and mid-twenties succeeded in significantly curbing the influx of immigrants onto American soil. The Immigration Act of 1921 was passed “as a means to stem the immigration tide,” and the Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson Act, named so for representative Albert Johnson, the creator of the proposal) “severely curtailed immigration and
erased the image of America as an open refuge” (Finkelstein 38). Over the next few decades, the Immigration Acts diligently attempted to curb the flow of immigrants into the United States. According to US census data, the decade between 1930 and 1940 actually experienced an “out-migration” of immigrants in the United States: the percent of the American population comprised of immigrants decreased from 3.0% in the decade between 1920 and 1930, to -0.1% between 1930 and 1940 (Irwin 19-21).

Further complicating the matters of immigration were the growing external and internal socio-political movements that were growing in support and activity during the period following World War I. Fascism, Socialism, Anarchism, and Communism were gaining popularity as social and political movements in European countries like Italy and Germany, and with the immigration of people from these countries into the United States, fear that these movements might overtake American democracy was heightened during this time. Part of the limitations on immigration during the 1920s was the aim to prevent people who supported these differing social and political sentiments from entering the country and co-mingling with other supporters, and to prevent any sort of organized movement or uprising from occurring in the United States. While this should have worked in theory, the problem was also that many Americans, immigrants or otherwise, saw benefits within these other social and political organizations, with Communism as the most accepted alternative in the United States.

The Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) was founded
in 1919, and Communism gained support in the United States as part of the labor movement. Due to the economic and social changes of the late 1920s and early 1930s, more Americans than ever were discontent with the current state of the United States: the dramatic downturn of the economy, the high rate of unemployment, and the existence of unfair treatment based on social class and racial background. This discontent suited the Communist Party, for “in the radical changes of American social and economic conditions, the Communists thought they saw the beginnings of the objective revolutionary situation...The United States, it was declared, abounded with ‘revolutionary potentialities’ which the Councils might help to exploit” (Leab 303). Bolstered by the support of the Communist Party, and with a comfortable and well-supported niche in the American Labor movement, the CPUSA had the potential to be a dominant force. For those Americans who did not support the Communist cause, and actually feared the widespread acceptance of communism in the United States, they immediately looked to the foreigners entering the country at the time as the reason for the increase in alternative social and political ideologies.

The overwhelming feeling that emerged between the 1920s and the 1930s was that foreigners were unwanted in American society because of their different and therefore both “inferior” and threatening lifestyles, religions, and cultural beliefs. It is the fear of the different and the foreign, and more precisely the threat of these things infiltrating American society, that Faulkner comments on with his characters in *Light in August*. All of the main characters—Lena Grove, Byron Bunch, Joanna Burden, Gail
Hightower, Christmas, and even Percy Grimm—become alienated and excluded from the community based on their “foreignness” or “otherness,” because they are different in some way from the accepted members of the Jefferson community. Each of these characters somehow threatens Jefferson society, which collectively adheres to the Old South ideals of patriarchy, history, and religion, and the morals and values that stem from all three. Their differences, their “otherness,” sets them apart from the community, and ultimately makes them seem threatening to the established order of Jefferson society.

Christmas is an important character when it comes to Faulkner’s commentary because he is excluded and alienated not only for his “blackness,” as already shown, but also for his “foreignness.” What is most interesting about the case of Christmas is the fact that, throughout much of Christmas’s time in Jefferson, it is never known to the people of the community that he might actually be black. Our first introduction to Christmas, before we are given any background information to his life, places him as a foreigner. Byron recalls a conversation regarding Christmas’s background:

“His name is what?” one said.

“Christmas.”

“Is he a foreigner?”

“Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?” the foreman said. (33)

The people of Jefferson automatically assume that Christmas is a foreigner because he
appears to be white to them, but carries a “foreign” name. To further complicate the matters of race and foreignness is the fact that most immigrants, with the exception of Northern and Western Europeans (as they represent the race of the founding fathers of the United States) were considered not only racially inferior, but were considered “nonwhite.” As historian Mae Ngai states,

...the Immigration Act of 1924 comprised a constellation of reconstructed racial categories, in which race and nationality–concepts that had been loosely conflated since the nineteenth century–disaggregated and realigned in new and uneven ways. At one level, the new immigration law differentiated Europeans according to nationality and ranked them in a hierarchy of desirability. At another level, the law constructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common whiteness that made them distinct from those deemed to be not white. (69-70)

The feeling during the mid-1920s that all foreigners (with the exception of a select group of Europeans) are nonwhite immediately places them in a category of “blackness.” This added complexity makes Christmas’s supposed foreignness, before it is known that he is black, even more complicated. Even if he was first considered foreign, his foreignness also makes him racially inferior and therefore just as threatening as if he were a black man. This is only one way in which Christmas’s foreignness contributes to his exclusion from the community.
According to Byron’s calculations, Christmas has been in Jefferson for the better part of three years before Christmas’s race, not his foreignness, is brought into question. For those three years, the only thing that Christmas is, in the eyes of the community, is a foreigner. As Burch says to the police, when he reveals that Christmas is not foreign, but black: “‘The folks in this town is so smart. Fooled for three years. Calling him a foreigner for three years, when soon as I watched him three days I knew he wasn’t no more a foreigner than I am’” (98). This is not the first time that Christmas was mistaken for a foreigner, either. When Christmas confesses his “black blood” to one of the various prostitutes he has slept with, she responds, “You are? I thought maybe you were just another wop or something” (225). And Burch/Brown, as well, calls Christmas during an altercation a “durn yellowbellied wop” (275). The use of the term “wop,” as a derogatory name for someone of Italian descent, points to the idea that Christmas might be Italian, hence his foreignness. In an article discussing Faulkner’s use of Italians and blacks as nearly interchangeable in Light in August, Thomas Argiro states that “Faulkner’s curious strategy for dealing with issues of ambiguous racial identity employs a double-voiced articulation that proceeds by way of chiasmus, in which the identities of blacks and Italian Americans are assimilated and reversed in a signifying arrangement involving both displacement and substitution” (112). Understanding Argiro’s argument of the “interchangeability” of blacks and Italian Americans, it is not surprising that Faulkner would have Jefferson mistake Christmas for a foreigner instead of a black man.
What is most compelling is the fact that Christmas is already excluded from the community during the three years that he lived in Jefferson. Since it was not known at that time that Christmas could possibly be black, and yet he is still ostracized from the community, it begs the question of why Christmas was ostracized by the community in the first place, and the only viable answer is the fact that Christmas was considered an “other” based on his “foreignness.” Up until the moments that it is revealed in the text that he may be black, the people of Jefferson perceive Christmas as an “other,” not for being black, but for being “foreign.”

In this way, Christmas becomes the manifest embodiment of the fear that Americans were imposing on immigrants during the early 1920s. Americans were trying to weed out and prevent the influx of immigrants as societal outsiders who might attempt to break down the social codes of American society and the foundational rules of the American government.

*Light in August* is not limited to the discussion of only Christmas as one persecuted by and excluded from the community of Jefferson. Nearly all the principal characters of the novel can be viewed as outsiders or excluded from the community of Jefferson. The reception and treatment that these characters receive from Jefferson residents further show that these characters are considered different than the townspeople of Jefferson, and are therefore threatening to the established order of Jefferson society. Like their immigrant counterparts of real-life United States, these outsiders are potentially harmful to Jefferson society with their differences. Cleanth
Brooks agrees, stating that "(N)early all the characters in *Light in August* bear a special relationship to the community... They are outcasts—they are pariahs, defiant exiles, withdrawn quietists, or simply strangers" (179-80). What is at work in both the real-life United States and the fictional United States of *Light in August* is the exclusion of people based on their status as different, foreign, or "other" than the members of a specific community. These characters are treated unfairly and differently and are excluded from the community simply because they are considered "other" than—and therefore threatening to—the people of Jefferson.

The first outsider we meet in the novel is Lena Grove, and she is an outsider in the strictest sense of the term: she is not from Jefferson nor a member of the community, and in theory she is only passing through on the search for her baby’s father, Joe Brown. The first description of Lena is that she is a stranger and she is not from Jefferson; this automatically puts Lena in the realm of the "other." We are immediately aware of the fact that Lena is not one of them, that she is outside of the community of Jefferson. Lena is the only character in the novel who is an actual outsider, who does not live or attempt to live within the borders of the Jefferson community; for this reason she is, at the outset, innocuous. Instead of outright excluding her, Jefferson keeps her at a distance and considers her with wariness, as if she might be able to prove herself worthy of acceptance. There is simply not enough information available about Lena for the town to make a decision. All that is known to the town are these few facts: she is pregnant, and she has come in search of her
baby’s father— who is, unfortunately, not yet her husband. As the novel progresses, Lena becomes a mainstay of town gossip because of her protruding pregnant belly and her burgeoning relationship with Byron Bunch. Unfortunately, these two things severely skew Jefferson’s opinions of her. She is obviously a woman pregnant out of wedlock, which would have been a matter of quick and easy judgment against her. We see this judgment of Lena from Mrs. Beard, when Byron brings Lena back to stay at the boarding house:

She looked at Lena, once, completely, as strange women had been doing for four weeks now.

“How long does she aim to stay?” Mrs. Beard said...

Then she looked at Lena again. Her eyes were not exactly cold. But they were not warm. (85)

The “strange look” that Mrs. Beard gives Lena is most likely that of scorn and dismay for being pregnant and unmarried. While she allows Lena to stay, she—like Mrs. Armstid—does so not out of kindness, but out of womanly duty to help her. Mrs. Beard’s reception of Lena gives away the judgment she has already made about her: that she is obviously morally deficient, having allowed herself to become pregnant out of wedlock.

Lena’s pregnancy out of wedlock and her search for the father makes her, in the eyes of the community, a person of questionable taste, especially when it comes to her morals and values. Her actions and sentiments threaten the ones established and
held true by the Jefferson community. Critic Ted Atkinson says that

major characters in *Light in August* can be viewed as embodiments of
disorder whose internal conflicts both reflect and affect the destabilized
society they occupy. Lena Grove's disruptive contribution comes mainly
in terms of her unorthodox approach to motherhood; particularly her
inability to name the father of her child and her reluctance to name the
child after he is born. Both of these deferrals challenge the conventions
of a patriarchal order invested in naming and lineage as indicators of
continuity and order. (150)

While the idea that Lena must name the father and the baby to continue on the
established order of a patriarchal society is somewhat antiquated, Atkinson's
argument does point to the fact that Lena's out of wedlock pregnancy threatens the
norms and values of society, simply because it goes against the standard that a baby
be born to a married couple. Jefferson will not be able to accept someone of such
questionable nature because her lack of morals and values might corrupt the
community. If she were to be accepted into the community, her inability to have and
raise the child in the acceptable manner would usurp the norms and values of the
community. For these reasons, Lena must be excluded from the community to
maintain the established order and decorum of Jefferson society.

Lena's alignment with other Jefferson miscreants, like Bunch and Hightower,
only further decreases any chances she has of being included and, in the end, secures
her exclusion from Jefferson. Her association with Bunch and Hightower prevents her from ever being viewed as one of the community, because the people she aligns herself with are as much outsiders in the court of Jefferson public opinion as Christmas. Bunch and Hightower are the only two characters who have—or at least have had—any semblance of membership in the community. They seem to find solace in each other’s company, since their exclusion gives them something in common. However, their exclusion is based on very different circumstances.

By the end of the novel, Bunch has been alienated and excluded for a number of reasons. First and foremost is the fact that Bunch is, for all intents and purposes, a self-made outsider. His isolation is a consequence of his own fear of being a part of a real community. Though he has lived in town for seven years, Jefferson does not know much about Bunch because he has chosen to keep himself on the fringe of their society: Bunch has no other interaction with the town other than the six days a week he works at the planing mill. As noted about Bunch, “In fact, there is but one man who could speak with any certainty about Bunch, and with this man the town does not know that Bunch has any intercourse,” that man being, of course, fellow outcast Gail Hightower (48). This lack of knowledge about Bunch would most certainly cause wariness about him on the part of Jefferson. In this case, because Bunch does not make himself accessible to the community, and since he does not share information about himself with the community, Jefferson has every reason to keep him at arm’s length. Bunch has chosen to keep himself apart from the community of Jefferson, it
appears, because he is afraid to be condemned by that same society, as he has seen happen to Hightower. Bunch’s association with Hightower, who has also been excluded from the community, only further solidifies his self-imposed exclusion from the Jefferson community. When Hightower and Bunch discuss why they both keep their distance from Jefferson, Bunch explains it by stating, “it is because a fellow is more afraid of the trouble he might have than he ever is of trouble he’s already got” (75). For Bunch, if he can live his life in Jefferson without being noticed, then trouble should never come his way. But trouble does come his way, when he becomes involved with Lena Grove. Critic John Duvall believes that “beneath the peace and quiet lurks sinister intention, as illustrated in the community’s reaction to Byron Bunch aiding Lena Grove” (102). By aiding Lena, Bunch is ultimately drawn into the community sphere because he has finally done something that the town can judge him for: “he has upset [the community’s] moral sensibility” (Duvall 102). Since he has come to the aid of an unwed pregnant stranger, Bunch has associated himself with the fears that the town feels about Lena. If Bunch feels some sort of sympathy for someone whose morals and values are obviously out of sorts, then Bunch, by proxy, must also be lacking in moral fortitude. The town’s reaction to Bunch’s sudden and questionable change is best described during his final encounter with the sheriff, who “listened quietly to the man who for seven years had been a minor mystery to the town and who had been for seven days wellnigh a public outrage and affront” (421). For Bunch, he was first a self-made outsider and then, because of his questionable
actions and sympathies, he is excluded from the community by its members.

Bunch’s actions also exclude him from his only ally in Jefferson, Gail Hightower. Hightower does not like Bunch’s newfound ability to make his own decisions, especially since he does not agree with the decisions he begins making. Hightower, just as the rest of the town does, views Byron’s decision-making abilities as threatening, because the decisions he starts making are not of the highest caliber. His decision to help Lena; to move out to the Burden estate with her and sleep in a tent in the woods; and certainly his affection for her and his desire to step up to make an honest woman of her in place of Burch/Brown, even if that means hiding the truth about him from Lena—all of these decisions are indicative of the newfound and immoral path that Bunch is heading down. This is threatening to the community because suddenly this quiet, formerly upstanding citizen is getting himself mixed up in a bad situation, and perpetuating the morally defunct decisions of miscreants like Lucas Burch and Lena Grove.

To Hightower, Bunch’s decisions are threatening on various levels. First of all, Bunch’s decisions display questionable judgment, which Hightower, as a man of faith, would value highly. More importantly, Hightower recognizes that Bunch’s decisions are alienating and excluding him even more from the Jefferson community. And, if Bunch gets Hightower involved in the situation, as he has asked him to, he will once again become the recipient of town judgment and exclusion. Hightower’s response to Bunch shows that he is aware of the consequences and is not sure if he
can be judged so harshly again in his life.

Then he begins to cry, sitting huge and lax in the sagging chair. ‘I
don’t mean that. You know I don’t. But it is not right to bother me, to
worry me, when I have — when I have taught myself to stay — have
been taught by them to stay — That this should come to me, taking me
after I am old, and reconciled to what they deemed —’ (364-365)

Hightower has to disassociate himself from Bunch’s activities because he just cannot
bear to be judged again by the town. In his old age, he has already resigned himself
to the fact that he is, just as Bunch is, an outsider to the Jefferson community, and he
cannot allow himself to be caught up in activity of the community again.

Hightower has good reason for not wanting to get pulled in to Byron and
Lena’s troubles. He has already been ostracized once and does not want to have to
face it all over again. Despite having been in Jefferson for years, Hightower was
excluded from the community nearly since the day he first arrived in town. He came
to Jefferson to preach in the church, and not long after he started preaching the
community shunned him for his overzealousness, which smacked of misplaced
fanaticism. Bunch is told how Hightower “arrived with his young wife, descending
from the train in a state of excitement already, talking, telling the old men and women
who were the pillars of the church how he had set his mind on Jefferson from the first,
since he had first decided to become a minister,” which in itself might have been
acceptable, except that “they listened to him with something cold and astonished and
dubious, since he sounded like it was the town he desired to live in and not the church and the people that composed the church, that he wanted to serve” (61). Because of the nature of his arrival, the people of Jefferson were immediately wary of Hightower’s intentions for their church and community. And then Hightower began to tell them the stories of his grandfather, which was the reason for his desire to come to Jefferson; and then he started to preach, and the words that started coming out of his mouth alienated his entire congregation, because “...the dogma he was supposed to preach [was] all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory...it in turn would get all mixed up with absolution and choirs of martial seraphim, until it was natural that the old men and women should believe that what he preached in God’s own house on God’s own day verged on actual sacrilege” (62-63). The people of Jefferson thought his preaching “sounded like a horsetrader’s glee over an advantageous trade” and how he “seemed to talk that way in the pulpit too, wild too in the pulpit, using religion as though it were a dream.... And the old men and women did not like that, either” (61-62). To the townspeople, his preaching was less about religious salvation and more about romantic nostalgia. Doubt about Hightower’s ability to be a good and righteous preacher, about his ability to provide proper spiritual leadership, eventually becomes a bone of contention with the residents of Jefferson: “So he preached to them, as he had always preached: with that rapt fury which they had considered sacrilege and which those from the other churches believed to be out and out insanity” (69).

Jefferson doubts Hightower’s own moral, mental, and religious standings,
which in turn makes them doubt his proficiency as their preacher. With this doubt in mind, Jefferson persecutes Hightower and his young wife, especially when they begin to suspect that she is having an affair and Hightower appears to be oblivious of his wife's transgressions. All of these factors—his "rapt fury" in his preaching, his nostalgia for the past that seems to outweigh his passion for religion, and the blind eye he seems to turn to his own wife's moral transgressions—makes the people of Jefferson question whether he is a man of legitimate faith. And if their own preacher has questionable conviction, how can he ever be able to lead them to a life of moral and religious fortitude? Certainly, Hightower's questionable religious standing make him a man of questionable character, and therefore not only different, but threatening: threatening because, as their preacher, he could be bringing his skewed religion to the masses of Jefferson and leading them down a path of religious destruction. The town cannot depend on a misguided preacher to guide them, and they are therefore threatened by his beliefs and behaviors.

When Hightower's wife is killed in Memphis, in a hotel room with an unknown man, Jefferson officially banishes Hightower, going so far as to ask him to resign from the church. As the townspeople tell it, "He would not resign... no other town would have him either...So the people quit coming to the church at all, even the ones from the other churches who had come out of curiosity for a time: he was no longer even a show now; he was now only an outrage" (69). And when asked to leave Jefferson, Hightower refused, and instead remained in his house on the road into
Jefferson, an outcast and fodder for Jefferson gossip for the remainder of his days. The town speculates that Hightower killed his wife for her insurance money, even though “everyone knew that this was not so, including the ones who told it and repeated it and the ones who listened when it was told” (71). When Hightower delivers the still-born child of a black woman, they suspect that he killed it because he was actually the father, but Byron knows that even they do not believe the story they fabricate about Hightower. Byron “believed that the town had had the habit of saying things about the disgraced minister which they did not believe themselves, for too long a time to break themselves of it” (74). All of this speculation about the immoral activities of Hightower—killing his own wife, begetting a child by a black woman—shows the townspeople’s desperate attempts to find a legitimate reason for their alienation and exclusion for Hightower. In the end, the only real reason they have for his exclusion is that fact that he is different from them, that they perceive his differences as threatening to the established order of the community.

But Hightower, despite this outright alienation and rejection from the community, refuses to leave Jefferson, no matter how much the townspeople exclude him. He continues to live out on the road, watching the street as people come and go from Jefferson. Critic Laura Doyle considers that despite the fact that Hightower has been forcibly removed from the events of Jefferson, there is still a “gap that connects him to (the) unfolding” of the dramatic events of the story. “Insofar as he maintains even an onlooker’s attachment to the street through the window...he leaves himself
vulnerable to a living re-enactment” of the events that led to his exclusion in the first place (Doyle 357). What must be stressed here, to add to Doyle’s observation, is that Hightower remains attached of his own accord and desire. It is because of his own interest and attachment to the goings-on of Jefferson that Hightower is ultimately drawn, like Bunch, back into the realm of the community. Hightower is drawn into the drama that unfolds concerning Byron, Lena, and Christmas, despite his initial best efforts to remain uninvolved. Having never contacted a doctor about Lena’s condition, Byron asks Hightower to deliver the baby when Lena goes into labor. And when Christmas has taken refuge in his house, on the run from Percy Grimm and his cronies, Hightower tries to do what has been asked of him and give an alibi for Christmas’s whereabouts on the night of Joanna’s murder. When Hightower becomes involved with this drama, including delivering Lena’s baby and giving a false alibi to Christmas right before he is killed, he solidifies his exclusion from the Jefferson community. What is important about Hightower’s actions this time around is the fact that, though he knows that he is again damning himself in the eyes of the town by helping Lena and Christmas, he no longer cares what Jefferson thinks: he has made the conscious choice to help them, and these actions make him feel better about his life and himself. For years he was impotent, living out on the road into Jefferson all alone, removed from the activity of the community and unable to do what is his nature: to help and guide others. Damned or not, he recognizes the need for help in Byron, Lena, and Christmas, and by helping them fulfill something in himself that had
been lacking for far too long. His blatant and final disregard for what the town thinks of him only exacerbates Jefferson’s alienation and exclusion of him from the community. With his decisions and disregard for their judgment of them, Hightower finally and securely aligns himself with the other miscreants who have managed to infiltrate Jefferson, which includes the person on which the impetus of all *Light in August*’s action hinges: Joanna Burden.

Joanna Burden, when alive, could be considered Jefferson’s resident alien: she has lived in Jefferson all of her life, and for that entire time she has been excluded from the community; and yet, despite her exclusion she will not leave Jefferson, either. Joanna is not only alienated and excluded by the people of Jefferson, but she becomes the living (and dead) embodiment of exclusion based on different opinions, values and morals. Unlike the others in the novel, Joanna is alienated and excluded for her differing sentiments and beliefs rather than for assumptions or judgments made upon moral character (like Hightower, Lena, or Bunch) or physical characteristics (like Christmas). Like Bunch, she has lived in Jefferson for a substantial amount of time; unlike him, Joanna’s exclusion is not self-imposed. Joanna is feared and condemned because her family is from the North and therefore are “negro lovers”: people who accepted blacks as equals, to the point that they even accepted them as lovers, wives, and husbands (which, of course, was considered not only illegal due to miscegenation laws, but morally and socially corrupt); who actively worked to gain civil rights for blacks; and who, through their actions, were
detrimental to the dominance and superiority of the white race over the “obviously”
inferior black race. As Atkinson notes, “Aptly named, Joanna Burden adds the weight
of historical conflict” to the novel. “Home to Joanna, the Burden estate is a historical
site of social conflict. The community and the estate have been forever at odds” due
to the complicated relationship between Northern and Southern sentiments (150).
The first introduction of Joanna in the novel immediately places her decidedly outside
of the community, despite the fact that she has lived in Jefferson all her life: “She has
lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose
people moved in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of negroes,
about whom in town there is still talk of queer relations with negroes in the town and
out of it...” (46).

Joanna knows that she is hated and condemned for her Northern sentiments;
more importantly, Joanna is also feared by the people of Jefferson because her
abolitionist and progressive beliefs threaten the accepted beliefs and the established
order of the Jefferson community. As it is stated in the novel, “it still lingers about her
and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is
but a woman and but the descendant of them whom ancestors of the town had reason
(or thought they had) to hate and dread” (47). Joanna herself explains to Christmas,
on one occasion, why it is that the people of Jefferson have so much disdain for her
and her family. She says, “They hated us here. We were Yankees. Foreigners. Worse
than foreigners: enemies... Stirring up the negroes to murder and rape, they called it.
Threatening white supremacy...” (249). Joanna knows that her sentiments and values concerning race keep her on the outside of a community that is steeped in segregation and slavery. For her entire life she has existed on the outside of the community, excluded because of her racial morals and values. And even in her death, Joanna Burden was a pariah, a scapegoat for the town’s fear of the possible intrusion from outsiders, with their differing—and therefore threatening—opinions and beliefs. Upon her death, the townspeople gather at her house, already burning like a funeral pyre. Faulkner’s eulogy-like narrative reads: “She had lived such a quiet life, attended so to her own affairs, that she bequeathed to the town in which she had been born and lived and died a foreigner, an outlander, a kind of heritage of astonishment and outrage, for which... they would never forgive her and let her be dead in peace and quiet” (289). Even in her death, Joanna Burden is persecuted and condemned for her “otherness,” because her beliefs were something other than those which the town of Jefferson believed and valued. Joanna is threatening to Jefferson because she breaks down the established and accepted social order of the community: to Jefferson, blacks were not equals, and were certainly not acceptable partners, whether sexual or otherwise. The townspeople will “never forgive her” for bringing her progressive thinking to Jefferson. If she and her family had never come to Jefferson and brought there “negro loving” to the community, then perhaps none of what happened in Jefferson would have ever occurred.

If it had not been for the murder of Joanna, the actions of the last alienated
character to be discussed—Percy Grimm—might not have ever occurred in Faulkner’s Jefferson. Grimm is at once both complicated and incomplete because he is not fully developed as a character; however, despite this lack of face time given to Grimm, it does not prevent Faulkner from developing him as one who is alienated and excluded from the community. As Cleanth Brooks notes, “In the first place it may seem strange to [readers] that one should regard Percy Grimm as an alienated character at all. Yet Faulkner has gone to great pains to show that Grimm is cut off from the community and is thoroughly conscious of being cut off from it” (61). More importantly, Grimm develops in such a way that he becomes a near “caricature” and embodiment of the threats that were prevalent in 1920s and 1930s America. Grimm does not appear until late in the novel (and is only given twenty pages in a novel that breaks the 500-page mark) but Grimm’s contribution to the action and analysis of the novel is incontrovertible. It is Grimm who pursues Christmas when he escapes en route to the courthouse, and it is Grimm who shoots and castrates Christmas in Hightower’s kitchen. More than just a character pivotal to important plot points, though, Grimm is the representation of not only one alienated from the community, but one alienated for a very specific reason: his likeness to a new and rising fear in the United States of controversial socio-political forces, the most threatening that of the fascist or Nazi dictator. Comparisons of Grimm to a dictator-figure are not new. Faulkner himself, many years after the publication of *Light in August* and when Nazism had become infamous around the world, was asked about the similarities of Grimm to a Nazi
Storm Trooper. His response was that he “wrote *Light in August* in 1932 before I’d ever heard of Hitler’s Storm Troopers” but had somehow managed to capture almost exactly a caricature of one (Brooks 60). Comparisons to Nazis aside, Grimm certainly represents the possibility that socio-political organizations, like fascism and communism, that were present in foreign countries could find support in the United States. Atkinson believes that Grimm’s presence in the novel “suggests that Faulkner was at the cusp of a movement to explore through various forms of cultural expression the potential rise of homegrown fascism in America” (152). Grimm is an outsider in his own hometown because of his rampant nativism and unrequited passion for militarism, misplaced ideals that lead him to fight with ex-soldiers and veterans who got to experience what he did not: World War I. With no direction or outlet for his ideals, Grimm developed “a sublime and implicit faith in physical courage and blind obedience, and a belief that the white race is superior to any and all other races and that the American is superior to all other white races and that the American uniform is superior to all men” (451). Grimm’s beliefs and actions are reason enough for the town to exclude him, since his sentiments are not welcomed nor echoed in many of the town’s residents. Already an outsider at the outset of the novel, Faulkner does not spend much time adding to Grimm’s alienation. What does develop, however, is Grimm’s representation as the fascist dictator that so many Americans were fearful of in the early 1930s.

Grimm and his posse of like-minded men come to town when Christmas is
brought back to Jefferson from Mottstown to try and impose their own militant sense of justice and order on the situation. As Atkinson says,

Grimm’s ideology of nationalism and racial purity is a major factor that aligns him with fascism and thus expands the novel’s provincial setting to encompass issues of national and international import...

Grimm and his band of para-military special deputies, clad in khaki shirts, act on a mandate to “preserve order,” invoking powers reminiscent of a police state to accomplish that mission (LIA 451). Betraying his undemocratic inclination, Grimm dismisses the will of the people, insisting unequivocally that “there won’t be any need for them to even talk” (452) and then imposing a sort of martial law. (153-154)

Grimm’s attempt to take the control of Jefferson law into his own hands, which he thinks are more capable of “preserving order” than the actual Jefferson police, is indicative of his predilection for a fascist-like military state. True to fascist sentiments, his racially-motivated actions during the killing of Christmas—the castration, the statement that Christmas will now “let white women alone, even in hell” (464)—also show his feelings about racial purity. In true dictator form, Grimm even manages to gain the support of Jefferson residents for a moment, when they think that maybe his ideas for handling the situation might be better than the police. Atkinson believes that Grimm achieves dictator comparisons when he gains the town’s acceptance, because “without knowing they were thinking it, the town had
suddenly accepted Grimm with respect and perhaps a little awe and a deal of actual faith and confidence, as though his vision and patriotism and pride in the town, the occasion had been quicker and truer than theirs” (456-457); however, their respect and support is not only in vain but misguided because “true to the form of fascism, though, any sense of common purpose is consumed by the egotism of the leader. The pursuit of Christmas by Grimm and his militia/mob quickly evolves into a violent display of Grimm’s individual lust for power” (Atkinson 154). Grimm’s respect and acceptance from the town is short lived, for once Grimm enacts his violent revenge on Christmas he is once again alienated, even by the same men that once followed him. His version of justice and law is simply too violent and horrific for them; “When they approached to see what he was about, they saw that the man was not dead yet, and when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit” (464). Grimm becomes threatening to the town because of his sentiments and actions, and therefore must be excluded yet again. In this way, Grimm serves as the embodiment of both arguments. He is alienated and excluded for his otherness because he is a threat to the established order of society. And he is also the embodiment of the fear of these threatening others that was present in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s by representing a literary caricature of a real-life threatening presence: the fascist dictator.

As we have seen, all of the central characters of Light in August represent some kind of threat to the established order of the community and are alienated and
excluded because they appear as a threat. Two of the main issues concerning the members of the American community at the time—race and immigration—are represented in the treatment of the characters in *Light in August*. They are all perceived as different and threatening to the community, for a variety of reasons. Christmas, Lena, Bunch, Hightower, Grimm, and Joanna are all alienated and excluded from the community because their differing opinions and beliefs make them appear threatening to the moral and social fabric of Jefferson. If they are accepted into the community, then they would be bringing their tainted, corrupted values and beliefs with them, which threaten to spread to the rest of the community. Christmas is doubly threatening, because he fits into two very threatening categories: he is at first seen to the community as a foreigner, and then later as a black man. By being both, Christmas becomes the representation of the judgments being made by the American people concerning two distinct classes, both equally threatening to the established order in the 1920s and '30s: blacks and immigrants. As shown, the issues of race and immigration in the United States during the time period were matters of great importance and severe discontent among the American people because they were both considered threatening. Taking note of these feelings, Faulkner molded the characters of *Light in August* into living, breathing embodiments of the societal issues of race and immigration. With *Light in August*, Faulkner left behind a still-image of the United States of the late 1920s and early 1930s: a United States rife with feelings of fear about the threatening intrusion of blacks and immigrants.
Chapter II: “The scion, the heir, the apparent”: Race, Eugenics, Nazism and the Threat of the Other in *Absalom, Absalom!*

Four years after the publication of *Light in August, Absalom, Absalom!* appeared to a country still dealing with the issues discussed in the previous novel, with a few new additions. In 1936, when *Absalom, Absalom!* was published, the United States had changed from the nation it had been upon the publication of *Light in August*. The turmoil of the Great Depression had spanned past the half-decade mark. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to the presidency in 1933 and immediately began instituting New Deal programs to try to turn the economy and American morale around. By 1936, the New Deal programs had been in place for a few years. While these efforts were successful to an extent, the New Deal programs created tensions among the American people, particularly when it came to race. New Deal programs had the appearance of aiding blacks, which added to the fear many Southerners felt about the possibility of equality for blacks. On a more global front, though, there were new additions to these tensions. As Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany starting in 1933 and as support for Nazism grew in Germany and knowledge about it grew in the United States, the perspectives about both immigrants and blacks changed once again. Nazi sentiments about blacks and Jews, the theories of Social Darwinism and the practice of eugenics, all added a new context to the “threat of the other” that appeared in 1930s America. The “threat of the other” that appears in *Absalom, Absalom!* comes in the form of Jim Bond and Thomas Sutpen. Jim Bond,
the last remaining Sutpen, represents the threat of the other, especially when taken in
the context of Nazi and American practices of eugenics and the advancement of
blacks in the United States during the 1930s. Thomas Sutpen represents the fear of the
“threatening other” seen in changing feelings about foreigners, but particularly as the
threat of Nazi and other fascist dictatorships—specifically Hitler.

An important tenet of the Nazi party’s ideologies in Germany was the idea and
practice of eugenics, a concept which was gaining support throughout the world in the
thirties. Eugenics was based on the premise that undesirable traits, such as poverty or
mental illness, were passed down through genetics. As sociologist Frank Dikotter
explains,

Eugenics was a fundamental aspect of some of the most important
cultural and social movements of the twentieth century, intimately
linked to ideologies of “race,” nation, and sex, inextricably meshed
with population control, social hygiene, state hospitals, and the
welfare state...Far from being a politically conservative and
scientifically spurious set of beliefs that remained confined to the
Nazi era, eugenics belonged to the political vocabulary of virtually
every significant modernizing force between the two world wars. It
was part of such widely discussed issues as evolution, degeneration,
civilization, and modernity, and touched on a wide variety of emerging
fields like maternity, psychiatry, criminology, public health and sex
In practice both in Germany and the United States, eugenics lent itself to forced sterilizations in the hopes of preventing those with these "undesirable" traits from procreating, and hence passing them down to further generations and diluting the makeup of society. Eugenics was "widely seen to be a morally acceptable and scientifically viable way of improving human heredity" and was "embraced by social reformers, established intellectuals, and medical authorities from one end of the political spectrum to the other" (Dikotter 467). While eugenics may have had academic relevance in respect to human heredity, it also "gave scientific authority to social fears and moral panics, lent respectability to racial doctrines, and provided legitimacy to sterilization acts and immigration laws" (Dikotter 468). In Nazi Germany, the eugenics movement sprang mainly from the values of Darwinist theories and the predilection for Social Darwinism as a social schema. According to social historian Richard Weikart,

The notion that humans only have value in relation to the species or to the extent that they contribute to the progress of the human species led to a radical reconceptualization of the value of human life, especially since many Darwinists stressed biological inequality among humans. Most Darwinists believed that biological traits varied considerably from one individual to another; natural selection could not occur without variation. When they applied this
to humans, they emphasized biological differences among humans;
some were more “fit” (tüchtig) than others. (333)
The theories of Social Darwinism that were so prevalent in Germany during the
periods before the Nazi rise to power significantly affected the policies and practices
that the Nazi party put into place. As noted by Weikart,
The ideology of Hitler and many of his closest associates was heavily
influenced by Social Darwinism, eugenics, and euthanasia in the first
decades of the twentieth century, as just about all scholars of Nazism
recognize. Once the Nazis came to power, they implemented these
ideas with sterilization laws and later euthanasia and mass
extermination. Also the Darwinian devaluing of human life may
help explain why so many physicians, scientists, and other Germans
cooperated with the Nazis. (343)
Social Darwinism and eugenics justified Hitler’s treatment of any non-Aryans: in
Nazi Germany, eugenics applied not only to Jews, but to blacks, gypsies, and
homosexuals as well. Jews received the brunt of Nazi eugenics and mass
extermination and are therefore the most discussed when it comes to Nazi practices.
However, as noted before, Hitler was also viciously anti-black (Grill 668), leading to
“Nazi plans to sterilize German children of mixed race, the so-called Rhineland
Bastards” (Grill 684). Nazi eugenics practices spanned across racial boundaries to
include anyone who was non-Aryan (therefore “nonwhite”), which gave rise not only
to white supremacist views of eugenics, but a particularly anti-black skew to Nazi eugenics.

While Hitler’s policy of eugenics emerged in practice more than it did in the United States, eugenics ideologies were very much the same and just as prevalent in the United States as they were in Nazi Germany. In the United States, particularly in the “isolated and provincial parts of the United States,” eugenics was used as a justification for forced sterilization as a contraceptive method to prevent the mentally ill from procreating:

Practicing physicians blamed the “insane” and the “feeble-minded” for a variety of social problems. Invoking the language of science...

medical authorities proposed marriage restrictions, sexual segregation, and compulsory sterilization to curb the reproduction of people with presumed dysgenic traits. Introduced during the first two decades of [the twentieth century], eugenic statutes providing for the sexual segregation of individuals defined as “unfit” in state institutions were passed...

Moves in favor of sterilization continued unabated in several states up until World War II, followed by a movement of repudiation and withdrawal from eugenic practices. (Dikotter 471).

While perhaps not in practice, in ideology eugenics was just as racially motivated in the United States as it was in Nazi Germany—a similarity that many American eugenicists would vainly try to distance themselves from as Hitler’s practices
increased. Eugenic ideology in the United States would eventually address two issues of high importance in the 1930s—immigration and race.

As noted previously, American policy and law in the mid-1920s attempted to restrict, if not prevent, the influx of immigration into the United States. One prominent American Eugenicist, Harry H. Laughlin, the director of the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Spring Harbor (Glass 139) used the ideologies of eugenics as support for anti-immigration sentiments in the United States. In the early 1920s, Laughlin published the book *Eugenical Sterilization in the United States* “in which he extolled the efficacy and desirability of compulsory eugenic sterilization as a basic policy of eugenics” (Glass 139). When the Immigration Act of 1924 was up for vote in Congress, Laughlin lent his opinions, considered “expert,” as testimony before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. As Glass states,

Laughlin’s testimony was based on an analysis in which he demonstrated, from statistics, to his own satisfaction that the immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe were of poorer mental capacities and moral fiber than the former waves of immigrants from northern and western Europe who had provided the backbone of America’s population. (139-140)

The Immigration Act of 1924 was indeed passed and radically restricted the numbers of immigrants from “undesirable” areas entering the United States. The ideology of eugenics greatly influenced the immigration laws in the United States at the time, and
they were based on the idea that people from certain countries—specifically southern and eastern Europe—were biologically inferior to the northern and western counterparts, and therefore should not procreate and dilute the American gene pool. As shown in prior discussions of the Immigration Act, disdain for these immigrants was not just about inferior morals and values, but also about the fact that these immigrants were considered to be of a nonwhite race. When discussing immigration laws and their relationship to eugenics in the United States, it is impossible to distance ourselves from the underlying issue truly at hand—race. And eugenic ideology in the United States certainly influenced American sentiments and practices concerning race. Edward M. East, a leader of the American Eugenics movement and a member of the American Philosophical Society, took a stand on both the issues of immigration and race in the United States. East viewed with alarm the immigration into the United States of inferior elements, and he feared the consequences of the differential birth rate that favored the increase of the lower social and economic classes, but he was cautious about advocating repressive measures. Nevertheless, no one went farther than East in lending his authority to racist and social prejudices. (Glass 135)

As shown with East’s arguments, it is nearly impossible to discuss eugenics in the United States without understanding how it both supported and influenced anti-black sentiments within the country.
Eugenics and race in the United States were, whether acknowledged or not by some Eugenicists, inherently connected to one another. East, in his book *Heredity and the Human Affairs*, made arguments for racially-motivated eugenics practices, stating that "the Negro is somewhat inferior to the white physically," that "every observer has found that the negro ranks much lower than the white in all tests designed to measure the higher mental functions" and that "we can find no probability that the negro will contribute hereditary factors of value to the white race" (as quoted in Glass 134). Racial eugenics was a highly regarded and commonly accepted ideology in the United States, specifically in the South. Gregory Dorr, in his discussion of Ivey Foreman Lewis, an avid supporter of eugenics who taught the subject at the University of Virginia for over 35 years, states that "although American eugenics maintained its own class dynamic, race remained a focus for American eugenical policy" (260). Furthermore, American eugenic ideologies concerning race more specifically supported the Southern sentiments about blacks, which is important to consider when discussing Faulkner's commentary about the 1930s. As Dorr notes,

Eugenicists' race- and class-based explanation of the social order fed Americans' growing nativism and racism and echoed white Southern rhetoric regarding racial purity...Scholars at elite northern institutions emphasized whiteness and Anglo-Saxon heritage in defining the "American race." This definition resonated with the traditional white Southern identity. Southern eugenicists applauded their northern
compatriots who argued for the preservation of this distinctly American race. Fears of miscegenation and the resulting offspring alarmed northerners and buttressed Southern concerns about both African Americans and the eugenically tainted "shiftless, ignorant, worthless class of anti-social whites of the south." (261)

Southern ideals of racial purity were bolstered by the eugenics movement because it gave scientific credibility to the values that they had instituted in practice for centuries. On one side of the race argument in the 1930s was the eugenics-supported idea that blacks were biologically inferior and therefore their procreation needed to be monitored, if not prevented, to protect the purity of American society. On the other side of that argument, however, were the advancements that were taking place in the 1930s concerning the sentiments about and treatments of blacks as equals.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the civil rights movement, although still grassroots, was just beginning to emerge. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP, was founded in 1909 and strove to achieve its "original goal of securing the basic citizenship rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution"—the Amendments intended to give blacks equal rights, such as due process and equal protection under the law, and the banning of race-based voting qualifications (Meier 4). These burgeoning civil rights activities were of particular interest in the 1930s, particularly with the acts that were developed in post-depression New Deal legislation. After the
outbreak of the Great Depression, the Roosevelt presidency had the daunting task of trying to pick up the pieces of the American economy. For Roosevelt and his cabinet, this meant not only for the white members of American society, but for every member of American society—blacks included. Roosevelt’s plan not only attempted to fix the lagging economy for all American citizens, but also to advance the civil rights causes in general. “The Roosevelt administration took unprecedented steps towards advancing the interests of black Americans... Roosevelt’s closest advisors pressed the issues of civil rights. At their urging, Roosevelt appointed blacks into various Cabinet departments” (Brueggemann 143). Appointing blacks into positions of governmental authority was unheard of at the time and guaranteed, in theory, that any legislation that came out of the Roosevelt administration would consider the interests of blacks as equally as it did the interests of whites. To the general public, these appointments more than likely influenced the perception—whether negatively or positively—that blacks finally had the same status as their white counterparts.

The main concern of the Roosevelt administration was, of course, fixing the economic despair that was the result of the Great Depression. To attempt a stabilization of the American economy, Roosevelt passed numerous New Deal acts focused on creating jobs and increasing aid to the now nearly destitute American public. For Roosevelt, this aid did not discriminate based on color, and many of the New Deal acts attempted to place blacks on the same level as white American citizens. Despite the intentions of Roosevelt’s programs to promote equality, once
actually executed at the local level “most of these programs, even those regarded as particularly favorable by blacks, had discrimination and/or segregation institutionalized into their structure, especially in the South, either by design or in practice” (Brueggemann 146). While the programs did provide aid to blacks, they were “discriminated against with lower relief rates than whites, and greater difficulties in securing relief” and “although federal guidelines prohibited discrimination against blacks in these programs, and they were recipients in large numbers in some areas, they were often treated as less than equal” (McGovern 12-13).

Whether these New Deal programs were actually beneficial to blacks did not really matter to Americans still holding on to the values of racial segregation and inferiority: the perception that these programs were giving blacks the potential to be true equals of their white counterparts was not only controversial but also threatening to Southern whites, especially those still steeped in slavery sentiments. The threat of black equality—of black intrusion and infiltration—in white society, particularly in the South, was becoming more apparent and possible. Between the abolitionist sentiments of the dominant North, a president whose Cabinet was pro-civil rights, and legislation that was geared toward the betterment of all lifestyles—regardless of color—black Americans were suddenly gaining status in the United States. In direct opposition to the widely accepted theory of eugenics as a support for segregation, anti-miscegenation and black treatment in general, the advancement of African
Americans was something that was very threatening to the established order of American society, and particularly Southern American society. This threat and the fear of what could happen should black procreation not be regulated becomes embodied in *Absalom, Absalom!* in the final result of Sutpen's dynasty—Jim Bond.

The single remaining Sutpen left at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* was Jim Bond, comes to represent the changes concerning race that were taking place in the United States at the time. All that remains of the Sutpen bloodline is Jim Bond, the son of the racially-confused Charles Etienne St. Valery Bon and a “full-blood Negress” (309)—which would have made him significantly black according to social standards of heredity. Quentin describes Bond as “a hulking young light-colored negro man in faded overalls and shirt, his arms dangling, no surprise, no nothing in the saddle-colored and slack-mouthed idiot face. He remembered how he thought, ‘The scion, the heir, the apparent (though not obvious)’” (296). Bond is the characterization of what Howe called the “[degeneration] into slack-mouthed idiocy” (76). That the result of Sutpen’s hard work to conform to the strict codes of the South would be a mostly black, slack-mouthed idiot of a Sutpen is indicative of the folly of both Sutpen’s dream and the ideals of the South, as well as representative of the “threat” that was perceived of black advancement during the thirties.

Bond represents what the United States could eventually evolve into given the large number of mixed-race Americans. There is no way to escape the fact that slavery and miscegenation actually resulted in the exact opposite of what had been
intended: instead of keeping the blood lines separate and therefore “pure,”

miscegenation and slave-master sexual relationships resulted in great numbers of
mixed-race citizens. Bond becomes the representative of these mixed-race citizens:

...and he, Jim Bond, the scion, the last of his race, seeing it too now
and howling with human reason now since now even he could have
known what he was howling about. But they couldn’t catch him. They
could hear him; he didn’t seem to ever get any further away but they
couldn’t get any nearer and maybe in time they could not even locate
the direction of the howling anymore. (300-301)

Using the narrator’s own words—that they couldn’t catch him, or hear him, or locate
him anymore—shows how Bond, as the representative of all mixed-race citizens, is no
longer distinguishable from anyone else. Critic Frederick Karl sees the discussion of
race in *Absalom, Absalom!* as the moment when “we find Faulkner moving toward his
most radical statement on race, the furthest he would ever go...Here he appears on the
edge of suggesting that the resolution of the South’s (and the Nation’s) racial dilemma
was in a single race, one that would transcend black and white by becoming black-
and-white” (558). As we are left at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* with only Jim
Bond as the outcome of one man’s dogged attempt to adhere to the white-centric
ideals of the South, it seems that Faulkner is suggesting that the only way to resolve
the issue of race in the United States is by accepting that the Jim Bonds of the world—
the “bleached out,” indiscernibly racially-mixed— not only occur, but will, in essence,
become the American race.

This line of thinking is discussed by Quentin and Shreve near the end of the novel. Shreve explains to Quentin what he thinks that Jim Bond as the surviving Sutpen means and bodes for not only the South, but all of the United States:

I think that in time the Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. Of course it wont quite be in our time and of course as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do, so they wont show up so sharp against the snow. But it will still be Jim Bond; and so in a few thousand years, I who regard you will also have sprung from the loins of African kings. (302)

Shreve almost seems to be the voice of Faulkner here, expounding for him the idea that the Jim Bonds of the world, the sole survivors of the generations of mixed-race families that sprang from miscegenation and slavery, will eventually blend in and inherit the United States. This point is particularly effective when Bond’s own lineage is taken into consideration. Jim Bond is, albeit far removed, the last descendent of Thomas Sutpen and Eulalia Bon, the “octofoon mistress,” a woman so “bleached out” that Sutpen did not realize that she had any black blood. As Barbara Ladd points out, in many of the “Deep South texts the octoroon is initially attributed not with an African origin, but with a European, that is, a French or Spanish, one; the figure seldom carries any telltale sign of African ancestry” (525). Sutpen is told that Eulalia is the daughter of the French planter and a Spanish creole, most likely to
explain her darker coloring and cover up the actuality that she is part African, which would have made her "black" by American standards and therefore forces Sutpen to repudiate her when the truth is revealed. As Ladd continues, "This 'mistake' in identifying the octoroon as a French or Spanish creole is strategic and points to questions and anxieties that the white southerner had about his or her own future in a nationalistic and increasingly imperialistic United States" (526). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the presence of the "bleached out" octoroon and the racially-mixed Jim Bond as the last descendent of Sutpen's folly in marrying one supports the fact that, eventually, it will be impossible to tell who is of what race and descent. The "questions and anxieties of the white southerner" will come true. Eventually, as Shreve notes, everyone will blend together and any traces of black descent in the blood lines will be indiscernible, and the Jim Bonds will truly "conquer the western hemisphere" (302). And if there is no way to distinguish the heritage of anyone anymore, if black and white blend together, then white race will be irrevocably "tainted" and can no longer be considered the standard of purity.

In the context of the eugenics movement, Jim Bond as the sole successor of the Sutpen blood line serves as commentary about the inevitability of black advancement. First, Shreve points to the fact that the Jim Bonds of the world will "bleach out" and eventually all people will "have sprung from the loins of African kings." This idea is diametrically opposed to the ideologies of eugenics. Eugenics could be used to completely obliterate the black race and result in a pure white race,
especially in terms of Hitler’s “final solution.” The problem is that there was already an allowance for the mixing of races, to the point that as decades go by, the mixed-race dilutes over and over until it is impossible to discern where the color lines are drawn. Like it or not, blacks are an inherent portion of the American race. The Jim Bonds of the world already exist because the laws of miscegenation allowed blacks and whites to mix, and after decades of subsequent mixing, those blood lines are almost indiscernible. The practice of eugenics will not solve the problem: Jim Bond already exists and is out there in the world, and nothing can be done to remove him from the world.

Secondly, Jim Bond as the sole remaining Sutpen becomes a tongue-in-cheek commentary against the theory of eugenics. Eugenicists argued that procreation had to be monitored amongst “undesirables” in order to maintain the purity and caliber of the American gene pool and to promote the continual advancement of society. And yet, all that is left of the Sutpen name, the final product of a design built upon and adhering to strict codes of white supremacy, is Jim Bond. Sutpen, as the representation of a valuable white Southern citizen, should—according to the laws of eugenics—pass down the desirable traits and supplement the American gene pool. How ironic it seems that the end product of the Sutpen design is the “slack-mouthed,” mostly black Jim Bond. In this way, Faulkner mocks the idea of eugenics as a viable option for American society. Bond is held up as both an icon of the futility of eugenics and also the inevitability of the American race. Despite trying to adhere to
the rules of the South and create a dynasty of “pure” descendants, Sutpen does not recognize that Eulalia is not of purely white blood and bears mixed-blood children with her. Even after Sutpen recognizes his mistake and tries to make reparations with his marriage to Ellen and the birth of Judith and Henry, he cannot escape the fact that he had a child of mixed-blood. Jim Bond is the inevitable result of Sutpen’s disregard for the rules of segregation and eugenics, purposeful or not. Regardless of any attempts to undo the mistakes of the past, no matter how hard the South tries to adhere to their own policies regarding racial mixing, the end result is still Jim Bond. Jim Bond is the ironic and inevitable result of the South’s flawed codes and ideals, and for that reason the South will have to accept him as their sole heir.

Bond also becomes the embodiment of the realization that, no matter how hard Southern American society may try to prevent and ignore the proliferation— or, worse still to the segregationists, the advancement— of the black race, it is simply impossible to do so. As Shreve says to Quentin,

“So it takes two niggers to get rid of one Sutpen, don’t it?... Which is all right, it’s fine; it clears the whole ledger, you can tear all the pages out and burn them, except for one thing. And do you know what that is?... You’ve got one nigger left. One nigger Sutpen left. Of course you cant catch him and you dont even always see him and you never will be able to use him. But you’ve got him there still. You still hear him at night sometimes. Dont you?” (302).
As Shreve so aptly puts it, the end-result of all that Sutpen set out to achieve was Bond, the remaining “nigger Sutpen” that no one can deny nor escape. Bond, like all the other citizens of mixed race cannot just be ignored. You can “tear the pages out and burn them” but that does not make them go away. They are part and parcel of the South because the codes that Southerners live and abide by allowed them to occur.

No matter how hard Sutpen tries to adhere to the Southern codes, even he cannot escape the fact that, by partaking in a relationship of miscegenation, he inevitably seals his own successive fate. As Atkinson describes it, “Bond represents the blurring of a color line that Sutpen sought to maintain in theory, if not practice, as a means of preserving his power. By the same token, Bond haunts the Jefferson social order, because he undermines the ideology of racial purity on which it relies for structural integrity” (169). Like all other Southerners that maintained the pretense that their mixed-race children born from their own miscegenation was allowable if not acceptable, Sutpen’s own design ultimately degenerates into nothing more than a sole successor of black blood. In this way, Bond becomes the embodiment of the fatally flawed Southern codes concerning race. While miscegenation laws were enacted to prevent the mixing of races, it made allowances for relationships between masters and slaves on the basis of ownership, allowing them to produce children of mixed-blood in order to gain more property and wealth. By making such allowances that were meant to perpetuate economic and social disparities between the Southern aristocracy and anyone else, which were also outrightly morally and ethically corrupt, the
Southern lifestyle had built itself upon a flawed structure. Bond, the product of generations worth of miscegenation, ultimately becomes the end result of this flawed ideal and the codes that sprouted from them. Faulkner obviously recognized that, since miscegenation was so prevalent amongst the Southern aristocracy, there were inevitably thousands of "real-life" Jim Bonds living in the United States. By posing Bond as the "inheritor" of the Sutpen dynasty, Faulkner points to the distinct possibility that the entire South—and, after that, the entire nation—will be inherited by the exact products that these flawed ideals intended to prevent.

Even more telling, Shreve has the understanding that not only is that result inevitable and not inconceivable, but that it is not such a horrible outcome. In terms of equality, what Shreve insinuates, Quentin already seems to comprehend. As Karl notes,

[Henry and Quentin] must confront the dilemma of how to respond to what the South demands when it runs counter to what they feel. Even more than Henry, however, Quentin is the one to embrace the racial dilemma: the knowledge that the Negro should be equal and yet the feeling that for the white Southerners things are more complicated than that. (554-555)

Quentin never disagrees with what Shreve says about the Jim Bonds of the world becoming the white race, because he already has the conflicted understanding as a Southerner of his generation: that blacks should be equal, and yet that feeling goes
against what he has been raised to believe as a product of his environment. In this way, Quentin and Shreve represent Faulkner himself, the Southern-bred man who embraces the equality of blacks.

Despite his own feelings about black advancement, Faulkner recognized that these advancements were adding to the racial tensions still lingering in the United States in the mid-1930s, which he represented with Jim Bond. Yet, even as Americans struggled to accept racial changes in society, concerning both blacks and immigrants, a new power across the ocean in Germany was emerging as an addition to the fear of the “other” during the mid- to late 1930s. Americans had a new threat to fear: the spread of yet another socio-political power very different from democracy, this time in the form of the Nazi Party and its leader, Adolf Hitler himself. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the response to this newly emerged threat is represented in Thomas Sutpen.

The history of Hitler’s rise to power, the Nazi party and the practices of both during the late 1930s until the end of World War II are all well-known in this day and age. What is less well-known and even less discussed by the general public are Hitler’s activities in the years prior to 1939. Hitler was appointed to Chancellor in 1933 and took over power as the Führer of Germany in 1934, exactly the time that Faulkner was pondering the first incarnations of *Absalom, Absalom!* Frederick Karl argues that “what is remarkable—and as yet unnoted—is how insulated Faulkner was from what was occurring in Europe and Asia, what would engage America in a few
years...he nevertheless lacked an acute sense of what was occurring in the larger
world” (595). It seems improbable that something of such gravity as the Nazi party,
an issue of great importance to Americans and discussed often in American
newspapers, would have gone unnoticed by Faulkner. With his own general
knowledge of the current events of the time, his contacts in New York, and his
involvement in Hollywood, Faulkner would have specific exposure to knowledge
about the socio-politics of areas outside the United States. Indeed, critic Ted Atkinson
agrees with this argument, pointing to the fact that Faulkner had contact with
members of the Popular Front—the convocation of various radical parties, both
bourgeois and proletariat, that were opposed to fascist politics—who had emigrated to
the United States in the thirties. As Atkinson states, “for the most part, radical
political beliefs were channeled by the mid-1930s into this defacto alliance of
intellectuals, artists, politicians and social activists. Faulkner witnessed this
movement firsthand during stints in Hollywood and visits to New York—hotbeds of
Popular Front activity, as exiled intellectuals streamed in from Europe in advance of
and during Hitler’s conquest” (37). Just because he did not openly discuss these
issues does not mean that he was unaware of them. Karl seems to contradict himself
on the difference between what Faulkner knew and what he wrote about. When it
came to discussing and taking a position on the political issues of the time, both
foreign and domestic, Karl argues:

Faulkner seemed well outside of all this, as he would remain outside
Hollywood political activity. Guarded by his Jeffersonian-Emersonian beliefs, he hardly ventured into more ambiguous waters. Yet he recognized his ideals were fantasies, that he had to transform history and the past into allegories to make them seem valid. Faulkner was a man who resisted all extremes—as he would try to do in racial areas also—and yet he realized his own moderate positions were unavailing, incapable of bringing resolution. As a novelist, Faulkner did not have to resolve such political and ideological matters; but as a man writing these novels he had to work through some forms of belief he could transform into his fictions. (511)

Here, Karl admits that while Faulkner may not have been willing to take a bona fide position on such issues as politics or ideologies and include it in his work, as a well-educated man Faulkner would have most likely had an opinion on the matter. Faulkner would have certainly had some understanding of what was happening outside the confines of the United States in the thirties, including the Nazi Party and Hitler’s activities, and it is my contention that he actually did make statements about these issues by investigating the threat of the other in his novels, specifically here in Absalom, Absalom!

Over the years, historians and critics have pointed out the similarities between Nazi Germany’s sentiments and practices and those of the South, particularly when it came to the treatment of Jews and nonwhites in Nazi Germany and the treatment of blacks in the South. Hitler’s design for a pure Aryan race and the practices that
stemmed from this design is, in comparison, not that far from the practices of segregation and anti-miscegenation laws that were present in the South at the time. Johnpeter Grill, in his article “The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?” has discussed these similarities in great depth. Grill notes these similarities in general, stating

Nazis were not only anti-Semitic but they were also viciously antiblack. Like many southerners, they saw the African-American as a major threat to white civilization. Hence the American South, with its long established system of white supremacy, was a source of interest to the Nazis as they, too, sought to work at their own system of Aryan supremacy. (668)

Grill pulls no punches in noting the specific similarities between Nazi and Southern race practices. “There were many similarities between pre-1938 Nazi discriminatory racial laws and their counterparts in the South. The Nuremberg laws, which prohibited sexual relations between Jews and Aryans, were similar to southern laws that banned racial internmarriage” (692-693). Anti-miscegenation had long been in place in the South whether by law or practice, but anti-miscegenation laws like that enacted in Virginia in 1924 only solidified the anti-white sentiments further into the twentieth century. Comparisons between the practices of the Nazis and Southern racial laws were often denounced in the South, even though the comparisons were valid. As Grill notes, “even though southern liberals were outraged by Nazi prejudice, they continued to support segregation in order to save the white race”
(693). The threat of the other, especially in terms of immigration into the United States during the 1930s, hit especially close to home when Southern practices were compared to those of the Nazis concerning “undesirables” in Germany. And yet, the sentiments of the Nazis were in some respects not that different from those of the South, a comparison that is often overlooked in discussions of the era but that seems especially important when discussing the works of one of the South’s most famous writers. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Thomas Sutpen represents the potential for these forces to intrude upon American society, and he can even be compared to a fascist dictator, including the most infamous of them all—Adolf Hitler.

Through the various ways that Faulkner depicts Sutpen’s position in the community, he reflects the shifting opinions of “the other” that were occurring in the United States during the 1930s. Sutpen first appears as unknown and therefore threatening. Different kinds of socio-political thought were seen as possible threats in the United States at the time. As stated before, the Communist Party in the United States was gaining support because they spoke directly to fixing the labor problems that were plaguing the United States. Many of the labor organizations, like the AFL and the CIO, were inherently connected to the communist support. Complicating matters was the rise of Nazism in Germany, culminating with Hitler’s takeover as leader of Germany. With American society teeming with its own tensions—race, immigration, class struggles, and so forth—America was indeed open to threats of intrusion and infiltration. Sutpen’s unwanted entrance into Jefferson illustrates the
threat of these types of “other” organizations in the United States, but more specifically he comes to represent, in various ways, a Hitler figure in the novel.

When Sutpen first appears in Jefferson, he is immediately perceived as threatening because nothing is known about him. Atkinson believes that Sutpen represents a very specific threat: the threat of the fascist dictator. According to Atkinson, “With the economy in disarray and the social order potentially in jeopardy, Americans in the early years of the Depression understandably entertained visions of strong leadership to restore the nation’s prosperity and purpose,” pointing them in the direction of a dictatorship (115). This kind of social unrest made the potential for the rise of a dictator figure possible in both the fictional Jefferson and the real United States. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen becomes a Hitler figure by trying to enter into the Jefferson community and establish himself as a powerful person, much like Hitler’s usurpation of the German leadership.

Part of Hitler’s draw was the curiosity he engendered in the people of Germany. Even with his controversial political ideas, Hitler gained support in Germany through his very enigmatic presence, which he used to his advantage by creating a sense of charisma and curiosity about himself. Before they knew what they were actually supporting, many Germans had already given their support to Hitler, so much so that even a young Jewish woman, at a rally for Nazi support, “found her arm in the air and heard her own voice cheering with the others, ‘Heil Hitler.’ Years later... she was still appalled that she could have done it” (Davis 152). We see similar
curiosity generated about Sutpen, when he first appears in Jefferson. His arrival sparks curiosity among the people of Jefferson, based mainly on his presence.

Sutpen’s arrival into Jefferson is told as such:

He was already halfway across the square when they saw him, on a hard-ridden roan horse, man and beast looking as though they had been created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer sabbath sunshine...face and horse that none of them had ever seen before, name that none of them had ever heard, and origin and purpose which some of them were never to learn. So that in the next four weeks...the stranger’s name went back and forth among the places of business and among the residences in steady strophe and anastrophe: Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. (24)

This much is obvious from the description of Sutpen’s arrival: he is a man whom the town does not know, and for that reason he is automatically received with both caution and curiosity. Because he is something new, strange, and foreign to the community they are immediately wary of him. And yet, at the same time, Sutpen has a presence that makes the community wonder about who he is and what he is doing there. To Atkinson, Jefferson’s caution and curiosity concerning Sutpen is the exact reaction that a dictator would inspire in the community, pointing to Sutpen’s role as the dictator-figure. As Atkinson notes:

Sutpen mirrors the “great dictator” figure first and foremost in terms of the enigmatic aura that renders him a source of fear and fascination
from the moment he arrives in Jefferson. The first reference to him in
the novel captures the charisma that will aid his design on power and
make him a constant source of awe, intrigue, and animosity, even some
forty years after his death, when his story again comes to life. (163)

With Atkinson’s arguments in mind, Sutpen’s infiltration into the Jefferson
community takes on a new light in regard to the real-life infiltrations possible in the
American community in the 1930s. As Hitler and Mussolini became powerful and
disruptive forces in Germany and Italy, so did Sutpen attempt to do so in Jefferson.

What makes a leader— including one like Hitler— such a charismatic presence
that he can gain power and control over his subjects? Political analyst Ann Ruth
Willner deconstructs the charismatic behaviors of these types of leaders, describing
their characteristics as such:

...the predominantly charismatic leader is distinguished from others
by his capacity to inspire and sustain loyalty and devotion to him
personally, apart from his office or status. He is regarded as
possessing supernatural or extraordinary powers given to a few to have.
Whether in military prowess, religious zeal, therapeutic skill, heroism,
or in some other dimension, he looms “larger than life.” He is imbued
with a sense of mission, felt as divinely inspired, which he communicates
to his followers. He lives not as other men. Nor does he lead in
expected ways by recognized rules. He breaks precedents and creates
new ones and so is revolutionary. He seems to flourish in times of disturbance and distress. (79)

These characteristics are clearly demonstrated in a leader like Hitler, who gained support through his oratory skills and his enigmatic presence. Sutpen, in the image of the “charismatic leader,” embodies some of these characteristics as well.

From the moment he is introduced, Sutpen certainly attempts to create loyalty and devotion, seen in his desire for acceptance by the community, his master-slave relationships, and most considerably in his relationship with Wash Jones. Upon arrival, Sutpen tries to gain access into and therefore the loyalty of the Jefferson community. Sutpen’s access into Jefferson is first initiated when he starts to invite the men of Jefferson out to Sutpen’s Hundred: “It was at this time that he began to invite the parties of men...out to Supten’s Hundred to camp in blankets in the naked rooms of his embryonic opulence; they hunted, and at night played cards and drank, and on occasion he doubtless pitted his negroes against one another” (30). When it came to his control over the Haitian slaves, Sutpen creates his authority in a very distinct way: while other slave owners might use fear to control those inferior to them, “Sutpen never raised his voice at them, that instead he led them, caught them at the psychological instant by example, by some ascendancy of forbearance rather than by brute fear” (27). In this way, Sutpen uses his charm to inspire loyalty and devotion in his slaves instead of simply using brute force and authoritarianism.

Perhaps most telling is the loyalty and devotion that Sutpen inspires in Wash
Jones. Wash Jones, the “gangling, malaria-ridden white man whom he had given
permission fourteen years ago to squat in the abandoned fishing camp,” was one of
Sutpen’s most beleaguered supporters for many years— that is, until Sutpen’s charm
runs out even with him and Jones becomes the one to take Sutpen’s life. Somehow,
Sutpen inspires in him a loyalty and devotion that Jones displays numerous times over
the course of their relationship. Jones waits on Sutpen as if Sutpen were master and
Jones slave: Sutpen would “in the same tone in which he used to address his orderly
or even his house servants...direct Jones to fetch the jug” and Jones would sit with
Sutpen and “from time to time pour for the demon from the demijohn and the bucket
of spring water which he had fetched from the spring more than a mile away squatting
again, chortling and chuckling and saying ‘Sho, Mister Tawm’ each time the demon
paused” (149). It is Jones who sits with Sutpen, knowingly watching and waiting
until
catching him [Sutpen] as he fell and commandeering the first passing
wagon to take him to the house and carry him up the front steps and
through the paintless formal door...and on up the stairs and into the
bedroom and put him to bed like a baby and then lie down himself on
the floor though not sleep. (150)

It is Jones who, despite the grim figure that Sutpen becomes upon his return from the
war, “apparently saw still in that furious lecherous wreck the old fine figure of the
man who once galloped on the black thoroughbred about the domain” (150). In Jones,
we see how Sutpen as the charismatic leader instills and inspires loyalty and devotion. Ironically, it is that devotion to Sutpen that impels Jones to take Sutpen’s life: when Sutpen refuses to accept Jones’s granddaughter’s child as a legitimate Sutpen heir, Jones is so upset by the rebuff that he takes Sutpen’s life. Through the devotion and loyalty he attempts to (and sometimes does) instill in others, Sutpen embodies this characteristic of a charismatic leader.

Another characteristic of a charismatic leader that Sutpen embodies is his ability to “loom larger than life.” In so many ways, Sutpen becomes a legend in the community. Even after his death, Sutpen looms larger than life. Miss Rosa cannot seem to escape the ghost of Sutpen: she tells Quentin the story in 1909—forty years after Sutpen has died. It takes at least four different narrative passes—Rosa’s, Quentin and Shreve’s, Mr. Compson’s, and Sutpen’s—to establish the entire story of Sutpen, because the story is just too much for one person to tell. Sutpen’s presence in the community becomes part and parcel of the community’s story: the story of Sutpen’s life is intrinsically part of the history of Jefferson. The story of Sutpen lives on long after he has died, much like a legend. In life, and in death, Sutpen is “larger than life.”

With his “grand design,” Sutpen displays the last charismatic characteristics: the “sense of mission,” living “not as other men,” and not “in expected ways and by recognized rules.” When it comes to the grand design, Sutpen certainly has a sense of mission. While Sutpen’s grand design is not divinely inspired, as a sense of mission often is, the creation of the grand design does come about in a moment of epiphany.
When he describes the moment the grand design was formed, Sutpen says:

It was like that, like an explosion...that innocence instructing him as calm
as the others had ever spoken, 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... “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?” and he said Yes. “But this aint a question of rifles. So to combat them
you have got to have what they have that made them do what he did. You
got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with. You
see?” and he said Yes again. He left that night. (192)

From the moment that Sutpen creates his grand design, from the moment of epiphany
where he understands what he has to do to achieve the success he envies in other men,
he never strays from that path. Sutpen’s sense of mission is so strong that he will do
anything it takes to ensure that he achieves the grand design. Sutpen’s strict
adherence to the design and his sense of mission to achieve it forces Sutpen to live his
life “not as other men” and not “in expected ways by recognized rules.” In Sutpen’s
case, “not as other men” is in direct relation to how the rest of Jefferson lives. Sutpen
lives according to his own rules, which do not always match those of the rest of the
community, and for this he is often criticized. Rather than being an heir to a Jefferson
name and place in the community, Sutpen makes one for himself in Jefferson. Instead
of inheriting it, Sutpen buys the land on which he develops Sutpen’s Hundred from a “Chickasaw Indian agent” and with “Spanish coin...[which] was the last of any kind which he possessed” (25-26). Sutpen lives on the Hundred with his “wild negroes” that eventually become the stuff of local legend, because no one in Jefferson could imagine living with the likes of such unrefined men (27). And of course, when no explanation could be made for how Sutpen could afford to build and furnish Sutpen’s Hundred, Jefferson automatically assumes that he really lives like no other: that he is, in fact, a criminal. When Sutpen returns with his four wagons full of doors and furniture and rugs and crystal chandeliers

the town looked at them and knew, no matter what they might have contained, that Mr Coldfield could not have mortgaged everything that he owned for enough to fill them; doubtless this time there were more men than women who pictured him during this absence with a handkerchief over his face and the two pistol barrels glinting beneath the candelabra of a steamboat’s saloon. (33)

While it is not true that Sutpen acquires his belongings through crime, the sheer fact that the town assumes that he lives in this fashion and that Sutpen does not deny it shows that he does, in fact, live “not as other men” and not “in expected ways by recognized rules.” In the end, it is precisely these characteristics that allow Sutpen to, for a time, achieve his grand design:

He was the biggest single landowner and cotton-planter in the county
now, which state he had attained by the same tactics with which he had
built his house— the same singleminded unflagging effort and utter
disregard of how his action which the town could see might look and
how the indicated ones which the town could not see must appear to it. (56)
Sutpen’s “sense of mission,” divinely inspired or not, and his decision to live “not as
other men” and not “in expected ways by recognized rules” allows him to steadfastly
adhere to and eventually achieve his “grand design.”

In addition to being part of the characteristics of a charismatic leader, Sutpen’s
“grand design” adds to Sutpen’s representation as a Hitler-figure. Sutpen’s goal is to
create his own dynasty, and he goes to great lengths to ensure that he achieves this
dream. The design hinges on two important factors: an acceptable amount of wealth
and a line of successors of an acceptable Southern caliber. The first factor of Sutpen’s
plan is the need for wealth, a pre-requisite for becoming a member of the Southern
aristocracy of which he so adamantly wants to become a part. Wealth and material
objects were impressive to the Southern aristocracy, because it symbolized success on
a very material level. Plantation society was built on the values of the huge mansion,
the expanses of land, and the slaves to work that land: all material measures of a
person’s character. Critic Olga Vickery discusses Sutpen’s understanding of wealth
as part of his grand design, stating that “A new attempt to create his counterpart of the
South’s design takes Sutpen to Jefferson. He is once more the outsider, but at least he
knows the passwords—wealth and power. Lack of a respectable past remains a
disadvantage, but the grandest mansion with the most magnificent furnishings in Jefferson helps to compensate” (95). Sutpen’s Hundred is Sutpen’s way of proving his wealth and worth to Jefferson (as the representation of Southern society) and to impress upon the community his presence as an upstanding member of the Southern aristocracy. As discussed earlier, a large part of the fascist dictator’s ability to gain power over the community was his ability to instill confidence and security in his abilities as a leader, and Sutpen’s Hundred is Sutpen’s way of doing so. As Atkinson notes,

As Hitler and Mussolini demonstrated, an initial phase of the fascist program was to impress on the people a vision of restored order and renewed confidence through the repair and advancement of roads, bridges and buildings...For Sutpen, the fetish for infrastructure fixes on the large mansion he wants to construct as a display of his wealth and power and an added instrument of the mystique he wants to cultivate. (164-165)

As with the fascist dictators, the first factor of the design—wealth and material possessions—to Sutpen is his way of impressing the Jefferson community and gaining access into the community. Once he gains access into and cultivates an interest within the community, gaining power within Jefferson should naturally follow, at least according to the fascist design. Sutpen assumes vainly that his material possessions would so impress the people of Jefferson that they would just roll over
and accept him into the community without question, much like fascist dictators wielded their power over their own communities.

The second factor of the grand design was the need for a line of successors of an acceptable caliber. To Southerners, race was inherently built into the understanding of acceptable lineage. Southern codes and the resulting miscegenation laws deemed that only children of purely white lineage could be considered white and constituted as a legitimate heir. Southern codes were based inherently on the "one-drop rule." Lawyer Christine Hickman states that "for generations, the boundaries of the African-American race have been formed by a rule, informally known as the 'one-drop rule,' which in its colloquial definition, provides that one drop of Black blood makes a person Black" (1161). And, according to historian David Hollinger, Jim Crow and miscegenation laws also prevented mixed-race or black children from being recognized as legitimate progeny "by legally marking all of the issue of their former slaves as permanently and exclusively black and by prohibiting any black person from marrying a white person. Hence all children of black-white couplings were bastards and under the law in many jurisdictions they had no claim to inheritance" (1379). For Sutpen, the race of his children becomes an important part of his grand design in light of these values and beliefs. Sutpen has to repudiate his first born son since he is of unacceptable lineage. In order to be able to achieve his grand design, Sutpen has to strictly conform to the Southern codes, which means he has to abandon his partially black family in the West Indies. Sutpen explains to General Compson how it was
imperative to abandon his wife and child in the name of the code and the design, “told him, mind, not excusing, asking for no pity; not explaining, asking for no exculpation: just told Grandfather how he had put his first wife aside... ‘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, so I provided for her and put her aside’” (194). As Vickery contemplates:

Nor does this rigid attitude provoke any tensions or conflicts in his own mind...Sutpen had made an irrevocable decision; consequently, his succeeding choices involve no apparent agonies on either a personal or a moral level. He is presumably bound to Eulalia Bon by ties of marriage, children, and daily companionship. Yet in the “just” divorce that follows, he gives up all these without hesitation in order to conform to the South’s worship of pure blood and its horror of miscegenation...

Sutpen’s “innocence” is manifest: it consists not only of his unquestioning belief in the value of all the idols of the South but in his belief that the structure, the design, is itself the secret of its strength and its perpetuation, that he need only to follow its ritual to grasp its substance... (95)

The only way for Sutpen to completely and successfully achieve his self-created design is for him to forge his dynasty out of pure white stock, hence his need to marry Ellen Coldfield and begin a new Sutpen succession with her. We see in his actions
similarities to Hitler’s own grand design. As is well known, Hitler had a grand design as well: to create a pure Aryan race. The value of racial purity in both Sutpen and Hitler’s plans is eerily similar and portrays Sutpen as a representation of a Hitler figure.

Furthermore, Sutpen’s strict adherence to the Southern codes that guide his grand design show in him a will power and self control that has been recognized as an important part of the Nazi ideology, specifically in reference to the creation of its leader. Political scientist Hajo Holborn notes that Nazi ideology “included the self-esteem and worship of its prophet. In him the Germanic race has come to full consciousness of its inner self and of its mission in the world. With the deepest insight he combines the greatest will-power, hallmarks of the born leader. Therefore he must demand complete obedience from the whole people” (547). In this sense, Sutpen’s adherence to the Southern codes demonstrates his sheer will power to create himself as a Southern aristocrat and parallels the will-power necessary of the dictator. As Vickery notes,

The germ of Sutpen’s design is simply his determination to create by his own shrewdness, courage, and will that pattern—which he sees, rightly or wrongly, in Southern society and to conduct his life strictly in terms of its ethical code...[Sutpen] never deviates from the design, never allows himself to forget the letter of that law by which he has chosen to regulate his own behavior. Since his position must be achieved rather than simply maintained,
he cannot afford any such relaxation of principle. (94-95)

By creating his design in the image of the Southern codes for no other reason than the fact that he needed to in order to become someone of power in the community (not necessarily because he believed in them) and adhering to them more strictly than even members of that community would have, Sutpen displays his determination and will power to gain the power he desires. In this way, Sutpen's determination to achieve the design by strictly follow the Southern codes mirrors that of the fascist dictator in the characteristic of will power that drives them to gain control over their people.

With Bond and Sutpen, Faulkner created two important vehicles for his commentary concerning American society in the 1930s. As with *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!* does not exist in a vacuum; when read in context of the period when Faulkner was writing, the meaning of the novel changes significantly. *Absalom, Absalom!* tackles the issues of societal threats, with respect to the advancements of blacks in the United States and in the rise of Nazism and Hitler. Jim Bond becomes the embodiment of the inevitability of black advancement, as sentiments concerning race shifted in the United States and as the theory of eugenics attempted to influence these sentiments. Thomas Sutpen, with all of his charismatic characteristics, becomes the Jeffersonian version of a dictator figure, as heightened awareness of Hitler and the Nazi party influenced American reactions to social and political changes. Within the pages of the novel, two issues prevalent in 1930s America—the threats of race advancement and of the socio-political “other”—are brought to life through these
character, showing that Faulkner may have been more attuned to present issues than most critics normally perceive.
Conclusion

In traditional readings of *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* history and race are most often the two issues most frequently focused on in the resulting analysis. An in-depth analysis of these novels that takes into consideration the current events of the time during which Faulkner was writing inevitably changes the way in which all Faulkner novels can be interpreted as well. When these novels are read in light of Faulkner’s present time, a quite different interpretation can be formed concerning the themes presented. In both novels, parallels are formed between the real-life American issues of race and immigration and the themes of the “threat of the other” that appear in each work. A “historical past” interpretation of *Light in August* focuses on the issue of racial tensions, not only in Joe Christmas and his supposed “blackness,” but in Jefferson’s reaction to this problem of race. With a more “historical present” interpretation, the analysis of *Light in August* can move beyond the issues of only race as a threat, and finds a more modern threat represented: that of the immigrant as the new “other.” In the novel, American reactions to the influx of immigration and the rise of Communist support in the United States during the late 1920s and 1930s are paralleled in the novel with the ostracizing of the main characters. Similarly, the “historical past” interpretation of *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses on the southern obsession with history in many ways: in Thomas Sutpen’s adherence to historically-revered southern traditions, in the lingering constructs of race relations, and in Quentin’s struggle with the southern past. When read with a
more “historical present” perception, the presence of “history” also has to contend
with the presence of the present: no longer do we focus on issues of an antiquated
society, but see in the novel hints of more modern threats. In *Absalom, Absalom!*,
parallels can be distinguished between the novel’s characters of Jim Bond and
Thomas Sutpen, and in the real-life societal reactions to the advancement of blacks in
New Deal programs and the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party that were occurring
during the mid-1930s.

This reading of *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* provides a new
approach for interpretation of these novels. Too often these works are analyzed with
the traditional critical lens, and such limited interpretations have been passed on from
generation to generation of Faulkner readers. This new approach allows for more
contemporary interpretations of Faulkner novels to coexist with the other, more
traditional responses to his works. Faulkner’s works have, historically, been well
known as a fictional representation of the state of antebellum America: issues
concerning the Old South, the Civil War, and slavery. With both of these critical
lenses in the arsenal for interpretation of Faulkner novels, we can review these works
not only as a portrait of antebellum America, but postbellum America as well;
essentially, we can turn to Faulkner’s novels to give us insight into the United States
during the time he was writing, not just during the past. By interpreting *Light in
August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* in both manners, we can see Faulkner’s own reaction
to and representation of a much larger span of time—that of the past and of the present.
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