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FLEM SNOPES AND THOMAS SUTPEN:

TWO VERSIONS OF RESPECTABILITY

At first glance few characters in fiction seem less similar than Flem Snopes and Thomas Sutpen. We see Sutpen first as an heroic figure riding astride a huge roan horse looking as though he "had been created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer sabbath sunshine." (AA, 132)[1] He is a man without a past, plan or purpose and thus has the air of mystery as well as the stately appearance of one of the knights riding across the pages of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, his large frame emaciated as a result of hard battles fought, his eyes "visionary" as a result of the wisdom gained from these battles. He is, to the townspeople, a man of mystery and they pass his name back and forth among themselves "in steady strophe and antistrophe: *Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen. Sutpen.*" (AA, 32)

Flem's past, too, provokes whispers among the townspeople, but the whispers are not in strophe and antistrophe. They are, rather, frightened whispers or snarled whispers weaving together the threads that will create the legend of Flem Snopes, son of a barn burner. Flem is a somewhat less heroic figure than Sutpen. He has a broad, flat face and eyes the color of stagnant water. He is soft in appearance and short, almost stunted, a full head shorter than Will Varner, we are told. He wears "a soiled white shirt and cheap gray trousers." (H., 22) A question directed at him produces either a mono- or di-syllabic response or a gob of spit landing just short of the speaker's shoes.

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1. Page numbers in this paper refer to the following books abbreviated in the following way:
   The 1940 Modern Library Paperback edition of *The Hamlet* (H)
   The 1951 Modern Library edition of *Absalom, Absalom!* (AA)
   The 1957 Vintage Paperback edition of *The Town* (T)
   The 1959 Random House edition of *The Mansion* (M)

So in appearance, at least, Sutpen and Flem Snopes are quite different. There is something grand about Sutpen, something laughable about Flem. We are surprised, then, in reading *Absalom, Absalom!* and the novels comprising the Snopes trilogy to discover similarities of ideas and themes running through the four novels. We discover that what is given tragic import in *Absalom, Absalom!* is given comic treatment in the trilogy. A look at the four novels will reveal this distinction.

Sutpen is a man who successfully cuts himself off from his past and thus enters a state of innocence. He proceeds from "a little lost spot on the side of the hill" (AA, 235) to which none of the family, neither the alcoholic father, the fornicating sisters, nor the virgin Sutpen himself could have returned even if they had wanted to, to a place where time ceases to exist. He sits, symbolically, "beside a big flat river that sometimes showed no current at all and sometimes ran backward. . . ." (AA, 227)

So, since Sutpen has no past he has no experience and thus becomes innocent; but it is an innocence he must lose, for innocence, like virginity, is a negative state which ignores, first of all, time and, secondly, experience, the clock of time. Sutpen loses his innocence by acquiring a social awareness through experience.

Some time before he had lost his innocence, Sutpen saw Negroes working and sweating in the fields "while white men set fine horses and watched them." (AA, 225) Thus, we are told,

> That's the way he got it. He learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but was learning there was a difference between white men and white men. . . . (AA, 226)

The "it" is the birth of a social awareness by means of which Sutpen was to lose his innocence and eventually acquire a tragic flaw.

One day before Sutpen had acquired his tragic flaw, he crawled through some tangled shrubbery and, lying hidden, saw the man in charge of all the land and all the Negroes lying in a barrel-stave hammock with his shoes off. A Negro dressed better than Thomas Sutpen, himself, and better even than his father or sisters, fanned the man and brought him drinks.

Later Sutpen went to the house of this man with a message. The door was opened by a "monkey-dressed nigger butler" who barred the way of the barefoot boy. Before the boy could even state his errand, he was ordered by the butler to use the back way. Perplexed, the boy left without leaving his message and went into the woods to contemplate.

In the woods he decided there must be some connection between the man owning all the land and all the Negroes and his being turned away. But since the boy had no past there was nothing with which he could compare his most recent experience except what he called the rifle analogy. The rifle analogy somehow or other involved the man lying in the hammock with his shoes off. When Sutpen first saw the man with the Negroes and the land and the shoes for summertime wear which he did not even have to wear, he did not envy the man. He coveted the land and the Negroes and the shoes and the not having to wear the shoes even though he had them. In asking himself how he would combat the man, Sutpen uses the rifle analogy:

> "If you were fixing to combat them that had 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?" (AA, 238)

Thus the rifle analogy persuades Sutpen that he must acquire land and Negroes and a fine house with which to combat the man in the barrel-stave hammock. But the land and Negroes and fine house are not what he has to have ultimately. They are only a means of acquiring what he has to have. They alone will not compensate for his being turned away, for him and his family being seen

> . . . as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace, brutely evacuated into a world without hope or purpose for them, who would in turn spawn with brutish and fearless prolixity, fill space and earth into a race whose future would be a series of cut-down and patched and made-over garments. . . ." (AA, 235)

So Sutpen wants to strike out at being seen as socially inferior, at being seen as a man without a past and with no promise of leaving the world a pure-bred posterity. What Sutpen wants, then, is respectability. For this reason he marries Ellen, the daughter of not necessarily the wealthiest man in town, but the most highly respected. It is said of Sutpen at this point:

> Then he needed respectability, the shield of a virtuous woman, to make his position impregnable even against the men who had given him protection on that inevitable day and hour when they must rise against him in scorn and horror and outrage. (AA, 15)

What Sutpen has to do, then, is create a family name. It is this decision to create a family name that results in his acquiring a tragic flaw, for his concern with the respectability that a family name will bring him comes to obsess him to such an extent that he chooses to ignore individual, human values in favor

of social values. Respectability replaces humanity. He rejects a wife because she is, he discovers after they are married, an octoroon, and rejects Bon too rather than create a

> mockery and a betrayal of that little boy who approached that door fifty years ago and was turned away, for whose vindication the whole plan was conceived and carried forward to the moment of this choice. . . ." (AA, 274)

Flem, like Sutpen, is obsessed with the idea of respectability. He is, however, not the tragic figure that Sutpen is. Flem's attempts to gain respectability are given comic treatment by Faulkner although Faulkner keeps in view the fact that the consequences of Flem's comic behavior are often quite serious. The suggestion is that whether a character is comic or tragic, evil can result.

So Flem is a comic creature moving not out of a state of innocence like Sutpen, but rather out of a past marred by stories of barn burnings, moving into the present of Yoknapatawpha County accompanied and joined by relatives who infest the land like so many vipers and rodents, spawning offspring who in turn are as viper-like and rodent-like, until finally there are more Snopeses than Varners. Flem, the representative Snope, gains a type of agelessness as Sutpen did. He has the "thick squat back, shapeless, portentous, without age," (H., 61) of a toad, and his appearance, one of stagnant timelessness, conjures up visions of sordidness.

But although Flem is comic whereas Sutpen is tragic, both react to basically the same things. We have already seen that Sutpen reacted to the man "in the barrel-stave hammock between two trees, with his shoes off." (AA, 228) Flem, we discover, reacts to Will Varner, the man "lying with his shoes off in the barrel-stave hammock slung between two trees in his yard." (H., 105) Sutpen acted to combat being forced to use the back door and to combat his and his family's being seen by the world "as cattle, creatures heavy and without grace." Flem, too, acts in response to the stimulus provided by the world's view of him. He acts

> to gain the only prize he knew since it was the only one he could understand since the world himself as he understood it assured him that was what he wanted because that was the one thing worth having. (M., 240)

The "that" is, of course, respectability. This is shown more explicitly in *The Town*. Charles Mallison is speaking:

> "What?" I said, "What is it he's got to have?"

"Respectability," Ratliff said.

"Respectability?"

"That's right," Ratliff said. "When it's jest money and power a man wants, there is usually some place where he will stop; there's always one thing at least that ever—every man won't do for jest money. But when it's respectability he finds out he wants and has got to have, there ain't nothing he wont do to get it and then keep it." (T., 259)

So Flem, too, casts aside human values. When in *The Hamlet* the Prince of Darkness offers him first Paradise and then the gratifications and the vanities, Flem refuses them. He wants simply the rights banking civil laws entitle him to.

It is important to notice that Faulkner uses much of the same language in referring to Flem as he does in referring to Sutpen. We have already seen the similarity of the descriptions of the two men lying in barrel-stave hammocks who served as stimuli for Sutpen and Flem. We have seen, too, how both became obsessed with the idea of gaining respectability. We can go a step further and point out that Faulkner emphasizes that both did not merely want respectability; they both had to have it. The terms "got to have" and "had to have" are used repeatedly in reference to both Flem and Sutpen when Faulkner mentions their obsession with respectability.

So Flem and Sutpen both decide to accept and live by social norms rather than to observe human, individual integrity. Both set out to gain the appearance of being respectable since the respectability they seek is merely an appearance, a good name, a reputation which, as soon as it is given recognition, becomes meaningless:

> You see? That was it: the very words *reputation* and *good name*, merely to say them, speak them aloud, give their existence vocal recognition, would irrevocably soil and besmirch them, would destroy the immensity of the very things they represented, leaving them not just vulnerable, but already doomed. . . . (T., 202)

Both Flem and Sutpen give respectability much more than mere vocal recognition. They make a mockery of it by insisting on being ostentatious.

Sutpen decided he would have to have land, Negroes and a house. He purchases the land from Ikkemotubbe when the old Indian is drunk, builds the mansion with timber carried from the swamp and with the help of a kidnapped architect, and, after being away a while, returns to Yoknapatawpha County with a group of savage-looking imported Negroes who do not speak English. But Sutpen had decided earlier that these—the land, the house, the

Negroes—were simply a means of attaining a goal rather than the goal itself. Therefore he marries Ellen, the daughter of the most respected man in town. In doing so he makes a mockery of marriage for there is every indication that he marries Ellen solely for breeding purposes. We know he was a virgin when he married (AA, 248) and that he gives no indication marriage will satisfy any kind of need for him: "None of them, certainly not those of them who knew him well enough to call him by name, suspected he wanted a wife." (AA, 39) Thus the marriage becomes a marriage of convenience.

Sutpen feels he must call attention to the respectability he is gaining or believes he is gaining. It is for this reason that he insists on a big wedding and that he wears a frock coat, a hat, and a tie, ostentatious symbols of respectability in Yoknapatawpha County. But far worse than advertising his newly acquired respectability is the fact that Sutpen does not hesitate to trample on human rights to get it. He rejects a wife who is, he discovers, an octoroon. He renounces Bon, his son, whose desire for love from his father knows no limits and causes him to exclaim that he would be satisfied with a mere lock of his father's hair or a paring from his nail. Later he insults Miss Rosa by asking her to have relations with him and, if the child they produce is a boy, to marry him. Finally, he sleeps with Wash Jones's granddaughter and, when he learns the baby is a girl, refuses to marry her.

As Sutpen commits each violation we feel a sense of anguish, for Sutpen is a serious, strong man capable of being so much better than he is. Flem does many of the same things Sutpen does, but we merely smile at him—at least at first. Like Sutpen, he feels he must dress respectably. He purchases a white shirt shortly after he begins working in Varner's store, a shirt which on him is ridiculous. It still has the creases resulting from its being packed in the box and is worn by Flem all week so that the townspeople can watch it become steadily grayer from Monday morning until Saturday night. Next he begins to wear a little bow tie described at one point in *The Hamlet* as a "depth-less . . . enigmatic punctuation symbol," a mere ludicrosity. (H., 138) Finally he dons a hat, "a new one of the broad black felt kind which country preachers and politicians wore." (T., 138)

Flem, like Sutpen, acquires land and in the process—again like Sutpen—makes a mockery of marriage. He marries Eula solely to acquire the Old Frenchman's Place. The mansion he needs comes with the land. In order to make the mansion more respectable, Flem has new columns reminiscent of Civil War days added onto it. In furnishing the house Flem goes to Memphis to find someone who "could tell him what he had to have" in the way of

furniture. (T., 221) (Again the term "had to have" is used in connection with Flem's obesssion.)

Thus although Flem is a comic version of Sutpen, the results of Flem's comic behavior are often disastrous. Flem's relationship wth Eula demonstrates to what extent he is willing to sacrifice human values for respectability. The wedding is a mockery to begin with, since it is simply a business venture for Flem. There can be no doubt that Flem and Eula are incompatible, for whereas she walks in an aura of sexual warmth and sexual sensations, he is impotent. He is impotent physically, it is true, but the physical impotence is merely a symbol, a manifestation, of the spiritual impotence that comes to the man whose ideas of right and wrong are read in the credit and debit columns of an accounting ledger.

Flem is willing to accept Eula as his wife for in doing so he takes a major step toward gaining respectability. Once he is married he denies completely the sexual, the natural, and advocates strongly the social norms. He ignores entirely natural sexual love. (We know this is true for Gavin Stevens has watched Eula and Flem in bed together.) (T., 132) He is not even interested in perverted sex. He does not, for example, attend Montgomery Ward's pornography exhibitions and is not a part of the crowd that watches Ike "diddling the cow". But the marriage must have the semblance of respectability. Flem is quite concerned that people know Eula was carrying someone else's bastard before they were married (T., 227) and he resents the fact that De Spain seduces his wife. He hopes, he says, for "vengeance and revenge on the man who had not merely violated his home but outraged it." (T., 270) He cannot renounce Eula since she is too much of a good business investment, but when she dies he sees to it that she is buried "respectable" and erects what he insists is a monument, rather than a headstone, in her memory, thus using even Eula's death as a means of creating the appearance of respectability.

It is ironic and consistent with the picture we have of Flem as a comic character that Flem should marry Eula, the embodiment of the primal sexual force. It is ironic and comic, but it is distastrous, too, for in placing the impotent, socially-conscious male in the marriage bed with the embodiment of sex, sex, the natural life-giving force, loses its strength and value. The social standards adopted by Flem entirely supersede human, individual values.

The actions of the other Snopeses serve only to emphasize Flem's complete sterility, his complete devotion to economic norms, the fact that he is "THE son of a bitch's son of a bitch." (M., 87) Ike's love affair with the cow, presented in mock-heroic terms, while it may not be a suggestion that a

sodomic affair is better than no affair at all, does serve to show that the idiot, Ike, has at least some form of love, although at the lowest level. Since it does exist at the lowest level, and since it is more of an affair than Flem has, emphasis is given to the fact that Flem's sex life is a complete void.

Flem's concern with respectability causes him to reject his own blood just as Sutpen did:

> Montgomery Ward figgered it was this here new respectability Flem had got involved with: a respectability that delicate and tetchous that wouldn't nothing else suit it but it must look like the law itself had purified the Snopes a-teelyer industry outen Jefferson, and so Flem was jest using Lawyer Stevens and Hub Hampton for a cat's-paw. (M., 58)

So Flem, like Sutpen, rids himself of those graceless creatures whose actions or very existence slander the Snopes name, the name "that ain't never been aspersed yet by no living man." (H., 207) Flem denies his own flesh, using and moving them like so many pawns, pitting one against the other, ignoring human values, and, finally, virtually takes Mink's life by allowing him to spend thirty-eight years in prison. But the Snopeses keep popping up and are as undesirable and elusive and irrepressible as the Jim Bonds of the South. The invasion of the half-breed Snopeses at the end of *The Town* suggests there will aways be Snopeses for Flem to combat just as their will always be Jim Bonds for the South, in general, to combat.

Sutpen's decision to create a family name at all costs results in his acquiring a desire which grows into the obsession with respectability that he eventually has. The obsession grows, disease-like, spreading into every part of the book until we feel that the obsession—or disease—must because of its very nature destroy itself. This is exactly what happens. The obsession with respectability causes Sutpen to reject Bon, but to be completely rid of Bon, Sutpen has to involve his other son, Henry. When Henry learns from his father that Bon is a Negro who is going to sleep with his sister, he kills Bon, thus effectively destroying himself, for he must spend the rest of his life in hiding. Thus Thomas Sutpen's concern with respectability causes him to destroy both of his sons who, ironically enough, are what he needs in order to have respectability.

Sutpen's obsession with respectability does not die when Charles Bon dies. Later, in violating Wash Jones's granddaughter, Sutpen is being consistent in his abuse of individual integrity and in nurturing his obsession to gain respectability at all costs. The violation leads to his death at the hands

of Wash Jones, another man without a past, by means of a scythe, the symbol of time, but also, ironically, the "symbol of a caesar's triumph." (AA, 177) Thus Sutpen's obsession results directly in his death.

We are made to feel that Flem's obsession, too, must destroy itself and destroy Flem. Suggestions of doom surround him. Words such as doom, fate and destiny are used frequently in the trilogy, particularly in *The Mansion*.

The treatment of Snopesism is quite light at first and in *The Hamlet*, especially, the actions of Flem Snopes and his relatives provoke much laughter. But even in this book there is the suggestion that Snopesism is a self-destructive force. One of the Snopes women is described as "a figure in a charade, a carved piece symbolising some terrific physical effort which had died at its inception." (H., 20)

As we progress through the trilogy the Snopeses fall into two sharply marked categories. There are the evil Snopeses who are identified with Flem and are destroyed by him, as he sees fit, and there are the good Snopeses who move outside of the influence of Flem. The good Snopeses appear to have a chance for survival. They adopt standards others than those used by Flem and as such are referred to as "not Snopes at all." The evil Snopeses cannot survive. Gavin Stevens points this out when he says: "So this was not the first time I ever thought how apparently all Snopeses are male." (T., 136) Unable to produce a female offspring, the Snopes species is doomed to extinction.

The idea that Snopesism must die because of its very nature is emphasized by focusing attention on Flem Snopes and the fate that awaits him, for "when you say 'Snopes' in Jefferson you mean Flem Snopes." (T., 33) Mink admires Flem greatly, much as Wash Jones admired Sutpen. Flem, like Sutpen, chooses to ignore human values and thus, in an effort to rid Jefferson of Mink and gain for himself the appearance of respectability, Flem allows Mink to be convicted of murder and then allows Mink to spend thirty-eight years in prison. Thus Mink represents the violation of human integrity that Wash Jones and his granddaughter represented in *Absalom, Absalom!* Mink prepares for a revenge similar to that inflicted by Wash Jones on Sutpen. He displays a type of patience while in prison that suggests the certainty that he will eventually have his revenge. Hints are frequently given that fate provides for the type of revenge that Mink wants:

> *No Sir. It will have to. It will jest have to. There aint nothing else for it to do. I dont need to worry. Old Moster jest punishes; he dont play jokes.*
>
> (M., 407)

So Mink is finally released from prison and makes his way slowly back to Frenchmen's Bend. His journey is interrupted, but we never doubt he will have his revenge even though the odds are against him.

Mink eventually finds Flem in his pre-Civil War house looking the same as he did forty years earlier, "no different, really: just sitting there with his feet propped and his hat on, his jaws moving faintly and steadily as if he were chewing," timelessly lethargic. (M., 413) Flem appears to have waited as patiently as Mink for destiny to run its course:

> Now his cousin, his feet flat on the floor and the chair almost swiveled to face him, appeared to sit immobile and even detached too. . . . (M., 415)

So Flem, the victim of fate, the fate which involves his denial of human values, is also the patient, immobile, detached observer of fate. Mink holds in his hand the instrument of death: an ancient, rusted pistol, appropriately comic and wielded by the man whose human value Flem chose to ignore.

We cannot look at either Sutpen or Flem as individuals isolated from the rest of the novel and gain the appreciation of how Faulkner is using these characters. Sutpen, for example, is closely identified with the South. General Lee says that the South is brave and says "in a hand-wrote ticket" that Sutpen, too, is brave. He is like the South. While *Absalom, Absalom!* is revealing Sutpen's tragic flaw, it is revealing, too, the tragic flaw of the South vainly trying to build a tradition on wavering social values. Faulkner is referring to both Sutpen and the South—and is thus fusing the Sutpen tragedy and the tragedy of the South—when he says there will be a day

> . . . when the South would realize that it was now paying the price for having erected its economic edifice not on the rock of stern morality but on the shifting sands of opportunism and brigandage. . . . (AA., 260)

Sutpen is again like the South—indeed he is a mirror of the South—in seeing the Nergo first of all as a Negro and secondly as a person. This view of the Negro is what causes Sutpen and the South to choose respectability first and individual integrity second.

The figure of Sutpen assumes even greater proportions. The problems of Thomas Sutpen become the problems of Henry Sutpen who, like his father, cannot ignore social norms and thus rejects the love he has for Bon in order that he might rid himself of a brother tainted with a few drops of Negro blood. Henry and Quentin become, symbolically, one. Shreve and Quentin

have already merged at this point into one, saying the same things and anticipating the thoughts of each other. So, finally,

> . . . it was not two but four of them riding the two horses through the dark over the frozen December ruts of Christmas Eve: four of them and then just two—Charles-Shreve and Quentin-Henry. . . . (AA, 334)

In this way Sutpen mirrors the entire continent from New Orleans to Alberta, Canada, and, by implication, assumes universal scope. The problem of Sutpen building on "the shifting sands of opportunism and brigandage" becomes the problem of the world.

We have seen Flem as a comic character and comic he is, for although his actions and goals are much the same as Sutpen's, what he does remains comic since he exists on so much lower a level than Sutpen. Yet we must conclude that the results of Flem's actions are much like the results of Sutpen's—and just as serious. Flem, although he may not be a perfect mirror of the South since he is such an exaggeration, is a type of dim reflector, at least of Yoknapatawpha County. The people laugh at Flem at first, but come soon to see their actions reflected in his actions. He is like a nail buried in a tree

> while all of Jefferson waited for the saw to touch that buried nail. No: not buried, not healed or annealed into the tree but just cysted into it, alien and poison, not healed over but scabbed over with a scab which merely renewed itself, incapable of healing, like a signpost. (T., 305)

So the people wait in fear for someone—Flem Snopes, likely—to brush against the scab and reveal the open sore. Jefferson, too, wants respectability. The people of Jefferson are willing to resort to unethical means to have it, for respectability requires not that evil be absent, but rather that it be hidden. In the words of Mrs. Littlejohn: "It's all right for it to be, but folks musn't know about it, see it." (H., 201)

The people of Jefferson know they are responsible for Snopesism and therefore are guilty of the evil which, if bared, is incompatible with respectability. "We've all bought Snopeses here whether we wanted to or not," Gavin Stevens says. (T., 95) Thus the people of Jefferson live in terror of the time when Flem Snopes will reveal his lack of real respectability which becomes by implication a revealing of their lack of real respectability.

So the people of Jefferson merely wait for the nail to be bared, hating Flem while admiring him and sharing his values, and thus become more involved in his actions. How completely they share Flem's values and how

completely they share his guilt is shown clearly in a speech by Montgomery Ward:

> All you got is Grover Winbush, and he dont dare testify, not because he will lose his job because he'll probably do that anyway, but because the God-fearing Christian holy citizens of Jefferson wont let him because they cant have it known that this is what their police do when they're supposed to be at work. Let alone the rest of my customers, not to mention any names scattered around in banks and stores and gins and filling stations and farms too two counties wide in either direction. (T., 163)

So what the Snopeses do is what the people of Jefferson do—but the Snopeses do it more flagrantly. That is why the people who questioned Grover Winbush earlier were ashamed, all of a sudden, "ashamed to look at him anymore, ashamed to have to find out what we were going to have to find out," because "it wasn't Grover Cleveland you had to be ashamed of: it was all of us." (T., 160-161)

When De Spain cuckolds Flem, all of Jefferson shares in the cuckolding. It is De Spain who, by means of his relationship with Eula, bridges whatever gap exists between the townspeople and Flem. De Spain is, paradoxically, both the epitome of civic virtue and the disreputable cuckolder who makes a mockery of love and marriage by carrying on and hiding his affair with Eula for eighteen years. He is, then, a representative of the respectability both Flem and the townspeople want and a representative of that lack of respectability they fear so much.

Therefore, when Eula kills herself the people of Jefferson wait anxiously to see "what else the flash of pistol showed up." (T., 341) The flash of pistol shows De Spain arriving in Jefferson the following morning acting as if nothing has happened. In this way he effectively denies the existence and negates the value of eighteen years of love rather than lose his respectability. The people share his guilt in affirming that it is "all right" for him to wear the black mourning band not because his mistress has killed herself, but because the wife of his vice-president at the bank has killed herself. (T., 339)

The wheel comes fully around then. A comic and a tragic figure both rise in society but in making the rise find they must perform actions that result eventually in their destruction. The one leaves behind only a babbling, idiot Negro reminiscent of Shakespeare's idiot telling "a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The other leaves behind his murderer who is free, finally, of "the justice and the injustice and the griefs" of the world as the earth tugs at him, bringing him, too, to his death. (M., 435)