

ABSTRACT

Fall of the House of Atkinson:
Gothic Resonances between Graham Swift's *Waterland* and William Faulkner's
Absalom, Absalom!

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The voice of William Faulkner haunts the novels of Graham Swift. Following the example of writers like Faulkner, Swift adapts the Gothic tradition for narratological purposes in *Waterland*. This thesis treats how Tom Crick uses the Gothic as a narrative strategy in *Waterland* to cast himself not as an active participant in the destruction of his family, but as a victim of chance and circumstance. *Waterland* shows Swift drawing upon Faulkner's use of the Gothic mode, deeply interested in narrative constructions that wrestle with how the sins of the past haunt the present. By engaging and re-appropriating the Gothic qualities of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Swift recycles Faulkner's themes, plot, and tropes in a way that signals not the exhaustion of the Gothic tradition in *Waterland*, but

Swift's intertextual aesthetic, which creatively misreads or reinterprets past works of literature to clear an imaginative space for his own work.

Fall of the House of Atkinson:
Gothic Resonances between Graham Swift's *Waterland* and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

by

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DEDICATION

To my love, Elizabeth Conte
who moved her life from Pennsylvania to Texas for me

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Faulkner, Swift and the Gothic

The voice of William Faulkner haunts the novels of Graham Swift. *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders* (1996), in particular, share strong connections to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *As I Lay Dying*, respectively. Critics have made much of Swift's indebtedness to Faulkner in *Last Orders*; at one point a large controversy arose from the literary ancestry of Swift's book. Shortly after *Last Orders* won the Booker Prize in 1996, John Frow published an article in February of 1997 arguing that Swift had directly imitated the structure of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in *Last Orders* ("Borrowed Treasure" 31). Frow's accusation sparked heated controversy. On March 8, little more than a month after its publication, Frow's article was given front-page treatment by Chris Blackhurst in *The Independent on Sunday* ("A Swift Rewrite, or a Tribute?"). In the wake of this publication, readers and critics alike were thrown into doubt about whether Swift had copied Faulkner and whether Swift should have won the Booker Prize. Yet in an interview on May 6, 1996, Swift had told *Salon Magazine* that "I admire Faulkner very much, and there are obvious similarities between the narrative [of

Last Orders and *As I Lay Dying*] . . . I think there is a little homage at work” (“Glowing in the Ashes”). Although Frow based his indictment of *Last Orders* upon Swift’s “direct and unacknowledged imitation” of Faulkner, Swift’s interview reveals that Faulkner’s influence upon his work was never a secret (“Borrowed Treasure” 31).

In fact, reviewers have noted Swift’s fondness for Faulkner as early as *Waterland*. *Waterland*’s early reviewers remarked upon the novel’s connection to *Absalom, Absalom!* as well as Yoknapatawpha in general. For instance, reviewer Michael Wood writes that “the ghosts of Faulkner, Günter Grass, and García Márquez stamp about in [*Waterland*] rather heavily” (“Haunted Houses”). In her *New York Times* review, Michiko Kakutani describes *Waterland* as “a kind of *Absalom, Absalom!* set in the English Fens” (“Books of the Times”). Kakutani notes that, like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Waterland* is, on one level, Tom Crick’s “attempt to piece together his past and come to terms with his family’s guilty secrets; and on another, a story about storytelling and how we make up tales to explain who we are.” In *The Wilson Quarterly*, an anonymous reviewer likewise notes that “the Fens of east England serve novelist Graham Swift as Yoknapatawpha County served William Faulkner: less as a geographical setting than as an active force shaping people’s lives” (“Paperbounds” 159). The reviewer, moreover, draws further correlations between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, noting that as

Waterland progresses “mysteries ramify but ultimately lead, as in all Gothic novels (including Faulkner’s) to a secret at the center of the family house.” In *Waterland*, this secret is the incestuous lineage of Dick Crick and, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the unknown ambitions of Thomas Sutpen as well as the paternal origin of Charles Bon. Like *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Waterland* focuses upon how history haunts the present. Both novels examine the rise and fall of a powerful family that has shaped local history and geography. *Waterland* probes the history of the Atkinsons in the Fens of England and *Absalom, Absalom!* explores the legacy of the Sutpen family in Jefferson, Mississippi. Swift’s early reviewers recognized that *Waterland* drew upon the historiographic concerns of *Absalom, Absalom!* as well as the Gothic tale of familial decline at its heart.

Although the structure of *Waterland* may not correlate to *Absalom, Absalom!* as *Last Orders* does to *As I Lay Dying*, *Waterland* nevertheless evidences Swift’s Faulknerian concern with familial bonds, guilt, and historiography. The Gothic concerns with history and familial decline that appear in Faulkner’s 1936 American novel *Absalom, Absalom!* resurface “across the pond” in Swift’s 1983 British novel *Waterland*. Both novels contain Gothic tales of familial decline that locate the root of present misfortunes in the sins of the past, specifically the sins of Thomas Sutpen and Ernest Atkinson, respectively. These Gothic narratives are the product of first-person narrators’ explanatory efforts to comprehend the past.

As Tom Crick and Rosa Coldfield wrestle with familial guilt and sin, they construct narratives that pin the blame for present misfortunes on ancestral scapegoats through the notion of a family curse. Just as Rosa attributes her and her family's destruction to Thomas Sutpen, so too does Tom attribute his and his family's destruction to Ernest Atkinson (*Waterland* 176; *Absalom, Absalom!* 14). This thesis treats Tom's use of the Gothic as a narrative strategy to cast himself not as an active participant in the destruction of his family, but as a victim of chance and circumstance. *Waterland* shows Swift drawing upon Faulkner's use of the Gothic mode, deeply interested in narrative constructions that wrestle with how the sins of the past haunt the present.

Waterland tells the story of Tom Crick, a fifty-year-old history teacher, whose life has been violently unsettled by his wife's theft of a baby from a supermarket in 1979. Mary's theft prompts Tom to wrestle with his past, specifically the three deaths that occurred during his adolescence in the summer of 1943. Months prior to Mary's mental breakdown, several events prompt Tom to stop teaching his history class the official syllabus. In response to the insistent questions of a student named Price, who believes that history will soon come to an end, and his wife's claim that she will give birth to a child in her post-menopausal age, Tom begins telling his history class stories from his adolescence rather than teaching the French Revolution. By digressing into his personal

history, Tom hopes to show his class why history is real and why it matters. Dismayed by Tom's digression from the official history syllabus, however, the school's headmaster, Lewis, offers Tom a chance for early retirement. Disgusted, Tom refuses Lewis's offer. When Mary kidnaps a baby, though, the bad publicity gives Lewis sufficient cause to force Tom into retirement. Knowing that he must retire, Tom decides to tell his history class a final, never-before-told story from his past. To better understand the roots of Mary's mental breakdown, Tom tells his history class the story of why he and his wife are childless. His narrative reaches back into family history to explain the relationship between the deaths of the summer of 1943 and his current predicament.

As Richard Rankin Russell has pointed out, Tom wrestles with his responsibility for these three deaths in a confessional narrative that delays the process of remembering as long as possible (116, 140). A significant amount of time thus comes between Tom's narration of each of the three scenes of death. Tom, for instance, fails to tell of Mary's abortion and Dick's suicide until the end of the novel even though he opens *Waterland* by recalling the discovery of Freddie Parr's corpse. Although Tom eventually admits his responsibility for these three deaths thirty-six years later when he and Mary return the stolen baby to its rightful mother, he nevertheless qualifies his certainty about whether Dick's death "was really a death" (314). Tom's failure to acknowledge Dick's

death qua death signals his attempt to mask his responsibility for it. Moreover, as Russell has argued, Tom's failure to confess the story of his brother's death until the very end of the novel suggests that he has played "the greatest role in this death and that he has been unable to deal with it since it happened. The only way he finally can accept Dick's death is to cast it in mythical, cyclical terms, thereby deflecting his own responsibility for causing it" (144). I argue that this mythic quality stems from Tom's use of the Gothic to construct a tale of familial decline. The mythic qualities Tom ascribes to Dick's death, allow him to link it with earlier deaths in the Atkinson family, those of Sarah and Ernest Atkinson, and cast it as the inevitable result of a family curse. Tom's Gothic tale of familial decline thus casts his grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, as a deranged individual whose insane ambition to sire the "Savior of the World" precipitated the deaths of the summer of 1943 and contributed to Mary's mental breakdown in 1979.

Just as Tom Crick attempts to make sense of the history of his Atkinson forebears and the role Ernest Atkinson played in determining the circumstances of his life, so too do the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom* seek to understand the figure of Thomas Sutpen and the effect his legacy has had on Jefferson, Mississippi. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the story of Rosa Coldfield's desire to unearth the past and of Quentin's education in the history of the Sutpen family and how his own life is reflected in that history. In 1909, forty-three years after leaving

Sutpen's Hundred, Rosa Coldfield suspects that someone other than Clytie and Jim Bond has been living at Sutpen's Hundred for the last four years (*Absalom, Absalom* 140). Her curiosity, or desire for revenge, gets the best of her, and she summons Quentin Compson to her home one hot, summer afternoon to ask him to accompany her that night to Sutpen's Hundred to expose whatever creature lurks within the bowels of the house. In preparation for this quest, Rosa tells Quentin the story of her relationship to the Sutpen family, framing it as a Gothic tale of familial decline. As Rosa tells Quentin of Sutpen's establishment in Jefferson, she wrestles with sources of guilt and hatred: guilt for her role in the demise of her family and hatred for Sutpen, who instigated her family's demise. Rosa's narrative casts Sutpen as a demon, hell-bent upon accomplishing his will and building his empire no matter the cost and explains the ruination of her family and the Sutpen family in terms of a Gothic curse (14).

When Quentin returns home later that afternoon before he must go to Sutpen's Hundred that night with Rosa, his father takes an interest in Rosa's tale, and, rather than allowing Quentin to speak, provides his own interpretation of the events surrounding Thomas Sutpen's arrival and establishment in Jefferson. Mr. Compson derives his tale from information passed down to him through his father, General Compson, who had been one of Sutpen's few friends in Jefferson. Later that evening, Quentin goes with Rosa to Sutpen's Hundred and discovers

that the fugitive, Henry Sutpen, has been living in that house for the last four years, having returned there to die. The discovery of Henry initiates a chain of events that leads to the burning of Sutpen's Hundred and Quentin's being psychologically swallowed up by the parallels that the Sutpen family's story bears to his own family story. When Quentin returns to Harvard in the Fall, he and his roommate, Shreve, begin the process of filling in the missing pieces of Rosa and Mr. Compson's stories to understand Sutpen's motives for establishing a plantation in Jefferson. Shreve and Quentin analyze Rosa and Mr. Compson's tales, judging where they may either have been wrong or silent, and employ frequent speculation in their attempt to best explain events in Sutpen family history.

This thesis examines how Tom Crick's history of the Atkinsons and his attempt to best explain Mary's mental breakdown and the tragic events of the summer of 1943 resonate with *Absalom, Absalom!*'s Gothic tale of familial decline. Both *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* contain Gothic tales of familial decline that locate the root of present misfortunes in the sins of the past, specifically in the sins of Thomas Sutpen and Ernest Atkinson, whose desire for sons destroyed them and their families (*Faulkner in the University* 71). Just as Rosa attributes her and her family's destruction to Thomas Sutpen, so too does Tom attribute his and his family's destruction to Ernest Atkinson. Tom's narration transforms

Ernest Atkinson and his mad desire for a son who would be the “Savior of the World” into a kind of Thomas Sutpen, who, as Faulkner once characterized Sutpen, seeks to “establish a dynasty” even if it means “violate[ing] all the rules of decency and honor and pity and compassion” (*Faulkner in the University* 35). Tom’s student Price suspects, however, that all of Tom’s explaining is just “a way of avoiding the facts while you pretend to get near to them” (*Waterland* 166). Tom tries to deny his agency in the murders of the summer of 1943 by pinning blame upon Ernest Atkinson.

Nonetheless, Ernest’s actions did not determine Tom’s sexual escapades with Mary Metcalf. Tom and Mary’s sexual escapades are the true cause of the deaths of Freddie Parr, Mary’s fetus, and Dick. Tom’s fate, however, was not to know the secrets of the buried past. Realizing that he was born into peculiar circumstances, Tom demands an explanation for the events of 1943 from Atkinson history. This demand for an explanation leads him to formulate a Gothic tale of familial decline that pins the blame for Dick’s mental deficiencies upon Ernest Atkinson and casts Dick’s death and Mary’s mental breakdown as the result of the resurgence of a Gothic curse. Tom’s Gothic tale thus functions in a capacity similar to Rosa’s. Both Tom and Rosa use Gothic tales of familial decline to establish their own innocence and pin blame upon ancestral scapegoats, who reputedly brought curses upon the family households. Thus, I

examine how Tom Crick, like Rosa, uses a Gothic tale of familial decline to elicit pity and qualify his guilt for his brother's death by influencing the hermeneutical system that readers use to understand his narrative.

A Definition of the Gothic

Defining the Gothic is a notoriously difficult task. Fred Botting writes that the Gothic is a genre of excess and transgression (Botting 1, 6). Gothic fiction depends on the gloomy and mysterious, sublime realities which cannot easily be explained. Gothic atmospheres signal the return of terrible pasts in the present, evoking emotions of terror and horror (1). Fred Botting writes that Gothic fiction transgresses social boundaries, conjuring fears associated with moral disintegration, imaginative excess, uncontrolled passion, excitement, sensation, madness and delusion, mental disintegration, religious and spiritual corruption, human evil, and monstrous supernatural and natural forces (2). Gothic narratives originated in eighteenth-century England, but have continued into the twentieth century in both British and American literature.

Gothic plots evolved from centering around the gloomy castle, as in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, to the old house or ancestral line as in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Waterland*. The castle harked back to the values of the old feudal order associated with "barbarity, superstition and fear" (Botting 3). The old house replaced the castle in Gothic literature and came to stand for "both

building and family line" (3). The old house "became the site where fears and anxieties returned in the present." These anxieties shifted according to the age in which novels were written, and could include anxieties regarding "political revolution, industrialization, urbanization, shifts in sexual and domestic organization, and scientific discovery" (3). Although Gothic novels are interested in the "trappings of the past," they can concern contemporary events.

The Gothic utilizes stock features and characters to evoke cultural fears and anxiety. Typical of Gothic fiction, *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* contain monsters (Dick is described as half man, half fish), demons (Rosa repeatedly describes Sutpen as a demon), corpses, mad scientists, tyrannical fathers, negligent husbands, mental illness, criminals, incest, ruined manors, and devastating family secrets. As Gothic texts, *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* evoke fear and anxiety using stock Gothic features as well as narratives that highlight the resurgence of secret, ancestral traumas—secrets which wreak havoc in the lives of their discoverers. Charles Crow writes that "the Gothic exposes the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten, in the lives of individuals and of cultures" (2). Francis Russell Hart similarly says that Gothic literature focuses on "the dark persistence of the past in sublime ruin, haunted relic, and hereditary curse" (86). Both *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* revolve around the return of the repressed, the resurfacing of past traumas that should

have remained buried or hidden. Tom Crick and Rosa Coldfield rely on Gothic tales of familial decline to identify sources of “evil” and differentiate between the innocent and the guilty (*Waterland* 35; *Absalom, Absalom!* 12). By evoking cultural fears and anxieties through emotional excess and social transgression, Tom and Rosa highlight sources evil and distinguish between those who are the victims of curses and those who are the instruments of them.

Summary

The three chapters that follow examine *Waterland's* relationship to the Gothic tradition, *Waterland's* intertextual relationship to *Absalom, Absalom!*, and Tom Crick's use of the Gothic as a narrative strategy to qualify his guilt. More specifically, chapter one delves into Swift's Gothic legacy, analyzing how Swift and Faulkner are indebted to earlier Gothic traditions, especially Charles Dickens's Victorian Gothic. Chapter one also considers the appropriateness of labeling *Waterland* as a work of Gothic fiction. This consideration arises from engagement with the work of Stephen Bernstein, who has argued that *Waterland's* postmodern characteristics preclude it from the possibility of being labeled Gothic. In response to Bernstein, I provide a genealogy of the development of Gothic literature to determine whether Swift's *Waterland* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* can properly be called Gothic. In light of *Waterland's* engagement with other works of Gothic fiction such as *Great*

Expectations and *Absalom, Absalom!*, I argue that reading *Waterland* as a Gothic text makes sense. *Waterland*'s Gothic qualities and its engagement with Gothic texts demand a Gothic reading. Chapter two examines the parallels between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, and investigates how Rosa Coldfield and Tom Crick use the Gothic to account for their traumatic pasts. The parallels between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* suggest that Swift drew upon Faulkner in the construction of *Waterland* and support a Gothic reading of Tom Crick's history of the Atkinsons. Finally, chapter three examines Tom Crick's quest to qualify his guilt for his brother's death and his wife's mental breakdown by telling a Gothic tale of familial decline. Swift uses the Gothic so that it functions not as an exhausted trope, as Bernstein argues, but as a rhetorical strategy in Tom's narrative quest to explain the past and qualify his guilt.

CHAPTER TWO

A Genealogy of Swift's Gothic Legacy

A postmodern novelist, Graham Swift writes in a heavily intertextual style and with a strong ethical bent. As Daniel Lea notes,

Swift is a problematic figure amongst postmodernist writers largely because he questions the cynical or detached irony of many of its proponents. Instead, he reminds us that writing and reading are fundamentally ethical pursuits that cannot stand outside history, aloof and indifferent. (96)

Like Faulkner, Swift deeply engages with the ethical dimensions of history.

Faulkner's voice, moreover, is not the only voice to haunt *Waterland*. Swift's writing alludes to, borrows from, and echoes many writers of past generations.

In *Understanding Graham Swift*, David Malcolm notes that Swift's work alludes to writers as diverse as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Trollope, Hardy, and Fowles, but especially Faulkner (10-11). As a result of this extensive array of influence, critics have speculated on the significance of Swift's intertextuality.

Jakob Winnberg, for instance, describes Swift's intertextuality as "a gentle acknowledgment and respect for the already said, an acceptance of the impingement of the past and the other on one's claim to originality" (69). In Swift's postmodernism, "'originality' becomes '*originality*.'" In other words,

Swift's *originality* derives from his conscious engagement with his origins, his literary progenitors. Winnberg views Swift's intertextuality as "an expression of love," suggesting that Swift sees intertextuality not as indicative of an "anxiety of influence or as Oedipal drama, but as acknowledgment and respect" for the ideas of those who have preceded him. Lynn Wells, on the other hand, believes that Swift "compulsively repeat[s] the past until it is mastered" (99). She frames Swift's use of intertextuality in *Waterland* as an Oedipal battle in which Swift seeks to master his novel's parental patterns and achieve his own voice that is both "imitative and original" (100). In the wake of these opposing interpretations of Swift's intertextuality, the question remains whether Swift seeks to master writers of the past or to respect them and to work in accord with them. It appears that Swift's intertextuality is not a case of anxiety of influence, but a genuine respect for the writers of the past and a love for their work. Despite the two sides of this debate, it remains clear that in adapting the mannerisms, themes, and genres of past writers, Swift retains a creative power that is no less significant than the creativity manifested by the authors from whom he draws.

Before launching into fuller a discussion of *Waterland's* intertextuality and a genealogy of Swift's Gothic legacy, however, it is important to note that although the term "intertextuality" derives from Julia Kristeva's work in the 1960s, this thesis does not strictly adhere to her definition. For Kristeva,

intertextuality designated the way a variety of texts participate in the “general text” of the culture of which they are a part (36-37). Gregory Machacek notes that Kristeva’s approach to intertextuality is “synchronic,” analyzing how texts emerge from “a *contemporaneous* semiotic field,” the general culture and historical moment of which the text, literary or nonliterary, is a part (524, emphasis mine). Machacek notes that Kristeva’s intertextuality differs markedly from studies of allusive writing in literature that have appropriated her terminology. Such studies operate diachronically, investigating how newer works of literature draw from earlier works of literature. In this thesis, intertextuality refers to how literary texts draw diachronically upon preceding literary texts, recycling their themes, reworking their plots, and alluding to or parodying their language and structure.

Dickens’s Influence on Faulkner and Swift

The genealogy of Swift’s Gothic legacy can be derived from the intertextual composition of *Waterland*. Critics have noted that it is a rewriting or pastiche of works as various as *Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Great Expectations*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Moby Dick* (Winnberg 69, Malcolm 10, Gorp 100, Wood). As Tom recounts his father’s advice in the opening page of *Waterland*, for instance, Swift’s novel uncannily resembles the opening page of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* where Nick Caraway similarly recounts his

father's advice to refrain from judging others. Such reworkings pervade *Waterland*. Nonetheless, among those who have influenced Swift, Faulkner and Dickens are perhaps the most important to an analysis of the Gothic in *Waterland*.

A common literary ancestor of Faulkner and Swift, Charles Dickens influenced their use of Gothic and detective fiction techniques by providing a model for the revelation of dark family secrets and contemporary Gothic environments in his own work. During the Victorian era, writers such as Dickens modified characteristics of the original, eighteenth-century English Gothic. Dickens transposed Gothic imagery from the remote, medieval-like settings of early Gothic novelists into contemporary settings where the Gothic could intermingle with current social issues and domestic narratives. In *Great Expectations*, for example, Dickens replaced the haunted castle of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* with the labyrinthine streets and tenement buildings of urban environments like London and the gloomy Satis house. Allan Pritchard writes that, in Dickens, "the remote and isolated country mansion or castle is not so much the setting of ruin and darkness, mystery and horror, as the great modern city: Gothic horrors are here and now" (436). Swift and Faulkner likewise situate their Gothic imagery within contemporary, local and regional environments rather than in grandiose and sublime locales. *Waterland* is set in London and the English Fens—much like Dickens's *Great Expectations*—and

Absalom, Absalom! in Faulkner's fictional, but locally inspired Jefferson, Mississippi.

Furthermore, the dark secrets that plague the families of Swift and Faulkner's fiction—secrets that range from insanity and illegitimacy to misplaced parents—echo Dickens's plots. Not only did Dickens replace the Gothic castle with the more quotidian landscapes of common experience, he also translated the dark secrets of the noble family from earlier Gothic fiction into the instability of the lower-middle-class family. Plagued by secrets that ought to have remained hidden, Dickens's lower-middle-class families are sites for the resurgence of the unhomely and uncanny. David Malcolm notes that "Swift's fascination with the family, and the disrupted family in particular, has its antecedents in Dickens's *Bleak House*" (11). Similarly, the lack of epistemic clarity in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* foreshadows the epistemological uncertainty that surrounds familial origins and historical knowledge in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Waterland*. In *Little Dorrit*, the detective-protagonist Arthur Clennam never comes to full knowledge of the mystery he has been trying to uncover, the mystery of the gold watch given to him by his father, a watch whose inscription, "d. n. f.," "do not forget," signals an even deeper mystery of which Arthur is not aware, the mystery of his true parentage. The epistemological difficulties that Arthur Clennam faces prefigure those of Quentin Compson and Tom Crick as they investigate the familial origins

of such characters as Thomas Sutpen, Charles Bon, and Dick Crick. Bernstein notes that Arthur's failure to learn the secret of his lineage and the suppression of truth through the silencing of those characters who possess the knowledge of his origin "is obviously anything but the celebration of immediacy, epistemological clarity, and disclosure which was found at the closures of [earlier] Gothic novels" (163). In novels like *Little Dorrit*, Dickens was reworking and problematizing the "panoptical clarity," the satisfactory resolution of mystery, that had been so prevalent in late eighteenth-century Gothic literature (163). Dickens's transformation of the eighteenth-century British Gothic genre had a major impact upon the Gothic mode that Faulkner and Swift would later use. The dark secrets hidden within the Atkinson-Crick and Sutpen families echo the dark family secrets of Dickens's *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit*, and *Great Expectations*.

Although not limited to Dickens, Faulkner's American Gothic has roots in Dickens. Several critical studies exist on Faulkner's relationship to Dickens.¹ Joseph Gold, Elizabeth Kerr, and Leslie Fielder note how Faulkner's interest in

¹ These studies on Faulkner's use and appreciation of Dickens include Leslie Fiedler's, "William Faulkner: An American Dickens," pp. 384-87; Michael Millgate's, *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, where he writes that "it is Dickens whom Faulkner most resembles in the passionate humanity of his tragi-comic vision, in the range and vitality of his characterization and the profusion of social notation, in the structural complexity of his novels and their broad symbolic patterns" (292); Thomas Adamowski's, "Dombey and Son and Sutpen and Son"; and Joseph Gold's, "Dickens and Faulkner: The Uses of Influence," where Gold notes that Faulkner esteemed Dickens to such an extent that he put "Dickens at the head of his list of those whose reputation he would like to equal (a list that includes Homer and Tolstoy)" (70).

Gothic and detective fiction parallels Dickens's interest in it. Gold writes that "both writers depend heavily on the subjects of horror, nightmare, and mystery. The dark secrets of *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* are paralleled in *Absalom* and *Intruder* and *The Hamlet*" (74). Building upon Gold's argument, Elizabeth Kerr argues that Dickens was "a major link between the original Gothic novel and the works of such writers as Faulkner who similarly wrote Gothic novels which utilized detection techniques without being detective stories" (6). Leslie Fielder furthermore notes that as Faulkner matured, the detective story became the "inevitable crown of Faulkner's work," just as it had with Dickens (386).

Following in the footsteps of Dickens, Faulkner wrote detective-like novels patterned on the revelation of dark family secrets. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, for instance, Quentin Compson, with the help of Shreve McCannon, uses detective techniques to flesh out the piece-meal story of Henry Sutpen and to ascertain its bearing on his own personal anxieties, his incestuous fascination with Caddy. As Quentin reconstructs the story of Bon, Henry, and Judith, John Irwin notes that Quentin does so "in light of his own experiences with Candace and Dalton Ames" in *The Sound and the Fury* (74). Henry Sutpen's incestuous desire for his sister Judith disquietingly reminds Quentin of his own desire for Caddy. Ultimately, just as Dickens's characters often wrestle with sudden revelations of the historical forces or personages that have secretly shaped them,

as when Pip in *Great Expectations* makes the appalling discovery that the criminal Magwitch is his benefactor, so too do Faulkner's characters. Pip and Quentin's discoveries make them excruciatingly aware of how past evil both reflects and impinges upon the present. In this way, Faulkner's Gothic and pseudo-detective fiction echoes Dickens's fiction.

Graham Swift, like Faulkner, esteems Dickens, and has repeatedly referenced Dickens's work in his own. In fact, after completing his Master's degree at Cambridge, Swift began his doctorate at York where his dissertation had the working title, *Dickens and the City* (Solberg 26).² Although Swift never made it past the second chapter of this dissertation, his interest in Dickens is evident. In an interview with Tone Solberg, Swift says, "I make no secret of using Dickens as a model" (Solberg 26).³ *Waterland's* opening epigraph, "Ours was the marsh country," even comes from Dickens's *Great Expectations* and reveals the extent to which Swift has continued to wrestle with Dickens in his creative work. Swift situates sections of *Waterland* in the English Fens, a landscape which Dickens had earlier used for Pip's first ominous encounter with Magwitch. In both novels, a childhood encounter with evil causes the protagonists, Tom and

² "[Having studied English at Cambridge, he] moved to York and started his doctorate with the working title *Dickens and the City*"; "Etter å ha studert englesk ved Cambridge, flyttet han over til York og tok fatt på doktorgraden med arbeidstittelen *Dickens and the City*" (Solberg 26).

³ "Jeg legger ikke skjul på at Dickens er et forbilde" (Solberg 26).

Pip, to reexamine their own relationship to evil at later points in their lives. Tom's detective-like concern with the origin of Mary Metcalf's insanity, Dick's incestuous lineage, and the legacy of the Atkinson family, echoes Pip's concern with the troubled histories of Magwitch and Estella and their relationship to him. Like Pip and Quentin, Tom's historical investigations make him profoundly conscious of how the past impinges upon the present. *Waterland's* epigraph not only signals profound respect for Dickens, but also suggests that Swift, like his protagonist Tom Crick, is grappling with his "Atkinson forbearers," his literary predecessors, in a struggle for the inheritance of authorial voice.

Waterland and the Gothic

Additionally, as Stephen Bernstein notes, Swift's reference to Dickens's "strongly Gothicized novel" immediately situates *Waterland* "within a matrix" of Gothic associations (258). Even apart from its allusion to *Great Expectations*, the themes and setting of *Waterland* place it in a Gothic vein. References to superstitions, family curses, mental injury, insanity, prophetic ability, ghosts, criminals, incest, half breeds, fish-men, even a Gothic mansion (Kessling Hall) saturate *Waterland*. Tom Crick himself admits that in such a gloomy landscape as the Fens, "melancholia and self-murder are not unknown . . . Heavy drinking, madness and sudden death are not uncommon" (*Waterland* 17). Because of

details such as these, Swift's early reviewers were quick to note that *Waterland* drew upon the Gothic.

Early reviewers, however, often saw *Waterland's* Gothic elements as faults, the result of an emotional excess that bordered on melodrama. For instance, an anonymous reviewer in the *Kirkus Review* saw *Waterland's* Gothic elements as symptoms of structural weakness and sentimental excess. The reviewer notes that despite the ambitious achievements of *Waterland*, the novel still "doesn't quite manage to hide the melodramatic, even Gothic, nature of the central story." In his *Listener* review of *Waterland*, Derwent May expresses a similar criticism when he writes that "all the accomplished story telling leaves us in the end with a rather weightless melodramatic or Gothick tale" (26). Marion Glastonbury, in her *New Statesman* review, likewise derides the Gothic elements in *Waterland*. She writes that Tom Crick's discourse on land-reclamation and drainage in the Fens "is more entertaining than the fictitious climaxes of the saga—murder and mayhem, rape and incest" (27). Nonetheless, when reviewers associate *Waterland's* Gothic elements with little more than clichés and melodrama, they do the novel a disservice.

As the novel has gained critical acclaim, few scholars have explored or sought to redeem the role of the Gothic in *Waterland*. Stephen Bernstein is among the few critics to analyze *Waterland* according to a Gothic reading. Bernstein

nonetheless believes that *Waterland* “fails to be much of a Gothic novel” (258). Even though *Waterland* possesses “a quasi-gothic narrative structure” and “sections of Crick family history which are strongly gothic in themselves,” Bernstein argues that it fails as a Gothic novel because it lacks “faith in an unmediated access to the past” (258-59). Bernstein nevertheless defines the Gothic much as if he were referring to the Gothic of the eighteenth-century when the genre “thrived on the idea that history was indeed a verifiable thing” (259). However, modern definitions of the Gothic are not nearly so rigid. Bernstein’s purist definition of the Gothic prevents him from being able to acknowledge more modern variations of the Gothic as Gothic—variations begun by Dickens and his contemporaries in the Victorian era.

To a certain extent, though, Bernstein is correct in his judgment that *Waterland* fails as an entirely Gothic novel. *Waterland*, as a whole, is not Gothic. Bernstein fails to notice, however, that, in *Waterland*, Gothic imagery and themes are employed specifically by Tom Crick during his classroom history lectures, lectures that Tom gives chiefly to explain how his family history has shaped him and to avoid his guilt. If the Gothic in *Waterland* is symptomatic of an emotional excess, as early reviewers maintain, it is not a blunder on Swift’s part, but as direct consequence of Tom’s narration, of Tom’s prejudices coloring the narrative, for in telling the history of the Atkinson family, he spins a Gothic tale

of familial decline. Reviewer Michiko Kakutani describes *Waterland* along these lines exactly. She calls the novel “a Gothic family saga” (“Books of The Times”). In doing so, Kakutani raises the question of whether Tom’s “tribulations” were “somehow prefigured—perhaps even *determined*—long, long ago by the misfortunes of another generation of Cricks” (emphasis mine). Kakutani writes that “by the time Tom finishes his inquiry into the past, a tangled family epic of madness, incest, drunkenness and suicide has been revealed.” That Kakutani suggests that Tom’s “tribulations” are a consequence of the sins of his ancestors shows, however, just how effective Tom’s narrative manipulation has been. His viewpoint shades the novel in such a way that the reader may be persuaded to believe that Tom’s misfortunes have been prefigured, even determined, by his ancestors, namely the hubris of men like Ernest Atkinson. In *Waterland*, Tom Crick employs the Gothic for persuasive rhetorical ends: the evasion of his own guilt.

Unlike an eighteenth-century Gothic novel, Tom does not employ the Gothic throughout the whole of *Waterland*, but only where it is most useful for him to affect historical interpretation. Because *Waterland* is largely a confessional narrative, Tom uses the Gothic as a narrative strategy to qualify his responsibility for the Dick’s death and Mary’s mental breakdown in 1979 (Russell 116, 130). Although Bernstein argues that *Waterland* fails as a Gothic novel, Tom Crick’s use

of the Gothic for his specific rhetorical purposes makes the presence of the Gothic quite effective in *Waterland*.

Swift's piecemeal employment of the Gothic resembles that of Faulkner. Neither *Absalom, Absalom!* nor *Waterland* entirely unfold within the Gothic genre. Bernstein notes that "when genres can be picked up and put down" like this, "we are on the verge of the postmodern" (256). Although Bernstein says this by way of introduction to his analysis of *Waterland*, his observation also applies to *Absalom, Absalom!*, which switches between genres according to whether they appeal to first-person narrators' persuasive purposes. For example, in her article, "The Four Narrative Perspectives in *Absalom, Absalom!*" Lynn Levins shows that Faulkner's narrators switch between the telling of a Gothic mystery, a Greek tragedy, a chivalric romance, and a tall tale. Levins notes that the Gothic genre emerges only during select portions of character narration, for instance, during Rosa Coldfield's narrative of her relationship to Thomas Sutpen. Like Faulkner's narrators, Swift's narrator Tom Crick sporadically employs Gothic imagery and motifs to achieve persuasive rhetorical ends, to affect the reader's perception of certain events in the novel. Although Bernstein believes that this piecemeal usage of the Gothic "shows what remains when Gothicism has become one of many discretely available exhausted cultural codes," Swift and Faulkner's usage of the Gothic signals not the enervation of the Gothic, but its rejuvenation (261). Swift

and Faulkner, following in the footsteps of Dickens, adapt the Gothic to their own historical and ideological context, using it not as a genre, but as a mode.

Approaches to a History of the Gothic

Like all genres, the Gothic has changed over time. Defining the Gothic is therefore problematic, for the term has come to refer to a multiplicity of characteristics. In general, though, the Gothic seems to be able to be broken down into two major categories: the original British Gothic *genre*, used by writers like Walpole, Radcliffe, and others from 1764 through 1820, and the Gothic *mode*, used by Victorian and later writers like Swift and Faulkner to produce a specific effect within novels that otherwise belong to other genres. Bernstein makes a similar distinction between the use of the Gothic as a genre and a mode (158). He writes that the Gothic was “exhausted as an active genre around 1820” and now “operates as a system by way of its form, conventions, and techniques” (153). In fact, several critics hold that the Gothic genre ceased to replicate itself as a genre soon after 1820.⁴

Bernstein’s view, nonetheless, differs markedly from that of this thesis, especially regarding the Gothic in *Waterland*. Whereas this thesis views Dickens,

⁴ Maurice Levy makes this distinction in his article Gothic and the Critical Idiom, as do James Keech in “The Survival of the Gothic Response,” Robert Hume in “Gothic versus Romantic: A Reevaluation of the Gothic Novel,” and Robert Platzner in “‘Gothic versus Romantic’: A Rejoinder.”

Faulkner, and Swift's use of the Gothic as indicative of the innovative changes that have occurred since 1820, Bernstein views the Gothic forms, conventions, and techniques available to writers after 1820 as mere relics of a once robust and unified genre. For Bernstein, the eighteenth-century British Gothic remains the touchstone of not only of the genre, but of the Gothic phenomena as a whole. This prevents him from viewing its transformations after 1820 as anything but the result of a period of decline, a deviation from the "gothic's ideological 'master narrative,'" which he locates in the "historically specific genre" of Walpole and Radcliffe (158). When Bernstein uses the descriptor "Gothic" to refer to novels after 1820, he thus indicates little more than their distance from the archetypal "master narrative" of the eighteenth-century genre. In other words, when applied to novels written after 1820, the descriptor "Gothic" signifies absence, not presence.

While Bernstein's definition of the Gothic is extremely exclusive, for his purposes it is not wrong. Bernstein carefully charts his own genealogy of the Gothic. In this genealogy, Bernstein applies Frederic Jameson's concept of ideology to the Gothic genre, viewing it as an ideological framework that allowed eighteenth-century individuals to imagine and conceive their "lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of history" from their specific historical moment (Jameson 30, qtd. in

Bernstein 35). By highlighting the transformations that the original eighteenth-century Gothic ideology has undergone, Bernstein reveals the ideologies of later historical moments and the process of “sedimentation” that has obscured the original, eighteenth-century Gothic ideology from later texts (Bernstein 33). Through an investigation of the transformations of the Gothic genre, Bernstein maps the relationship of the archetypical Gothic ideology to its manifestations after 1820 to “[direct] our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full manifestation or replication” of the eighteenth-century Gothic ideology in later texts (Jameson 146, qtd. in Bernstein 158, emphasis mine). In other words, Bernstein’s genealogy directs attention to the “historical ground, now no longer existent,” in which the eighteenth-century Gothic ideology once thrived (Jameson 146). The result, however, means that manifestations of the Gothic in writers such as Faulkner, Swift, and Dickens can signify little more than the decline or exhaustion of the eighteenth-century genre; for in so much as their work diverges from the historically specific “master narrative” of the eighteenth-century Gothic, their writing signifies the “sedimentation” of the archetypical genre.

A Brief History of the Gothic

In what follows, I hope to offer an alternative to Bernstein’s genealogy of the Gothic, one that views changes in the Gothic more positively. Outlining the

development of the Gothic tradition will clarify how Swift, Faulkner, and Dickens emerged from that tradition and how their writing relates back to it. The Gothic genre first appeared in the 1764 when Horace Walpole published the second edition of his *Castle of Otranto* with the subtitle, "A Gothic Story" (Clery 21). Walpole wrote his novel in reaction to literary orthodoxy, specifically the moralistic narrative prescriptions of Samuel Johnson, who had written that fiction should educate the young by "exhibit[ing] life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world" (Johnson 18). Walpole found such a recommendation stultifying. In his preface to the second edition of *Otranto*, he brazenly challenged Johnson's guidelines, writing that "the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life" (Walpole xvi). E. J. Clery notes that Walpole's novel is one long flight of fancy intended "to combine the unnatural occurrences associated with romance and the naturalistic characterization and dialogue of the novel" (24). As a result, *Otranto* combines acts of supernatural retribution with vignettes of the workings of human psychologies in the aftermath of disaster. In the wake of fantastic occurrences, Walpole "wished . . . to make [his characters] think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions" (Walpole xv). Thus, *Otranto* has little to do with accidents that daily

happen in the real world, but rather the transposition of men and women from the real world into the realm of the Gothic fantasy.

Walpole's preface reveals what Fred Botting has identified as the subversive role of Gothic novels in eighteenth-century British culture and beyond (Botting 4). The Gothic is naturally transgressive and excessive, evoking a paradoxical mixture of fear and desire in the reader. Botting writes that Gothic novels like Walpole's contested the traditional "mores and manners on which good social behavior rested" (4). Such novels "produced emotional effects on [their] readers rather than developing a rational or properly cultivated response." Botting continues, writing that Gothic novels chilled readers' blood, "delighted their superstitious fancies and fed uncultivated appetites for marvelous and strange events, instead of instructing [them] with moral lessons that inculcated decent and tasteful attitudes to literature and life." As a result, the Gothic genre was often attacked for "encouraging excessive emotions and invigorating unlicensed passions." For writers like Walpole, the Gothic genre was a medium through which to reevaluate the values of society. Walpole's novel set the standard for later manifestations of the Gothic genre, especially regarding its subversive nature.

The Gothic genre also owes much to a revival of interest in the architecture, landscape, and *mythos* of medieval Europe in the eighteenth-

century. The preface to the first edition of Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, for instance, phonily claimed that the book had first been printed in Naples in 1592, and that the story itself was even older, written somewhere between 1095 and 1243 (Walpole v). The false dating of the text allowed Walpole to lay claim to the dark mythos of the "Gothic age," which stretched from the fifth century AD to the revival of classical learning in the Renaissance (Clery 21). Clery notes that to Walpole's contemporaries this age was associated with the predominance of "barbarism, superstition, and anarchy" in Europe (21). These associations resulted in the creation of an atmosphere of pervading gloom. Such an atmosphere was essential to generating the Gothic effect—the elicitation of terror, horror, or dread.

With the passage of time, the Gothic novel's nostalgia for the medieval grew more nuanced as its readership grew more middle-class. In addition to barbarism, the medieval era came to signify the reign of illegitimate aristocratic power. Gothic novels written on the verge of the ascendancy of the English middle-class in the late eighteenth-century appealed to a middle-class readership by interrogating the aristocratic values of feudalism. In such novels, "anxieties about the past and its forms of power" were projected onto villainous aristocrats who were made into scapegoats to justify "the ascendancy of middle-class values" (Botting 6). Thus, despite its sentimental fascination with the medieval,

the bourgeois values of family and domesticity grew to dominate Gothic fiction. As a result of targeting an increasingly middleclass readership, Gothic writers began to shroud the “aristocratic trappings of chivalry and romance” in an atmosphere of foreboding. Eighteenth-century Gothic novels were thus replete with haunted castles, ancient family curses, supernatural occurrences, ghosts, old manuscripts with devastating secrets, gloomy midnight scenes, and allusions to characters from chivalric romances (knights, damsels in distress, monks, and dukes) designed to haunt the minds of a middle-class readership. These predictable elements nevertheless predisposed the genre to the accusation that it was formulaic.

Although the eighteenth-century British Gothic has long been criticized, perhaps unfairly, because its elements can be checked off a list as if they were so many ingredients in a Gothic soup, its themes, style, and content have shaped all variations of the Gothic mode employed thereafter. Despite the persistent changes in the Gothic over its 250-year history, certain of its features remain essential to generating the Gothic effect. Given how “relatively constant” these features are, Jerrold Hogle suggests “general parameters” for identifying Gothic fiction (2). According to Hogle, Gothic tales are usually set

in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space—be it a castle, a vast prison . . . a decaying storehouse, factory, [or] laboratory . . . Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt characters, psychologically,

physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story. These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters . . . that rise from within the antiquated space . . . to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view. (Hogle 2)

Hogle's parameters apply to Gothic fiction written both before and after 1820, and revealingly reflect the narrative structures of *Great Expectations*, *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, and *Waterland*. Despite the dissolution of the Gothic genre in the 1820s, certain themes and structures have remained integral for generating the Gothic effect.

The Victorians were the first to separate the themes and style of the Gothic from its generic content—its ghosts, vampires, and castles—and use the Gothic as a narrative mode or strategy applied to more contemporary circumstances (Botting 6). Jerrold Hogle writes that after the explosion of the Gothic genre in the 1790s, the Gothic, which had always been a “highly unstable” genre, collapsed and “scattered its ingredients into various modes, among them aspects of the more realistic Victorian novel” (1). As a result of the dissolution of the genre, James Keech notes that from the Victorian era onwards, the Gothic has been used for “thematic” or “metaphorical” purposes (138). Operating in this thematic capacity, the Gothic mode has become “a means of evoking a response, both emotional and moral, to those aspects of life which we fear, or ethically should fear, most” (141). Fred Botting similarly writes that

Gothic terrors activate a sense of the unknown and project an uncontrollable and overwhelming power which threatens not only the loss of sanity, honour, property or social standing but the very order which supports and is regulated by the coherence of those terms. The terrors and horrors of transgression in gothic writing become a powerful means to reassert the values of society, virtue and propriety: transgression, by crossing the social and aesthetic limits, serves to reinforce or underline their value and necessity, restoring or defining limits. (7)

Gothic terrors thus threaten to undermine, but actually reinforce social values.

Like transgression and excess, Gothic terrors evoke a paradoxical, but irresistible mixture of fear and desire that compels readers and characters to confront that which is most unpleasant in society.

Dickens, in particular, utilized the Gothic mode to reveal the fearsome aspects of moral darkness that pervaded Victorian society. Keech writes that, for Dickens, the Gothic “was not necessarily an imaginary fancy in a cheap novel but a part of the very nature of normal society” (138). Dickens blended “social misery with Gothic effect in such a way that it [became] impossible to separate his vision of bleak misery, imprisoned humanity, and spiritual poverty from that of horror and terror.” Robert Mighall similarly writes that, for Dickens, “the horrors of the slums, with their ‘stagnant pools’ of mud and ignorance (129), are a consequence of the political stagnation, isolation, and willful ignorance of the Gothic House of Britain,” of the people governing the nation (74). Unlike the traditional Gothic genre which authors, readers, and critics have associated with the fantastic and

unreal, Dicken's Gothic aimed at addressing real world grievances. Dickens's use of the Gothic resonates with Teresa Goddu's observation that the Gothic "is intensely engaged with historical concerns" (3). Dickens's Gothic "registers its culture's contradictions, presenting a distorted, not a disengaged, version of reality." Separating Gothic themes from Gothic trappings allowed Dickens to use the Gothic as a mode to address contemporary life in more realistic settings.

Because the Gothic mode has come to address a variety of cultural and societal concerns, however, it has become protean in its applications and nuances; as soon as one use of the Gothic mode is nailed down in definition, two new uses take its place. Terms like "American Gothic," "Yankee Gothic," "Southern Gothic," and "Female Gothic" proliferate in contemporary criticism; all of which, some critics have argued, indicate that the word "Gothic" is losing its potency. Nonetheless, the proliferation of Gothic modes does not signal "an end to the gothic," as Bernstein argues (261). While the term "Gothic" may be growing semantically vacuous—"a meaningless *cheville*" with too many applications, as Maurice Levy suggests—the Gothic, as a literary phenomenon, is still thriving (10). While the usage of the Gothic has changed during its transition from the Victorian into the modern and postmodern era—just as it did during its transition from the eighteenth-century to the Victorian era—the basic narrative themes and style of the Gothic, its gloomy and terrifying nature, have remained

the same. Just as changing social milieu prevented Dickens from using the Gothic genre in the same manner as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, so too have changing social circumstances compelled Faulkner and Swift to adapt their use of the Gothic in *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* to reflect the epistemological concerns of their historical moment.

Both *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* explicitly draw attention to themselves as historiographic metafiction, that is, as self-consciously constructed historical fictions rather than reliable historical narratives (Hutcheon 53-57; Malcom 9). Typical of historiographic metafiction, neither novel contains a character who is “confident of his or her ability to know the past with any certainty” (Hutcheon 117). While critics such as Eric Casero have understood the lack of a central, authoritative narrator in *Absalom, Absalom!* as evidence that the novel emphasizes the “process of narrative over the content of the narrative,” each narrator’s obsessive concern with Sutpen and his house nevertheless reveals that Faulkner is interested in the content of narrative and perhaps how Rosa’s Gothic tale of familial decline determines what content, meaning, and message is preserved in the tale’s transmission from one narrator to another (86). Tom Crick’s obsessive concern with Atkinson family history in *Waterland* likewise signals Swift’s interest in the Gothic family and Tom’s attempt to connect the history of the Atkinsons to his explanation for Mary’s mental breakdown and his

brother's death. Despite *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*'s fragmented narratives, both novels contain tales of familial decline that reveal how Swift and Faulkner have adapted their use of the Gothic to twentieth-century anxieties regarding reliable narratives and truth.

Faulkner and Swift's Adaptation of the Gothic

In *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Swift and Faulkner generate moral horror at the transgression of social norms and family boundaries. Both Faulkner and Swift are particularly fascinated with presenting the family as an unstable site. In their engagement with incest, inheritance, ghosts, and old, ruined houses, *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* draw on the tropes of Gothic fiction associated with tales of familial decline and transgression. Moreover, just as Joanne Watkiss has observed of other tales of familial decline, in *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, "far from a familiar unit held secure by lineage, the nuclear family does not remain a unit by the end of the text" (157). *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* expose the family as an unhomely, violent site. In both novels, Tom Crick and Rosa Coldfield use tales of familial decline to invoke the notion that a curse lies upon their families. This notion of a familial curse allows them to omit responsibility for the consequences of their own actions by pinning blame upon an ancestral scapegoat, who reputedly brought the curse upon the household and doomed its members. In the case of *Absalom, Absalom!*, this scapegoat is

Thomas Sutpen, and in *Waterland*, Ernest Atkinson. Both *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* reveal the horrid consequences of families turning in upon themselves. Following in the footsteps of Dickens, Swift and Faulkner use Gothic themes and tropes to reveal the sordid foundations of history and society through the medium of the Gothicized family.

In the end, *Waterland's* Gothic qualities as well as Swift's engagement with writers in the Gothic mode such as Faulkner and Dickens's demand a Gothic reading of *Waterland*. Swift uses the Gothic so that it functions not as an exhausted trope, as Bernstein argues, but as a framework for understanding Tom's narrative quest to explain the past. Tom uses the Gothic as a narrative strategy to paint Dick's death and Mary's mental breakdown as the result of the resurgence of a Gothic curse. Swift's fascination with the revelation of dark family secrets and detective fiction puts him in dialogue with Faulkner and Dickens and legitimates a Gothic reading of *Waterland*.

CHAPTER THREE

Parallels between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

The parallels between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* suggest that Swift used Faulkner's novel as an intertext during the construction of *Waterland*. Both novels contain complex timelines and genealogies, cyclical narrative structures, similarly motivated narrators, and Gothic tales of familial decline. Comparing the two novels reveals Swift's engagement with *Absalom, Absalom!*'s Gothic tale of familial decline and supports a Gothic reading of Tom Crick's history of the Atkinsons in *Waterland*.

Several critics have noted the connections between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In his book length study of Graham Swift's work, David Malcolm writes that Swift's novels "most consistently refer" to the work of William Faulkner (11). Malcolm also expands on the similarities between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. He writes that both novels "are deeply concerned with history and its shaping of individual lives; both are regional, yet also national, in their focus; both engage with dark secrets and extreme psychological states" (12). In addition, George Landow, Lynn Wells, and Irene Kacandes have written about the connections between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Landow details the

novels' similar historical backdrops and family narratives; Wells discusses narrative distortion and the transference of narrative authority between father and son in *Great Expectations*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Waterland*; and Kacandes explicates the novels' similar styles of narration and story transmission (Landow 205-207; Wells 98-100; Kacandes 108-111). Landow's treatment of the connections between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* is particularly relevant for showing how Swift has modeled *Waterland* on *Absalom, Absalom!*. Landow notes that both novels

take the form of family tragedies in which a male ancestor's hubris leads to terrible disaster, both emphasize violations of the family bond, and both employ as backgrounds cataclysmic wars that change their nations forever. Like Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* . . . *Waterland* meditates on human fate, responsibility, and historical narrative by pursuing a mystery. (Landow 206-207)

Nevertheless, although Landow references *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*'s shared concern with family tragedies, he does not thoroughly explore the connections between the novels' Gothic tales of familial decline. While reviewers have noted the connections between *Waterland*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and the Gothic, few scholars have explored the novels' similarities in light of their mutual connection to the Gothic. A Gothic reading of *Waterland* nonetheless yields fruitful insight into the structure and narrative dynamics of the novel. Examining *Waterland* in conjunction with *Absalom, Absalom!* sheds light on Tom Crick's use of the Gothic as a narrative strategy to qualify his guilt for Dick's

death and Mary's mental breakdown in 1979. Both Rosa Coldfield and Tom Crick use the Gothic to account for their traumatic pasts and cast themselves as victims of fate rather than active participants in their own destruction.

Parallels between Narrators

Both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Waterland* follow complex timelines and contain cyclical narrative structures that loop back upon themselves. Incidents hinted at in the beginning of the novels are revised throughout with the continual addition of new perspectives and information. As the narrators revisit events, they flesh out the characters and situations that the reader, at first, knows only little about. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa's opening chapter contains the skeletal outline of the entire novel. Similarly, the first few chapters of *Waterland* contain the central details that the remainder of the novel unpacks.

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* wrestles with how the sins of the past affect the present. The novel traces the journey of Thomas Sutpen from the mountains of West Virginia into Jefferson, Mississippi where he wrests his mansion, Sutpen's Hundred, from the muddy soil. The story, however, is told in convoluted, a-chronological fashion through the voices of four narrators: Rosa Coldfield, Jason (Mr.) Compson, Quentin Compson, and Shreve McCannon. Each narrator interprets Sutpen's actions from a different vantage point. As the narrators create their individual visions of Sutpen, Lynn Levins writes that they

combine objectively observed facts with imaginative speculation in an effort to endow certain events of the past with motive and meaning . . . Each narrator, in searching for the missing pieces . . . accepts certain facts, discards others, and fills the unexplained gap between action and motive with conjecture. (35)

What emerges from this medley of perspectives is not a unified vision of Thomas Sutpen, but four fragmented stories that each narrator believes to be the truth about Thomas Sutpen. As a result, the reader encounters Sutpen only after he has been filtered through the imaginations of the frame narrators, each of whom, writes Richard Gray, interprets Sutpen's design in terms of their own "unfinished business of today" (Gray 225).

Of the four narrative perspectives in *Absalom, Absalom*, Rosa Coldfield's sets the stage for all subsequent renditions of the Sutpen story. As the instigator and originator of the Sutpen story in its most skeletal form, Elizabeth Kerr notes that Rosa involves all the narrators "in a dream of the past" that has been indelibly "colored" by her "romantic imagination" (223). Peter Swiggart notes that Rosa's imagination "invests . . . the past with a Gothic atmosphere of social sin and moral damnation" (151). Lynn Levins similarly writes that Rosa's "narrative is immersed in the atmosphere of the mysterious, unexplained terror that characterizes the Gothic novel" (38). Rosa's Gothic tale fixes the attention of all subsequent renditions of the Sutpen story upon Sutpen and his house, even as those narratives react against hers.

Rosa's narrative casts Sutpen as a demon, hell-bent upon accomplishing his will no matter the cost and explains the ruination of the Coldfield and Sutpen families in terms of a Gothic curse. By binding fact to motive through conjecture, Rosa spins a Gothic tale of familial decline that downplays her seduction by Sutpen and casts herself and her sister, Ellen, as expiators of family guilt through their relationships to Sutpen. Rosa, for instance, claims that because Sutpen first met Ellen in a church, "there [was] a fatality and curse on [her] family and God himself [was] seeing to it that it was performed and discharged to the last drop and dreg" (*Absalom, Absalom!* 14). Rosa's statement reveals her belief that a curse lies on her family. She interprets Ellen's introduction to Sutpen at church as a sign of God's wrath and punishment for some unknown, ancestral sin in the Coldfield family. Rosa's interpretive misrepresentations have led Lynn Levins to argue that Rosa's narrative "is the outraged cry of a woman seduced in mind, if not in body, by the overwhelming power of Thomas Sutpen" (39). Her tale divests Sutpen of reason and motivation and initiates the central quest of *Absalom, Absalom!*, which is to make sense of the figure of Thomas Sutpen and his actual role in the destruction of the Sutpen and Coldfield families.

Waterland shows Swift interested in similar concerns as Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!*, especially regarding the binding of fact to motive through conjecture and the resurgence of buried history. In that novel, history teacher

Tom Crick wrestles with guilt as he tries to understand the events that have brought him to his current impasse: his impending forced retirement because his wife Mary has kidnapped a baby. In lieu of teaching the official history syllabus, Tom turns his classroom lectures into a series of stories that recount how the past has shaped his present circumstances. Through narrative misrepresentations of his half-brother Dick's cognitive disability, Tom qualifies his responsibility for Dick's death and the loss of his wife's sanity in 1979 by pinning blame on the actions of Ernest Atkinson, Dick's father and Tom's grandfather. Like the narrators of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Tom interprets history in terms of his own unfinished business of today. Tom employs a Gothic tale of familial decline to link the fall of the Atkinsons and Dick's incestuous lineage to Mary's mental breakdown in 1979 and the three deaths of the summer of 1943—those of Freddie Parr, Mary's fetus, and Dick.

As a narrator, Tom displays parallels to Rosa Coldfield. Both Tom and Rosa tell stories that are biased by an admixture of personal experience and second-hand narratives. For instance, in chapter five of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa tells Quentin about the murder of Charles Bon. She tells Quentin that she "heard an echo, but not the shot" that killed Bon (*Absalom, Absalom!* 121). Peter Brooks writes that Rosa's statement is "emblematic of her whole relation to narrative event[s], which is one of secondariness and bafflement" (259). Tom Crick

occupies a similar position in *Waterland*. He does not know the story of the Atkinsons or even Dick's courtship of Mary first-hand, but rather receives an echo of it in the tales told to him by others and those that he recovers from his historical research. A significant amount of time elapses also before either Tom or Rosa retell their stories from childhood. Forty-three years come between Rosa Coldfield's final insult at the hands of Thomas Sutpen and her decision to tell that story to Quentin Compson. Similarly, thirty-six years elapse between the summer of 1943 and Tom's decision to tell his students about the reasons for Mary's mental breakdown. Moreover, both Tom and Rosa tell their stories because of the resurgence of past trauma in the present. For Rosa, this trauma takes the form of Henry Sutpen's return to Sutpen's Hundred, and, for Tom, Mary's theft of a baby. Both Tom and Rosa use the Gothic mode as a narrative strategy to downplay their role in events and cast themselves as victims of fate.

In addition to containing narrators who tell Gothic tales of familial decline, the novels also share similar epistemological dilemmas. Parallels exist between how narrators in *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* collect information and generate narratives. Because the narrators in both novels lack access to reliable historical knowledge, they utilize detective techniques to reconstruct historical narratives. Most of their narratives are nevertheless derived from hearsay, questionably accurate eye-witness accounts, and piecemeal historical

documents. For example, Tom Crick relies on a variety of historical sources to justify the contents of his narrative. Tom “cull[s]” the story of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons “from living memory and from records both public and intensely private of the Crick and Atkinson families” (*Waterland* 195). Tom uses his own eye-witness experience as well as the eye-witness testimonies of his mother, father, Mary, and other Fenlanders to confirm his claims. Among his many sources are even “flood-fostered rumor[s]” spread by the inhabitants of Gildsey during the floods of 1874, just days after Sarah Atkinson died and Ernest Atkinson was born (105). Tom also relies on official documents from Fenland history to confirm his stories. He unearths trial inquests, political speeches, and the records of the Leem Navigation and Drainage Board. He notes that he has “in [his] possession a verbatim copy of [the] brave and doomed speech” that Ernest Atkinson gave before he was laughed off the political podium in 1911 (161). In addition, Tom possesses the letter and notebooks Ernest Atkinson wrote and included in Dick’s chest of Coronation Ale, which contain detailed notes about Atkinson history (321, 325). Tom reconstructs the tale of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons through recourse to these numerous historical sources.

In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner’s narrators similarly derive their tales of Thomas Sutpen from multiple sources, both written and eye-witness. Rosa’s stories of Thomas Sutpen typically derive from her personal encounters with

Sutpen or from complete speculation. Mr. Compson, on the other hand, reconstructs the narrative of Thomas Sutpen from “a few old mouth-to-mouth tales” and “letters without salutation or signature” that were passed down to him by his father, General Compson (*Absalom, Absalom!* 80). Mr. Compson, for instance, shows Quentin the letter that Charles Bon wrote to Judith Sutpen in 1865 with captured Yankee stove polish, which Judith had given to Quentin’s grandmother. Quentin receives the stories of Thomas Sutpen from Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and possibly Henry Sutpen himself. Quentin, for instance, tells Shreve that he had to correct his father’s understanding of some events in Sutpen’s life. Shreve asks Quentin how he learned these facts, and Quentin intimates that he learned them from Henry Sutpen himself the night he visited Sutpen’s Hundred with Rosa (214). Moreover, like Tom, who must piece together the story of Ernest Atkinson, Quentin and Shreve must make sense of Rosa’s narrative and Mr. Compson’s notes on Thomas Sutpen. The recipients of all these tales, Quentin and Shreve, provide the most critical account of Thomas Sutpen’s establishment in Jefferson, Mississippi. But Quentin and Shreve also engage in patent conjecture. In both *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, understanding the past requires the narrators to formulate coherent narratives out of disparate stories and historical facts.

Despite consulting a variety of historical sources, the narrators of *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* frequently turn conjecture into fact to substantiate their interpretation of events. Tom, for instance, attributes “(conjectural) inward sorrowfulness” to his grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, only to transform his honest speculation into “(surely no longer conjectural) inward sorrowfulness” two paragraphs later (*Waterland* 160). Mr. Compson similarly speculates in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Peter Brooks notes that in Mr. Compson’s narration of Henry’s seduction by Bon, the reader is “ever passing from the postulation of how [events] must have been to the conviction that it really was that way” (295). Brooks writes that Mr. Compson

imagines the introduction of Henry to Bon in a series of clauses [prefaced by] “perhaps” . . . [Mr. Compson says,] “perhaps (I like to think) [that Henry] was presented formally to the man [Bon] reclining in a flowered, almost feminized gown, in a sunny window in his chambers” ([AA 76]), and then [less than] a page later [Mr. Compson] has turned [his] hypothesis into solid narrative event: “*And the very fact that, lounging before them in the outlandish and almost fine garments of his sybaritic privacy*” ([AA 76]). (295)

Mr. Compson thus transform his speculation into fact to suit his interpretation of events. Rosa likewise uses conjecture to describe scenes she never witnessed in vivid detail. She speculates in order to influence Quentin’s perception of Thomas Sutpen. For instance, in chapter one Rosa describes a wrestling match between Sutpen and his slaves. Even though Rosa admits that she “was not there” to see the event, she describes the scene in excruciating detail (*Absalom, Absalom!* 19).

She tells Quentin about Henry Sutpen “screaming and vomiting” at the sight of his bloodied father and Judith and Clytie secretly watching the fight from the barn loft (20-21). Rosa embellishes the scene with speculation to create a ghastly and brutish image of Thomas Sutpen.

Tom Crick similarly speculates about Ernest Atkinson's drinking binge and suicide. Though no witnesses are present to observe how long or how many bottles of Coronation Ale Ernest drinks before killing himself, Tom says that Ernest “drank all morning . . . He drank all afternoon . . . He drank, with intervals, *perhaps* all day” (*Waterland* 234, emphasis mine). The speculation that underlies Tom’s account of his grandfather’s suicide is not uncommon in stories Tom tells about Ernest Atkinson. Tom frequently engages in “not ill-researched surmise[s]” to explain his grandfather’s behavior (176). Tom’s frequent speculation and his use of the word “perhaps” link him to Mr. Compson.

Quentin and Shreve also employ frequent speculation in their narrative of events. For instance, they create fictional characters such as the Lawyer for the gratification of finding an explanation for events. In the end, the narrators of both *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* engage in speculation to support their interpretations of events. Speculation allows Rosa Coldfield and Tom Crick, in particular, to spin Gothic tales of familial decline to avoid their guilt.

Parallels between Characters

No strict, one-to-one correspondence exists between characters in *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!*; rather, Swift's characters are a composite of characters from Faulkner's novel. The parallels between characters, moreover, reflect similarities between their personalities, motivations, and life circumstances. As a narrator, Tom parallels characters like Rosa and Mr. Compson, but, as a participant in his narrative, Tom also parallels characters like Quentin Compson and Henry Sutpen. Both Tom and Quentin, for instance, are drawn into the chaos of the past because of accidental discoveries. Tom's tryst with Mary leads to the accidental discovery of Ernest Atkinson's letter, notebooks, and Coronation Ale, and Quentin's time with Rosa leads to the accidental discovery of Henry Sutpen. Just as Tom enters the story of the Atkinsons when he fishes the empty bottle of Coronation Ale from the Leem and "unlock[s] the past in a black chest," so too does Quentin, in the words of Peter Brooks, enter "the Sutpen story through the meeting with Henry at Sutpen's Hundred" (*Waterland* 320; Brooks 296). Tom and Quentin's guilt, their responsibility for the deaths of Dick Crick and Henry Sutpen, results from these accidental discoveries. By stumbling upon the secrets of the buried past, both Tom and Quentin participate, as Max Putzel observes of Quentin, "in the climax of a great tragedy" and are "an accomplice before the fact to the last deed of

malice visited on the children and the children's children" of Thomas Sutpen and Ernest Atkinson (*Waterland* 18). Like Quentin, who shivers in his bed at Harvard, knowing that he has contributed to the death of Henry and Clytie Sutpen, when Dick dives from the prow of the *Rosa II*, Tom similarly realizes that he has participated in the death of his brother and the destruction of the Atkinson family line. Tom and Quentin are both traumatized by their positions within history as they struggle to understand the world they inhabit.

In addition, like Henry Sutpen and Charles Bon, Tom and Dick are half-brothers. Tom and Dick's love for Mary, moreover, parallels Henry and Bon's love for Judith. For example, Henry Sutpen considers his sister Judith to be an "empty vessel," a phrase which Tom Crick also uses to describe Mary Metcalf (*Absalom, Absalom!* 95; *Waterland* 42). Of the relationship between Bon and Henry, the narrator of *Absalom, Absalom!* says that Judith was not

the object of Bon's love or of Henry's solicitude. She was just the blank shape, the *empty vessel* in which each of them strove to preserve . . . what each conceived the other to believe him to be . . . before Judith came into their joint lives even by so much as girlname. (95, emphasis mine)

For Tom and Dick Crick, Mary Metcalf is similarly the "empty vessel" that they strive to fill and in whom they seek to find their identities (*Waterland* 42). Conflict arises between Tom and Dick because of their shared love for Mary, just as it does between Henry and Bon because of their shared love for Judith. Like Judith, who acts as a catalyst for the conflict that has already existed between Henry and

Bon, Mary acts as a catalyst for the conflict that has already existed between Tom and Dick, conflict which extends as far back as their mother's death when she called Dick to her deathbed to receive an inheritance and not Tom (278). Finally, the revelation of Bon and Dick's status as half-brothers initiates the ultimate destruction of the Sutpen and Atkinson families. Upon learning that Dick and Bon are their half-brothers, Tom and Henry radically reevaluate their conception of kinship as well as their family priorities. The knowledge of Dick and Bon's secret origins drives Tom and Henry to fratricide; Henry through direct means, when he shoots Bon, and Tom through indirect means, when he reveals the contents of Ernest's secret letter to Dick.

In *Waterland*, Tom's student Price also functions much as Shreve McCannon does in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Both Shreve and Price put Quentin and Tom, respectively, under the pressure of cross-examination, and elicit the most detailed historical revelations of the novels. Carl Rollyson writes that "Shreve's constant interrogation forces Quentin to confront the [Sutpen] story's anguish and pain. Quentin can no longer simply listen to Rosa or to his father tell the story; he must retell it under Shreve's probing cross-examination" (Rollyson 59). Price similarly compels Tom to tell his personal history while under probing cross-examination about the definition and meaning of history. Tom says, for instance, that because Mary's "love-affair . . . with God," which began after her

abortion in 1943, “reache[s] a critical . . . pitch” in 1979, “the challenging remarks of a student called Price” prompt him to cease teaching “history” and start telling his class “fantastic-but-true,” “believe-it-or-not-but-it-happened Tales of the Fens” (*Waterland* 41-42). The parallels between Shreve and Price extend to later parts of *Waterland* as well. When Tom talks with Price at The Duke’s Head in chapter thirty-two, for instance, all the most minute details of Tom’s past emerge, just as the most minute details of Sutpen’s history emerge during Quentin’s conversations with Shreve in their room at Harvard in the latter half of *Absalom, Absalom!*.

Gothic Parallels

In addition to character parallels, *Waterland* also employs Gothic tropes that are similar to those that Faulkner uses in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Both novels contain family curses, Gothic mansions, domineering fathers, devastating secrets, incest, and fratricide. *Waterland*’s resonance with the Gothic qualities of *Absalom, Absalom!* reveals Swift’s dynamic engagement with the Gothic tradition.

The Gothic tales of familial decline in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Waterland* highlight the actions of Thomas Sutpen and Ernest Atkinson. Both novels contain the stories of men who wanted sons and destroyed themselves and their families in the process of begetting them. For instance, after being laughed off the political podium for his prophecies of war in 1909 and seeing war

envelop Europe in 1914, Ernest Atkinson conceives the idea of siring a son who will be the "Savior of the World" (160-161, 226-228). Similarly, after a slave rebukes him as a boy for approaching the front door of an affluent Southern plantation, Thomas Sutpen conceives the idea of siring a son who will wreak vengeance for all rednecks on the Southern aristocracy. When Sutpen turns his own son, Charles Bon, away from his front door years later, however, because of Bon's negro blood, Sutpen ultimately perpetuates the same cycle as the rich plantation owner who had turned him away. Sutpen's desire for a son of pure blood destroys him and his family. Like Thomas Sutpen, Ernest Atkinson invests all his hope in his son, Dick, who he believes will be the "Savior of the World," the continuation of his dreams, ambitions, and legacy. Dick, however, "proves to be a potato-head" (231). Contrary to Ernest's hopes, Dick fails to use his inheritance properly. Rather than enabling the salvation of the world, Dick's access to Ernest's chest of Coronation Ale contributes to the destruction of the Atkinson and Crick families. Ernest Atkinson and Thomas Sutpen's monomaniacal desire for a son wreaks devastation on succeeding generations.

Typical of Gothic tales of familial decline, the gradual decay of the Sutpen and Atkinson estates also reflects the growing moral degeneracy of the families. Elizabeth Kerr notes, for instance, that *Absalom, Absalom!* contains the "entire

history of the 'haunted castle'" (32). She writes that after Thomas Sutpen built Sutpen's Hundred,

it existed in splendid isolation, the realization of Sutpen's dream, from his marriage in 1838 until the Civil War; it gradually fell into ruin during and after the war; it was destroyed by fire in 1910. Thus, the mansion is seen first as it takes shape in the wilderness, then as the center of a prosperous plantation, and finally as a 'rotting shell' of a house. (32)

In *Waterland*, the Atkinson business empire undergoes a similarly Gothic decline.

Like Sutpen, who migrates from the mountains of West Virginia to the swamps of Jefferson, Mississippi, the Atkinsons move from the hills of Norfolk, England to the swampy Fens of the Wash where they buy land for next to nothing, drain it, and sell it for increased profits. After gaining a foothold in the Fens, the Atkinsons establish their malting business. They dig locks and canals throughout the Fens for the shipment and transportation of their ale (a kind of English plantation). As their business prospers, they build Cable House, a family home in the town of Gildsey where the Atkinsons become a central part of the community. As the family saga continues, however, the Atkinsons grow more reclusive and unhappy. In 1862, they build Kessling Hall, a mansion situated in the countryside a good distance from the town of Gildsey, and retire into "stylish seclusion" (*Waterland* 91). Some years after the Atkinsons retire into seclusion at Kessling Hall, the Atkinson brewery, symbol of the Atkinson empire, burns down. Ernest Atkinson, the reputed arsonist of the brewery, locks himself and

his daughter, Hellen, in “leaden seclusion” at Kessling Hall (162). As Kessling Hall falls into disrepair during World War I, Helen and her father fall in love, and Ernest conceives the idea of siring the “Savior of the World” through her. Years later, Tom discovers that Dick is the product of Ernest’s incest. In the end, just as the idiot Jim Bond is the bridge between the past and present legacy of the Sutpens, so too is Dick the bridge between the past and present legacy of the Atkinsons. At the end of both novels, idiots are all that remain of once powerful family dynasties.

Kessling Hall and Sutpen’s Hundred furthermore link *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* to each other and the Gothic tradition. Just as Sutpen’s Hundred possesses the “grim and castlelike magnificence” of the Gothic mansion, so too does Kessling Hall (*Absalom, Absalom!* 29). Tom says that Kessling Hall is “opulently ugly” and “complete with gargoyles and turrets, happily concealed by thick woods” (*Waterland* 91). Both Sutpen’s Hundred and Kessling Hall possess the traditional features of the Gothic castle. Both are grandiose structures isolated by thick woods. Both are haunted by Henry Sutpen and Sarah Atkinson, respectively, after they have been presumed dead. Finally, both mansions fall into disrepair during cataclysmic wars; Sutpen’s Hundred during the Civil War and Kessling Hall during World War I (216).

In addition, characters in both novels describe the mansions not only as dark, mysterious places, but also as ogre's lairs. Shut away from the world in Sutpen's Hundred and Kessling Hall, both Thomas Sutpen and Ernest Atkinson appear monstrous to the inhabitants of the nearby towns of Jefferson and Gildsey. For instance, when Ernest Atkinson locks himself and his daughter in Kessling Hall, Tom says that the town of Gildsey views the house as a kind of "ogre's castle" where Ernest has gone to commit dark deeds with his daughter (215). In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Rosa Coldfield similarly refers to Thomas Sutpen as an "ogre" from her childhood, who "removed [her] sister to [his] grim ogre-bourne" at Sutpen's Hundred where he "produced two half phantom children" with her (*Absalom, Absalom!* 135). The echo of Rosa's description of Sutpen's Hundred as an ogre's lair in Tom's narrative suggests that *Waterland* is in dialogue with *Absalom, Absalom!*, and reinforces the Gothic parallels between Kessling Hall and Sutpen's Hundred.

The Gothic tales in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Waterland* stem from the epistemological limitations of the first-person narrators as well as their tendency to romanticize and their desire to affect historical interpretation. Both Tom and Rosa adapt the conventions of the Gothic tale of familial decline to deny their agency in the destruction of their families and pin blame upon Ernest Atkinson and Thomas Sutpen.

The difference between the novels is that whereas *Absalom, Absalom!* contains a definite mystery, in *Waterland*, Tom constructs “a mystery where none exists” (Landow 207). *Absalom, Absalom!* is a kind of detective story in which Shreve and Quentin attempt to reconstruct Mr. Compson and Rosa’s narrative of Thomas Sutpen. *Waterland* also uses detective techniques, but Swift revamps Faulkner’s model of narration. Rather than four narrators who cannot quite get at the truth, Swift creates Tom Crick, who knows the truth, but nevertheless insists on telling it as a mystery, confusing the facts of the matter to qualify his responsibility for his own actions. Rather than using a narrator, like Rosa Coldfield or Quentin Compson, who has neither definite knowledge of the past nor the wisdom, tolerance, sensitivity, or thoughtfulness “to see [Sutpen] as he was,” Swift uses a narrator who has a great deal of historical knowledge, but who nevertheless chooses to obfuscate his knowledge (Faulkner, “Remarks” 290). Adult Tom knows, for instance, at the start of *Waterland* that Dick killed Freddie Parr. Yet rather than disclose this information and the relevant motives, Tom creates a Gothicized mystery that stretches into the distant past of the Atkinsons and the Fens. While in *Absalom, Absalom!* the Gothic arises out of the narrative and epistemological limitations of the narrators, in *Waterland*, Tom Crick creates a mystery where none exists and uses a Gothic tale of familial decline to qualify his responsibility for events in the summer of 1943.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tom's Gothic Tale of Familial Decline

In Graham Swift's *Waterland*, history teacher Tom Crick wrestles with guilt as he tries to understand the events that have brought him to his current impasse in 1979: his impending forced retirement because his wife, Mary, has kidnapped a baby from a supermarket. In an attempt to understand the causes of Mary's mental breakdown, Tom turns his classroom lectures into a series of stories that recount how the past has shaped his present circumstances. During these classroom lectures, Tom revisits the traumatic catastrophes of the summer of 1943 from his and Mary's adolescence. He recounts the deaths of Freddie Parr, Mary's fetus, and his brother Dick as well as the details of his Atkinson family history—his and his brother's maternal line—which he secretly investigated after Dick's death (*Waterland* 62). From these recollections, Tom constructs a Gothic tale of familial decline, which roots his and Mary's present misfortunes in the sins of the past. Tom links the fall of the Atkinsons and Dick's incestuous lineage to Mary's mental breakdown as well as to three deaths in the summer of 1943. Tom's narrative casts Dick's inheritance, the chest of Coronation Ale given to him by his father Ernest Atkinson, as the catalyst of the catastrophic events of the

summer of 1943 and 1979 and Dick as the unfortunate bridge between the past and present.

Tom abandons teaching the official history syllabus and embarks on a personal historical quest to account for his present misfortunes. Realizing that he was born into peculiar circumstances, Tom seeks to explain Mary's mental breakdown and qualify his responsibility for Dick's death by demanding an "Explanation" from Atkinson history. Tom tells his history class that he first "began to look into . . . the history of [his] Fenland forefathers" and "to demand of history an Explanation" as an adolescent after the three deaths of the summer of 1943, particularly Dick's (62). As he reconstructs the summer of 1943 as an adult, he continues the line of inquiry he pursued as an adolescent when he tried to understand the deaths of Dick and Freddie Parr. Whereas Tom's adolescent search for an explanation was foiled because the history of his Atkinson forefathers yielded "more mysteries . . . and grounds for astonishment than [he had] started with," adult Tom now dismisses these mysteries through "not ill-researched surmise[s]" and demands from Atkinson history the explanation of explanations—the definitive story of the summer of 1943 and Mary's mental breakdown (62, 176). Tom's demand for an explanation from Atkinson history leads him to formulate a Gothic tale of familial decline that pins the blame for Dick's mental deficiencies upon Ernest Atkinson and casts Dick's death and

Mary's mental breakdown as the result of the resurgence of a Gothic curse. While his audience of schoolchildren surely would not be familiar with the Gothic mode, perhaps Swift thinks his readers would be.

Although Hanne Tange argues that Tom "demands too much of history" and that it "breaks down" in consequence, Tom circumvents explanative breakdown by interposing fantastical speculation into his history of the Fens (Tange 80). Tom frequently resorts to superstitions, rumors, and speculation to explain events in the history of the Atkinsons. For instance, he admits to ascribing "conjectural" emotions and motivations to Ernest Atkinson (*Waterland* 160). At other times, he claims to know Dick's emotions even though he elsewhere implies that "the feelings of a potato-head" are inscrutable (32). In addition, Tom draws imaginative links between Dick and Ernest Atkinson to connect his brother's mental disability to familial decline (62). Tom's speculation about the actions and motivations of characters like Dick Crick and Ernest Atkinson allows him to restructure his past according to his own ends and explain his own ruin, as well as his family's ruin, in terms of a Gothic curse.

Tom's demand for an explanation from Atkinson history nevertheless leads him to misrepresent both his and his brother's role in the events of 1943. For example, Tom's "narration of Dick's suicide," as Richard Rankin Russell has noted, "elides [Tom's] responsibility for that act by overlaying it with a mythical,

ineluctable quality" (121). Pamela Cooper also writes that by revisiting settled facts, Tom both "embraces and parodically rewrites [his] own past, seeking through such revisionism and generic subterfuge to open that past up to the present" (375). Although Tom is fully aware that his role in the events of the summer of 1943 cannot be undone, part of his reason for "scurrying further and further into the past" seems to be because of what Michael Woods calls "a forlorn fantasy about rewinding the film, dislodging the settled facts" (Wood). Just as Tom and Mary once visited Martha Clay for Mary's abortion, hoping "[f]or something to unhappen," so too does Tom construct a Gothic tale of familial decline hoping for one interpretation of history—his responsibility for Dick's death and Mary's incipient insanity—to disappear, to unhappen in the wake of transferring blame onto Ernest Atkinson (*Waterland* 295). As Tom says, by reconstructing history, "you discover how you've become who you are" and "if you're lucky you might get back to where you can begin again" (312). By relocating settled facts into a history of the Atkinson family, Tom casts himself and his brother as victims of fate, rather than active participants in their own downfall.

Scholarship on Waterland

Although reviewers have noted that *Waterland* draws from the Gothic genre, few critics have explored the rhetorical implications of Tom's use of the

Gothic. Criticism on *Waterland* has often focused either on the postmodern methodologies of Tom's historiography and narration or on the ethical dimensions of his narrative as seen through the lens of confessional or trauma fiction. Critics like Linda Hutcheon, Margrét Champion, John Schad, and Katrina Powell focus on historiography in *Waterland* and how its narrative structure, in Powell's words, "calls into question the notions of history, the past, storytelling, and their impact on the present" (59). On the other hand, critics like Tamás Bényei, Daniel Lea, Stef Craps, and Richard Russell focus on the "ethical" dimensions of Tom's narrative, especially its confessional qualities that relay Tom Crick's guilt for the murder of Freddie Parr, the abortion of Mary's baby, and Dick's suicide (Russell 116). This essay draws upon the strand of criticism that views *Waterland* as a confessional narrative. As opposed to scholars like Bényei and Russell, who focus on how Tom's confessional narrative fails to absolve him of guilt, this essay analyzes *Waterland* on an even more foundational level, investigating how Tom structures his narrative as a Gothic tale of familial decline to attempt to absolve himself of guilt.

Tom's theories of history can be seen as a postmodern critique of traditional concepts of history, metanarratives, and truth. Tom disrupts the grand narrative of the official history syllabus with what Jean-François Lyotard would call a "petite" or little history. Like Gothic narratives, little histories

critique institutionalized and official master narratives (Lyotard 30-31, 37, 60). Tom replaces his lectures on the French Revolution with a local history of the English Fens, challenging his students' presumptions about history and interrogating his own understanding of the events of the summer of 1943. As Tamás Bényei notes, however, understanding *Waterland* only as a "critique of the ideological assumptions behind the telling of history" takes at face value Tom Crick's "theoretical investigations of history and historiography," and suppresses other important elements of the text, such as "the context that produces these theoretical inquiries" (109). Bényei argues that Tom's "penchant for theorizing . . . is part of an elaborate strategy which frequently serves purposes opposite to his professed claim of attempting a genuine and honest encounter with his past" (109). Although Tom tells a "petite" history, he, at times, borders on claiming the same legitimating omniscience that Paul Connerton argues creators of metanarratives do (2). When Tom speculates about the actions of his grandfather Ernest Atkinson, his authority as a teacher and his search for the Explanation of explanations threaten to transform his micro-history of the Fens into a reductionistic metanarrative that explains the tragic events of the summer of 1943 in terms of a Gothic curse. Thus, in Swift's novel, even the rejection of master narratives threatens the creation of new, legitimizing narratives.

In addition, Tom's frequent speculations about the motives and actions of his brother Dick and his grandfather Ernest Atkinson distort his historical narrative and violate his own rules of historical interpretation, which are to avoid myth-making and speculation (*Waterland* 86). Recognizing these distortions, Tom's student Price suspects that all of Tom's explaining is just "a way of avoiding the facts while you pretend to get near to them" (166). Like Bényei, Price wonders how honestly Tom engages with his past.

Tom's theories of history, his narrative distortions, and his circular construction of history are all enmeshed within the ethical fabric of his narrative. For instance, the circular structure of Tom's narrative not only plays with the idea that history is circular, but also suggests a cyclical interpretation of events. Tom uses the frequent ruptures in his narrative to suggest that history runs in circles. As Allison Lee writes, Tom "synthesizes events in such a way that history itself does indeed seem to repeat and foreshadow itself" (42). By jumping between the past and the present, Tom establishes links between Dick and the history of the Atkinsons to explain the events of the summer of 1943. Tom's stories from family history are therefore vital to his attempt to qualify his responsibility for Dick's death and Mary's mental breakdown in 1979.

Despite Tom's cyclical theories of history, he holds a distinctly cause-and-effect understanding of personal identity. He roots his, Mary, and his brother's

identities in a linearly structured, regional micro-history. To discover who he and Mary have become in 1979, for instance, Tom revisits Fenland history, which also happens to be his familial history. Tom delivers a history of the Atkinsons to understand his own past for the same reason that he believes that “to understand why Louis [XVI] died [in the French Revolution], it is necessary not only to reanimate in our imaginations his troubled life and times but even to penetrate to the generations before him” (*Waterland* 107). He says that the purpose of this kind of historical inquiry is “to uncover” and “to know that what we are is what we are *because our past has determined it,*” that “Y is a consequence because X preceded it” (107, emphasis mine). Geoffrey Lord argues that Tom’s desire to ground his identity in his family line is a characteristically British phenomenon.

Lord notes that

In England there is a propensity to see identity less as an act of individual will than as set in and determined by social, generational and historical contexts. In addition to giving Crick a plausible name, Swift supplies a background for Tom’s surname: “my name of Crick, which in Charles the First’s day was spelt sometimes ‘Coricke’ or ‘Cricke’, can be found [in] local archives” [W 10]. Consequently, his name seems less an “invention” dictated by the storytelling needs of the moment, and comes to belong to a continuous history instead. (152)

The British cultural historian Robert Hewison further explains the English proclivity to derive identity from family history. He writes that the identity of British individuals “depends” upon their knowledge of “personal and family history.” Hewison argues that the “language and customs which govern”

English social life “rely for their meaning on a continuity between past and present . . . Continuity between past and present creates a sense of sequence out of aleatory chaos” (43, 47). Tom likewise sees his identity, like his name, as rooted in and, in some sense, determined by history. In Swift’s novel, both Dick and Tom exist “in a context of textured family and social connections” (Lord 152). Tom “has a sense of his history, and an awareness of his indebtedness to the past” (153). By tracing the continuity between the past and present, Tom accounts for the present circumstances of his life, going so far as to question whether the circumstances of his life, and perhaps even his life itself, were fated by his ancestors. In *Waterland*, Tom does not work from a rootless approach to history, but profoundly engages with the local history of his ancestors. He repeatedly questions whether “a curse [lies] on the Atkinson family,” a curse which has continued to haunt him, his brother, and his father (*Waterland* 176, 32).

Despite his classroom denunciation of linear history in favor of cyclical, “Natural History,” Tom tellingly employs linear, cause-and-effect history when recounting the “Rise of the Atkinsons” (137, 63). Damon Decoste claims that this “path of linear ascent” is one “envisioned by the Atkinsons” themselves to describe their growth to power and success (387). Nevertheless, although Tom likely recovered this tale of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons from the four blue-bound journals he found in Ernest Atkinson’s chest of Coronation Ale, he

subscribes to this vision when he incorporates it into his own personal historical narrative. As Daniel Lea observes, “far from renouncing the ‘straight’ path of history in his own narrative, [Tom Crick] could be said to embrace the chronological and teleological possibilities that the autobiographical format extends” (83). Tom tells the story of the rise of the Atkinsons to affix a high point to their business empire “because to fix the zenith is to contemplate decline,” specifically familial decline (*Waterland* 93). Tom’s reversion to a linear mode of historical explanation allows him to deliver a cause and effect history that grapples with the tragic roots of his brother’s mental deficiencies in family history. Within Tom’s narrative, Dick’s mental handicap is a symptom of mental disintegration brought on by the transgressive history of the Atkinson family, specifically Ernest Atkinson’s incest. Tom’s Gothicized history of the Atkinsons shifts culpability for the traumas of 1943 and 1979 from himself onto Ernest Atkinson—who both committed the original act of incest and made the knowledge of Dick’s origin available in the letter he included in his chest of Coronation Ale.

Even though, as an historian, it seems likely that Tom would value historical accuracy over explanative convenience, he restructures his past according to a Gothic tale of familial decline. At one point, for instance, Tom’s student Price asks probing questions about the nature of revolutions, and

eventually prompts Tom to admit that he is “speculating” about history (140). Tom says to Price, ““We’re all free to interpret.”” To which Price responds, ““you mean, so we can find whatever meaning we like in history?”” And Tom is forced to admit to himself that he “actually do[es] believe that. I believe it more and more. History: a lucky dip of meanings. Events elude meaning, but we look for meaning” (140). Tom's internal monologue allows for the possibility that he believes that history, particularly his own history, could be interpreted in terms of the resurgence of a Gothic curse.

In fact, in his narrative of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons, Tom entertains and endorses the idea that a curse lies upon the Atkinsons (160, 176). Early in the novel, for instance, when Freddie’s body floats into the Atkinson Lock, Tom suggests that a curse lies upon his family, “for when a body floats into a lock kept by a lock-keeper of my father’s disposition, it is not an accident but a curse” (*Waterland* 31). Tom describes the scene as his father pumps water from the lifeless body of Freddie Parr. As Tom’s father labors to resuscitate Freddie, Tom says that he

is trying to pump away not just this added curse, but all the ill luck of his life: the ill luck that took away, six years ago, his wife; the ill luck that had his first son born a freak, a potato-head (for that’s what Dick is). And more curses, more curses perhaps, as yet unknown. (32)

As his father continues pumping, Tom's view of the scene zooms out from its original focus on Henry Crick and Freddie Parr to the crossed ears of barley, the Atkinson family crest, on the cornice of the Lock house. Tom says,

Thus I see us, grouped silently on the concrete tow-path, while Dad labours to refute reality, labours against the law of nature, that a dead thing does not live again; and larks twitter in the buttery haze of the morning sky, and the sun, shining along the Leem, catches the yellow-brick frontage of our cottage, on which can be observed, above the porch, a stone inset bearing the date 1875, and, above the date, in relief, the motif of two crossed ears of corn which, on close inspection, can be seen to be not any old ears of corn but the whiskered ears of barley. (32)

Tom shifts attention onto the Atkinson family crest as if it somehow presides over this cursed scene and the Atkinson legacy is somehow connected to the death of Freddie Parr and Tom, Dick, and Mary's role in his death by its proximity to the discovery of Freddie's body. Tom's attention to the crossed barley ears signals that he is telling a Gothic "fairy-tale" as he connects the Atkinsons' legacy to this disastrous event. Tom's juxtaposition of the discovery of Freddie's body and the Atkinson family crest subtly connects the death of Freddie Parr to the Gothic legacy of the Atkinsons.

Tom's Misrepresentation of Dick's Mental Disability

As Geoffrey Lord and Damon Decoste have noted, Tom's narrative can be viewed as his attempt to "best explain" the events leading up to the three deaths of the summer of 1943 and Mary's mental breakdown in 1979 (Lord 149; Decoste

377). Whereas Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve reevaluate and correct Rosa's Gothic tale of familial decline in *Absalom, Absalom!*, however, in *Waterland*, Tom Crick is the only narrator. Consequently, his narrative goes largely unchallenged, allowing him to significantly misrepresent characters like his brother Dick.

Examining the bodies, minds, and motives of characters apart from Tom's biases is therefore difficult. Despite providing multiple versions of history, *Waterland* is a novel in which characters, like Dick, depend upon Tom for their voice, their representation in the text.

Dick's frequent misrepresentation at the hands of his brother is a troubling reality, as are critics' failures to look beyond Tom's depiction of Dick as a symbol in the text—a symbol of the return to nature, the nullity of history, and salvation. Among the variety of approaches to Dick, Pamela Cooper, for instance, gives privileged attention to the intellectual facet of Tom's historical endeavor. Her privileging of "the paradoxes of history" as the "obvious focus of *Waterland's* intellectual endeavor" leaves characters such as Dick, whom Tom depicts as being of lower intelligence, prone to misrepresentation (372). She sees Dick's final dive into the Ouse as suicide, but more importantly as a symbolic reinstatement of the Christian redemption narrative, "as potentially a prelude to [Dick's] miraculous resurrection," which "becomes a prophecy—a sign taken for wonder" (388). This parody of the Christian redemption narrative at the end of

the novel nevertheless appears to be a creation of Tom's to qualify his responsibility for Dick's death, to diffuse the reader's attentiveness to Dick as a human, and perhaps even to mock Ernest Atkinson's desire for a son who would be the "Savior of the World" (*Waterland* 323). In the end, Cooper echoes Tom's own characterization of his brother, viewing Dick more as a symbol or personification of non-human forces than as an actual human being, the brother of the narrator.

As an adult, Tom misrepresents Dick's idiocy to gain power over his older brother. Through names like "Potato-head," adult Tom downplays Dick's intelligence and transforms him into a docile body, one that may "be subjected, used, transformed and improved" for the sake of historical explanation (*Waterland* 32; Foucault 180). Tom casts Dick's mental disability as symptomatic of social malaise and familial decline. Using his investment in a lifetime of historical research, especially in Fenland and familial history, Tom speculates about Dick's thoughts and emotions during the time leading up to the murder of Freddie Parr and establishes a Gothic backdrop behind Dick's final dive into the Ouse.

A fundamental contradiction nevertheless lies at the heart of Tom's portrayal of Dick. Despite Tom's efforts to rewrite his brother's consciousness, Dick's intellectual and emotional intelligence emerge on multiple occasions. For

better or for worse, Dick's intelligence emerges in his work on mechanical things, his love for Mary, the planning of the murder of Freddie Parr, and his learning from Tom that he is the product of incest. Although Dick does not have the scholastic intelligence to understand the world as categorically as Tom, he has an intuitive intelligence that allows him to repair his motor bike and navigate interpersonal relationships. Moreover, Dick has a capacity for planning and action that Tom consistently underrates. When Dick manages to evade Tom and his father at the end of the novel, for instance, Tom downplays Dick's cleverness with the statement, "ah, the cunning, *in extremis*, of a potato-head" (*Waterland* 326). Dick also outwits Tom when he hides the key to Ernest Atkinson's chest of Coronation Ale in the mouth of his stuffed pike (318). Up until the time when Dick retrieves the key from the maw of the prize pike on the wall, he has outwitted Tom; he has successfully kept the key hidden. In instances like these, Dick often problematizes Tom's depiction of him, but Tom refuses to acknowledge Dick's intelligence.

Because Tom's narrative denies Dick a voice, Tom frequently speculates on what his brother thinks and feels. In attempting to explain Dick's thoughts and feelings, however, Tom often occludes his brother's consciousness, imposing his own guesswork about Dick's thoughts onto him as if they were actually his thoughts. For example, when Mary embarks on her quest to educate Dick in

matters sexual, Tom repeatedly ascribes to Dick romantic emotions and inflated concepts of “love” and “beauty,” even though he had earlier claimed that Dick was mindless, “a sort of machine—in so far as a machine . . . has no mind of its own” (*Waterland* 254, 257, 38). Despite his earlier claim that “Dick stumbles helplessly or blanches in a kind of puritanical horror at any event which proves that human behavior is not to be regulated like that of a machine,” Tom compares Dick and Mary’s romantic assignments to those of Hero and Leander from Classical mythology (38, 251). By depicting his brother as both machine and tragic Classical figure, Tom avoids the facts of his brother’s existence while pretending to reveal who Dick actually is (32). Tom thus occludes his brother’s consciousness by ascribing feelings to Dick that are reflective not of his actual mental state, but of Tom’s romantic speculation and his desire to connect Dick to the legacy of his Atkinson ancestors (254).

In view of Tom’s misrepresentations of Dick, readers and critics ought to find themselves in as challenging a predicament as the one in which Faulkner places his readers and narrators in *Absalom, Absalom*. Faulkner’s novel compels readers to strain to understand Thomas Sutpen’s motives in a narrative from which he is absent, yet to which he is central. Readers of *Waterland* face a similar challenge as they attempt to understand Dick, whose absence from the present setting of the novel and inability to form spoken sentences make him prone to

misrepresentation. The danger for us as readers and critics of *Absalom, Absalom* and, by extension, *Waterland*, is that, like Rosa Coldfield or Tom Crick, we might hasten to fix Sutpen or Dick in history and culture as myth, erecting some safe, recognizable boundaries around the text before explanation slips away like an eel. If we as readers fail to attend to Dick carefully, then he may appear to us as he appears to Tom's history class—merely as Tom's "freaky brother" (*Waterland* 109). If we hasten to accept Tom's narrative of events, then we may also accept Dick as a symbol of familial decline, whose mental deficiency is symptomatic of Ernest Atkinson's incest, his "sins com[ing] home to roost" (320).

Tom's skewed portrayal of his brother and continual undermining of Dick's intelligence signal his conscription of cause and effect historical telling to his own ends and invite investigation. Dick's silence, as well as his absence from the present setting of the novel, make him vulnerable to misrepresentation in Tom's narrative of events. To Tom, Dick is at once surface and symbol, an image he can control, a mindless "machine," not a cognizant human being (38). Dick's voicelessness and the resulting mindlessness that Tom ascribes to it transform him into an analogue for the Fens—an empty space onto which Tom can project thoughts and emotions. Interpretive misrepresentations allow Tom to depict Dick according to his own purposes, to render Dick's mechanical behavior along

more mysterious or romantic lines. By rendering Dick's behavior along more romantic lines, Tom connects Dick to the legacy of his Atkinson ancestors.

Tom's ability to define the extent of Dick's mental impairment gives him retrospective control over Dick's mind and body—control he sorely lacked in events leading up to the volatile summer of 1943. Tom's changing characterizations of Dick's mental disability—his portrayal of Dick as mindless machine, Dick as criminal mastermind, then Dick as tragic figure—reveal that Dick's mental disability is more of a social construct than an actual mental impairment in Tom's narrative. Patrick McDonagh's definition of idiocy as a "social idea with particular purposes and functions" rather than a "stable trans-historical condition" therefore applies to Tom's construction of Dick's idiocy in *Waterland* (9). Throughout the course of *Waterland*, Tom redefines the nature of Dick's mental disability to affect historical interpretation and to achieve certain rhetorical ends. Adult Tom's misrepresentation of Dick's mental disability justifies his adolescent desire to educate Dick and enables his present attempt to correlate Dick's mental deficiencies to Atkinson decline.

Adult Tom maintains control over Dick through narrative delay and chronological inversion. For instance, although Dick's education leads to the murder of Freddie Parr, twenty-seven chapters come between the discovery of Freddie's body in chapter five and the story of Dick's education in chapter thirty-

two. By delaying the details of Dick's education until after chapter thirty-two, Tom deflects attention from his adolescent failure to understand his brother, a failure that led to the death of Freddie Parr and instead focuses attention on his adult understanding of Dick as mechanical, which the reader gets in chapter five. This gap in Tom's account of the death of Freddie Parr initiates a narrative delay that affects how the reader views Dick and blurs the distinction between Tom's adolescent and adult understanding of Dick's mental disability.

Chapter five reveals adult Tom, at an early point in his narrative, reevaluating a chronologically earlier view of Dick, yet one which only appears twenty-seven chapters later in his narrative—the view that Dick's education in love at the hands of Mary improved him as a person. The inverted appearance of these two views of Dick signals that Tom is blurring the lines between his adolescent and adult understanding of events. By describing Dick's mental disability as making him mechanical and inhuman at the beginning of the novel, adult Tom revises his adolescent understanding of events and sets the stage to explain the Gothic curse that lies upon the Atkinson family line, which he accidentally awoke when educating his brother.

Because adult Tom's narrative strategy for eliding responsibility requires blending the past with the present, blurring the boundaries between his adolescent and adult knowledge, distinguishing between adult and adolescent

Tom's attitudes toward Dick's mental disability is critical. Focusing on Tom's adolescent quest to educate Dick in chapter thirty-two prior to analyzing adult Tom's Gothic tale of familial decline between chapters five and thirty, brings Tom's adolescent view of Dick into focus. Knowing how adolescent Tom understood Dick's education sets the stage to reveal how adult Tom later reinterprets the catastrophic consequences of Dick's education in light of Atkinson history.

Tom's Adolescent Quest to Educate Dick

By analyzing the events leading up to the summer of 1943, readers can see how adult Tom manipulates his narrative for the sake of altering historical interpretation. Whereas adult Tom views Dick's mental disability as the result of his incestuous lineage, adolescent Tom viewed Dick's mental disability as a symptom of intellectual and emotional "backwardness," unintelligence (*Waterland* 243). Chapter thirty-two reveals that adolescent Tom allowed Mary to educate Dick in sex because he both pitied and detested Dick for his disability. During a drunken discussion with his student Price at The Duke's Head, a bar which he and Price visit one day after school, Tom explains both his adolescent and current distaste for Dick. In undisguised, drunken disgust, Tom tells Price about Dick:

Not a savior of the world. A potato-head. Not a hope for the future. A numbskull with the dull, vacant stare of a fish . . . And he can't be taught. Can't read, can't write. Speaks half in baby-prattle, if he speaks at all. Never asks questions, doesn't want to know. (242)

Tom practically confesses to being embarrassed at having had such “a dummy for a brother,” one who was “the daily butt of the other kids” and their jokes (242). In addition, Tom reveals that he tried to remediate his brother's mindlessness on two occasions through education. Tom's first attempt to educate Dick occurs before 1937, the year of their mother's death, because he was ashamed of how students at school were mocking Dick by turning his name into a kind of “nursery rhyme” (242). Tom's father curtails Tom's efforts to educate Dick, and “so Dick grows up, deft-handed, broad-shouldered, strong in body if not in mind” (243). Tom's second attempt to educate Dick occurs after their mother's death in 1937 and partly stems from his desire to ensure that his brother properly grieves their mother's death as well as to make Dick realize what love is. Tom ties Dick's apparent lack of grief for the death of their mother to his living in an “amnesiac” state (245). Tom says that Dick “forgets tomorrow what he's told today” (242). Moreover, “envious” of the “special” attention Dick received from their mother—which was “somehow proportionate to its not being returned” by Dick—Tom expresses disgust for the lack of grief he believes Dick showed at her death (243). Tom fears that his mother's love may have been wasted on “a botched job,” an “abortive experiment called Dick Crick” (241, 256).

In light of adolescent Tom's latent animosity toward Dick, education represents his attempt to jolt Dick out of the "forgetful flux of [his] experience" (*Waterland* 318). Jealous of his brother's being the favored child of their mother, the child that was called to her death bed and given an inheritance, Tom seeks to make Dick aware of his mental deficiencies through education (287).¹ By introducing Dick to perplexity and confusion, Tom hopes to shock him out of his amnesiac perception of time, to immerse Dick into an awareness of history, for "history begins only at the point where things go wrong, history is only born with trouble, with perplexity, with regret" (92). Education becomes Tom's means of initiating Dick into a painful self-consciousness of history.

Tom believes that Dick understands neither grief nor love (243). He therefore allows Mary to initiate what he euphemistically calls an education in "matters of the heart," believing that Mary will teach Dick what love is (248). At the same time, however, Tom hopes that education will teach Dick "that it's hard to learn . . . that he's not like other people," that "he's defective" (248, 256). By introducing Dick to the ideas of "beauty" and "love," Tom claims that Mary opens previously "unimagined mental territory" to his brother (254, 257, 251).

¹ Tom's grief and envy at Dick's being favored by their mother is evident in passages where Tom, wondering why he was not called to his mother's deathbed, queries, "Why only Dick? Then why should Dick and not I—?" (278). Tom grieves being excluded from his mother's deathbed goodbyes.

Moreover, as Mary initiates Dick into the realm of human emotions, Tom notes with satisfaction that Dick's face begins to register emotion in "troubled and baffled looks," facial expressions which transcend the mere eyelid whirring that had "alone registered emotion" before (256, 27). He takes cruel pleasure in seeing his brother struggle to self-awareness of his mental deficiency. Each night at the dinner table he watches Dick's face and sees written there that he is "learning that if he'd never set out to learn he'd never have learnt that it's all beyond him" (256). Tom depicts Dick's love for Mary as making Dick tragically human.

Nevertheless, by shocking him out of his amnesiac perception of time, Tom entangles both himself and Dick in history. Dick's sexual education has the unintended effect of making him jealous when Mary tells him that she is pregnant with Freddie Parr's child. When Dick learns that Freddie is the father of Mary's baby, he takes a bottle of Coronation Ale from the chest given to him by Ernest Atkinson and uses it to kill Freddie Parr, first by getting him drunk, then by hitting him over the head and pushing him into the river Leem. Dick's premeditated murder of Freddie Parr prompts Tom to reevaluate who his brother is and how well he understands him. For instance, when Mary tells Tom that Dick killed Freddie, Tom asks, "How do you know?" Mary tells him, "Because I know Dick." Tom responds, "I know Dick." "Perhaps you don't," Mary concludes (57). Mary's troubling deduction prompts Tom to reevaluate

what he knows to be true of his brother's character. This need for sudden reevaluation unbalances adolescent Tom's perception of Dick's mental disability and helps to explain adult Tom's open hostility toward Dick in early and later portions of the novel when he calls his brother a "machine," a "botched job," and an "abortive experiment" (38, 241, 256). The murder of Freddie Parr unbalances adolescent Tom's quest to educate Dick.

Ultimately, the reclamation of Dick's mind through education initiates a disastrous cycle of historical recovery. As Decoste notes, "it is because of Tom and Mary's efforts [to educate Dick], and the latter's lie that Freddie is father to her child, that Dick becomes an instrument of terror and not just blankness" (393). The murder of Freddie Parr changes the entire dynamic of Tom's perception of Dick and his goal to educate him. Not only does Freddie's murder root Tom and Dick in "irreversibly historical events," it also initiates them into the backward flow of history (*Waterland* 319). The empty bottle of Coronation Ale that Tom fetches from the Leem drags them into a confrontation with the sins of the past—the incestuous relationship between Ernest Atkinson and his daughter, Helen, Tom and Dick's mother.

The Chest of Coronation Ale and the Revelation of Dick's Lineage

When Mary tells Tom in chapter five that he does not know his own brother, adolescent Tom begins to investigate Dick's role in the murder of

Freddie Parr, “weigh[ing] evidence” and “put[ting] facts together” (*Waterland* 263). Adolescent Tom’s “historical method,” his “explanation-hunting,” leads to an even more tragic confrontation with reality. By shocking Dick out of his amnesiac perception of time, Tom finds that he has in fact entangled both himself and Dick in history. Contra the court’s verdict on the accidental nature of Freddie Parr’s death, Tom now knows Freddie’s death was no accident (264). Although Dick manages to evade the justice system, the empty beer bottle in the Leem gives Tom the key not only to confirm that Dick killed Freddie, but also to explain their mother’s privileged attention to Dick. The empty beer bottle acts as an alternative key to Dick’s inheritance, the black chest of Coronation Ale that Dick keeps locked in the attic—the real key having been so cleverly hidden by Dick after their mother’s death. When Tom returns the empty bottle of Coronation Ale to Dick’s room, Dick realizes that Tom knows he is responsible for the murder. Soon after Mary’s abortion, Dick approaches Tom with the desire to make a confession and show him the contents of Ernest Atkinson’s chest. He wants Tom to read him the letter that the chest contains (317). Dick tells Tom to follow him. They climb the stairs to the attic, Dick unlocks the chest for Tom, and Tom removes Ernest’s letter and begins to read.

After finishing the letter, Tom decides to tell Dick what it says. When adolescent Tom tells Dick about his parentage, however, he does not know for

certain that Dick is actually the son of Ernest Atkinson. The narrative structure of *Waterland* masks this, however, and makes it seem as if Tom has known the history of the Atkinson family all along, since adult Tom has been reporting it since the third chapter of the novel. But at the moment when Dick first gives Tom the letter to read in the attic, Tom has no choice but to take Ernest's word as either true or false. Yet to guess at the truth of the letter is little more than a gamble. Tom says that the letter "takes perhaps ten minutes to read (*much, much longer to digest*)" (321, emphasis mine). Tom nevertheless gives Dick his answer almost immediately. It "spills out almost before [he has] decided to say it" (321). After reading the letter, Tom concludes that children of incest are "unusual" (322). Because Dick is an "unusual person" and children of incest are unusual, Tom wagers that the information contained in Ernest's letter is true (323). Dick must be the son of Ernest Atkinson. Tom hammers home the point that Dick is the product of incest. Tom says to his brother,

"Your grandfather — my grandfather — was also your father"

[Dick] stares.

"My father isn't your father."

His chest starts to heave, to wheeze.

"Though your mother was my mother."

The wheeze grows hoarser.

"You and your mother had the same father."

And hoarser still.

"Before your mother and my father . . ."

But I've run out of variations. And Dick seems to be running out of air . . .

So he understands? (322-323)

The extent of Tom's animosity toward Dick emerges during this exchange. By telling Dick that he is the product of incest, adolescent Tom seeks revenge for the chaos Dick has brought into his life. Tom wants Dick to realize "that he's a bungle. Something that shouldn't be. There's been a mix-up somewhere and he's the result" (323). Tom despises his brother and is jealous of the attention his mother lavished on Dick. After assaulting Dick with this information, Tom gets the confession of guilt that he has been wanting. Tom says that "[s]uddenly [Dick] blurts out, as if it's all his fault, as if he being the effect is to blame for the cause: 'S-s-sorry, Tom. S-s-sorry'" (323). Tom dismisses Dick's apology, however, noting that Dick is merely the "effect" of Ernest Atkinson's incest. Tom saves his most severe blame for Ernest Atkinson, who is "the cause" of Dick's existence. Although Tom's adolescent curiosity and desire to educate Dick instigate the tragedies of the summer of 1943, Tom's discovery of the contents of Dick's inheritance opens an entirely new explanation for the fatal events of the summer of 1943. Tom believes that Ernest Atkinson's incest produces the mentally deficient Dick Crick, who then murders Freddie Parr in a jealous rage.

The knowledge of his incestuous origins drives Dick into a state of panic. He gathers all ten remaining bottles of Coronation Ale and heads toward the river Ouse on his motor bike. Tom and his father catch sight of Dick as he rides toward the *Rosa II*, a silt dredging ship, with the bottles of Coronation Ale in a

bag on his back (*Waterland* 327). Tom and his father follow Dick to the *Rosa II* where they see Dick onboard, quaffing all ten bottles of Coronation Ale. They call to Dick, but in vain. In a desperate attempt to navigate his identity crisis, Tom believes that “Dick is obeying other, *authentically paternal* instructions” (349, emphasis mine). Dick has understood Ernest’s instructions to drink the beer “in case of emergency” (349). Dick starts the dredger’s engine, and the series of “mechanical retchings and hiccups” that accompany its ignition attract a medley of observers. Stan Booth, skipper of the *Rosa II*, and two USAAF aircraftmen emerge from a nearby pub in startled disbelief. Tom and his father enlist Booth’s help to borrow a dinghy, and the American soldiers “clamor for inclusion,” goaded by curiosity (353). To the consternation of Stan Booth, all five men pile into the boat, which is only fit to carry three men at most. Booth rows toward the *Rosa II*, which floats mid-stream on the Ouse. When Dick sees the overladen dingy approaching, he panics, and Tom understands why. Tom says that “for the same second I see what [Dick] must see: an overladen dinghy, three familiar faces and two inexplicable (inexplicable?) attendants in uniform. In uniform” (356). When Dick spots the two aircraftmen in their army uniforms, he thinks that Tom and his father have brought policemen to arrest him for the murder of Freddie Parr. He jumps from the prow of the *Rosa II* into the water below to

avoid capture, and never surfaces again. Tom's decision to tell Dick that he is the product of Ernest Atkinson's incest thus leads to his brother's death.

Adult Tom's Revision of His Adolescent Quest to Educate Dick

As an adult, Tom believes that Dick's mental disability has roots in his incestuous lineage. Tom's "itch," his eagerness, to inquire into and explain family history in retrospect nevertheless reveals a latent anxiety regarding the truth of Ernest's revelation of Dick's parentage (*Waterland* 342). As an adolescent, Tom tells Dick that he is the son of Ernest Atkinson without full knowledge of Atkinson history. It is only after Dick's dive into the Ouse that Tom begins "poring over" Ernest's four blue-bound journals on Atkinson history, "itching to know more" about the facts contained therein and "making trips to Gildsey and Kessling Hospital" to confirm them (342). Tom provides a history of the Atkinson family to mask his adolescent ignorance of Dick's origins and make the tragic results of Dick's education seem predetermined by family history.

Tom preserves the linear narrative of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons to highlight Dick's emergence from that lineage and reinforce his connection to it. Evelyn Cobley notes that Tom "documents the family's decline as the hollowing out of inner strength that begins with Thomas Atkinson and ends with Dick" (282). In retelling the story of the summer of 1943 to Price and his history class, Tom attempts to justify his decision that Dick was in fact the son of Ernest

Atkinson by establishing mythic links between Dick, Ernest Atkinson, and the Atkinson family at large. Tom's history of the Atkinson family shifts culpability for Dick's death, Mary's abortion, and Freddie's murder onto Ernest Atkinson, who both made the knowledge of Dick's origin available and committed the original act of incest.

After researching the history of the Atkinsons, adult Tom now believes he knows "the complete and final version" of the story of 1943 (*Waterland* 8). To justify his adolescent desire to educate Dick and enable his present correlation of Dick's mental disability to Atkinson decline, Tom interposes a Gothicized history of the Atkinsons between the discovery of Freddie's body in chapter five and the story of Dick's education in chapters twenty-four and thirty-two. Rather than explaining what led Dick to kill Freddie Parr immediately after chapter five, Tom detours into Atkinson family history between chapters nine through twenty-two and again in chapter thirty. By interposing Atkinson history between the murder of Freddie Parr and the explanation of Freddie's murder, Tom makes clear the significance of Dick's Atkinson heritage and its role in the events of 1943. His tale of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons fixes Dick's mental disability in a history of family decline and establishes a Gothic backdrop behind the tale of Dick's education in chapter thirty-two. In adult Tom's narrative, Dick's education thus initiates a chain of events that culminate in Mary's pregnancy, Freddie Parr's

murder, Mary's abortion, and Dick's suicide because it unearths buried Atkinson history.

Tom's Gothic Genealogy of the Atkinsons

To establish that the events of the summer of 1943 are the result of the resurgence of a Gothic curse, Tom links Dick's mental deficiencies to Atkinson decline. By establishing parallels between Dick's life and those of his Atkinson ancestors, Tom justifies his decision that Dick is indeed the son of Ernest Atkinson and reads his mental disability as a sign of the social and moral decay wrought on the Atkinsons by the Fens as well as their monomaniacal pursuit of grand ideas and ambitious designs. Tom uses genealogy to understand his brother's "identity . . . in terms of [his] relation to past generations" in a way that Richard Albright defines as characteristic of Gothic novels (17). According to the conventions of the Gothic tale of familial decline, Tom traces the Atkinsons' progress from success to destruction, and casts Dick as the culmination of their ambitions. His genealogy anticipates Dick's birth, and reveals how Dick emerged from Atkinson history.

Tom's genealogy of the Atkinsons begins on the hills of Norfolk where the Atkinsons first "got Ideas" (*Waterland* 63). From the time of Josiah to William Atkinson, Tom depicts the Atkinson penchant for ideas as bringing blessing and profit, but later, from the time of Thomas to Ernest Atkinson, as growing more

curse-like and destructive. In the early half of the genealogy, Tom shows Atkinson ideas as tending toward physical, “palpable results” (69). For the early Atkinsons, ideas are a source of profit, success, and opportunity.

With Thomas Atkinson, however, the Atkinson’s penchant for ideas changes from blessing to curse. Thomas’s ideas bring him success, but make him “aloof” (75). In 1815, in a move toward abstraction that presages Arthur Atkinson’s transition into politics in 1874, Thomas Atkinson consents “to be turned into a symbol” and to have the Atkinson Lock named after him (72). In time, he becomes a public “monument” (75). Lacking the inner contentment that his forefathers derived from the ale they produced, however, Thomas Atkinson grows “gruff,” “surly,” and “angry” in his old age. One evening, in a fit of jealousy, he strikes his wife and causes her to lose her mind (76-77). Tom Crick adds the further detail that “when Thomas Atkinson struck Sarah he was blind drunk from his own fine ale” (79). The rumor Tom so cunningly introduces implies that madness arises in the Atkinson family from the abuse of alcohol, which had hitherto been the symbol of the family’s success.

With the emergence of madness in the family, Atkinson ideas become increasingly dissociated from reality. Ideas which were once directed toward outward, physical gain are now deflected toward reality-defying projects and ambitions. For example, despite Sarah Atkinson’s increasing madness, her sons,

George and Alfred Atkinson, begin to commission portraits which belie their mother's insanity. They "preserve the legend . . . that their [mother,] their Guardian Angel still watched over them" "by having a certain picture painted of Sarah in black dress and diamonds when in fact she was trussed up in a strait-jacket" (85). In addition, Sarah Atkinson's madness and attendant prophetic ability contribute to the increasingly Gothic tone of Tom's genealogy (83). Her prophecies of "Fire! Smoke! Burning!" are fulfilled when the Atkinson brewery burns during the lifetime of Ernest Atkinson (84).

With the passage of time, the Atkinsons become engrossed in increasingly grander ambitions and projects. After the death of Thomas Atkinson in December 1825, his sons, George and Alfred, take charge of the family business. Evelyn Copley observes that they have inherited their father's aloofness to an extreme degree. They are "cold and detached men, incapable of good cheer and sexual exuberance" (282).² "Inhibited" by a type of "Mother Fixation" or "Oedipal Syndrome" that foreshadows Ernest Atkinson's incestuous cravings, the brothers pump their sexual energy into a new channel, "that noble and impersonal Idea of Progress" (88, 92). Tom nevertheless attributes numerous pieces of George and Alfred's good fortune to the supernatural auspices of their

² Copley, however, confuses Alfred Atkinson with Arthur Atkinson. Alfred and George are the sons of Thomas, whereas Arthur is the son of George (82, 85).

mother, Sarah Atkinson. When Alfred makes a favorable marriage in 1832 and profits from it, for instance, Tom asks whether this was "Sarah's work" (87). Again, when George and Alfred invest in steam powered ships that rival railroad transportation, Tom suggests that this was "Sarah's work perhaps" (87). Similarly, when "the brothers foresee . . . that what the railway may take in long-haul trade, they regain in short-haul traffic in goods brought by the railway itself," Tom asks whether this was "(Sarah's work?)" (89). Tom attributes George and Alfred's success to Sarah, who "hears, in her room, the sounds of work in progress" (90). Thus, although Tom talks about retrieving history from the "swamps of myth" "with empirical fishing lines," Tom repeatedly treats his genealogy of the Atkinsons like a fairy-tale. Tom says, "at all costs let us avoid mystery-making and speculation, secrets and idle gossip. And, for God's sake, nothing supernatural" (86). Yet Tom's stories of the Atkinsons, especially those that follow Sarah Atkinson's madness, are full of myth, superstition, speculation, the supernatural, and other hallmarks of the Gothic.

The death of Sarah Atkinson signals the decline of the Atkinson business empire and the continued work of the curse upon the Atkinsons. Awful floods attend her death. These floods wreak havoc on the town of Gildsey and ruin the quality of Atkinson ale, making it an "inferior stuff" (104). In addition, Sarah's ghost is reputedly seen in various places during the weeklong rains that follow

her death. For instance, Dora Atkinson, granddaughter of Sarah, sees a woman “dressed in the style of fifty years ago” on the terrace, tapping on the rain soaked glass of the “French windows for admittance” into Kessling Hall (101).

Elsewhere, the wife of the sexton of St. Gunnhilda’s church, where Sarah was buried, sees a “woman, in outmoded dress, bending imploringly over the grave of Sarah Atkinson” (102). These rumors prompt Tom, in one of the most Gothic moments of his tale, to ask, “Do not ghosts prove—even rumors, whispers, stories of ghosts—that the past clings to the present, that we are always going back . . .?” (103). Tom recounts one final tale from the time of the floods.

According to one bargeman, Sarah Atkinson had never even died, but rather had been incarcerated in Wetherfield Insane Asylum, from which she escaped during the evening of the great flood, ran to the banks of the Ouse, and dove “like a very mermaid’ beneath the water never to surface again” (104). Tom’s last ghost story bears eerie resemblance to Dick’s dive into the Ouse. When Tom later describes Dick’s dive, he says that Dick “punctures the water” “like a fish of a man . . . And is gone” (357). If, as Tom says, history repeats itself and “travels back to where it came from,” then Dick’s death is much more explainable since he makes it match earlier deaths in the Atkinson family (205). In his genealogy of the Atkinsons, Tom subtly links Dick’s death to the resurgence of a Gothic curse

upon the Atkinsons by establishing mythic links between Dick and his ancestors, links that presage Dick's fate.

The floods that attend Sarah's death also inaugurate the birth of Ernest Atkinson, the "renegade" and "rebel" who will later see "no future" for the Atkinsons and their "one-time empire" (105, 156, 176). Unlike his father, Arthur, and grandfather, George, who were consumed by the desire for Progress, Ernest has no interest in business and political empires. He is the first Atkinson "to assume his legacy without the incentive of Progress, without the knowledge that in his latter days he would be a richer and more influential man than in his youth" (157). He therefore dismantles the Atkinson empire to consolidate his focus on the task of brewing beer.

Ernest's dedication to brewing improves the quality of Atkinson ale. He creates a "New Ale" that the people of Gildsey "[declare] to be the equal—no, the superior—of the Atkinson Ales of the middle of the old century" (159). Nevertheless, although Ernest succeeds in the creation of a superior ale, Tom says that Ernest suffers from an "inward sorrow" that is uncharacteristic of earlier Atkinsons (160). Unlike his great-great-grandfather, William, who possessed "infectious good cheer," Ernest suffers from an "inner gravity" that reflects the continued decline of the Atkinson family (66, 158). Ernest's "inward

sorrow” stems from knowledge of his family’s “dark” secrets, the scorn of the people of Gildsey, failing brewery profits, and an ailing wife (160).

With the passage of time, Ernest’s inward sorrow increases, and his reputation plummets. When his young wife, Rachel, dies in April, 1908, the people of Gildsey see her death as an ill omen and begin to “speak again of a curse upon the Atkinsons” (160). Thus, recurrent misfortunes in the life of Ernest Atkinson cause the people of Gildsey to mistrust him. Tom, moreover, does little to alleviate this mistrust. Rather, he encourages it. For instance, in 1911, when Ernest gifts the people of Gildsey Coronation Ale to celebrate the crowning of George V, Tom suggests that “far from being the victim of a curse [Ernest] was glad to be its instrument” (176). The highly alcoholic Coronation Ale, which Ernest secretly designed to unleash chaos on Gildsey’s war-mongering politicians, makes a mockery of the day’s festivities. In addition, the people’s drunken revelries culminate in the burning of the Atkinson brewery, leading Tom to question whether the burning of the brewery “give[s] final and positive proof . . . that a curse [lies] upon the Atkinsons” (174-75). Tom thus toys with the idea that Ernest’s actions exacerbate the curse upon the Atkinsons.

Just days after the burning of the brewery, Ernest and his daughter, Helen, take up permanent residence at Kessling Hall under the “pall of scandal, scorn, rumor and allegation” (214). By 1914, Helen’s continued love for her father has

scandalized the town. To explain her continued presence at Kessling Hall, the citizens of Gildsey invent a Gothic myth. According to Tom, they believe that “far from being swayed by filial motives, [Helen] was compelled against her wishes to live with her father, indeed was forcibly imprisoned by him, away from the bright and beckoning world . . . in that ogre’s castle of his at Kessling” (215). Tom questions whether Ernest “deserve[s]” this “villains’ part,” but admits that “in every myth there is a grain of truth” (215). Although Helen loves her father, the two had become entangled in such a complicated affair that Helen would later have to bargain with her father for her “freedom” by agreeing to bear his son, Dick (229). The man who was supposed to be her protector had become her terrorizer. Typical of the Gothic tale of familial decline, Tom depicts the Atkinson family turning in upon itself.

Helen and Ernest’s isolation at Kessling Hall between 1914 and 1918 exacerbates the process of familial decline. In their loneliness, they grow to love one another “the way a father and daughter shouldn’t” (227). With these details, Tom further connects his story to the Gothic because, as Ruth Perry notes, incest is “the hallmark of the Gothic genre” (103). Their affair intensifies in 1915 when Ernest attends the parade of the Royal Cambridgeshire Militia with his daughter. Although Ernest does nothing to disrupt the military parade, Helen’s beauty wreaks havoc on the “untrained and excitable recruits” (*Waterland* 217). It

“jinx[es]” them and makes “a mockery of [Gildsey’s] war-mongering proceedings” (219). When Ernest realizes that Helen’s beauty exerts such “sudden power” over the young men of Gildsey, he becomes “a worshipper of Beauty” (219). After witnessing the power of his daughter’s beauty to disrupt Gildsey’s war proceedings, he “cling[s]” to his daughter as if to a “left-over fragment of paradise” (219).

Thus, the ambitious ideas of the earlier Atkinsons culminate in Ernest Atkinson’s grandest idea to sire the Savior of the World. Helen’s beauty infects Ernest’s mind and turns his “old Atkinson” penchant for “Ideas” into a “malaise” (219). In the years that follow, Ernest comes to believe that “the sheer magic of [his daughter’s] beautiful presence” is capable of “effecting miracle cures” and creating “a redeemed race of men” (224). Succumbing to madness, he desires to sire a son who will be the “Saviour of the World” (228). Enraptured by his daughter’s beauty, Ernest asks Helen to bear this son for him. Helen is greatly troubled by her father’s request. She diverts his attention instead into the construction of a hospital for wounded soldiers, where later, working as a nurse, she meets and falls in love with Henry Crick, Tom’s father. Helen asks her father for permission to marry Henry, and Ernest consents upon the condition that she will bear him a son. Helen agrees, and “they set about begetting a child” (230). Helen conceives Dick under these circumstances. Learning that Helen is

expecting, Ernest prepares a chest of Coronation Ale and a series of letters and notebooks to guide his son, Dick, into his destiny as the Savior of the World.

Ernest's heir, Dick, proves to be the pinnacle of physical prowess. Yet, while Dick appears to be the physical incarnation of the Atkinsons' earlier tendency to yield physical, palpable results, critics, like Evelyn Cobley, who buy into Tom's Gothic tale of familial decline, also argue that Dick's mental vacancy reflects the hollowing out of Atkinson strength and ambition (282). Margret Champion similarly writes that Dick, as the product "of a degenerated relationship," is a "cursed child," who "functions as a disintegrating force" that "splinters the rational discourse of the novel" (41). Both Cobley and Champion support Tom's interpretation of events when they claim that Dick is a cursed child whose mental disability reflects familial decline. Tom's genealogy of the Atkinsons nevertheless enables and encourages the interpretation that Dick's mental disability is the result of the Atkinson family's degeneracy. In what follows, I hope to show that Dick's mythic connection to Atkinson history is actually the result of a fantasy that adult Tom erects around his older brother, a fantasy that ultimately obscures Dick's true character.

Dick's Relationship to the Atkinsons

The first sign of adult Tom's attempt to link Dick to his Atkinson heritage occurs during Dick's education at the hands of Mary. Although Tom's early

descriptions of Dick focus on his being machine-like—a mindless, physical creature—when Tom describes Dick’s love for Mary, he focuses not on Dick’s physical desires, but on his spiritual desires. Despite describing Dick as having the “dull vacant stare of a fish,” Tom ascribes to Dick the most abstract, non-corporeal ideas of Love and Beauty (*Waterland* 242, 255). He imagines Dick repeating after Mary the word beautiful, ““Bootiful”” —a word that reconnects Dick to the Atkinson penchant for ideas and Ernest Atkinson in particular (254). By putting the word “Beauty” into his brother’s mouth, Tom grafts Dick into the ideological trajectory of the Atkinson family, which, for over a century, had driven them toward success and now destruction.

Tom structures his narrative so that Ernest’s worship of Helen’s beauty presages Dick’s obsession with Mary’s beauty (219). For instance, in chapter thirty-two, only two chapters after relating how Ernest began to adore Helen’s beauty in chapter thirty, Tom tells the story of how Dick became fascinated with Mary’s beauty. The proximity of these chapters suggests that Tom sees Dick’s interest in beauty as a continuation of Ernest’s. For instance, when Ernest succumbed to the idea of producing the Savior of the World, it was as a result of having “succumbed to that old Atkinson malaise,” of having “caught Ideas . . . And not just any old idea, but Beauty—the most Platonic of the lot. The Idea of Ideas” (219). In a continuation of Ernest’s grand schema, Tom takes Dick’s idea

of Beauty and Love to the next level. Out of all the Atkinsons, Tom ascribes to Dick the most abstract and non-corporeal idea—the idea of a love that will produce children without physical union (260-262). Tom embellishes Dick’s view of Mary so that, like Ernest, who worships his daughter’s beauty, Dick views Mary as if she were the Virgin Mary. Moreover, when Tom describes Dick’s use of the word “love,” he calls it a “mystic word,” a detail which connects Dick’s use of it to the same magic that the words “ale” and “drainage” once held for past members of the Atkinson family (257, 66, 69).

In addition, the situational parallels between Dick and Ernest’s suicides signal that Tom has transposed the details of Dick’s death, with which he had firsthand experience, onto his grandfather’s, with which he had no experience, to draw a correspondence between the two. Although Tom had access to the details of the rise and fall of the Atkinsons via Ernest’s journals, he had no source for the precise details of Ernest Atkinson’s death. As Tom admits, there is no way of knowing certain details of the story, such as “how many bottles” of beer Ernest consumed before killing himself or his motivations for doing so (234). In fact, much of what Tom claims about his grandfather’s suicide and his day-long alcoholic binge is based on speculation (234-235). Despite the dearth of information surrounding his grandfather’s suicide, Tom nevertheless provides specific details that link Ernest’s suicide to Dick’s. Like Dick, Ernest drinks

himself into a stupor with Coronation Ale before killing himself, “leaving behind him a litter of empty beer bottles,” just as Dick leaves “empty bottles” all over the deck of the *Rosa II* (234, 358). Even the time of day of their deaths is the same. Both Dick and Ernest leave their homes at evening and head toward places associated with their work, Dick toward the dredger and Ernest toward Kessling Home Hospital. Finally, just as Henry Crick sights a will-o’-the-wisp the same day that Ernest Atkinson kills himself, so too does Tom sight Dick’s motorbike in the “will-o’-the-wisp dusk” soon after his dive into the Ouse (235, 358). Given that Henry Crick sights the will-o’-the-wisp the same day that Ernest Atkinson kills himself and the chest of Coronation Ale arrives at the Crick household for the first time, the final appearance of the will-o’-the-wisp after Dick’s dive into the Ouse reinforces the correlation that Tom appears to be drawing between Dick’s demise and his being the child of Ernest Atkinson’s incest (232). By paralleling the details of Dick and Ernest’s suicides, Tom casts Dick’s death as the result of Ernest’s sin “com[ing] home to roost,” and transforms Dick into a bridge between the past and present, a symbol of familial decline (320). The parallels that Tom draws between Dick’s death and those of Sarah and Ernest Atkinson suggest that he wants to view Dick’s death as fated or predetermined by familial history and reveal his attempt to mask his responsibility for Dick’s death.

The Gothic as Narrative Strategy

Ultimately, Tom uses the Gothic as a narrative strategy to qualify his guilt for the Dick's death and Mary's incipient insanity by casting himself and his brother as victims of fate and circumstance. Although Tom gives no final explanation of events in *Waterland*—the novel ends in 1943 just after Dick has dived into the Ouse, not in 1979—the Gothic tropes with which he structures his genealogy of the Atkinsons as well as the parallels he draws between Dick and his Atkinson ancestors reveal that Tom has interpreted the events of the summer of 1943 as if they were the result of the resurgence of a Gothic curse upon the Atkinsons.

After pondering Dick's incestuous lineage for thirty-six years, fifty-year-old Tom concludes that he, Mary, and Dick had been pursuing their adolescent curiosities in a veritable minefield of secrets from the past. When Tom and Mary decide to educate Dick, their youthful romance impinges on Ernest Atkinson's insane ambitions, which had lain dormant in Dick's cognitive disability and inheritance. Although Tom and Mary's decision to educate Dick precipitates the deaths of the summer of 1943, Tom casts their decision as having unwittingly triggered the disastrous events that culminate in the death of Freddie Parr, Mary's abortion, and his brother's suicide. In retrospect, he sees Ernest Atkinson as having instigated the tragic regression that led to the death of Freddie Parr

and the resurgence of buried Atkinson history “because when fathers love daughters and daughters love fathers it’s like tying up into a knot the thread that runs into the future, it’s like a stream wanting to flow backwards” (*Waterland* 228). Tom sees Ernest’s actions as having prevented Dick and himself from moving successfully into the future. To Tom, Dick’s death thus becomes the culminating moment in a tale of familial decline. He connects Dick’s mental disability to Atkinson family history to explain how the sins of the Atkinsons determined the events of the summer of 1943 and Mary’s mental breakdown in 1979.

In retelling the story of Dick’s dive into the Ouse, Tom connects Dick’s death to the resurgence of a Gothic curse. His attempt to qualify his responsibility for Dick’s death as well as the repercussions of the trauma of 1943 nevertheless result in a fundamental misrepresentation of his brother. By locating the root of Dick’s demise in the sins of his forefathers, Tom is guilty of mythologizing his brother and deflecting the reader’s encounter with the real. Dick’s mythic origins in Atkinson history are the result of a fantasy that Tom has erected around his older brother. By very nature of his depiction of Dick, as both mechanical potato-head and the inheritor of the Atkinson Idea, Tom bars himself from an honest consideration of Dick’s character and intelligence. Instead, the mental deficiencies he ascribes to Dick strain his narrative dynamic and compel

him to resort to myth and fantasy to reconcile the resulting discrepancies.

Although Tom's Gothic genealogy of the Atkinson family gives credence to the idea that the events of the summer of 1943 were partly the result of inherited sins, Tom's misrepresentation of Dick problematizes his attempt to best explain events.

In the end, Tom's Gothic tale of familial decline acts as a bruise upon a bruise. It obscures the real story of 1943 with a replica of it. Although Tom attempts to recover the real story of the summer of 1943 by digging into the history of the Atkinsons, Tom's attempt to understand the circumstances he was born into by reconstructing some original, historic scene veers away from and obscures that very scene. Like his father, who clumsily fishes for Freddie's body with a boat-hook, Tom creates and uses clumsy theories of history to reconstruct and recover the past. By reconstructing the past, however, he covers the original trauma of his childhood with a replica, a bruise upon a bruise. Just as the wound on Freddie Parr's face dispels suspicion about the true cause of Freddie's death, so too does Tom's Gothicized history of the Atkinsons cover the original wound of 1943—Tom's responsibility for Dick's suicide—with a replica of the wound, a Gothicized history of the Atkinson family that casts Tom and Dick as victims of fate. Tamás Bényei similarly writes that "narrative, for Crick, is a way of ordered remembering, the essential function of which is to help one forget. It reclaims the

past, reiterating the infliction of the wound while also covering the original wound" (111). Ultimately, Tom and Mary's adolescent curiosity and desire to educate Dick instigate the tragedies of the summer of 1943 and precipitate Mary's mental breakdown in 1979, but Tom recasts that narrative as a Gothic tale of familial decline to qualify his responsibility.

Tom uses the myth of the Gothic tale of familial decline to distort the history of the Atkinsons and recast his memories of the summer of 1943 in a way that allows him to live with himself. Because of his penchant for ideas, however, Tom enacts in his own life the very curse that he claims lies upon the Atkinsons, and falls prey to the genealogy that he himself constructs. By the novel's end, Tom's ideas, like those of his Atkinson ancestors, have become increasingly dissociated from reality. He has constructed a grand narrative of alternative histories that qualify his responsibility for the events of 1943, and distorted reality much as his grandfather, Ernest Atkinson, once did when he believed that he could produce the Savior of the World. He has been telling his school children wildly inappropriate stories and his mind remains trapped in the past, unable to cope with his forced retirement and his wife's continued insanity. Although he spins a Gothic tale of familial decline to qualify his responsibility and control historical interpretation, by the end of *Waterland* Tom himself has come under

the control of the myth. His obsession with the past has tied into a knot the thread that runs into the future.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Ultimately, when the Gothic appears in *Waterland*, it is not as an “exhausted cultural code,” as Bernstein argues, but as a dynamic narrative strategy that resembles Rosa Coldfield’s tale of familial decline in *Absalom, Absalom!* (Bernstein 261). Both Tom and Rosa invoke the Gothic to explain the trauma of their childhood and its continued impact on their lives. Like Rosa, who uses the Gothic to cast herself and her sister as expiators of family sin, Tom uses the Gothic as a narrative strategy to qualify his responsibility for the deaths of the summer of 1943 and Mary’s mental breakdown. By adapting the Gothic tale of familial decline to his own purposes, Swift highlights Tom’s epistemological crisis: the anxiety that attends his wife’s theft of a child as well as his desire to best explain the past and escape blame for his brother’s death.

The Gothic parallels between *Waterland* and *Absalom, Absalom!* reveal Swift’s dynamic engagement with the Gothic tradition. While Swift’s narrative goals and strategies differ from those of eighteenth-century Gothic writers, his adaptation of the Gothic mode does not signal its collapse. The basic tropes and themes that Swift employs to create the Gothic effect in *Waterland* remain

relatively the same as those used by earlier Gothic writers. Like Faulkner and Dickens, Swift uses Gothic tropes such as the return of the repressed, incest, the ruined mansion, and the family curse to generate a sense of moral horror, doom, and foreboding in *Waterland*. By engaging and re-appropriating the Gothic qualities of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Swift recycles Faulkner's themes, plot, and tropes in a way that signals not the exhaustion of the Gothic tradition in *Waterland*, but Swift's intertextual aesthetic, which creatively misreads or reinterprets past works of literature to clear an imaginative space for his own work.

Waterland thus exhibits diachronic and synchronic intertextuality.

Diachronically, *Waterland* engages the work of past Gothic writers.

Synchronically, *Waterland* reacts against the "cynicism" and "self-referential games" of postmodernism (Lea 96). Swift's diachronic engagement with the Gothic tradition reminds late twentieth-century readers that history and storytelling are fundamentally ethical pursuits that, as Daniel Lea notes, ask "what went wrong?" and "what comes next?" (96). Readers can see Tom grappling with these questions throughout *Waterland*. His Gothic tale of familial decline attempts to explain what went wrong in his past and formulate a strategy for coping and moving forward. Nevertheless, although Tom acknowledges the sins of his forefathers and brother, he fails to acknowledge his own sin, and maintains that evil is only something that "touches [his] arm," not something

that exists within himself (35). He thereby fails to consider fully his role in the events of 1943 that led to Mary's mental breakdown and prevents himself from answering the question, "what comes next?" In consequence, his mind remains trapped in the past at the end of the novel. Swift thus reminds readers that the telling of history is a fundamentally ethical pursuit that impacts how successfully we construct identities that allow us to flourish in the human community.

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