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ABSALOM, ABSALOM! AND *TRUE BLOOD*

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“I Wanna Do Bad Things [to] You:” Complicating Representations of Southern
Women and Cultural “Others” in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *True Blood*

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Table of Contents

Introduction: The History of Fear and Fascination of the South and Southern Ideology	1
Chapter One: The Enduring Friend and The Other Lovers.....	10
Chapter Two: A Bon Tempt Haunt	40
Conclusion: Double-Edged Stakes	64
Bibliography	67

Introduction:

The History of Fear and Fascination of the South and Southern Ideology

*“I dont hate it he thought,
panting in the cold air, the iron New England dark;
I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!”*

— William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

The English language Gothic genre can be traced to *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole (1765) which established some key themes repeated in subsequent gothic works such as a tragic hero, dark and gloomy setting, and remote locations. The term Goth came from a Germanic tribe—the Goths. The Goths, Visigoths and Ostrogoths, existed in the classical and medieval periods and they spoke a version of the Germanic language called Gothic. The term Gothic was later used to refer to European medieval architecture, structures that subsequently provided the setting and backdrop to most traditional Gothic literary plots. David Punter and Glennis Byron in *The Gothic*, argue that the gothic genre represented a structural opposition to “classical” because it was “ornate and convoluted...a world that constantly overflowed cultural boundaries” (7). Punter and Glennis also comment on critics’ approaches to the genre arguing that psychoanalysis is the most popular used lens in the Gothic discussion. The genre expanded over time and gave life to various sub-genres including American Gothic, Southern Gothic, and even Modern Horror, Horror Fiction, Occult Fiction, and Dark Romanticism to name a few. The gothic genre continues to grow and thrive around the world; in particular, in the

United States the subgenre southern gothic has sustained a vast audience and has garnered significant critical attention. In this thesis, I address the lack of peer-review analysis and scholarship on HBO's *True Blood* series by placing it in conversation with a key and well-researched text of the southern gothic: Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* In particular, I take up questions of how the gothic and horror genres enable me to analyze gender and race in these primary texts.

Some of the most widely reviewed and acclaimed critical works on the gothic genre include *Art of Darkness: a Poetics of Gothic* by Anne Williams and *Skin Shows* by J. Jack Halberstam. Those who focus on horror and how the graphic visuals and sensations of experiencing horror help us experience and process the "other" include *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* by Julia Kristeva, and *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* by Noël Carroll. The gothic genre and horror are separate entities used to lure audiences into an uncomfortable zone, but both can work together in texts such as *True Blood*. What most of these critics agree on is that gothic and horror genres expose how we view, experience, or process the "other," whether that be on a cultural or individual scale.

In *Art of Darknss: a Poetic of Gothic*, Anne Williams challenges the previous conventions of the gothic genre by presenting three theses. First, she poses that the gothic is a poetic tradition. Second, that gothic and romantic genres are not two separate traditions, but one. Third, that there is a female gothic and male gothic. Throughout her work, Williams uses a feminist and psychoanalytic lens to challenge previous conventions of women's victimization, punished curiosity and/or

transgressions, and that marriage is the ultimate goal for women characters. Williams' specific thesis on the male and female gothic distinctions are of particular interest to my study of Faulkner and *True Blood*. Williams argues that male and female gothic texts have different narrative conventions; for example, the female gothic almost always tells the story from the heroine's point of view. The heroine is usually employed by a wealthy and mysterious male and brought to his creepy castle and/or mansion—a home that is often in a remote location. Later she (the heroine) encounters the supernatural that ultimately turns out to be explainable and overcomes and marries the man of the house for a happily ever after. In the male gothic, Williams notes that there is a voyeuristic pleasure in the victimization of the female characters despite sympathy for their struggles. Williams' establishes the differences in authorship to challenge the traditional conceptions of the gothic genre and create room for a stronger feminist perspective. Ultimately, she concludes that the female gothic serves as a critique of male power, violence, and predatory sexuality.¹

In *Skin Shows*, J. Jack Halberstam deviates from previous critics' approaches such as Kristeva's theory of abjection. Where others analyze horror from a psychoanalytic lens, Halberstam is concerned with the bridge between sociocultural and psychoanalytical approaches to the gothic genre that help shape the monster

¹ In my work I use William's theories as a premise to synthesize and ground my understanding of gender portrayals in the gothic, southern gothic, and horror. I also use her work to synthesize and compare how other scholars approach the topic of gender within the genres as it pertains to my primary texts.

figure into a being that both horrifies the reader and one with which the reader/viewer can identify. Halberstam uses the example of Buffalo Bill from the film *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to highlight how the creation of monsters is culturally conditioned based on own collective social fears of “otherness” that can be historically contextualized.

In *Powers of Horror*, written by one of the most popular psychoanalytic theorists of our time, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as a process and breakdown in the distinction between what is Self and what is Other. Abjection is the response to the realization of difference between Self and Other. Much like Freud’s theory of the uncanny, where what was familiar becomes unfamiliar, Kristeva extends that theory by claiming we as humans construct our identity by processing the experiences of the in-between states of familiar and unfamiliar. As per one of Kristeva’s examples, when a child begins to realize the mother is a separate individual, the child then begins to “other” the mother and produce feelings of anxiety and horror. The child’s mother who is familiar and thought to be a part of the Self/child is now unfamiliar and the child must begin to define themselves separately from the mother.

In *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* Noël Carroll uses a philosophical approach to give an overview of the horror aesthetic and how it can make the audience experience disgust and fear of what they know is not real while simultaneously bringing them back for more. Carroll attributes the audience’s sensation of disgust and fear to the genre’s staple aesthetics of overt, grotesque, and

distorted portrayals of blood and guts. Further, he claims that the audience comes back to the theater for horror films because they are enthralled with anomalies. Carroll argues that curiosity is also a contributing factor to what generally lures audiences to return to Horror fiction despite negative emotions it may stir up.

In the past many scholars studying the traditional gothic genre favored a psychoanalytic lens. Psychoanalytic approaches tend to focus on how the gothic genre represents repressed fears and anxieties as a cultural whole. However, critics like Halberstam urge for a rereading of the gothic/horror genre through different critical lenses such as queer and feminist theory combined. Halberstam, by combining critical lenses, demonstrates that audiences view and identify with “otherness” found in the monstrous body from a safe distance.

While the previous scholarship provides many helpful frameworks, I have noted that they still present limitations, particularly for my study of a contemporary and hybrid genre text such as *True Blood*. For example, Williams separates the genre into two traditions male and female which implies a binary when some texts may be better understood as on a continuum between male and female gothic conventions. Yet, in *True Blood* there is a voyeuristic pleasure in watching Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin) be tortured or harmed that is traditionally aligned with the male gothic. However, the show ends in a reconciliation via a marriage that falls under the conventions of the female gothic.

The subgenre of southern gothic has its own specific scholarly consideration that highlights the unique cultural and political contexts of the American South.

The southern gothic often critiques specific issues that emerge from the region's antebellum history of slavery. Much like Byron and Punter in their work on *the Gothic*, Bridget M. Marshall outlines specific conventions of the southern gothic that have been adopted but uniquely transformed from the traditional gothic genre. One of the examples Marshall gives is the location and setting for the southern gothic that makes it distinct. Rather than an old church, dark and stormy skies, and grand castles set off shores or in a distant land, she claims that the setting of the southern gothic is very real and replaces those previous elements with an emphasis on decaying plantations that mirror the attitudes of the characters in the subgenre. Marshall also outlines the heightened emphasis on how authors made central the critique on slavery and social problems. Additionally, she notes the themes of incessant haunting and female victimization abound in the southern gothic tradition.

Similarly, Richard Gray and Meredith Miller examine the more distinct features of the southern gothic genre, particularly the historical role of race and racial tensions. Richard Gray argues that the southern gothic genre functions as an evil double of the American nation and its essentially triumphalist narrative and offers a counter-narrative in which the source of revelation is fear. Using critical race theory and gender studies, Meredith Miller argues that gothic fiction bridges the relationship between gendered and racial identity categorization. She narrows her focus to mid-twentieth-century southern American literature and questions how the gothic affects these bodies of work in regard to race and

femininity. Many anthologies on the southern gothic subgenre exist. For example, Susan Castillo and Charles L. Crow's collection catalogues the genre and categorically divides each section by the lenses used by scholars and show a wide range of critical approaches.²

Absalom, Absalom! is considered one of the most prominent southern gothic texts within the genre. It has all the expected narrative conventions such as the past haunting the present, the uncanny plantation home, racial tension and violence, incest, and more. The critical conversations on *Absalom, Absalom!* focus on race, gender, cultural displacement, and narrative structure. Susan V. Donaldson, John Duvall, and Carol Davison in particular use a feminist lens to analyze Faulkner's treatment of the female figures in the novel, but in very different ways that are instructive for considering the range of interpretative possibilities for female Gothic characters. For example, Susan V. Donaldson specifically argues that when reading *Absalom, Absalom!* with a feminist lens one can gain a different view of the novel that unravels "paternalistic myths" (168).

Like scholars before me, my thesis considers paternalistic myths and systemic oppression by analyzing how gothic and horror conventions support patriarchy and attempt to dismantle it. My thesis provides a new and much needed

² Many scholars have defined the nuances between the southern gothic and its connection to the southern grotesque. While I have provided and focus solely on scholarly conversations on the southern gothic which emphasizes the very real setting and sociocultural issues, Alan Spiegel conceptualized the grotesque as a person/figure in a Southern novel who, "...is always a thorn in the side of the society which produces him. His existence tells the society something about itself whether it wishes to acknowledge his presence or not. He informs the society that his deformity is real, that it is there, and will continue to be there because it is society's deformity (which produced it) as well as his own" (3). Leslie Fiedler also claims that the grotesque is a mode of expression used by authors with the South as their background to critique the relationship between black men and white (18).

look at how *True Blood* addresses issues of race and gender. By rooting my analysis of *True Blood* in Faulkner, I hope to show that despite the passage of time the genres of Gothic and Horror still seem unable to fully challenge racial and gender oppression in their narratives.

In my first chapter, I examine Judith Sutpen from *Absalom, Absalom!* and Sookie Stackhouse and Tara Thornton (Rutina Wesley) from HBO's hit series *True Blood*. I look at Judith's representations as a southern gothic hero(ine), Sookie as a hybrid of the southern gothic heroine and horror's "final girl," and Tara as horror's "enduring woman." By comparing all three women I argue that there are a multitude of contradictions that limit each woman's liberation from systemic oppression within the southern sociocultural landscape.

In chapter two I argue that *True Blood* reverses the haunting and traditional ghost figure from slave/Native/African American to master/Vampire/Southern white male to emphasize how southern patriarchal ideology is undead. I investigate the southern "dark house" and again compare *Absalom, Absalom!* to *True Blood* to answer how the construction or "resurrection" of a home in contemporary southern gothic texts reflects the patriarchal white male's mission to stabilize a rebellious female. I compare Judith's participation in Sutpen's home with Sookie's participation in Bill's home to analyze how the southern gothic heroine develops or is restricted from development within this space. I also examine Judith and Bon from *Absalom, Absalom!* and Bill from *True Blood* as the main ghosts who haunt these southern homes. All three characters are presented as ghostly or undead in

some form, but Judith and Bon are repressed and denied freedom by men in positions of power, while Bill is a figure of patriarchal white power seeking to oppress and reclaim his historical position of power and authority.

Chapter One:

The Enduring Friend and The Other Lovers

“Oh, yeah, baby. You survive. You always do.

But, goddamn, do you leave a trail of bodies behind.”

-Lafayette Reynolds to Sookie Stackhouse

The southern gothic genre is a subset of the broader gothic tradition that takes up the specific cultural framework of the American South. The southern gothic heroine archetype reflects the unique sociopolitical environment of the American South and how the legacy of slavery and interests in fictional romantic chivalry shape race and gender concerns. Scholars have often discussed the traditional gothic heroines as expressing the dominant society’s anxieties of female transgressive sexuality and curiosity; they are often punished in some way for their curiosity and sexual deviancy. The southern gothic heroine is not an exact replica of the traditional gothic heroine; whereas the traditional gothic heroine is often portrayed as passive, feminine, and the victim of a “dark man,” the southern gothic heroine, while still a victim, is portrayed as a hyper-aggressive woman who challenges the confining spaces and patriarchal ideology of the American South.³ When commenting on the southern gothic heroine, Susan Donaldson argues that within Southern texts there is an intertextual debate on women and the disruption of tradition in the twentieth-century South (2). I agree with Donaldson that some

³ For example, Anne Williams uses the wife in “Blue Beard” as an example of a traditional Gothic heroine. Kellie Donovan-Cardon discusses the heroines of *Absalom, Absalom!* (Judith, Rosa, and Clytie) as specifically connected to the Southern Gothic genre.

southern gothic heroines create a disruption in the gendered expectations of the patriarchal South, such as Judith Sutpen from *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner. Judith disrupts the angel-of-the-house expected of the southern belle by acting out with masculine qualities. Sookie Stackhouse from the hit HBO television series *True Blood* (2008-2014) disrupts traditional gender roles by being sexually liberated. Tara, Sookie's best friend in *True Blood*, also disrupts the traditional roles for women by challenging racial prejudice and stereotypes within both genres by overtly addressing racial discrimination and violence. However, despite each character's progression and positive feminist representations, they also embody multiple contradictions that limit their full liberation from systemic oppression. I look at Judith's, Sookie's, and Tara's progressiveness and contradictions in terms of their character type within the genres. Judith is represented as a southern gothic hero(ine), Sookie as southern gothic heroine/Belle and horror's "final girl," and Tara as horror's "enduring woman."

Absalom, Absalom! and *True Blood* are works within the longstanding discussion by scholars on the gothic and southern gothic representations of gender. Anne Williams argues that the female gothic genre allows for a means to address and challenge the patriarchal ideals such as women desiring a rich husband, women as passive and hysterical, the mother/whore dichotomy, and the trope of the helpless victim—to name a few. She identifies several distinctions between the conventions of the male vs. female gothic narratives and argues that the female gothic genre provides a space for authors, mainly women, to challenge the

previously sexist portrayals of females in gothic literature. For example, per Williams, the male gothic plot will focus on the tragic hero who fails and dies in his quest/journey. By contrast, the female gothic will focus on a happy ending that typically results in a marriage after the heroine has experienced a “rebirth” (Williams 103).

Critics of the southern gothic and horror genres have also developed and defined female archetypes that allows for feminist readings of these genre texts. The southern gothic heroine (closely related to the damsel and southern belle figure) is defined by Bridget M. Marshall as a victim of her father or gender and social roles of the American South (10-12). Likewise, Kathryn Lee Siedel claims, “The southern belle as an ideal woman would be sanctioned by Victorian morality and by southerners’ image of the home as a persistent standard of order and decadency (5). Both critics claim that an ideal image is projected onto the female southern heroine/belle that reflects their southern aristocratic status which is often unrealistic and unable to be upheld by women. In the horror genre, Carol Clover coins and defines the character type of the “final girl” as a woman who survives the monster’s attack. The final girl is a relatively young white female who is unavailable (sexually or romantically). She tends to be the lone survivor of the monsters by living long enough to be rescued or killing the monster herself with a phallic symbol (49). Clover uses Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) from John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) as an example of the Final Girl. Robin R. Means Coleman responds to the final girl by defining the black woman in the horror genre

as the enduring woman. The enduring woman is a black woman whose seduction serves as one of many tools in their “cache of armament” and is not limited to using a phallic symbol as the final girl frequently deploys (132). The enduring woman also fights on behalf of others including men and not solely for her own safety. Coleman’s example of the enduring woman is Lisa Fortier (Pam Grier) from Bob Kelljan’s *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973). What Clover and Coleman both note in their character description is the how the final girl and enduring woman go up against what no male survivor can defeat or overcome. However, Coleman makes clear that unlike the white final girl who wishes to restore her life to stasis, the black enduring woman’s fight is with ongoing racism and corruption (132).

The scholarly conversation surrounding *Absalom, Absalom!* focuses primarily on the intersections of race and gender anxieties. Numerous scholarly works and anthologies center the discussion and analysis of the representations of women specifically on Faulkner’s texts, including those on *Absalom, Absalom!* For example, Deborah L. Clarke’s argues that the females in *Absalom, Absalom!* operate as contradictions to the male order and the traditional patriarchal family of the South. Using Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of reality and the fantastic, Clarke claims that the men of the novel seek to place the females in the proper social order, the women refuse, and the men then dismiss them as unreal and thereby remove the women from the social order completely. Likewise, Sally Page argues that Faulkner’s female characters are perverse and their failure to participate in traditional roles reflects their isolation and decay from Southern society. The

females in southern gothic novels who fail to become a wife and mother are frequently portrayed as outcasts and their physical bodies decay and die due to their inability to uphold the Southern expectations of women. In both *Absalom*, *Absalom!* and *True Blood*, critics note that the women characters challenge patriarchal conventions.

True Blood has not garnered as much critical attention as *Absalom*, *Absalom!* However, most criticism written on the series uses a queer theory lens and analyzes the vampire as an allegory for LGBTQ civil rights. Darren Elliott Smith uses queer theory to argue that there is a hierarchy of “otherness” and difference when vampires are not only metaphors for the homosexual, but when the vampire is an outed homosexual, a hierarchy is constructed within respective groups and as a collective. While work like Smiths’ is the trend, there are critics who have used a feminist lens while exploring the series. Ananya Mukherjea argues that vampires fill a presence for the female authors’, such as Charlaine Harris, and viewers’ desires. They are the essential perfect mate that allows the heroine to feel strong/safe, independent/protected, etc. According to Mukherjea, vampire boyfriends allow their female love interest to keep in-tact their hard-earned feminist qualities, but also receive the qualities of the traditionally masculine lover.

True Blood contains a wealth of contradictions on the topics of race, gender, and class. Set in Bon Temp Louisiana, the southern gothic series’ opening sequence sets the tone for the complicated and controversial Southern sociocultural landscape and characters. The sequences juxtapose images that represent life/death and

religion/sin—to name a few—all to the tune of “Bad Things” by Jace Everett.

Critics such as Mukherja and Smith point to a few contradictions within the series within their own analyses. However, for this chapter I will limit my discussion on the contradictory feminist representations of Judith as a southern gothic hero(ine). I use the term hero(ine) disjointed to emphasize the gender implications of each literary type Judith occupies. The hero is associated with the masculine and heroine with the feminine, and both characterize Judith’s contradictory nature within *Absalom, Absalom!* I look at Sookie Stackhouse as a southern gothic heroine/belle and horror final girl hybrid, and Tara as horror’s enduring woman. I believe that there is a hierarchy of “otherness” within *True Blood* as Smith suggests, but I want to expand on his analysis to contend that the hierarchy affects Sookie’s development as a southern gothic heroine by providing her with a socially semi-accepted partner, vampire Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer), to interact with. Bill’s white, rich, and historically southern morals place him at the top of the hierarchy of otherness which allows Sookie to engage with him more freely. I would also like to add to Mukherjea’s argument by combining it with Smith’s to claim that Bill actually embodies the many contradictory narratives in the series. Following Smith’s claims and applying it to two leading men from *True Blood*, Bill Compton and Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård) demonstrate that they are at the top of the “herirachy of otherness” despite their “othered” nature as vampire. Both men are still at the top of the hierarchy of “otherness” because of their positionality as rich white males. However, more than Eric, I add to Smith’s claim that Bill’s

heterosexuality, historical connection to Southern history, and whiteness embody the source of both sexual liberation with the “other” and fear of being repressed for Sookie. This contrasts with Judith’s experience and availability to interact with her racially mixed Other, and unknown to her half-brother, Charles Bon. In addition, the hierarchy of “otherness” strongly affects Tara’s representation as liberated in terms of race and gender because she inevitably becomes “othered” for her race, gender, class, and species. Judith represents a classic and canonical representation of a southern gothic hero(ine), but Sookie picks up the mantel and becomes a hybrid of the southern gothic and Horror heroine/final girl, while Tara Thornton represents the enduring women emblematic of black women in the horror genre. Looking back at Judith and looking forward at Sookie and Tara, I argue that there is a continuing struggle within the southern gothic genre for progressive representation of women who achieve full liberation outside of their stereotype. Despite their efforts and accomplishments in challenging the patriarchal South, these women characters suggest that the South is still very much overrun with an inescapable and undead belief system sustained by white, rich, heterosexual men in power.

Judith Sutpen subverts traditional binaries between men and women, but despite her earlier insurrections she ultimately submits to becoming a martyr and dies from Southern patriarchal ideology that positions women within the stereotypical gendered roles of wife and mother. At the beginning of the novel Judith is a wild and uncontrollable child. She engages in socially accepted male activities such as horse racing and watching brutal male fighting. As she gets older

and her narrative progresses, Judith falls in love with Charles Bon, a mixed-race man who unbeknownst to Judith is actually her half-brother. The text presents Bon as “other” racially, culturally, and makes him even taboo due to the potential for incest. After Bon’s murder, Judith takes in his child from another marriage and she contracts yellow fever and dies trying to nurse the son back to health. Judith’s overall narrative promises a fierce woman who surmounts her prescribed social roles within the South by threatening to marry the racial “other,” but by novel’s end reverts back to the victim of systemic oppression which places her back inside the plantation house under her father’s control while assuming the role of mother/caregiver that inevitably causes her death. The critique of gender made in *Absalom, Absalom!* is that the return to the mother and nurse role serves as the catalyst which kills Judith.

Judith, like many of Faulkner’s Southern women, have been deployed to challenge Southern patriarchal values while attempting to break with systemic gender structures but arguably fail or get punished for doing so.⁴ The consistent comparison of Judith to her father, Thomas Sutpen, who represents the patriarchal ideal of the South made flesh, emphasizes Judith’s character as a female operating outside of social expectations of women. Judith’s appropriation of masculine traits

⁴ Faulkner frequently uses these types of victor/victim female characters identified as martyrs in his work. Examples of this female character include Emily from “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and Caddy from the *Sound and the Fury* (1929). Each of these women attempt to escape from systemic gender structures but arguably fail or are punished. Because these women are both victim/victor many scholars debate on Faulkner’s works as being either positive or negative toward gender representations for women in the South.

catches the eye of her community and they speculate on her innate “otherness.”

There is a passage in which Rosa says to Quentin:

And Judith looked once at the phaeton and realised what it meant and began to scream, screaming and kicking while they carried her back into the house and put her to bed. No, he was not present. Nor do I claim a lurking triumphant face behind a window curtain. Probably he would have been amazed as we were since we would all realise now that we were faced by more than a child’s tantrum or even hysteria: that his face had been in that carriage all the time; that it had been Judith, a girl of six, who had instigated and authorised that negro to make the same team run away. Not Henry, mind; not the boy, which would have been outrageous enough; but Judith, the girl. (17-18)

In this passage, Judith is being compared to her father and harboring masculine traits of authority and power. She destabilizes the traditional gender codes of the South at an early age by commanding several men into participating in horse races that her father would typically control. The community surrounding her attempts to police her by taking her up into her room that is a traditionally gothic confined space and tactic of dealing with the transgressing female. John Duvall also analyzes this passage from the novel and argues that it shows an inversion of cultural assumptions stating, “...had Henry encouraged the team’s running away, it would have been merely boyish outrageous, but since Judith authorizes the moment, it subverts the binary assumption” (108). I agree with Duvall that Judith Sutpen has

moments throughout the novel that subvert the binary between men and women. However, there is more at work in this particular moment in the novel than just an inversion as Duvall states. Judith's subversion of the binary between men and women is especially significant because of the deeply entrenched gendered roles of the Antebellum South and its fixation with chivalry. Judith's actions also reject the social customs of the southern belle and the heroic antics of chivalry it entails. One of the many ways Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope articulate such actions by females as hero figures within American and British literature is defining them as separate from the representations of heroines and claiming, "Simply by being heroic, a woman defies the conditioning that insists she be a damsel in distress, and thus she implicitly challenged the status quo" (9-10). In the carriage scene, if Judith were not a hero, she would have needed saving from this incident much like the closely related damsel, southern belle, and heroine figures. Siedel argues that the southern belle, "...would be protected from reality, championed, and wooed....A young girl had few tasks other than to be obedient..."(6). However, Judith is not only disobedient, which resists the victim role, but she also subverts gender binaries and dares to be a female hero that commands rather than is commanded or in need to be rescued from wild horse races.

Judith's rebellion against female's prescribed roles in the South becomes more intensified when the reader juxtaposes her brother's response to male group fighting that takes place on her father's plantation. Judith takes voyeuristic pleasure in watching her brother be held down by men to watch the fights at

Sutpen's Hundred. This is Judith's first encounter with "otherness." Rather than be afraid or look away in horror, Rosa describes Henry's reactions that Judith watches from a window intently:

...Henry plunge out from among the negroes who had been holding him, screaming and vomiting—not pausing, not even looking at the faces which shrank back away from her [Ellen Sutpen] as she knelt in the stable filth to raise Henry and not looking at Henry either but up at *him* [Thomas Sutpen] as he stood there with his teeth showing beneath his beard now...(21)

This scene in the novel goes against the male plot Williams' defines. Williams argues, "Male Gothic plot narrative conventions also focus on female suffering, positioning the audience as voyeurs who, though sympathetic, may take pleasure in female victimization" (104). Judith goes against Williams' distinctly separate gothic genres by being a participant in male gothic conventions; she does this by indulging in Henry Sutpen's psychological rape and victimization. Whereas the traditional gothic would normally emphasize the pleasure the male character takes in watching a female be held down and victimized, Rosa describes a gender role reversal in her details about Judith, "...who while Henry screamed and vomited, looked down from the loft that night on the spectacle of Sutpen fighting halfnaked with one of his halfnaked niggers with the same cold and attentive interest with which Sutpen would have watched Henry fighting with a negro boy of his own age and weight" (95). While white men like Henry typically possess agency, Judith claims agency by reinforcing the inverted social dynamic via watching a violent homoerotic scene of

active men of color and a passive white man. She is compared to her father as having the same dominant masculine interest in watching a violent scene take place, but her interests shift away from her father in terms of race. While Sutpen is mentioned taking interest in specifically watching his white male son Henry fighting a African American boy of the same “age and weight,” Judith in contrast and defiance is fascinated by men of color expressing dominance over a white male which goes against the sociocultural norm for the historic South. Noël Carroll suggests, “Unlike the characters in such fictions, we do not believe that the monsters exist; our fear and disgust is rather a response to the thought of such monsters. But our evaluative states do track those of the characters” (53). Carroll’s analysis of the horror reader/viewer, closely related to the gothic, can be applied to Judith’s fascination of “otherness.” While Carroll discusses the feelings of fear toward the monster that audiences receive through identification with the main character, Judith presents female readers with an inverted triumph and rebellion towards a graphic southern gothic scene of racial violence. Further, her disruption of the gender binary by being a voyeur of suffering inflicted on the White man by men of color allows the reader, particularly female, to also participate, assess, and register that women can challenge the sociocultural prescribes gender roles.

Judith, unwillingly, falls in-line with the restricted sexual experience of the southern gothic heroine which contradicts her earlier progressiveness as a female hero. Throughout *Absalom, Absalom!*, Judith is denied any sexual experience as a

way for the men to police female agency within the Southern patriarchal space. Mr. Compson tells Quentin:

There was no time, no interval, no niche in the crowded days when he (Charles Bon) could have courted Judith. You could not even imagine him and Judith alone together. Try to do it and the nearest you can come is a projection of them while the two actual people were doubtless separate elsewhere—two shades pacing, serene and untroubled by flesh, in a summer garden...(77)

In this passage of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Judith is in a traditionally arranged engagement to her mixed-race half-brother Charles Bon. However, the couple never physically touch. Moreover, they are characterized as non-corporeal “shades” which contains a dual meaning of shadow and ghost. Several times throughout the novel there is reference to the couple only having moments to talk before being separated. Judith’s denial of a new sexual identity is a reflection of the racial hostility of the South because her potential sexual partner is racially mixed. Her brother, more so than her father, denies Judith’s new identity by killing her fiancé at her doorstep (105-106). Henry commits the ultimate act of racial violence in order to keep Charles away from his sister and keep her from transcending into a liberated woman. Further, the act of violence places Judith back into a form of victimhood associated with the heroine/southern belle figure and essentially removes her dominant masculine hero qualities from the beginning of her narrative.

Absalom, Absalom! uses southern gothic heroine conventions and the archetype of the southern belle to critique the traditions of the patriarchal South in regard to marriage and motherhood. Historically, when the southern belle comes of age, her marriage is arranged for her. In her discussion of the upper-class white southern belle in relation to marriage practices, Seidel argues, “Unlike her brothers, who attend preparatory schools and college, a girl was to stay home until such time as a suitable—that is, lucrative—marriage was arranged...After marriage, a girl was expected to become a hard working matron who was supervisor of the plantation, nurse, and mother” (6). However, Judith’s complicates the belle’s position in Southern society by rejecting her position as obedient daughter and later accepting the role as future wife to community outcast—Charles Bon. Mr. Compson characterizes Judith’s response to marrying Charles Bon as follows:

Because she [Judith] could not have known the reason for her father’s objection to the marriage. Henry would not have told her, and she would not have asked her father. Because, even if she had known it, it would have made no difference to her. She would have acted as Sutpen would have acted with anyone who tried to cross him: she would have taken Bon away. I can imagine her if necessary even murdering the other woman. (95-96)

Judith is depicted as reversing the seduction narrative of the 19th century novel that typically portrays women as seduced and men as seducer. Further, Mr. Compson’s characterization of Judith demonstrates that she is not a traditional southern belle who submits to patriarchal traditions of Southern patriarchy. She

operates outside of the sociocultural standards created and maintained by men by attempting to take a husband of her choosing regardless of her brother or father's authority. Mr. Compson's comparison of Judith to her father emphasizes her subversion of the traditional Southern values because it paints Judith as a hyper-aggressive female with authority and agency that is her own. However, Judith's progression is undermined by her brother regaining control and murdering Charles Bon (106). Henry does this as a means of correcting and maintaining the social order enforced and thrust upon him while also concealing his homosexual and incestuous desire for both Charles Bon and his sister Judith. Kellie Donovan-Condron claims that the murder of Charles Bon by Henry forcefully removes Judith's qualities of victor who shatters patriarchal relationship and places her into the victim confined by patriarchal racist and sexist social structures (344). Henry's racial violence against Charles places Judith back into the home and into a position of widow without ever being married while concealing his own transgressions (7). For all of progress of acting out and defying her brother and father, Judith's narrative is contradicted as she reverts back to a heroine who is a victim of Southern patriarchal ideology.

In *True Blood*, telepathic waitress Sookie Stackhouse is also immediately established as a woman who operates against the patriarchal social codes of the South. Sookie is a combination of southern gothic heroine and final girl rebellion. Those within the small community of Bon Temps, which translates to "Good Times" and is another contradiction within the series since it's a place beset by serious

troubles, know Sookie as a “freak,” or as Mack Rattray (James Parks) jokingly says, “She’s crazy as a bed bug” (S.1 E.1, 00:18:06-00:18:12). However, *True Blood’s* camera angles and shots take the audience inside Sookie’s perspective which further challenges patriarchal conventions by forcing the audience to identify with the female perspective. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, readers are told that Judith was only a voyeur in the pain of men. However, in *True Blood* the audience gets the chance to identify with Sookie’s pleasure and allows for a personal experience into the southern gothic heroine’s perspective on the world around her. The convention of identifying with the female heroine by reading through her perspective in first person belongs to the female gothic according to Williams (102). Further, Williams claims that a stronger feminist representation emerges when readers can identify with the female through the use of first-person accounts. In comparison to Williams’ argument calling for a stronger feminist reading of the gothic genre, Carol Clover discusses potential feminist reading through female identification in the cinematic horror genre by claiming, “...Horror is far more victim identified than the standard view would have it—which raises the question about film theory’s conventional assumption that the cinematic apparatus is organized around the experience of a mastering, voyeuristic gaze” (9). Both critics make similar arguments which is that there is an empowering sensation that audiences, male and female, achieve when identifying with the female character. In *True Blood*, similar to the scene in *Absalom, Absalom!* when Judith gazes at her brother in fascination of “otherness,” Sookie gazes at Bill Compton with excitement and pleasure while the rest of her

community expresses uneasiness (00:16:07-00:16:33). Unlike Judith's encounter with "otherness" that is expressed in third person and falls into the category of southern gothic, Sookie's experience is almost entirely shot in first-person which draws from the Horror genre's use of first-person perspective and forced identification with the female "victim-hero" (Clover 8). The first-person perspective gives audience, male and female, an opportunity to identify with the female and her experiences rather than being told about them, which could lead to a limited representation of feminine experience.

In *True Blood* Sookie's rebellion and interaction with the cultural Other also gets her into trouble with her community and sets her up to be a rebellious female figure operating outside of sociocultural expectations. Much like Judith's community gazing at her in horror when they realize she instigated the horse races, Sookie's community looks at her in horror when she initiates a conversation publicly with vampire Bill. In the episode "Strange Love," Sookie asks Bill questions about the murder of Maudette Pickens (Danielle Sapia). The conversation is as followed:

Sookie. Oh, they're staring at me because my brother's in some kind of trouble with the police. But Bill, did you know Maudette Pickens?

Bill. I did not. They are staring at us because I am a vampire and you are mortal.

Sookie. Well, who cares what they think?

Bill. Well, I want to make this town my home, so I do. (00:52:54).

Following the intimate conversation, Sam makes a public spectacle of punishing Sookie by aggressively grabbing her arm and confining her in a room. This scene mirrors Judith's treatment after the horse races. The community attempts to control Sookie's growing curiosity and surfacing desire for the Other. Sam screams at Sookie telling her she is a "very stupid girl." And Sookie responds, "Who asked you? I can take care of myself" Sam. After being yelled at by not just Sam, but best friend and coworker Tara Thornton as well, Sookie storms out saying, "Oh, just shut up, the both of you, and stop bossing me around! I am a grown woman and I am the one who decides what I do, not either one of you" (00:54:17-00:56:02). Sookie does not allow herself to be restricted to a confined space as punishment. In addition, she overtly identifies herself as a woman who can make her own decisions and therefore rejects the infantilization of her gender as a means to undermine her agency and autonomy.⁵ Sookie rejects being called "girl" and asserts her own identity separate from that of the sociocultural status quo and thus complicating the representations of females in the southern gothic and horror genre.

Sookie's comfort with violence as a means to protect herself demonstrates her rejection of the usual trapping of the southern gothic heroine and relates to the final girl who must fight to survive. Sookie's comfort with violence also falls under the umbrella characteristics of a horror scream queen. While Judith's was a voyeur to violence, Sookie participates in violence directly and gets a sense of pleasure from

⁵ For more information and in-depth study on gender and the infantilization of women, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

it. In the following scene from “Strange Love,” while Mack and Denise Rattray constrain Bill to the ground and drain him of his blood, Sookie enters the camera and picks up a thick chain and hits Mack from behind with it. When he attempts to attack her, Sookie throws the chain with the help of her faerie powers and the chain begins to choke Mack. Faeries are among the strongest beings in the *True Blood* universe and a few of their supernatural powers include dimensional creation, illusion casting, photokinesis, shapeshifting, and telepathy. Sookie’s faerie qualities also contribute to the contradicting nature of her feminist qualities. Faeries are popularly portrayed as powerless, small, fragile, and girly, but Sookie’s faerie abilities are powerful and have the ability to end vampires’ lives. Once Sookie controls Mack, she gains a knife as a weapon and threatens Denise to leave Bill’s blood where it is. When the trouble has subsided, Sookie unchains Bill who is subdued to the ground in a traditionally female, sexualized, and passive position on his back. Sookie kneels dominantly over him to set him free (00:22:37-00:25:09). The scene highlights how the southern gothic heroine when combined with the gender-bending of horror creates a more progressive viewpoint in several ways. One, Sookie reveals that she is not a victim like her gothic heroine predecessor, but a savior. Second, her comfort with using violence as a means to get what she wants, makes her more active than Judith and as a result more successful in character arc. Last, that she also derives pleasure or fascination in the pain of men serves two key purposes: one, she performs a role associated with the traditionally male gothic, and

two, this gender reversal carries the possibility of feminist critique since it focuses on the punishment of men for upholding systemic sexism.

For Sookie, being a woman in the South does not have to involve submitting to the binary of the virgin/whore. She seeks an expressive sexuality which defies Southern patriarchal ideology and contradicts the virgin quality of the southern belle/final Girl. In the episode “Cold Ground,” Sookie, unlike her gothic forebearer Judith, seeks out sexual experience with not one, but multiple partners.⁶ Sookie constructs a sexual and liberated identity for herself that directly critiques the patriarchal conventions of the South. In episode six “Cold Ground” from season one, Sookie runs to Bill almost angelic like towards his plantation. Her arms are gracefully out by her side while in a flowing white nightgown which contrasts the dark and ominous cemetery. Cemeteries traditionally incorporate the Western angel figure as a part of the iconography for funerary statues, and *True Blood* uses the same imagery to emphasize Sookie’s angelic and feminine nature. He carries her inside his dark unkept home, and she makes love for the first time. Inside his plantation, Sookie says to Bill, “Do it. I want you to,” and Bill proceeds to bite her on the neck with his fangs (00:50:45-00:51:17). Similarly, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Charles Bon attempts to penetrate the gates of Sutpen’s Hundred and claim Judith but is denied and murdered by Henry (105-106). The imagery is sexual because Bon threatens to enter what is guarded and reserved by the white southern male. The reimagining of

⁶ Throughout my work I focus on Sookie’s reoccurring relationship with Bill Compton, but the series shows that she has sexual interests with several men including Alcide Herveaux (Joe Manganiello), Eric Northman, and Ben Flynn/Macklyn Warlow (Roberet Kazinsky).

the event told by Quentin Compson, who is a white southern male born and raised under the belief that women were meant to be sexually reserved, makes clear that Bon's intentions are sexual because he tells Henry that he will sleep and commit miscegenation with Judith unless he stops him (286). For the southern gothic heroine, claiming a new identity through sexual experience directly challenges the social structures within the South. Catherine Lee Seidel argues that there is a double-edged sword with being a woman in Southern society. The southern belle who is rebellious within Faulkner's novels must choose to resubmit to social norms or be a pariah. Moreover, she claims that if the belle does not succumb to ladyhood than she is represented as a fallen woman (114). However, Sookie does not necessarily become a "fallen woman" by series end. She keeps her hard-earned new identity as sexual being. Part of Sookie's sexual liberation also contradicts a few aspects of what Carol Clover claims about the horror genre's final girl. The final girl trope and term was coined by Clover and defined as the distinctive female lead character in horror films (particularly slasher films such as *Halloween*) as someone who typically has a male associated name, is resourceful, not sexually active or available, unattached or lonely, and watchful to the point of paranoia (39). However, Sookie is a female name and variant of Susan or Susannah, which in Hebrew means lily or rose. She is also sexually active which goes against the sexually reserved nature of the final girl. Sookie models, at least throughout a large portion of the series, progressive and updated traits of the southern gothic heroine and horror final girl despite some contradiction.

Much like Judith, the progress Sookie has made as a sexually liberated southern gothic heroine and final girl hybrid by series end is contradicted by her reassuming the angel-of-the-house role of wife and mother. In the series finale “Thank You,” Bill asks Sookie for the “true death.” The “true death” for a vampire in the world of *True Blood* means they are unable to regenerate or come back to life as an undead entity. Bill adds that he wants Sookie to give him the “true death” via her faerie powers knowing it will leave her mortal and unattractive to other vampires (00:48:38-00:56:58). By asking Sookie to remove what makes her special or “othered,” Bill is asking her to assume an outdated identity that places her back within the traditional patriarchal control. What attracted vampires, and the erotic sexuality that comes with them, to Sookie is the smell of her blood that differs from other humans due to her special abilities that derive from her part-faerie status. However, Sookie rejects Bill’s proposal and keeps her powers that have come with her new identity as a liberated woman. Further, she exercises her ability to choose—an ability that Judith was not granted. Sookie grabs a phallic symbol, a wooden steak, stabs Bill through the heart, cries for what seems like a very long time, and walks away through the graveyard in darkness. The scene can be read as Sookie killing off Bill’s toxic masculinity associated with the historic South, but I read the scene as Bill wanting to die because of his inability to reconcile his vampirism/otherness with his former unchecked privilege as a white Southern male in power; he has been longing for the traditional South since season one. The scene at first glance appears to be Sookie’s desire to remain liberated, but then the horror

sets in that she is also killing off his undesired “Otherness.” Sookie killing off Bill’s otherness confirms that there is still a lingering desire for the southern gothic heroine to marry a sociocultural acceptable man who is white and upper-class. Her mate cannot be Bill, despite his values, economic wealth, and connections to the historic South, because he possesses “otherness.” Instead, Sookie regresses and fulfills Bill’s patriarchal desires for her to become the angel-of-the-house. After Bill’s death she is seen hugging a man intimately before he takes his seat at the head of the table during their Thanksgiving feast. She wears a wedding ring and is pregnant (1:02:09-1:03:15). Sookie is no longer a final girl, but a prisoner of Bon Temps’ Southern sociocultural landscape. The contradictions at work within Sookie’s character as a southern gothic/horror hybrid serve to provoke the fear that no matter how much progress women make, particularly in the South in regard to their sexuality, the fear and anxiety that they will revert back into a traditional racist, misogynistic, and fixed social role is still very real possibility.

Whereas Judith and Sookie’s position as southern gothic heroines reveals and at times challenges toxic Southern masculinity, Tara Thornton corresponds to the horror genre’s archetype of the enduring woman whose character targets the continuing racisms within the Southern region. Othered for her racial identity as a Black woman, Tara Thornton experiences a completely different aspect of the sociocultural landscape than the two white southern gothic heroines. Robin R. Means Coleman has analyzed the difference between the experience of black women and white women in the horror genre, she claims, “...Black women don’t go up

against the boogeyman; rather, often their battle is with racism and corruption” (132). I agree that Tara goes up against a more horrific element of the South, which is racism and sexism simultaneously; however, all three women experience the same oppressing figure of the white Southern patriarch which is important to understanding each woman’s unique experience within the South. In the episode “Beautifully Broken,” a White male vampire named Franklin Mott (James Frain) at first appears to help Tara act out her aggression when experiencing violent racist gossip about her recently deceased black male partner Benedict Talley (Mehcad Brooks), more commonly known by his nickname “Eggs.” Two white males make racist comments and defecate on the site where Eggs was a victim of racial violence that resulted in his death. Franklin holds one of the men’s arms while Tara punches him—almost to death. The scene becomes erotic and Franklin’s vampire teeth “click” out and indicate to audience that he is aroused by watching Tara enact violence (S.3 E.2, 00:52:22-00:53:37). However, being an enduring woman, Tara must quickly, and repeatedly, fight furiously for her life. Throughout season three, Franklin and Tara’s narrative quickly turns dark and becomes a master/slave reenactment. Tara is forced to endure kidnapping, rape, torture, and much worse at the hands of her vampire master Franklin. However, in “I Got the Right to Sing the Blues,” Tara does not need a phallic symbol like the final girl deploys in order to escape her oppressor. On the eve of their wedding night Tara uses her cunning intellect and sexuality to escape Franklin. Their conversation is as follows:

TARA. Untie me. Two hands are better than none.

FRANKLIN. Why, you wicked little strumpet....

TARA. I'm going to drink your blood tomorrow night.

FRAKNLIN. Oh, yes, you are.

TARA. I want it now. I want to experience being high on you while making love to you. Knowing it's my last act as human, I want to have the most amazing sex any human can have before I give myself to you in death.

FRANKLIN. Kinky. (S3. E.6, 00:22:36-00:25:18)

Tara, while tied up and in a seeming position of powerlessness, convinces Franklin to untie her and feed her his blood knowing vampire blood gives humans super strength that she can use later to overcome him. She cleverly tricks and manipulates Franklin through her sexuality that is explicitly related to the enduring woman as a way of challenging oppression and gaining a position of power. The enduring woman overcomes moments of adversity by whatever means necessary. In her analysis of black women in horror films, Coleman claims, "She does not set aside her sexuality or have a 'masculine' name or possess her own 'masculine' weaponry, rather she has lips and hips, but no chainsaw" (132). More than the southern gothic heroine or horror's final girl's fears of a single oppressor, Tara as enduring woman promises a positive representation of self-resilience and a fury to fight the oppressive racist systems currently still existing in the Southern sociopolitical landscape. Her fight isn't with one entity—but an entire oppressive system.

While Sookie represents a southern gothic horror heroine hybrid seemingly fighting for her rights for agency and autonomy within an ongoing patriarchal space, Tara's character as an enduring woman presses the critique of racial hostility still present within Southern sociocultural landscape. In the episode "And When I Die," Debbie Pelt (Brit Morgan) breaks into and enters the home of Sookie Stackhouse. She readies her gun and aims at Sookie. However, Tara intervenes and lunges before the bullet hits Sookie, ultimately ending her own life in place of her friend's (00:55:34-00:56:53). The scene can be read at a base level as female jealousy over Alcide Herveaux who left Debbie and is currently dating Sookie. However, I read the scene as the larger representation of violence between race and class. Tara's defense of the white southern gothic heroine perpetuates the historically racist representations of African Americans within the horror genre. They are the sacrificial buddy to their white main character. Coleman contends, "...Blacks were pressed to enter into support relationships with Whites, and to display a value system of loyalty and trust that was generally unilateral. That is, there was no expectation that the kinds of displays of faithfulness emanating from Blacks would be reciprocated by Whites" (151). This is exactly the ending, or horrifying beginning I should say, for Tara as she is quickly made into a vampire by Pamela Swynford De Beaufort (Kristin Bauer van Straten) at the request of Sookie. Despite Tara's cousin Lafayette Reynolds (Nelsan Ellis) being the first to suggest that Tara should be made vampire, he quickly gives up. Sookie is the one that presses Pam and pays the price of "owing a favor" in order to keep Tara "alive" (00:01:23). While this seems

like an act of loyalty on behalf of Sookie, Tara vocalizes throughout the entire series her hatred of the vampire species, typically her comments are towards the white vampires who have used their new enhanced abilities to further their racist and sexist agendas such as Franklin. Sookie's attempt at keeping Tara alive is not one of loyalty, but selfishness, and it places Tara in a position of extended powerlessness against white Southern aristocracy. Tara wakes from being transformed, not into a more powerful species, but more confined and under the control of her white maker, Pam. When a vampire is newly made, they are bound to obey the orders of their maker and their free will is rendered obsolete which in turn represents a form of slavery. For Tara, this means she is now a slave controlled by a rich white woman that, for a second time in her narrative arc, reenacts an oppressive and violent dynamic in American history. Tara not only tried to liberate her gender and race, but now slips further down the "hierarchy of "otherness" as lower class, black, female, and now vampire. For all the effort she places into liberating herself from systemic oppression, it comes to a halt in "Authority Always Wins," when she says, "I will never forgive either of you," to Lafayette and Sookie (S.5 E.200:43:26-00:43:58). By the end of the same episode, Tara attempts to commit suicide by locking herself in a tanning booth and exposing herself to UV rays. Sookie's pursuit of sexual freedom and challenge to the patriarchal system of the South is made possible at the expense of the "Other" and marginalized characters such as Tara. Tara's attempt at suicide demonstrates that despite her efforts in

liberating her gender and race, her efforts are contradicted by being made vampire and being placed in a master/slave narrative she cannot escape.

Tara's narrative within *True Blood* casts her as the sacrificial friend for the preservation of whiteness. In the episode "Jesus Gonna Be Here," Tara is seen in slow motion fighting a white male who is tall, strong, and towers over her. Tara, who previously rejected vampirism, uses her new powers to help her community survive an attack against a cluster of rogue hep-v infected vampires. The scene shows her using her blunt force and physical capability to overcome a White male figure which can be read as progressive for African American female representation because it gives a varying representation other than sexuality available to the character type of the enduring woman. Tara is not sexualized nor using a phallic symbol like the final girl. Moreover, Tara knees him in the face while fully clothed and un-sexualized which differs from previous depictions of black women within the horror genre according to Coleman (00:00:40-00:03:04). However, this scene is immediately contradicted by reinforcing that the black "buddy" always dies first within the horror genre. In the same episode after the fight sequence, the remaining survivors gather around Tara's mother, Lettie Mae (Adina Porter), as she cries to Sookie and crowd, "They killed my Tara. They killed my baby girl" (S.7 E.1 00:00:40-00:03:04). Coleman describes and analyzes the frequency of such scenes in horror as, "...a Black character's constancy to Whites was frequently evidence by a willingness not only to pitch in, but often to die a horrific death on White's behalf—horror's version of the buddy film" (151). Lettie Mae emphasizes and draws

attention to the convention of black characters dying on the behalf of whiteness by saying, “Don’t you put your hand on me, Sookie Stackhouse. It’s your fault my baby’s dead. She always went running to you, and you led her down the path to hell. You are not welcome in this house of God” (00:47:36-00:48:00). Sookie gets blamed for not one, but two of Tara’s deaths. Lettie Mae’s anger at Sookie represents a larger issue of how the black community is continuously portrayed as collateral damage for the sake of saving whiteness, a whiteness that has historically been known to oppress them. Again, at the beginning of the series until her final fight scene, Tara represents a strong and powerful black woman, but her efforts at liberation from systemic oppression are contradicted by her death on behalf of the culturally dominant that have caused her pain and suffering throughout the entire series.

Absalom, Absalom!'s southern gothic hero(ine) is a leading example for how the character type is used to challenge women’s position within Southern patriarchal society by revealing the trapping and confining nature of their prescribed roles. Judith appears strong willed, masculine, and threatens the security of the patriarchal South. However, by novel’s end, Judith’s martyrdom status reveals a consistent critique of sociocultural prescribed roles for women via her death caused by nursing and motherhood. Sookie undoubtedly also represents women’s very complicated nature in both the southern gothic and horror genres. She is progressive for the character type of the southern gothic heroine and final girl hybrid via her expressive and liberated sexuality, but this progression is

contradicted by her killing off the “otherness” in Bill at his request and her acceptance of the angel-of-the-house role. At the heart of *True Blood* is the very real horror and anxiety that Sookie represents a woman who attempts to gain sexual freedom, but doesn’t follow through with independence. Moreover, she recedes back into the comfort of her socially prescribed role that Judith from *Absalom, Absalom!* dies trying to escape. As for Tara Thornton, she also experiences moments of positive feminist representation, but also embodies multiple contradictions that place her back into stereotypical and oppressive roles associated with black women characters. While seemingly presented as a strong and promising updated representation of horror’s enduring woman, Tara is placed back into the sacrificing buddy role to support the leading white female. The contradictions and use of stereotypes in *True Blood* indicate that Southern patriarchy is undead and ever-present despite the appearance of national social progress.

Chapter Two:

A Bon Tempt Haunt

“When you came in, the air went out
And every shadow filled up with doubt.”

-“Bad Things,” by Jace Everett

The Gothic and Southern Gothic genres have distinctive settings and backdrops. The traditional gothic often set in an old church (usually a monastery), with dark and stormy skies, or grand castles set off shores or in a distant land include ostensibly real settings that are rendered fantastical in so far that they describe locales and experiences foreign to most contemporary readers of these works. By comparison, the setting of the southern gothic is very real and replaces those previous elements with an emphasis on decaying plantations that mirror the attitudes of the characters in the subgenre. Leslie Fiedler summarizes the use of gothic conventions in American novels as unique by claiming, “Against the background of miasmatic swamps and sweating black skins, the Faulknerian syndrome of disease, death, defeat, mutilation, idiocy, and lust continues to evoke in the stories of these writers a shudder once compelled only by the supernatural” (475). He goes on to claim that the gothic genre has been the most fruitful in the hands of the best American writers because it was the only mode that allowed them to project their conflicts that were indescribable through realism (28). Originally and appropriately titled *Dark House* before publication, the main setting for Faulkner’s retitled novel *Absalom, Absalom!* is Sutpen’s Hundred, the 100 square

miles of secluded land Thomas Sutpen swindles from a Chickasaw Indian chief Ikkemotubbe and builds his plantation style home upon. In *True Blood* (2008-2014), there are several distinct settings, but two are central to discussing the southern gothic heroine's development. The first setting is the dark plantation style mansion that Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) comes to re-inherit from his deceased relatives. The second is the small antebellum home owned by Adele Stackhouse (Lois Smith).⁷ After Adele's death in the first season, the home is quickly passed on to her granddaughter Sookie Stackhouse.

The settings of the contemporary southern gothic, such as those found in *True Blood*, function as a symbol for the Nation. Houses as a symbol for the United States enable considerations of who or what is considered threatening and who is invited into the home/nation (Bergland).⁸ In *True Blood*, vampirism functions as a threat that can endanger the home and its family, and when seen symbolically the home as nation invites conversations about who or what threatens the ideal citizens. In other words, what haunts a house also haunts a nation. Comparing *True Blood* to *Absalom, Absalom!*, allows for a look into the past and historical space of the Southern plantation to examine the representations of the haunted home and its ghosts in modern work. *True Blood* reverses the narrative of haunting and decaying seen in *Absalom, Absalom!* Whereas the "other" haunts Sutpen's Hundred

⁷ The Stackhouse home was built by Jonas Stackhouse in the 1800's. Bill mentions in "The First Taste" that he was sixteen years old when he met Jonas for the first time (S.1 E.2). This means that both Compton and Stackhouse families were well established in the Deep South of Louisiana prior to the Civil War.

⁸ Bergland gives a general premise of marginalized bodies (Native and African Americans and women) haunting the homes in American literature. The haunting reflects the inability to keep these bodies repressed by the white male settler.

in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the white master turned slave through vampirism now haunts the plantation and antebellum homes seen in *True Blood*. Despite the inversion of southern gothic conventions, both works express anxiety over the potential inability to escape the control of Southern patriarchal ideologies.

David Punter and Glennis Byron define the architecture and structures present in the traditional gothic genre. In their definition, the castle is a labyrinth containing secrets. The castle is also a paradoxical site of domesticity with “womb like security” (261). However, the central location and setting in the gothic can be a contradictory site of incarceration and liberation for heroines and other characters who experience terror and security simultaneously.⁹ Despite the closely related conventions between the gothic and southern gothic, the southern gothic spaces and plantation homes are more linked to the South’s dark history of slavery and forced removal of Native American tribes.

Sigmund Freud’s definition of the uncanny continues to have key role in scholarly discussions of the Gothic genre. Freud looks at two German terms, “heimlich” which means canny/homey and “unheimlich” which means uncanny/unhomely. Using the terms, he then defines the uncanny as the sensation of anxiety felt when something that is meant to remain secret/hidden comes into the open (126-132). For example, a mannequin set inside a store display is familiar as a

⁹ An example text that includes the contradictions of the Gothic setting is *Jane Eyre* by Emily Brontë (1847). Jane Eyre is a gothic heroine who experiences terror and confinement within the home of her employer Edward Rochester. However, by novel’s end Jane also experiences security and domesticity within the home through her marriage to Edward. Kate Ellis argues that the 18th century Gothic novel, through its representations of the castle, creates a resistance to an ideology that imprisons women despite the sphere of safety it provides (x).

human figure, but once identified as plastic it becomes unsettling and unfamiliar. Freud further uses the uncanny to describe a person's fears and anxieties on a psychological level. Applying Freud's theory of the uncanny to the southern gothic plantation allows for a close reading of how the plantation is a place of comfort and security but also generates fear and dread. In regard to the haunted home, Freud claims, "Indeed, we have learned that in some modern languages the German phrase *ein unheimliches Haus* ['an uncanny house'] can be rendered only by the periphrasis 'a haunted house'" (148). Critics have used Freud's definition to discuss the conventions within the genre that help invoke discomfort for readers, particularly in regard to the house and those who "haunt" them. Anne Williams applies Freud's uncanny to the gothic home and claims, "In other words the nightmarish haunted house as gothic setting puts into play the anxieties, tensions, and imbalances inherent in family structures. But the reader may 'safely' assume, 'This is nothing like my family.' The dreadful pleasures these tales evoke declare that it is" (46). Both Freud and Williams summarize in their work that literature uses the uncanny to both supply audiences with familiarity whether that be represented culturally or otherwise while simultaneously forcing discomfort with a distortion of the familiar. The gothic and southern gothic homes are no exception in taking part of uncanny representations.

Despite having close ties with the gothic genre, the horror genre has garnered its own critical attention in regard to location and setting. Noël Carroll provides a

descriptive geographical location for the monsters within the horror genre that reside in remote locations by saying:

...the geography of horror stories generally situates the origin of monsters in such places as lost continents and outer space...that is, they belong to environs outside of and unknown to ordinary social intercourse...what horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories and is, perforce, unknown. (34-5)

While I agree with Carroll in his work, the monsters in *True Blood* presents a very complicated presence for the surrounding characters that challenge the formula Carroll identifies. The haunting vampires that garner the most screen time are aristocratic white men who are now forced as vampire “others” to operate within the social constructions they helped create.

Critics of the southern gothic examine how the haunted plantation home is a space for marginalized characters to haunt and be heard. For example, Bridget M. Marshall finds that there is a recurring theme of incessant haunting of the past on the present. Similarly, Carol Davison argues that the gothic haunted house settings provide an abundance of revealing issues of race, class, and gender. Often, the setting allows for those who have not had a voice an opportunity to “haunt” and be heard. Specifically, Davison claims:

“...occupied as they are by the unsettled undead, houses become uncanny, defamiliarized spaces, subverting the established generational power dynamic and even (dis)possessing their putative, living owners, the thematic

of possession/dispossession assuming rich spiritual, psychological and material implications” (55).

Mathew Sivils also argues that the landscape takes on a haunting personality all its own that threatens to expose and resurface from past to present humanity’s “monstrous legacy” of racism and slavery (92). The common thread among critics is that the southern gothic house allows for Southern cultural anxieties to be manifested and represented. Charles L. Crow summarizes the atmosphere and landscape in his chapter on southern gothic by claiming, “Swamps are sometimes beautiful, but they are inherently dangerous, messy, and resistant to the attempts of humans to impose order upon them. They are ready-made symbols for dark, uncontrolled human emotion...” (142). Predominantly set in the Deep South of Louisiana, *True Blood*’s settings, specifically Bill and Sookie’s separate homes, reflect southern gothic conventions of repressed and haunting histories.

In contrast to the extensive critical background that surrounds *Absalom, Absalom!*, *True Blood* has acquired less critical attention regarding the setting, landscape, and homes. However, Coraline Ruddell and Brigid Cherry claim that *True Blood* both fixes itself within and contradicts the gothic genre through its depictions of environment and characters. While traditionally the environment for the gothic genre would be gloomy and off-putting, the dangerous setting for the gothic characters within the show is in the sun/daylight. The sunny environment of *True Blood* is where many murders, violence, and other horrific elements take place within the show and the traditional conventions of the gothic and southern gothic

are reversed. Ruddell and Cherry use various examples to emphasize their argument such as the seemingly average male human René (Michael Raymond-James) and his attempt to kill Sookie in season one. They also point to the vampire's fragility with being able to die from sunlight exposure throughout the entire series. I agree with most of the critics when they claim that the structures of the house, setting, and landscape within the southern gothic reflect the horrors of American history of violent slavery and feel that extending this as a framework for understanding *True Blood* can heighten understanding of the show's depiction of race, gender, sexuality, and horror. More specifically, I posit that Bill is a haunting presence who conveys an important message affecting the white Southern woman character. In attending to the show's settings which include the plantation and antebellum home as haunting locations at night, I challenge the assertions of Ruddell and Cherry; yet, by looking at the more traditionally gothic spaces in the series enables me to consider how *True Blood* itself contains several structural contradictions hence why my readings and those of Ruddell and Cherry can exist simultaneously. I will specifically focus on the southern gothic home and those who haunt it as uncanny contradictions.

Looking back at the existing criticism on the southern gothic, horror, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *True Blood* allows for a deeper reading of the modern "other" and status of the female heroine with the historically white male space of the South. In Faulkner's canonical southern gothic, the male space is traditionally gothic and all-consuming. Sutpen's Hundred reflects the attempt and failure to

oppress marginalized characters. In *True Blood* the space reflects the white male's attempt at maintaining traditional patriarchal Southern values while simultaneously experiencing "otherness." Despite white male vampires' inability to enter a home without permission, the fear of the vampire in *True Blood* is that traditional Southern patriarchy is not only undead, but manifesting with more power than before.

The beginning of *Absalom, Absalom!* starts with an outcasted Rosa Coldfield telling the story of Sutpen's Hundred to a young Quentin Compson. She tells Quentin about how Thomas Sutpen appears out of seemingly nowhere and swindles land from a Native American chief named Ikkemotubbe in order to construct his plantation style home in Jefferson, Mississippi. The text follows closely southern gothic traditions of the home representing a haunting history of the way the plantations were built and sustained forcibly. Quentin subsequently imagines the creation of Sutpen's Hundred as follows:

Then in the long unamazed Quentin seemed to watch them overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like card upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred...(4)

Sutpen's construction of the home is symbolic of the violent rape of the land that celebrated ecofeminist Annette Kolodny defines in *The Lay of the Land*. Kolodny argues that the pioneering man viewed the virgin land of America as one for the

violent taking. Further, the land is symbolic of several feminine representations of mother, virgin, temptress, and ravished. A further passage in *Absalom, Absalom!* extends this metaphor when Quentin considers, “He (Sutpen) now had a plantation; inside of two years he dragged house and gardens out of virgin swamp, and plowed and planted his land with seed cotton which General Compson loaned him” (30). Sutpen violently courts the land much like he does towards Ellen Coldfield who is his future well-to-do second wife and mother to his children Henry and Judith. In connection with Kolodny’s work on virginal land metaphors and colonial/masculine violence, Marilyn R. Chandler contends, “At its most literal *Absalom, Absalom!* is the story of that house—a story of exploration, settlement, empire-building, destruction, and dubious hope of reconstruction on questionable terms” (249). Sutpen’s rage and rape of the land construct his home, but at the expense of oppression of women and African American slaves in antebellum period. Those who were forced to help construct the home are personified as ghostly, demonic, or outright shapeless. Rosa Coldfield’s retelling of Sutpen’s story to Quentin provides an example of the dehumanized African American body, “...a man who rode into town out of nowhere with a horse and two pistols and a herd of wild beasts that he had hunted down singlehanded because he was stronger in fear...” (10). The enslaved men that are hunted down by Sutpen are not given names but personified as wild beasts who are forced to construct the structures that represent Southern aristocracy that they also prevented from entering. In the same chapter Quentin reiterates his new knowledge from Rosa by telling himself, “—(*Tore violently a*

plantation, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—tore violently. And married her sister Ellen and begot a son and a daughter which—(Without gentleness begot, Miss Rosa Coldfield says)—without gentleness” (5). Much like the treatment of the land, Rosa makes it an emphasis in Quentin’s learning of their Southern history how Sutpen conceived his children the same way—with violence and force towards his second wife Ellen. Similar to Judith’s demonic characterization, Ellen is characterized in the novel as, “...the butterfly of a forgotten summer two years defunctive now—the substanceless shell, the shade impervious to any alteration or dissolution because of its very weightlessness: no body to be buried: just the shape...” (100). Ellen is an example of the positionality of women’s purpose in within the ideology of the Old South to be a mother and wife.

True Blood contains traditional southern gothic ghostly figures like those found in Faulkner’s novel. However, the show focuses more on the inverse of the ghostly undead that replaces the slave with the white male master. Historically, the white aristocratic male, such as Sutpen or Mr. Compson, controlled who was allowed into the home. However, in the episode “The First Taste,” Sookie must “invite” Bill into her home. Vampires in *True Blood* cannot enter a home without an invitation, and the owner can “rescind” the invitation at will. Following Bill’s entrance into the Stackhouse home, Sookie and her brother Jason Stackhouse (Ryan Kwanten), best friend Tara Thornton, and Gran/Adele Stackhouse gather in a small living room to meet vampire Bill for an intimate night of conversation. Adele and Bill discuss their family lineage because she wishes to pass the

information to her elderly social group called the Descendants of the Glorious Dead whose members share the interest of family genealogy and ancestors from Bon Temps that served during the Civil War. Bill's participation and memories of Southern history amuse Adele. However, the conversation and levity is disrupted, when Bill reveals his family participated in slavery. While the conversation at first seemed light, Tara Thornton's identity as an African American woman functions in the scenes to remind Bill and Adele of the ghosted/erased black bodies who really established their homes. Despite being alive and well, Tara functions in the scene as a marginalized ghost archetype found in the southern gothic. She lingers in the background of the scene and conversation only to abruptly interject:

TARA. Did you own slaves?

SOOKIE. Tara.

BILL. I did not, but my father did.

TARA. Hmm.

BILL. A house slave, a middle-aged woman whose name I cannot recall, and—
—and a yard slave. A young, strong man named Minus.

ADELE. Oh, this is just the sort of thing my club will be so interested in hearing about.

TARA. About slaves?

ADELE. Well, about anything having to do with that time. (00:30:38-
00:32:40)

In the conversation there are two ghosts and two locations. First, the slaves that Bill mentions haunt the conversation and the history behind the construction of his home. The female house slave is emphasized as a ghostly figure because Bill cannot even recall her name. The lack of naming dehumanizes the character. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Mr. Compson similarly fails to use the name Charles Bon when referring to Sutpen's children (48). In *True Blood*, Tara stands in place of the ghostly figure in this conversation. She lingers in the back, looming over the legacy of Compton and Stackhouse with eyes of disbelief. Tara disrupts the conversation long enough to remind the "descendants" that their legacy is constructed from a violent past of oppressing the historical "other" that she identifies with. The conversation grows tense and heightens the notion that Adele's and Bill's homes, while it might not have literal ghosts, are haunted by suppressed racial anxieties. Renée Bergland neatly defines haunting in America as a dual process, "we are haunted either by the revival of what we have repressed or by the (seeming) conformation of what we have surmounted" (11). I agree with Bergland's argument, but in the context of *True Blood* the inverse of the predominant haunting figure emphasizes the fear of the returning patriarchal South being let back into the home while Tara functions as a traditional southern gothic haunting/ghost figure who refuses to let history be forgotten.

Sutpen's Hundred and the Compton plantation share a historically racist and oppressive construction. Both homes were built on the stolen land belonging to Native American tribes and constructed by the violent commands of white Southern

plantation holders toward their slaves. Each of the homes are built and sustained on the backs of the cultural “Other.” The hegemonic system of the old South depended on the subordination of the “Other.” In *Absalom, Absalom!* the violent nature of this master/slave dynamic is abrasive and gives the reader a haunting image to the treatment of both African and Native Americans. Faulkner writes, “Heretofore, until that Sunday when he came to church, if he had misused or injured anybody, it was only old Ikkemotubbe, from whom he got his land—a matter between his conscience and Uncle Sam and God” (39). Moving to America, such as Sutpen does to build his dynasty, and swindling the Chickasaw of their land leaves the rich white male “conqueror” with the moral dilemma of fastening himself at the top of the hierarchy at the cost of keeping the “Other” in a position of powerlessness. *Absalom, Absalom!* casts African and Native Americans as ghostly figures as a way for the characters such as Sutpen to deny them of an American identity and social position. Bergland, in a quick definition, summarizes the Native American and “others” in the American Gothic as ghosts claiming, “...the ghosting of Indians presents us with a host of doubts about America and American ideology. The entire dynamic of ghosts and haunting, as we understand it today, is a dynamic of unsuccessful repression. Ghosts are the things we try to bury, but refuse to stay buried (5). *Absalom, Absalom!* serves as a reminder that Sutpen’s ideology about creating a dynasty is fragile and threatens his national identity. Sutpen attempts to repress and bury what challenges his success as a rich white Southern male, but fails. Another passage which demonstrates Native Americans as ghosts who

consistently reappear to haunt Sutpen's consciousness is when Mr. Compson tells his son Quentin about the night before Sutpen married Ellen, he says, "...when they reached the church for the rehearsal on the night before the wedding and found the church itself empty and a handful of men from the town's purlieus (including two of old Ikkemotubbe's Chickasaws) standing in the shadows outside the door, the tears came down again" (47). The two Chickasaw haunt from the shadows the establishments that those in power brought over and implemented. The Chickasaw refuse to stay buried and haunt Sutpen's Christian wedding ceremony which exposes the flawed and unjust premise of American national identity.

Unlike Sutpen's Hundred that is created quick and violently, Bill must mend his already constructed, unkept, and rundown mansion. The Compton plantation, opposite of Sutpen's Hundred reflecting the transition of supposed glory into decay, reflects Bill's attempt to revive old Southern ideology. Much like his attempts to bring himself away from his "otherness" and as closely to human as he can, Bill's renovations of his antebellum home reflect exactly the same attitude. In season four's episode "You Smell Like Dinner" Bill gets a taste of more power as a white Southern aristocrat. Sookie runs up to his house at night and pauses in amazement of the renovations he's made in the few years he's regained ownership of the plantation. However, Sookie is denied access by Bill's nameless bodyguards and this changes her expression from amazement to fear and uncertainty (00:09:58-00:10:42). Where Sookie once had access and free range within the Compton plantation, she is now limited by Bill's control over her access to his home. The

scene is comparable to a young Thomas Sutpen's desire to go into the wealthy white man's home for the first time to deliver a letter by his father. However, he gets rejected by an African American man based off his class as a poor white boy. The encounter launches Sutpen into creating his design to be the rich man who gets to decide who enters the front door of his own grand house (187-188). When discussing the Southern home, Chandler uses *Absalom, Absalom!* to argue that houses in American fiction are "monuments to the magnitude and persistence of ambitious dreams as well as signs of misplaced aspirations and ultimate defeat" (19). Bill regains his power of positionality as the vampire "King" of the Louisiana Parish and further expresses this power through his renovations which allows him to decide who is and is not allowed access. Bill accomplishes this with the assistance of nameless bodyguards that resemble the man a young Sutpen encounters. However, the Compton plantation and process of reclaiming and renovating critiques something further. The horror in *True Blood* is that the dreams of reclaiming the Old South, such as the one Sutpen seeks out, that fosters oppression and sexism is very much a nightmarish reality. Bill's renovations and militant style control of his bodyguard staff signify that his desire for a dark oppressive past is equally as undead as he is.

The predominantly ghostly figure in *Absalom, Absalom!* is Charles Bon who threatens patriarchal security via attempts at penetrating Sutpen's Hundred. Bon stalks the parameters of Sutpen's Hundred and his uncanny presence threatens his half-brother's imposed white Southern aristocratic identity within the 19th century,

Faulkner writes, "...the one with the tarnished braid of an officer, the other plain of cuff, the pistol lying yet across the saddle bow unaimed, the two faces calm, the voices not even raised: *Don't you pass the shadow of this post, this branch, Charles; and I am going to pass it, Henry...*" (105-106). Henry's conflict with Bon is that he is familiar as his half-brother, but unfamiliar because of Bon's mixed race encourages Henry to define him as "other." Before Henry kills Bon, we learn that he struggles with separating Bon's ghostly body as that of his brother and "other." Quentin and Shreve create a narrative about the motive for Bon's murder. Henry in a panting fury says to Bon, "You are my brother," and Charles Bon's response is, "No I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry" (286). First, Quentin and Shreve's demonstrate their power of the white gaze when constructing the scene of racial anxiety by using a derogatory term that Charles does not choose for himself. Second, Charles Bon is cast as a ghostly figure to represent Henry's struggle with maintaining Southern patriarchal values of the home at the cost of other human beings who are culturally "othered." After all, it is the miscegenation that Henry cannot bear, not the incest (285). Charles represents the dark history of Henry's inheritance, including Sutpen's Hundred, that he struggles with accepting. Henry is haunted by Bon and struggles with repressing and accepting him because Bon is simultaneously a part of Henry's identity as half-brother, but Bon also occupies cultural "other" who threatens the security of Henry's rich white Southern male identity. Shreve and Quentin also participate in

the ghostliness of *Absalom, Absalom!* in their construction of the encounter between Bon and Charles because is not based in reality but is phantasmal much like ghosts.

Bill both upholds and contradicts the Southern patriarchal presence within the home. While he owns and reinvents his plantation mansion to meet his design for control and dominance like Sutpen, he is “othered” by vampirism and has limited, sometimes rejected, access to his love interest’s home. In the episode, “To Love is to Bury,” Sookie becomes the master who rejects Bill from her antebellum home:

SOOKIE. Stop fighting you stupid men!

BILL. He had his hands all over you.

SAM. She’s not your property.

SOOKIE. Shut up, Sam! I can speak for myself. [To Bill] You left me alone with no promise to come back, and attack the man who’s helping keep me safe? How dare you?

BILL. He’s helping keep you safe because I asked him to.

SOOKIE. Get out!

BILL. If you knew what I had done to return to you—

SOOKIE. I rescind your invitation.

BILL. (fangs click). Sookie, don’t. Please. Sookie. Please. (00:46:44-00:47:37)

Sookie slams the door in Bill’s face and he pauses for a haunting expression of grief behind transparent curtains. Bill experiences what the American cultural “other” underwent during the reign of white male patriarchy in the South during the 19th

century. In her discussion on the representations of ghostly “others” in early American literature, Bergland contends, “Native Americans are ultimately either demonic or ghostly, and white women are either angelic or ghostly” (87). Both Native American and women, despite white women having far more privilege than Native Americans, were considered subordinate to the white male. Given that *True Blood* is a modern text, I believe the reversed otherness onto the white male body is a means to critique the terror white men have of becoming the cultural other and losing their position of power over those such as women and African and Native Americans. Bill is horrified that he can no longer have control over and within Sookie’s space. Further, Bergland writes, “The legislative and cultural domination of women by men depended on a rhetoric of irrationality and even supernaturalism” (17). Judith is cast as demonic at an early age because she overtly rejects the angel-of-the-house role prescribed to women. Rosa thinks of Judith and her brother Henry as, “...two half-phantom children whom I was not encouraged, and did not desire, to associate with...” (135). Judith’s “phantom” personification is a result of her publicly rebelling via commanding horse races, overtly expressing masculine tendencies of courting a man (Charles), and threats to commit miscegenation and incest. In contrast, Sookie embodies both angel and other. Her desirability stems from her faerie blood that attracts dangerous men to her, including Bill who attempts to police and secure her position with the domestic sphere. Bill’s irrational behavior about his access to Sookie’s home by his body literally being sucked out of her house, places him in both the positions of ghostly outdated patriarchal upholder and

cultural other. *True Blood* creates an inverted scenario where the traditional ghostly or demonic “other” is a white male who does not know how to cope.

Absalom, Absalom! takes part in the literary tradition of the Southern woman as the angel-of-the-house or demonic/spinster outcasted “other.” Judith’s threat of miscegenation with Charles Bon thrusts her into being symbolically fed upon by Sutpen’s Hundred and cast as a ghostly figure whose voice is stolen by her home. Particularly in regard to American literature, Bergland focuses on Native American ghosts that haunt white men as symbolic of both guilt and pleasure. However, she also contends that white women are depicted as angelic or ghostly depending on their adherence to the gender conventions expected of them (87). Judith rejects being the angel-of-the-house and threatens the idealized Southern home by running away with a man of mixed-race; these actions cast her as a ghostly figure trapped within Sutpen’s Hundred. Rosa describes to Quentin how Sutpen’s Hundred ventriloquizes Judith’s voice by saying, “It said one word: ‘Clytie.’ Like that, that cold that still: not Judith, but the house itself speaking again, though it was Judith’s. Oh, I knew it well, who had believed in grieving’s seemliness; I knew it as well as she—Clytie—knew it” (114). Not one Sutpen woman makes it out of the home alive, despite their efforts to abandon the “angel of the house” motif and gain freedom. Judith is referred to as “a widow before she was wed,” and she remains imprisoned in her father’s home until her untimely death (170). Her only access to freedom was an engagement to Charles Bon that Henry denies via murder that renders his sister forcefully into a form of widowhood before actually being

married. The home's personification as Judith is one of the most haunting moments in the novel. Kellie Donovan-Condron comments on Judith's shift in monstrosity when she claims, "The murder (of Judith's fiancé, Charles Bon) pre-empts Judith unwittingly committing incest and miscegenation, shifting her monstrosity from that of shattering patriarchal social relationships to that of excessive attachment to her father's house" (344). I agree with Donovan-Condron, but I don't believe she has an excessive attachment to her home. I argue that Judith dares to challenge the confining space and ideology surrounding Sutpen's Hundred and therefore her monstrosity is transformed into a haunting figure.

In both life and death, Judith rejects racist and domestic ideology. For example, Judith acknowledges her fiancé's son Charles Etienne de Saint-Valery and welcomes him into the home despite the violence against her mixed-race fiancé via her brother. When Judith corrects Charles Etienne de Saint-Valery from calling her "Miss Sutpen" to "Call me your aunt Judith, Charles," she goes against Sutpen's desire for a perfect Southern white family (169). Her acknowledgment of Bon's son as family destabilized her father's plan for a traditional patriarchal Southern house. Judith's final act of defiance towards her father's is in her tombstone placement when Faulkner writes, "...her grave was at the opposite side of the enclosure. As far from the other four as the enclosure would permit" (170). On the same page it is confirmed that Judith made the arrangements for herself. Reading against Donovan-Condron's argument, Judith's deliberate tombstone placement signifies

that she chooses to use her last moments of living within the home to continue “shattering patriarchal social relationships.”

In “Thank You,” the series finale of *True Blood*, the haunting of the plantation home is inversed from that of the traditional southern gothic such as *Absalom, Absalom!* Bill is an undead “othered” white Southern aristocratic male who haunts Sookie during a mixed species wedding between his permanently virgin white vampire daughter Jessica Hamby (Deborah Ann Woll) and white male human Hoyt Fortenberry (Jim Parrack). Despite the fact that his daughter Jessica is also a vampire, she is still a young white southern belle transitioning into womanhood via Bill’s approval of her marriage to Hoyt. During the wedding ceremony, Bill’s haunting thoughts creep into Sookie’s mind: “*So happy, so much pain. Don’t let them see. Be here, be present. So happy...I love you Sookie Stackhouse. I love you with everything I’m made of...I want this for you so badly. So badly for you to have this. Please, Sookie. Set yourself free*” (00:37:38-00:37:50). Bill’s thoughts are heard by Sookie for the first time in the series because he is choosing to die of Hep-v despite an existing cure. In the series, Hep-v is a disease that has the ability to kill vampires who drink from infected humans. Bill chooses to die because he struggles with existing as an “other” in the modern world. His thoughts that haunt Sookie’s mind stem from his participation in Southern aristocratic patriarchal ideology that he cannot return to while being a vampire. The scene contrast *Absalom, Absalom!* in several ways. One, the “others” of society are historically African and Native Americans and women who haunt the plantation in southern gothic texts as a form

of revenge of Southern patriarchal ideology. The horror of *True Blood* is that the inverse of haunting perpetuates the aristocratic white male's desire for Southern ideology to continue, specifically the belief that women should be the obedient angel-of-the-house.

What Bill wants for Sookie "so badly" is a life without agency or autonomy. By the end of the episode, Sookie fulfills Bill's desire for her to be the angel-of-the-house and uphold Southern patriarchal ideology by becoming a wife and mother to an unnamed white male. This contrasts with the end result of Judith's experience in Sutpen's Hundred because Judith dies fighting against these values. While the series establishes that Sookie herself desires marriage and a family earlier on, the series finale implies that she fulfills Bill's vision of how to achieve these goals. While Sookie enacts a caretaking role by pouring beverages for her guests, the camera work emphasizes her bright wedding ring and partnership with a white man at a traditional Thanksgiving meal. Sookie is also noticeably pregnant before the two take their seats at the head of the table for a Thanksgiving feast (1:02:04-1:03:10). Sookie and her new husband are celebrating a traditional and conservative Thanksgiving which is part of the mythos of white American national identity. Typically, when a person takes a seat at the head of a table, be it for dinner or otherwise, they are the leader and in a dominant and controlling position over the rest of the attendees. By sitting at the head of the table in a position of power and authority, Sookie and her new partner demonstrate the status quo of a white heteronormative family to the culturally mixed couples that include Lafayette

Reynolds and his vampire partner James Kent (Nathan Parsons). Further, the scene mirrors the myth of white America that claims peace and acceptance for Native Americans, but in fact was surrounded by genocide and colonization. The scene comes to a close while Led Zeppelin's "Thank You" plays as the closing soundtrack, "Inspirations what you are to me. Inspiration, look, see..." which suggests that Sookie and her new partner inspire and demonstrate for the culturally mixed pairs the idealistic white heteronormative family which Bill has been attempting to reinforce. The pairing in the scene of white heteronormative family overlooking the cultural "others" on this particular holiday also underscores that Sookie fulfills Bill's desires for her to participate in a conservative marital dynamic that he can never provide her so long as he is "othered" for his vampirism. *True Blood*, in light of its many and varying contradictions, reinforces the horror that despite whatever progress is made in representing America as a culturally diverse identity, the Southern history of racism and sexism are still festering within the region and projected onto the white male body as an undead "other" who refuses to let old Southern ideology stay buried.

Haunted southern gothic houses portray the decay and inability of Southern patriarchy to withstand an evolving Southern society. The ghosts that inhabit such houses represent the repressed presence of those who were forced to create such structures for men like Thomas Sutpen and Bill Compton. *True Blood* reverses the script and portrays a decaying mansion rebuilt and inhabited by a white male "other" bent on haunting those around him as a means to convey that the Old South

and its traditions are not fully dead. Despite Sookie's sexual progressiveness, she remains a symbol of domestication confined within her antebellum home. Confined to women's traditional roles of wife and mother, Sookie is offered no escape from the haunting past of patriarchy by series end. The series reinforces and perpetuates the angel-of-the-house stereotype that women sought to free themselves from. I believe *True Blood* warns women that for all the progress they've made throughout history, the South remains haunted by the threat of toxic masculinity coming back stronger and more violent than before.

Conclusion:**Double-Edged Stakes**

“You’re a brave girl, brave and stupid.”

-Unnamed man to Sookie

The Southern Gothic text *Absalom, Absalom!* and the Southern Gothic Horror hybrid *True Blood* present a multitude of contradictions that limit female characters’ liberation from systemic oppression. In addition, the source of fear in both texts is that the South sustains a patriarchal ideology. In Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Southern patriarchal ideology is represented by the character Thomas Sutpen and in *True Blood* by Bill Compton. Both men represent a toxic masculinity that seeks to repress and sustain the female within the sociocultural prescribed roles of wife and mother.

In my first chapter I explored three oppressed women—Judith, Sookie, and Tara. All three women experience systemic oppression which they attempt to liberate themselves from, but ultimately fail. Their failure is due to their embodiment of multiple contradictions. Judith’s contradiction is that she expresses both hero and heroine traits, or as I have defined her—hero(ine). The conflicting gendered terms of hero and heroine are what limit Judith’s liberation. She challenges the confining role of traditional doting daughter and Southern belle with her heroic characteristic such as leading men into wild races and courting a man. However, she fails at retaining her heroism and becomes a heroine who falls victim to traditional roles of motherhood. I then explored Sookie Stackhouse as a Southern

Gothic Horror hybrid of the heroine/southern belle and Final Girl. Sookie's failure at liberation is similar to Judith's. In the majority of the series, Sookie rejects the Southern belle's nature of being a chaste virgin. Moreover, she seeks sexual autonomy with multiple partners. However, she ultimately succumbs to the angel-of-the-house role prescribed to women. By series' end Sookie's liberation via sexual experience is overshadowed by her role as wife and mother to an unknown Southern White man. As for Tara Thornton, she provides a stimulating revolt against systemic oppression for Black women in the South. She overcomes the gruesome kidnapping, rape, and master/slave dynamic forced upon her by White male vampire Franklin. Tara accomplishes her escape and freedom with wit and sexuality without the help or phallic tools associated with the Final Girl. Tara is progressive as Horror's Enduring Woman who fights an ongoing battle with racism and corruption. Despite her efforts, by series end Tara's narrative places her back into the master/slave role as she becomes the vampire progeny of White female vampire Pam. Tara also dies, for a second time, on behalf of whiteness for Sookie. Each woman promises progressiveness and liberation for women in the South, but succumb to some form of Southern Patriarchal ideology due to their many contradictions.

In my second chapter I analyzed the decayed haunted house motif and the undead who haunt them. In Faulkner's text, the ghostly figures are historically marginalized peoples such as Native American and African Americans and women. However, in *True Blood*, I discovered that the inversion of Southern White

Patriarch (Bill Compton) as ghost/undead expresses the fear that Southern Patriarchal ideology festers in the South and could return with more power and life taking ability than before.

While my thesis has focused in great detail on systemic oppression in these texts, there is still room to explore these ideas further looking at other characters in both texts. For example, In *True Blood* Eric Northman is also a White male vampire like Bill Compton, but he does not fit neatly as a Southern White patriarchal role due to his open bisexuality. Rosa Coldfield is a female character worthy of further exploration because she possesses agency when she tells her version of Sutpen's story, but she ultimately falls victim to Sutpen and his design for patriarchal domination just like Judith. Further scholarship can help explore the intricacies of identity, region and genre—one only need be brave enough to step inside the dark house of the Southern Gothic.

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