



Religious Perspectives in William Faulkner's Novels

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Abstract

William Faulkner, one of the most eminent writers in the world and America as well, is not an easy writer to interpret. In reply to interviewers' questions about his reading, Faulkner frequently cites the *Old Testament* as one of his favorite books. This is significant because many of his critics have hinted at the biblical, the legalistic, elements in his work. It is in 1950 when he delivered his famous Nobel Prize address that people began to read his novels in a completely new point of view and consider him an optimistic and religious writer. In an attempt to give readers a comprehensive understanding of Faulkner and his fictions, the author puts Faulkner in the southern religious context, thus having a thorough and more profound understanding of his religious feeling and religious commitment. The present essay probes deeply into the religious perspectives of three of his canonical masterpieces, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which are examples of the Biblical influence on Faulkner's literary thought.

Key words: *The Old Testament*; Southern; Religious perspectives Biblical

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INTRODUCTION

When William Faulkner (1897-1962) is mentioned, almost immediately appears in our mind his fictional Yoknapatawpha County, which includes his major works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) and *Go Down, Moses* (1942). These four canonical masterpieces are the core of Faulkner's main achievement. They are a brilliant beginning of Faulkner's profound illustration of the influence of religion on ordinary people in general and on him in particular. An American critic once pointed out:

In most of his Yoknapatawpha County novels, Faulkner contains and dramatizes the basic conceptions or notions of Christianity so effectively that they can be candidly viewed as one of the profoundest writers in Christianity. In his works, the premises of original sins of Christianity is everywhere and everywhere is the conflict of soul and flesh. (Cox, 1982)

Clent Brooks even remarks,

It would be more appropriate if we presumably deem him as a profound religious writer, whose characters derived from his Christian surroundings represent—whatever their defects or theological heresies may be—the Christian events, hence only in the light of Christian premises can his works be finally given a correct interpretation. (Brooks, 1990)

Few Modern important writers have ever employed so many biblical allusions, stories and legends in their works as Faulkner has done. According to a statistics, direct and indirect cite from the Bible reach 379 times, 183 times from the Old Testament and 196 times from the New Testament respectively. Most of his allusions to *the Bible* are centered on the words and biography of Jesus Christ and religious images, as manifested in such novels as *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August* and *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* However, more than citing a few allusions to the Bible, his works are permeated with scriptural images, echoes, stories, and themes and are created under the framework of the Bible. But for a long

time, he has been misunderstood by quite a large number of people, including literary critics and his readers as well. In order to make readers a better understanding of him, the author considers Faulkner's cultural heritage and its impact on his religious perspectives, reveals in Faulkner his religious feeling and religious commitment and exemplifies the influence of the Holy Bible on his novels. Also, in this essay I would like to indicate the uses Faulkner makes of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, for his imagery and, what is much more important, for his themes.

1. THE SOUTHERN RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF WILLIAM FAULKNER AND ITS INFLUENCE

As a genuine Southerner himself, William Faulkner was quite familiar with the American Deep South, the Bible Belt, whose diversity and richness was displayed by him to the non-southern readers. He has been regarded as a representational writer of the South and at the same time he has ever been a literary influence far beyond the South. It is also the South that gave him endless writing inspirations and provided him a wide space for his "invention" of his Yoknapatawpha County. This is due not to the mere fact that he was a recorder of the Southern manners but to the fact that he heartily embraced the southern culture, which places much value on community, courtesy, and the standard of morality: the Bible. His connections to Presbyterians and to Calvinism have long been noted and explored. In Faulkner's South, Presbyterians are cast as the dominant religious group, despite the fact that historically they were outnumbered by Baptists and Methodists. It is difficult to ignore the issue of fatalism which is present in nearly every Faulkner work, and in Faulkner the Christian form of that fatalism goes under the heading of Calvinism. *Light in August*, certainly one of Faulkner's best novels, simply makes no sense if we leave out what one critic has called its "religious pathology", and in that novel Calvinism (or what Faulkner usually calls Puritanism) is the core of dominant, white religion.

Unconsciously influenced by Southern Calvinistic belief, Faulkner was very familiar with the content of the Bible, since the recital of the Bible was a must in his childhood days. He once said he is a lifelong student and reader of the Bible and that the Holy Bible was his favorite book. In his works, he uses a lot of Christian quotations, allusions and images to build his characters better. Some scholars suggest that "[r]eligion in Faulkner's world, at its best and worst, has contributed through tenacity and strength to the survival of these people".¹ But his criticism

of Calvinism is obvious from his novels, as Charles Reagan Wilson says "Calvinism was indeed a burden to Faulkner's characters. Faulkner was a critic of Calvinism, saw it limiting human potential".² He sees Calvinism like "Calvinism teaches the absolute sovereignty of God and the depravity of human beings. They are unable to fathom God's purposes, nor can they dictate their own destinies".³ Xiao Minghan also points out that "Faulkner both inherits and criticizes Christian tradition. Christian has deep impact on him. He publicly says that he believes in God. On the other hand, he criticizes Puritanism and Calvinism strongly" (79). Actually, what he disapproves of is the extreme aspects of Puritanism and Calvinism, i.e. cruelty and selfishness from the deep of his heart but he still believes the good aspects of religion, tolerance and goodness.

Beyond survival Faulkner's characters search for meaning, often through identification with, or rejection of, family. The commandment to "honor thy father and mother"⁴ echoed throughout the southern religious ethos of Faulkner's era. There is also the question of the southern propensity for "ancestor worship"⁵ and the inherent conflicts between "idealization of the family" and some of the central values of Christianity, conflicts so apparent in Faulkner's fiction, from the Compsons to the McCaslins. "The idealization of women, the sanctity of motherhood, the veneration of moral innocence, the defense of sexual purity" collide with "the ethical practices of mutual support, of sympathetic understanding, of loving forbearance, and of truthful candor".⁶

2. ANALYSES OF FAULKNER'S THEMES

Like other Faulkner novels, *Light in August* is kind of hard on religion, in which Faulkner argues that religion is used to justify racism. His anti-Puritanism and anti-Calvinism can be clearly seen throughout the pages of *Light in August*. He also criticizes the Protestant church for it goes against human nature:

Actually, he considers the Doxies of Christianity and Jesus stories as a principle and a moral code. This is not because he doesn't believe the Christian spirit. If he really distrusts it, he could not consider it as social and moral standard.⁷

McEachern's strict Calvinistic beliefs leave no room for joy or fun, and seem to stifle individuality and kills and distorts humanity. The supposed gatekeeper of religion in the novel – Reverend Hightower – was defrocked due to his selfish, bombastic preaching style and his adulterous wife. Mr. Hines uses religion as an excuse to preach

¹ Wilson, *Faulkner and Religion*: 30.

² Wilson, *Faulkner and Religion*: 22.

³ Wilson, *Faulkner and Religion*: 22.

⁴ Exodus, 20:12.

⁵ Wilson, *Faulkner and Religion*: 33.

⁶ Gunn, *Faulkner and Religion*: 49.

⁷ Xiao Minghan, *Studies of William Faulkner*: 76.

white supremacy. While Doc Hines and McEachern use religion in cruel and self-serving ways, in contrast to these depictions, Byron Bunch is sincerely spiritual, and he doesn't advertise or preach, maintaining a quiet spirituality that sustains him throughout the novel. Joe Christmas is depicted as a Jesus Christ figure. The individual linguistic elements in the text add up to a common theme: "Our tragically persistent yearning for a scapegoat",⁸ whether he be Joe Christmas or Jesus Christ.

Light in August retold the story of the New Testament Christ, in much the same way as *Absalom, Absalom!* borrowed from the Absalom episodes found in *Samuel* in the Old Testament. *Absalom, Absalom!* could well signal the peak of Faulkner's career, not only because it builds on such works as *That Evening Sun*, *Evangeline*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, but because it achieves a breakthrough in the art of narration; its structure seeks to push the limits of metaphor to new heights. The structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* employs the biblical creation stories, showing Faulkner's concern about the relationship between humanity and nature and the thin line between human dominion and inappropriate human domination of the rest of the created order. Creating, making order out of chaos, belongs not just to the God of the Judeo-Christian stories, but also to the writer, and to each of his characters. Lindsey explicates Faulkner's Sutpen, demonstrating how Sutpen oversteps his bounds and thereby creates chaos rather than order.

The Sound and the Fury centers on Caddy, and her story is told from different angles four times by her three brothers and another narrator. Faulkner once told one of the interviewers how *Sound and Fury* were written,

It began with a mental picture. I didn't realize at the time it was symbolical. The picture was of the muddy seat of a little girl's drawers in a pear tree... by the time I explained who they were and what they were doing and how her pants got muddy, I realized it would be impossible to get all of it into a short story and that would have to be a book. (Coffee, Jessie Mcguire, 268)

Caddy's soiled drawer is the symbol of depraved Caddy. The degeneration of Caddy gives the Compson family a fatal blow: the eventual suicide of Quentin; Mr. Compson's wantonly ruining himself in drinking; Jason's lifelong resentment to Caddy and her daughter because of the loss of the job opportunity in bank; Benjy's loss of Caddy's care and love and being entrapped in inextricable suffering; and Caddy herself being reduced to being a mistress of a Nazi general. The image of Caddy's soiled drawer is closely related to the fall of man in the Old Testament, the original sin, which begins with the fall of woman. More importantly, the fall of Caddy is also related to the degeneration of the southern values. In addition, the novel is placed in temporal context of the passion week of Jesus Christ: the Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter

Sunday. In sharp contrast to the Bible, Jesus Christ sheds his last blood to save the whole human kind, what we see in the novel is the bleak and gloomy scene in Compson family: Mrs. Compson lying in bed, fragile and dying with the book fallen to the ground, Jason driving his car desperately in hot pursuit of little Quentin.

3. ANALYSES OF SEVERAL OF FAULKNER'S CHARACTERS

In *Light in August*, there are several Christian characters, among whom Joe Christmas is intentionally compared to Jesus Christ: both were humiliated before death, and then tortured and killed on Friday; both were 33 years old when executed. To some degree, both were the scapegoats of human being. Christmas' tragedy is not made by himself but the religion and reality. Born an orphan, maybe with Negro blood, he had in all his life been demanding his identity. His process corresponded to people in the modern western world, a wasteland, without the guidance of God. The great tragic force in Joe Christmas came from the clash of his private world and the world at large. He tried to assert himself from the inner self outward in terms of a recognizable systematic set of moral standards and religious beliefs. He was a mixture of heroism and sorrow, a person who was lost, miserable and of endurance. Even the murder he committed in the end was merely a way of securing his belief instead of the religious belief forced into him by his godfather McEachern, and getting rid of the bondage of Puritanism, for the woman he killed the representative of Puritanism and had turned him into a devil without humanity. If Jason Compson can be regarded as a total Satan, Joe Christmas can be considered, to some extent, a perverted Christ figure, for "he was the one who had been taken in sin and was being tortured with punishment." (Faulkner, 1990) It is Joe Christmas who is a reflection of Faulkner's conflicting religious belief.

In *Light in August*, Lena Grove, a "simple girl with a simple faith" (Faulkner, 1946), was on her long voyage from Alabama to seek the father of her child. She proved a substitute for original sin and also proved that social pretensions were not necessary, or at least that it was possible to exist without them. She was untouched by the violence of the outside world, and was an embodiment of life. "Saintly in her innocence a simplicity, and fertile as against the meaningless existence of people like Joanna Burden, she represents, together with Byron Bunch, a reinvigorating life force which stems from an unquestioning affirmation" (Faulkner, 1946). She resigned herself to adversity but always struggled against her fate to win a better future. She was quite clear that her fate was nothing but marrying a man, bearing children, but she was determined to have her own views. So she ran away from her family, contending with her fate. It never occurred to her that she needed anyone's mercy, for she

⁸ Hlavsa, *Faulkner and Religion*, 138.

firmly believed that God would take care of her. It was just this natural faith that supported her trekking a long way to look for her man.

Faulkner's anti-Calvinism can also be vividly seen from the sharp contrast of two characters, Lena Grove and Mr. Hightower. Lena is always on her way, while Mr. Hightower always sits by the window; Lena always walks to the sunshine while Mr. Hightower always lives in a dark room; Lena is young and energetic while Mr. Hightower is old and dark; Lena symbolizes fertility while Mr. Hightower is a symbol of fruitlessness and poverty. Moreover, Mr. Hightower lives in solitude and loneliness while Lena can always attract people's attention and get the best out of people. She is an embodiment of the Virgin Mary. In the end, Lena prevails Mr. Hightower in that he not only helps deliver Lena's child but also feels again the vitality and joy of life and love for people, which are the essence of Faulkner's religious belief.

Delsi in *The Sound and the Fury* is a simple and plain black woman shining with human nature. Faulkner gives her a kind of image of a pious servant, but she is no doubt a righteous and unselfish, benevolent and lofty person with firm belief and moral principles. She treats people around her with kindness, lavishing more care of Benjy and little Quentin, and silently making sacrifice for the family without complaint. She is also the one who daringly opposes to such evil person as Jason by rebuking his cruelty and ruthlessness. Here again emerge the compassion, pity and the sacrifice and moreover, the courage. Therefore, the purpose of shaping such a character as Delsi in this novel is not to preach how a Christian disciple should behave like her, but rather to highlight those refined qualities that Faulkner cherishes and emphasizes in his Nobel Prize Awarding Speech.

4. CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION IN FAULKNER'S NOVELS

Faulkner's life as a writer was not an easy one. It was not until he received the Nobel Prize in 1950 that his stature as a writer was secured. Before then, Faulkner was generally considered by most critics as a minor regionalist. Now Faulkner is regarded as one of America's and the world's greatest writers has left us with a collection of literature that compellingly captures the intricate nuances and complexities of experience. His imagination not only created entirely new and original works, but spiraled back on itself as it incorporated ideas, themes, situations, events from previous works of literature as it brought to perfection the work at hand. His experiment with narrative form and structure, moreover, has profoundly impacted the shape of the twentieth-century novel and will no doubt continue to do so for future generations.

William Faulkner shows his deep concern about the dilemma and spiritual conditions of humankind in all

of his literary works. Deeply influenced by the Christian traditions and cultures in the process of growing up, Faulkner holds the belief that religion is indispensable to human beings since it can provide people with powerful spiritual support to conquer all the obstacles and hardships, to overcome the temptations and seductions from both inner weakness of human natures and the external influences of evils, and to purify, to improve and to sublimate the spiritual and moral conditions of people's souls. In this sense, for Faulkner, the process of writing itself then becomes a "leap of faith",⁹ a statement of the novelist's religious belief.

The Bible can be called the source of Faulkner's works. It not only inspires him to write but also provides the most important context for the understanding of Faulkner's novels, which to some extent, can be read as an interpretation and explanation of *the Bible*. The themes, biblical archetypes, and characters in his works can be traced back to it. However, Faulkner does not follow the norms, the doctrines and the standards of Christianity blindly or dogmatically, but borrows the Christian philosophy and other elements as the artistic means to reveal and to expose the real condition of mankind in general, and the religious dilemma of the South America in particular. Although his works are fraught with darkness, evils and degeneration, Faulkner always advocates that he has a strong faith in people and his novels are full of hope and a bright future for humankind.

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⁹ Marshall, III, *Faulkner and Religion*, 191.