

RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S NOVELS

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If a writer's final aim is to discover and present his own truth about human life, William Faulkner's fiction has certainly attained that aim with singular clarity and force. There are several facets to the truth seen and reflected in his work, but at its core lies the age-old assumption that man is guilty. It is this assumption that forms the basis of the tragic world created in Faulkner's novels.

Faulkner believed in the existence of God and, although a lack of order in the general management of the universe is sometimes hinted at in his work ("The world ain't run as it ought to be,") a rebellion on a metaphysical scale is never demonstrated in fictional form. The author's faith in the existence of a creator and his basic assumption of man's guilt place him firmly in the Christian tradition. What is peculiar about this Christianity, however, is that its function remains strictly within the social sphere. Faulkner's God seems to care little about matters of piety or worship. In fact, he does not seem to mind at all if man fails to do his duty by Him. On the other hand, the sins that draw the curse of God upon man, concern man's daily living, namely, his treatment of the land and of other human beings. "Christianity," said the author, "is every individual's individual code of behavior by means of which he makes himself a better human being than he wants to be, if he followed his nature only."¹ However, it is seen in the novels that an individual moral code in itself is not considered sufficient for redemption. Before its validity can be ascertained, it has to be tested in social situations. And a "better" human being is invariably one who is "good" in his relations with others.

Faulkner's definition of Christianity fits the universal verities mentioned in the author's Nobel Prize Speech rather than the principles of a particular denomination. The right relationship with other human beings, then, should be based on love, compassion, pity, humility, pride (of the right sort), endurance and sacrifice.

Man, whom Faulkner's Christianity requires to practise these virtues in his daily living, is by birth neither totally good nor totally depraved. He has potentialities for both.

¹ Jean Stein, "William Faulkner: An Interview", *Three Decades of Criticism*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, 1960, p. 75.

Evil is part of man, evil and sin and cowardice, the same as repentance and being brave. You got to believe in all of them, or none of them.²

It is education that determines the direction in which a man's potentialities will develop. With the totality of his work Faulkner seems to be saying that the frame of no church or temple can be flexible enough to meet the complexity of human relationships and the education that will help man to develop his individual moral code is never the one received within such a frame. Religions have been useful in supplying mankind with examples of superior men -men who were able to live by the universal verities- but that seems to be the extent they have been able to go.

The irony in the human situation is that religious institutions have encouraged by their instructions the evil, rather than the good, in man's nature. For the acts of violence which so often take place in Yoknapatawpha the individual finds an easy support in his religion to justify his incentive to sin against people, in the name of serving God.

Faulkner presents various Protestant sects in Yoknapatawpha as powerful educational moulds which give human personalities inflexible shapes that resist the development of human understanding and compassion. In this world where religious feeling is very strong, the absence of the universal verities in human relationships is deeply emphasized. These verities have been substituted with greed, selfishness, cruelty and indifference until all relations between different social strata, various economic, racial, religious groups, members of decadent aristocratic families and post Civil War bourgeoisie have become non-existent, causing thus the alienation of man from man, and therefore from God, leaving the individual a lonely, haunted creature unable to cope with his tragic destiny.

Whether they are personally guilty or not, many individuals in Faulkner's work are pursued and finally destroyed because they somehow fail to fit the pattern required by one or another kind of religious education. In such a case the struggle may take the form of religious zeal or fanaticism in the people around the individual, or it may take place within his own being, or it may not be a struggle at all but just a fixed social attitude that condemns without fair trial.

Presbyterianism, the predominant protestant denomination among the white in the South, is presented as one of the most active negative forces determining the human relationships in Faulkner's novels. Its principle of the absolute sovereignty of God in man's daily living has resulted in the diminishing of the individual's chances to choose right. Its preoccupation with sin and the depravity of mankind has caused its adherents to hate both their neighbours and themselves. While, on the other hand, the doctrine

2 A. *Fable*, Random House, New York, 1954, p. 203.

of grace through election, together with the belief in the right of the individual to interpret the Bible according to his own conscience, has led to extreme self-righteousness and pride, so that an individual can see it as his right and duty to deal out punishment in this world without waiting for divine punishment. Its cult of hard work as a means of serving God has encouraged materialism. Its rigidly hierarchical system has worked against the spread of true democratic feeling, widening especially the gulf between the white and the Negro.

Among characters in whose undoing Presbyterianism has no little effect, one can mention Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, Benbow and the Goodwins in *Sanctuary*, Joe Christmas in *Light in August* and Charles Bon in *Absalom ! Absalom !*

Caddy starves for love but neither her family nor her lovers can give it to her. The only other one who could have intelligently loved her would have been Quentin, her older brother. Only, Quentin's consciousness is helplessly twisted and distorted by the wrong education he has received. It has become imprisoned within the iron frame of wrong conceptions constituting a mixture of southern code of honor and Presbyterian pre-occupation with sin and its punishment. Quentin finds release in suicide, thus precipitating his own punishment in an Edwardsian hell, leaving his sister alone to cope with her fate as best she can. In spite of what Mr. Compson thinks about women's affinity to evil, Caddy herself has the puritan's magnified conception of carnal sin and her own feelings of guilt intensify her tragedy.

In *Sanctuary* the Presbyterian consciousness itself is presented as the anti-hero, rather than the villain Popeye. For Popeye's villainy Faulkner supplies an explanation in the inherited and environmental conditions. Besides, Temple, Popeye's victim, is far from being innocent. While she is enjoying her rape, Goodwin, a totally innocent man is condemned to death by the outraged community. The actual lynching may have been done by the lower class Baptists whose minister has suggested the burning of the sinful couple in order to teach their child a lesson about the wages of sin, but they are fully supported by the higher class Presbyterians who cannot forgive the Goodwins for their irregular life. In this atmosphere lawyer Benbow finds himself on dangerous grounds too. He goes back to the wife whom he does not love and who does not love him. In fact, the only true family feeling in the novel exists between the outcast couple. Only their relationship is based on love and sacrifice.

Presbyterianism causes great damage in human relationships in *Light in August* also. It is the real arbiter of the fate of Joe Christmas whose character is perhaps not so much sympathetic as tragic. Owing to some inexplicable integrity in his nature, Joe refuses to fit into any of the categories

prescribed by the Presbyterian attitude to life. Two of the three important factors shaping his personality are manifestations of the Presbyterian spirit in two men, Euphues Hines and McEachern.

The five-year-old Joe, an orphan at the white city orphanage in Jefferson, gains his first self-awareness simultaneously with an awareness of being watched. Doc Hines, the man who is watching him, is in reality the boy's grandfather in the guise of a janitor. Both a racial and a religious fanatic, Hines believes that the boy has Negro blood. He sits with an "open book," a favorite symbol with the Presbyterian church, waiting for the day when evil make itself manifest. Hines commits the greatest sin ever committed against Christmas by planting in the child's consciousness the idea that he is different from the other children. *"That is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time,"* the child thinks. Years afterwards when Hines finds his grandson again, Christmas has killed a white woman and is already condemned to death by the Presbyterian Community. Hines takes it upon himself to act as cheerleader in order to bring about his lynching.

McEachern, the foster father of Joe's adolescent years, does not suspect the boy of having Negro blood, but his Presbyterian education has prepared him to expect evil from all men. Therefore, he too watches the boy. This man who is without any traces of compassion for anyone, including himself teaches Joe the principles of hard work and the fear of God. He is not surprised, and he feels justly vindicated, when he finally catches the seventeen-year-old Joe dancing with a girl. At the moment when he is moving forward, as the "actual representative of the wrathful and retributive Throne," to deliver his blow of punishment, he no longer sees a human face before him. It is Satan himself looking through Joe's eyes. McEachern is hit on the head by his foster child and meets his death like a martyr. The authorial comment adds that he is absolved into "nothingness". As a man who has sinned against his fellow creatures one could not possibly expect McEachern to find anything else.

Finally, it is his relationship with a woman that undermines Joe's capacity for endurance. Joanna Burden has been brought up as a Unitarian by her grandfather Calvin whose attitude to life is very much like the attitude of the Presbyterians. The only difference is that the Burdens hate slavery and slave-holders with the same fervor as McEachern hates hell. Although the Burdens work for the betterment of the Negro, they believe in his baseness and have no affection for him. Consequently, the work they do has nothing of compassion or understanding. It is her perverted love of self-degradation and self-torture that makes Joanna try to help Joe, hoping thus, to punish herself and to put him in his place as a Negro. Christmas will not be categorized as anything, and when she at last resorts to prayer, he has to kill her in order to stop her.

In *Absalom! Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen has inborn characteristics that make him prone to tragedy. The unshakable faith in his reasoning capacity is his own, and so is the determination to exercise his free will in carrying out his decisions to their logical conclusions. Both of these characteristics can be seen at work very early in his career when, at the age of thirteen, he is deciding on the weapons with which to fight the enemy.

Beginning, however, from the day when he is sent away from the front door of a rich plantation owner, he sets about acquiring new qualities that he sees as necessary for the accomplishment of his design. His materialism, for example, is neither innate, nor is it a quality borrowed from the North. It is a by-product of Presbyterianism. In the South where the soil is so fertile as to awaken the greedy instinct in any man, materialism has been the rule of the day since the time of the earliest settlers whose revealing family histories are carefully recounted by the author. Also the rigidly hierarchical social order set up by the white Presbyterian landowners in the South is at first very foreign and puzzling to Sutpen, but soon he learns to consider it as just and right, and when he works his way up, he defends it with the fervor of a religious convert, which, in a sense, he is. Finally, the total disregard he develops for human feelings and "soft virtues" such as pity, gentleness and love is also typically Presbyterian.

As an antithesis of the Presbyterian attitudes represented by Sutpen, a completely different frame of reference is offered in the novel in the standards and values of Catholicism. Sutpen's first and abandoned child, Charles Bon, has been brought up by his octaroon mother in the fatalistic and morally relaxed atmosphere of New Orleans. Not being materialistic like his father, all Bon wants is to extract a recognition from him. Sutpen's adopted standards do not of course allow him to recognize a son with mixed blood. In desperation Bon presents himself as an open target for the bullets of his Jefferson half-brother Henry. In a similar situation in *Light in August* Christmas commits murder first and then lets himself be caught. For, after all, he is brought up in the puritanical atmosphere of Jefferson where suppressed emotions tend to find an outlet in violence.

While the religious teaching of various protestant sects such as Presbyterianism, Methodism and Baptism and even Unitarianism work their harmful effects on laymen, few men of religion acting as pastors for these churches are able to establish any sort of relationship with God, because they are guilty in their relationships with other human beings.

Hightower, the preacher in *Light in August*, does more harm than good, because he is so wrapped up in his dreams of the part played by his grandfather during a Civil War battle in Jefferson that he fails to notice either his flock or his wife who need his help. Suffering and recognition do come to him, but that is very late in life when he has been shaken into a conscious-

ness of others by some violent experiences. Being forced to deliver Lena Grove's baby and deciding to try to protect Christmas from his pursuers, Hightower pays with involvement for the final illumination he gains. Only at this point is he able to achieve an objective assessment of his own character and life. "I was the one," he thinks, "who failed, who infringed. Perhaps that is the greatest social sin of all: ay, perhaps moral sin."

None of the men of religion who are found faulty in their relationships with others is allowed by Faulkner to have the sort of illumination which Hightower has at the end of his life. Brother Whitfield in *As I Lay Dying*, for instance, carries hypocrisy to a point where he is able to deceive even himself. In this novel where actions of small farmers motivated by petty self interest are viewed humorously, Brother Whitfield receives a very harsh judgement. In *A Fable* the catholic priest who comes to tempt the hero is a servant of worldly authority without knowing it. When he notices the duplicity of his position, he is driven to suicide.

In Faulkner's view, then, religious institutions and their clergymen have not only failed in guiding mankind to truth, they have even formed obstacles on the way to it. Looking over the town with its many steeples, Hightower thinks that the professionals who control the church are destroying it. "He seems to see the churches of the world like a rampart, like one of the barricades of the middleages planted with dead and sharpened stakes, against truth and against peace in which to sin and be forgiven which is the life of man".¹

Men of religion who are able to live by the universal verities are few in Faulkner's work, but they exist. They have three common characteristics: they all lack formal clerical education; they are all selfordained; and they are all remarkable men of action rather than pastors of great learning or devotion. Brother Fortinbride in *The Unvanquished*, Brother Tobe Sutterfield in *A Fable*, and Brother Goodyhay in *The Mansion* are such characters.

Fortinbride is a soldier who, after being disqualified by a wound during the Civil War, comes to Jefferson to serve his country as a pastor. Ignoring the missionary aspect of the Methodist religion to which he belongs, he accepts its principle of the brotherhood of men. He acts as a kind of Robin Hood, obtaining mules from northern army troops by using forged documents and selling them back to other northern troops. He then distributes the profits among the poor.

Negro Brother Sutterfield is outside the pale of all religious forms. Significantly, the charity organization of which he is the head calls itself *Les Amis Myriades et Anonyms a la France de Tout le Monde*. Sutterfield alias Tooleyman (short for *tout le monde*) combines in himself Baptism and Masonry, doing all he can to aid the peace movement started by a corporal in the French army during the World War II. A conversation between him and

¹ *Light in August*, the Modern Library, New York, 1950, p. 427.

an English runner is helpful for understanding Faulkner's view of the true function of a man of religion.

"Are you an ordained minister?"
"I don't know. I bears witness."
"To what? To God?"
"To man. God don't need me. I bears witness to him of course,
but my main witness is to man".¹

Brother Goodyhay in *The Mansion* is another veteran soldier. He is not a product of a religious institution either. He too serves man rather than God, and he too is a man of action. Each Sunday he tells his congregation the story of his ordination: he was lying fathoms deep at the bottom of the ocean where he had gone to save another soldier from drowning but had not been able to come up himself; Christ came and called him to duty. And this is how he became a minister, helping the pioneers in a new settlement. His methods of serving mankind are rather unorthodox and sometimes martial; the language he uses while preaching is full of army slang; but his unchanging principles in life are brotherhood, sacrifice and honesty.

However, in Faulkner's work the majority of men and women who are able to live by the universal verities have nothing to do with religious institutions. They may have a personal relationship with God, but even that is not considered important.

Among such individuals there are children, old women, men who till the soil, and Negro nurses. These are all familiar stock characters with an instinctive knowledge of good, but they learn a great deal also through suffering. There are others who are intellectuals, although secular education in a highly mechanized civilization is not presented by the author as a remedy for man's guilty nature. More often, book learning leads to introversion and passivity which are moral sins. Even then an intellectual like Gavin Stevens, for example, is presented as a knight of many virtues, capable of love, suffering and sacrifice. However, he falls short in *Intruder in the Dust* because he must finally classify white and black people as different entities, even though he considers the black superior to the white in many respects.

Then, there are hunters. Although nature is neither good nor evil in itself, it serves as a convenient hunting ground for the discovery of the universal verities in the self. The hunters go through a period of initiation in the forest, learning about the universal varieties through suffering and endurance. The mystical quality of this education makes it a successful counterpart to the unsuccessful religious education received in the church. Ike McCaslin who is an initiated hunter proves his right to the name when he repudiates at twenty-one the ownership of the valuable land acquired by a sinful ances-

1 *A Fable*, Random House, 1954, p. 180.

tor. Then he takes up carpentering, Christ's profession, in order to make a living. However, he too finally fails as an old man in "Delta Autumn". When he is confronted with miscegenation again, this time not in the family's long forgotten ledgers but as living fact, he cannot do anything other than think: *Maybe in a thousand years in America, but not now! Not now!*

No matter by what method these characters have achieved their self-discovery, once they have formed their individual moral code, it becomes almost a ruling passion with them. They feel the necessity to follow the universal varieties with the single-mindedness of a religious zealot. Christian myth too comes handy at this point in the creation of such people. It provides an immediately recognizable system of symbols that evokes the desired responses in the reader.

Significantly, in a frankly allegorical work like *A Fable*, Christian mythology is used with literal accuracy, yet the theme still operates strictly within the boundaries of the social sphere. The Corporal resembles Christ outwardly and inwardly in many ways. He goes through Christ's experiences of temptation and denial during the Passion Week. At the end of this week he dies at stake between a thief and a murderer, leaving behind him his eleven disciples to continue his work. He is a peace worker, trying to persuade the soldiers to stop fighting in order to enforce a peace treaty among hostile governments.

The two opponent camps in the novel, the forces of war and of peace, are supported on the one side, by economic and social superiority, position, rank, uniform and rules, and on the other, by man's desire for freedom to live and let live. As opposed to the French Marshall, the champion of the former camp, the Corporal, the champion of the latter, is free from all the blinding social ties. He is poor, of obscure origin, he has no position or rank or noticeable uniform or any regard for rules. Although the whole story is presented in an openly Christian context, the hero himself is not religious, nor does he make any reference to a metaphysical system in order to convince the soldiers. He is respectful of all religions and their representatives as long as they do not interfere with what he is trying to do. When they do interfere, he quietly pushes them aside.

As the Corporal is being driven on an open truck between the rows of people cursing him for his "treason", his face harbors no illusions about the results of his act. Rather than being the face of a martyr, this is the face of one who has attained tragic illumination. He definitely is not in a religious ecstasy. Neither does he want to die. He does what he does because he feels he must. The deed done by the responsible individual is its own reward or punishment. Man is responsible to man not to God.