

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it would be safer to say that Faulkner is a profoundly religious writer; that his characters come out of a Christian environment, and represent whatever the shortcomings and whatever their theological heresies, Christian concerns; and that they are finally to be understood only by reference to Christian premises.¹

Brooks in his article "Faulkner's Vision of Good and Evil" suggests that Faulkner takes a Christian stand as a writer and that a better comprehension of the characters would be achieved if the characters are studied in the light of "Christian premises". We should also note that critics on Faulkner have held views that differ from Cleanth Brooks's as to :-

1. How religious Faulkner was ;
2. What his religious ideas were grounded upon;
3. What extent, religious readings can be extracted from textual analyses of Faulkner's works ;
4. The varying religious stands of his characters, both black and white;
5. How one can determine the sort of religious meaning in Faulkner's works.

I intend to present in the course of my thesis on Faulkner a study of Christian Humanism as I see it depicted in his Afro-American women characters. Although I am limiting the field of my study to this specific question, I am not asserting Christian Humanism to be the only element in the study of Christianity in Faulkner's works. However, I will try to present a case for the existence of Christian Humanistic traits in these Afro-American women characters.

This new humanism, has... a real and effective respect for human dignity and for the rights of human personality. It is not to the dynamism or the imperialism of a race, or of a class, or of a nation, that it asks men to sacrifice themselves: it is for the sake of a better life for their fellows and for the concrete good of the community of human individuals.²

Jacques Maritain in *True Humanism* , explains what humanism should ideally entail. Humanism points to a devotion, a desire to safeguard human interests and human welfare. The crux of the matter here is that human life should be regarded with value and honour. Being humanistic would necessitate living life as meaningfully as possible as well as positively upholding human life unselfishly and purposefully.

The word humanism could perhaps be better explained when seen in context with the period of Renaissance, when the term humanism was created.

The Renaissance period began in the late 14th century in Northern Italy and gained momentum in spreading during the 15th and 16th centuries. The word 'renaissance' conveys the meaning of *rebirth, rejuvenation*.

What was of valuable essence during the Renaissance period was the rebirth of ancient art and culture. Renaissance Humanism stressed and placed an intrinsic value on man. Man was deemed capable of achieving much and this thought contrasted with the main thought during the age before Renaissance, that of the Dark Ages, which was that life in every sense was seen solely and singularly in relation to God.

With this different view of man and his potential to live life to maximum expectations, man was held up to be special and significant. Thus there was emphasis on the *individualism* of man - separate in his worth and dignity. Also, the crucial difference between the humanists and the traditionalists, arose in the fact that the humanists believed that individual effort could make a difference and could bring about man's own salvation, whereas the traditionalists did not.

"Throughout the whole medieval period, the point of departure had always been God. The humanists of the Renaissance took as their point of departure man himself."³

This theme of humanism, where life is seen as revolving around man, suggests in the study of these Afro-American women characters that although the roles they play in the respective novels may not always be leading ones, they should be considered important because they are above all people too.

What is the connection between Humanism and Christian Humanism ?

Christian Humanism shares with other humanistic philosophies the desire to protect and enhance human beings but it is unique in finding the source and goal of human powers in God the Creator, Redeemer and Spirit. ⁴

Desiderius Erasmus was notably the most important Christian Humanist. A. H. T.

Levi comments on Erasmus's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*,

The most interesting features of the *Enchiridion* are its emphasis on interior, evangelical piety and its use of a frankly neoplatonist psychology to support it. It is essentially a guide to Christian living...
...Christ appears above all as the exemplar of patience, humility and the passive virtues. ⁵

The characters Dilsey Gibson, Mollie Beauchamp, Clytie Sutpen and Nancy Mannigoe to a certain extent, all manifest this exemplary "patience, humility and passive virtues" and they are not verbal characters. Thus symbolically these women would appear to have characteristics reminiscent of Christ Himself.

This fact is encouraging in the process of examining the possible existence of Christian Humanistic traits in these women.

Franklin and Shaw explain in *The Case for Christian Humanism* that,

Christian humanism points to the deep interest in human life, well-being, culture and significance, that belongs to the Christian faith. Central to that faith is Jesus Christ...⁶

Christian Humanism is not a religion but Christian Humanism as a philosophy has its roots in the Christian religion. The whole basis of Christian Humanism lies in the importance attached to man the individual.

It is a belief that emphasizes the sharing of common human needs and difficulties and this belief seeks to overcome human shortcomings and failings through the power in man himself that comes from God.

Critics have debated and discussed the presence of Calvinism, Humanism, Stoicism and Puritanism as elements discernible in Faulkner's characters. I do not think Faulkner acknowledged himself being all or any of these - Calvinist, Stoic, Puritan or Humanist or holding to any particular one of these beliefs.

A son of the South, Faulkner was undeniably influenced... also by the South's predominantly Christian culture.⁷

Faulkner himself acknowledged his religious background, maintaining that while he had never accepted as true the dogmas of any particular Christian Sect, having grown up in what Mencken labelled " the Bible Belt, " he had unconsciously absorbed a Judaeo - Christian tradition...⁸

What I am highlighting in my area of research is that possibly there do exist Christian Humanist traits in Faulkner's Afro-American women characters. Faulkner as creator of these characters may not have intended them overtly to be seen as Christian Humanists, but I will prove that these Afro-American women characters do possess Christian Humanistic traits. Next, I will have to ascertain whether these Afro-American women characters, with their roles in the novels in which they appear, are conscious of being Christian Humanists though not under this label. Their behaviour, actions and beliefs, as well as their relationships with those they come into contact with will be studied, for these could suggest the presence of Christian Humanistic traits in them.

Christianity is well known historically to have been accepted in Africa itself. Joseph E. Harris in his work, *Africans and Their History* states that :-

The ancient kingdom of Ethiopia evolved around and became known by its capital, Axum. Much of Axum's early history is shrouded in legend.

The kingdom continued a trend toward unification and the development of its own culture which was manifested largely in the Ethiopian Church, one of the oldest and most significant institutions in Ethiopian history...

Christianity existed in Axum before it became the official religion. One tradition relates Ethiopia's conversion by St. Matthew who allegedly preached there... Christianity became the official religion in the fourth century A.D. ...

Only in Egypt and in Ethiopia did Christian communities find a way of surviving the onslaught of Islam.⁹

Slavery - the traffic of human beings is an act both despicable and shocking.

Slavery has a history in that the practice of slavery dates back a long way.

When the Christians of Western Europe began to turn their attention to the trade in men in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were not introducing a new practice among human beings .

...Slavery was widespread during the earliest known history of Africa as well as of other continents.¹⁰

Some prominent European attitudes about Africans, during the period of the Atlantic Slave Trade, regarding slavery and Christianity were biased and condescending.

The image of Africans as inferiors was reinforced further by arguments of several Christian missionaries, ministers, and others who explained that an African was better off a slave in a Christian Society than free in "African savagery ." ¹¹

These "Christian missionaries, ministers, and others" sought to sanction their act of endorsing and advocating slavery through religious doctrine. They felt that it was correct and justifiable to save the heathen Africans from tribal primitivity and sin. The non-existence of any sort of social status for these African slaves in America, and their oppressed situation made them unable to resist efforts made by white Ministers or their white masters to christianize them.

...Finally, this was the period in which Europeans developed a rationalization for their deeds based on Christianity.
 ... If they were chaining Negroes together for the purpose of consigning them to a lifetime of enforced servitude, it was "a holy cause" in which they had the blessing of both their king and their Church. ¹²

However, converting or baptizing African slaves posed a problem to their white masters. These whites feared that the Christian concept of baptism for the African slaves could lead to a change in their status as slaves or servants-for-life. They feared this change might convert the slaves' status so that the slaves would be free from life servitude.

To quell these doubts, measures were taken to justify the conversion of African slaves to Christianity while retaining their status as slaves.

In 1727 the Bishop of London spoke on the matter, resolving the remaining doubt. "Freedom which Christianity gives," the Bishop declared, "is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men's Lusts and Passions and inordinate Desires; but as to their outward Condition, whatever was before, whether bond or free, their being baptiz'd, and becoming Christians, makes no manner of change in it..."¹³

With religious authority determining the "correct " status of the slave, and with laws stating that slaves would not be freed after their conversion, fears and misgivings regarding the consequences of converting the African slaves were quelled.

... several of the American colonies passed statutes which held that conversion did not necessitate manumission.¹⁴

For these baptized African slaves, becoming Christians would necessitate their becoming more obedient and humble servants. White masters understood this as a necessity thoroughly expounded with literal biblical references by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians.

Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ...¹⁵

Ephesians 6:5-6

What these white masters failed or refused to acknowledge was that St. Paul spoke also of the impartiality of God, meaning that before God all men are equal and that masters should treat their servants well.

And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven and there is no partiality with Him.¹⁶

Ephesians 6: 9

Literacy among these slaves was strictly prohibited for fear of the slaves acquiring

knowledge of freedom and equality especially from the Bible . The knowledge of freedom and equality could cause discontent among the slaves against their condition of enslavement, and thus give rise to insurrections.

The Gospel of Christ was travestied and diluted before it came to suit the 'peculiar institution' by which millions of human beings were converted into chattels. ¹⁷

I believe that the slaves on their part, saw and came to learn that Christianity the religion could provide them with a reason to survive in an alien and hostile environment in that Christianity evoked for the slaves a promise of a better life in the eternal sense.

Christianity became for the slaves a balance in which the Christian religion created... solidarity among a people who lacked social cohesion and a structured social life... ¹⁸

W. E. Dubois reaffirms the positive influence of the Christian religion on the African-American in that he saw the black American Church being ... the only social institution among the Negroes.¹⁹

Christianity became a uniting factor, binding groups of slaves together into a more communalistic whole. The slaves that were landed in America came from countless differing tribes and communication was not easy among themselves. Captured African families were often separated once they reached the colonies. Christianity did not offer these slaves a way out of slavery physically. In fact for a long time, the Christian God that

these slaves were introduced to was a white God. The disparity between colour and race for both the blacks and whites remained distinctly wide even though the African slaves worshipped a white god.

Not so much by what Christianity said as by the way in which through their teachers, it said it, were the Negroes influenced. The teachings they received conveyed for them no clear idea or definite impression of the religion of Christ. As regards their religion, they were left less to their intellectual apprehension of the truth than to their emotional impulses. ..The influence of the Church was exerted continually to repress to produce absolute outward submission.²⁰

On the other hand, Christianity did open out possibilities for the African slaves if only in terms of their souls' emancipation. I believe that, however ironic the situation, the African slaves were conditioned emotionally and spiritually to believe that Christianity could offer them eternal rewards for patience, meekness and obedience. Holding on to such spiritual values the African slaves were able to endure the various injustices dealt out to them.

...to not a few of them the preaching of the Gospel, defective as its practical exemplification, opened a new world of truth and goodness.²¹

Similarly the white man's language, English, became another means of unification for the black slaves. The adoption of the white man's religion, Christianity, and his language, English, helped to lessen the degree of alienation experienced by the slaves among themselves.

Religion especially offered a basis for sharing whereby the slaves could draw themselves closer together in prayer and worship. Here they felt that they belonged to something - in and through religion they became persons, not just mere chattels of their white masters.

Black folk religion has always had a pronounced communal aspect ; the characteristic Evangelical concern for the individual salvation has been tempered by the need for collective expression of spirituality. ²²

In Faulkner, folk religion is that among the plain folk, the poor whites, and blacks. ²³

Thus religion for the Afro-Americans, or for the slaves as they were known before Emancipation, was a very verbal experience. In Faulkner's depiction of black Christianity as in the Easter Sermon by Reverend Shegog in *The Sound And The Fury*, there is an unmistakable and a tremendous sense of uplift for the church people (all blacks except for Benjy Compson - the retarded white child of the Compson family) as they participate in listening to the Word of God. Reverend Shegog's sermon is not without verbal effects.

What about the black characters in Faulkner's works? What is their stand on religion - as portrayed by Faulkner?

The religion of black Southerners in Yoknapatawpha County was centered on a personal faith in Jesus, a loving Counsellor and friend.²⁴

(Question) Q : Mr.Faulkner, you have been called, among other things, Christian humanist. I was wondering if you would tell me what you consider your relationship to the Christian religion ?

(Answer -
Faulkner) A : Why the Christian religion has never harmed me. I hope I never have harmed it. I have the sort of provincial

Christian background which one takes for granted without thinking too much about it, probably. That I'm probably within my own rights I feel that I'm a good Christian - whether it would please anybody else's standard or not I don't know. ²⁵

Faulkner's view on Christianity is somehow reflected in his portrayal of Dilsey, Mollie and Nancy. These Afro-American women characters do not see religion as something to be judged - to them religion becomes a way of living.

The issue to be addressed is the possibility of the selected Afro-American women characters showing elements of Christian Humanism. The characters who will be studied and discussed are drawn from these novels listed in the order in which they were published.

1. Dilsey Gibson, *The Sound and The Fury*, 1929.
2. Clytie Sutpen *Absalom, Absalom!*, 1936.
3. Mollie Beauchamp, *Go Down Moses*, 1942.
4. Nancy Mannigoe, *Requiem for a Nun*, 1951.

My purpose in selecting these Afro-American women characters in a chronological context is to study the possibility of whether the portrayal of Afro-American women characters has undergone noticeable and significant changes within a span of twenty-odd years in the course of Faulkner's writing career.

These salient features will be examined in the course of my thesis.

1. Faulkner's portrayal and depiction of Afro-American women characters will be studied in relation to these chronological differences.
2. The crux of this study will entail the examining of Christian Humanistic elements or traits in these Afro-American women characters.
3. What does it mean for these Afro-American women characters to be Christians ?
4. Can a notion of Black Christian Humanism exist in Faulkner's works via the depiction of these Afro-American women characters in the selected novels ?

This study will also include the determining of Faulkner's stand on Afro-American women, based on my on-going research of reading into the possibility of finding Christian Humanistic traits in these characters.

An important issue will be this :-

With the passage of time, does Faulkner's characterization of

Afro-American women characters become more complex and challenging?

The study of these four Afro-American women characters will also take into account their differing ages, background, personality traits and the roles they play in the respective novels.

Dilsey Gibson appears in *The Sound And The Fury* (1929). Dilsey is the housekeeper in a white household - a rather stereotypical role, but she symbolizes also,

1. A maternal figure.
2. A strong woman in the midst of white negation and decadence depicted by the Compson family whom she works for.
3. One who endures in times of adversity and trial.

Dilsey is the moral gauge by which certain characters in the white family she works for are measured against. Although she is depicted with the traditional Afro-American characteristic of slavish endurance and perseverance in troubled times expected of African-Americans by whites, her religiosity is symbolic of her humaneness and Dilsey's religiosity is marked by her sincere and naturally compassionate and kind acts. She respects human life and she censures wrong.

In 1936, Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!* Clytemnestra's (Clytie in abbreviation) role in the novel is perhaps a minor one in terms of appearance when it stands in comparison to the primary characters. Clytie is the child of Thomas Sutpen and a black slave woman. Clytie is the product of miscegenation. Towards the end of the novel, Clytie is featured dramatically. She sets the house on fire with Henry, her half-brother and herself in it. Henry is Thomas Sutpen's son from his marriage to Ellen Coldfield, a white woman. Clytie sacrificed both Henry's and her own life because she felt that she had to save Henry from what she thought were the authorities coming to arrest Henry for a murder he committed over forty years ago. Henry shot Charles Bon, his sister's fiancé.

Charles Bon was actually Henry's half-brother. Charles was the child of Thomas Sutpen's first marriage to Eulalia Bon, a woman who had "Negro blood" in her. Thus, Charles would have "Negro blood" in him as well.

Mollie Beauchamp is featured in *Go Down Moses* (1942). In *The Fire And The Hearth*, Mollie becomes a sort of surrogate mother to a motherless white infant. She is at her master's house for six months and this causes Lucas, her husband, anguish and bitterness. Lucas suspects his master of taking advantage of his wife. Mollie on her part is not ignorant of her husband's sentiments on the matter but she continues nursing the white infant even in the midst of tension. Is Mollie being fair here? For the sake of a motherless infant Mollie has to be away at the master's place and this jeopardizes her relationship with her husband. In *Go Down Moses*, Mollie's grandson is killed in the North and Mollie is determined to give her grandson a decent burial. She blames her white master for her grandson's death for it was the master who sent her grandson away after he had been caught stealing money from the plantation commissary. She says the white master has sold her Benjamin to the Land of Egypt. This biblical reference coupled with the significance of the title, *Go Down Moses* can be a sign of some religious significance. Her grandson was not without moral failings but she is convinced that the white master led her grandson to his death. She wants a decent burial for him. She has taken matters into her own hands.

Nancy Mannigoe is featured in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951). She works for a white family and in the novel she is known as a "nigger, dope-fiend whore". She is later brought to trial for murdering one of the two children under her care. She commits the murder in order to save the child, the child's brother and the mother of these two children from evil. She is to be hanged for this.

However Nancy has sacrificed her apparently worthless "nigger, dope-fiend, whore" life to save a disintegrating white marriage and family, for Temple Drake, the mother, planned to leave the family with another man.

My basis for examining whether these Afro-American women characters possess features of Christian Humanism lies in their actions and relationships towards those they come into contact . I mean to study and examine their *behavioural attitudes*.

Dilsey's (*The Sound And The Fury*), Mollie's (*Go Down Moses*) and Nancy's (*Requiem for a Nun*) characters are similar in that they all work for white households. Clytie on the other hand is the child of a black slave and a white master. She lives in the house but her role is somewhat relegated to that of housekeeper.

There are likenesses between Clytie and Nancy running through both their portrayals. Both of them sacrifice their lives in order to save another ; in both situations, the ones saved were whites. Both achieved this through violent and drastic means. Dilsey and Mollie played more domesticated and family-oriented roles in comparison with Nancy and Clytie. For both Dilsey and Mollie, their being in more conventionally domesticated roles could lead one to see them painted as stereotypical figures. What I attempt to prove is that their actions are possibly Christian Humanistic despite the fact that they are invested with the stereotypical trait of being the traditional housekeeper - mammy type looking after white children.

Their actions count more than anything else, because these Afro-American women characters live life more in the manner of doing things than of thinking and searching for answers.

Faulkner does not provide an insight into Dilsey's, Mollie's, Clytie's and Nancy's inner selves.

We are not told at length of their thoughts, emotions, feelings. What is conveyed to us are their actions and their actions both verbal and physical are motivated by concern and love in wanting to help those whom they feel are in need.

Clytie's and Nancy's cases as possibly showing traits of Christian Humanism may be difficult to prove because both of them commit violent acts to bring about good. Both Clytie and Nancy deal with sacrifice in order to save. Clytie sacrifices her life and that of her half-brother Henry. Nancy sacrifices the life of a baby girl to save the child and child's brother and their mother (Temple Drake) from the evil influence that threatens the family's security. Both Nancy and Clytie believed they tried to save. The pertinent reminder here is that both Clytie and Nancy sacrificed their lives too.

God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in union with God and God lives in union with him.²⁶

1 John 4 : 16

These women do love and they know how to love even if they do it in their own difficult to understand ways. They must know God.

Endnotes

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