BIBLE-INSPIRED IMAGES AS REPRESENTED IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S "CURSED" SOUTH

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Abstract: *The South has been known as the "Lost Cause," crushed to its soul by an experience of defeat. But, out of defeat, there rose an extraordinary Southern religious and biblical literature in the twentieth century, in which William Faulkner holds a special part, since he was undeniably influenced both by the South's heritage of defeat and by its predominantly Christian culture. Faulkner himself acknowledged this religious background even though he had never accepted as true the dogmas of any particular Christian denomination. Yet, he unconsciously absorbed a Judeo-Christian, biblical tradition. Considering several references to Faulkner's use of biblical topics in novels such as* ***The Sound and the Fury****,* ***Light in August****, and* ***Absalom, Absalom!****, we intend to highlight the Biblical imagery of curse and some types/ante-types of Faulknerian characters, as represented against the biblical background in the American South.*

Keywords: *Biblical images/representations, Biblical representation, Curse, archetypal criticism.*

Conceptual Framework

The mythical method of writing, supported by the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in analyzing the role of the subconscious mind in human behavior, promotes the well-known concept that individuals possess not only a personal but also a "collective" unconscious, or "racial memory" in which are stored "archetypes" that embody the memories and experiences of the entire human race. These archetypes, also known as "primordial images," have supplied the characters, situations, symbols, and themes of stories from primitive societies onward throughout history. According to Hamblin, these archetypal symbols, motifs, and character types will naturally and unconsciously find expression in literary works via writers who are individuals in whom the working of the collective unconscious is particularly strong (Hamblin, 2004: 2).

While William Faulkner seems to have had little direct involvement with the works or ideas of Freud, Jung, he clearly identified with the basic principles of the mythic approach to literature. On at least one occasion, Faulkner discussed the symbolic aspects of his work in language that almost exactly parallels Jung's notion of the collective unconscious. "What symbolism is in the books," Faulkner told one interviewer, "is evidently instinct in man, not in man's knowledge but in his inheritance of his old dreams, in his blood perhaps his bones, rather than in the storehouse of his memory, his intellect" (Meriwether and Millgate, 1968: 126). The writer, Faulkner also said, "collects his material all his life from everything he reads, from everything he listens to, everything he sees, and he stores that away in a sort of filing cabinet" (Gwynn and Blotner, 1959: 116).

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Representations of Biblical/Archetypal Imagery in Faulkner's Work

A starting point for discussing the presence of the Bible in imaginative literature might be C. S. Lewis's monograph *The Literary Impact of the Authorized* Version, where he emphasized the distinction between the Bible as literary source and literary influence. As a consequence, "a source gives us things to write about; an influence prompts us to write in a certain way" (Lewis, 1963: 15).

Needless to say, the Bible is the basic text of American civilization, its influence having been identified since the colonial beginnings and consequently in Faulkner's fiction (Murphy, 2006: 141). At the simplest level, Faulkner used the Bible as a source of titles and plots for his works. For instance, the writer approaches the Biblical story of Absalom in his novel *Absalom, Absalom!* , reminiscent of 2 Samuel 13-18, in which King David's eldest son, Amnon, has incestual relations with his sister Tamar. In retribution, their brother Absalom kills Amnon. The title alludes specifically to 2 Samuel 18, in which David learns of Absalom's death by Joab, and one can easily parallel the Biblical adulterous episode with the one in the novel.

Moreover, the Bible is the most familiar and a definitive version of the archetypes of literature. Northrop Frye calls it "a grammar of archetypes" – the place where we can find them in their most systematic and complete form (Frye, 1957: 135). Often writers use devices of disclosure that invite us to connect their archetypes with the Bible. William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* for instance emphasizes the archetypal journey of a discontented young man away from home to a life of work that finally brings disillusionment, followed by a return to the protagonist's home. This is obviously a reenactment of the inverted archetype of the prodigal son, as Faulkner hints when he tells the story of Thomas Sutpen.

It goes without saying that biblical imagery has been a dominant influence on American fiction. In 'Myth II' from *The Great Code*, Frye examines natural images as primary features of the Bible. There are two levels of nature, lower and higher, the one to be dominated and exploited by humans and the other to which humans can belong with redemption. These representations constitute part of what Frye calls the 'apocalyptic world,' the vision that the human creative imagination sees, the model that human energy attempts to bring into being, and the blueprint that the Bible presents as a structure of revelation (Frye, 1982: 139). Frye also notes that 'in between the demonic and the apocalyptic come the Old Testament types, which the Christian Bible regards as symbols or parables of the existential form of salvation presented in the New'. As an illustration of this structure, Frye examines the female figures in the Bible, mothers and brides (*Ibidem*: 140-2).

A son of the South, Faulkner was undeniably influenced not only by the South's heritage of defeat, but also by the South's predominantly Christian culture. Faulkner himself acknowledged this religious background, maintaining that while he had never accepted as true the dogmas of any particular Christian sect, having grown up in what Mencken labeled "the Bible Belt," he had unconsciously absorbed a Judeo-Christian tradition: "My life was passed, my childhood, in a very small Mississippi town, and that was part of my background. I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I might believe or disbelieve – it's just there" (Fowler and Abadie, 1991: xi).

Essayists who consider how a Christian frame of reference informs Faulkner's fiction include William Lindsey, Glenn Meeter, and Virginia Hlavsa. Lindsey, for instance, focuses on Faulkner's use in *Absalom, Absalom!* of a central myth of the

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Judeo-Christian tradition, the creation myth. According to Lindsey, Faulkner parallels the Sutpen story with the Genesis account to expose and to explain the failure of Sutpen's design: Sutpen fails to create order because he is blind to his own complicity in the disorder and irrationality he seeks to eradicate. Also examining *Absalom, Absalom!* in relation to the Bible, Glenn Meeter makes a convincing case for a Biblical analogy for the telling of the Sutpen story. More specifically, the Sutpen story is pieced together, told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted, expanded and condensed in the same way that, according to modern Biblical scholarship, the Bible was transmitted. The relationship between Faulkner's texts and Sacred Scripture also figures importantly in Virginia Hlavsa's paper. In "The Crucifixion in *Light in August*: Suspending Rules at the Post," Hlavsa attempts to demonstrate that the nineteenth chapter of *Light in August*, which recounts the death and castration of Joe Christmas, thematically and verbally echoes John 19, which relates the crucifixion of Christ (*Ibidem*).

Everyone who reads or ever has read William Faulkner "has been confused by the long sentences, the elaborate syntax, the terrifying action, and the obscure pronoun references. The only way out of such confusion is to go through it. No shortcuts, no substitutes exist for the act of reading Faulkner; but reading Faulkner will teach you how to read Faulkner well" (Towner, 2008: 10-11).

Faulkner scholars in the past have rarely mentioned religion in relation with Faulkner's work. Malcolm Cowley's essay on the Faulkner legend did not include a place for religion, nor did George Marion O'Donnell's article on "The Mythology of William Faulkner." Later scholars focused on Christian themes, and especially the Christ imagery associated with Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (Cowley 1946, Howe 1951, O'Donnell 1963).

Faulkner explained his views on the Bible. "To me," he says, "the Old Testament is some of the finest, most robust, and most amusing folklore I know. The New Testament is philosophy and ideas, and something of the quality of poetry. I read that, too, but I read the Old Testament for the pleasure of watching what these amazing people did, and they behaved so exactly like people in the nineteenth century behaved. I read that for the fun of watching what people do. The New Testament I would read for the reason that one listens to music, or one would go to a distance to see a piece of sculpture, a piece of architecture" (Jelliffe, 1961: 269).

William Faulkner approaches the Biblical story of Absalom telling the story of the downfall of a family, the gothic tragedy of the house of Thomas Sutpen and his grand "design." Sutpen's journey from the highland to the lowland is presented as a metaphor of the Fall, fact confirmed by the disintegration of the Sutpen family.

Thomas Sutpen: Creator in the Wilderness

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner recounts the story of an American type, a self-made man. Using the mythic language of the Judaeo-Christian creation narratives, Faulkner depicts Thomas Sutpen's settling of a plantation in the wilderness of early nineteenth-century Mississippi as an act of hybris that engenders a series of tragic consequences spanning generations.

According to William D. Lindsey, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Faulkner makes deliberate use of the imagery and rhetoric of the Biblical account of the Judaeo-Christian creation myth (Lindsey, 1991: 86). The creation theme is not incidental to the statement made by the novel. Rather, the inverted creation myth with which the novel begins is central to the Sutpen narrative around which all other narratives in the novel

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revolve. Faulkner employs creation imagery to comment on Sutpen's pretentious self-creation and his ironically destructive creation of the domain of Sutpen's Hundred.

The notion of creation is fundamental to the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. Though the mythic account of the original creation occurs in Genesis, both creation imagery and theological reflection on the theme of creation are to be found throughout the Hebrew and Christian canons. In the view of exegete Gerhard von Rad, the creation motif is so fundamental to the Hebrew scripture that it is the single unifying thread of the disparate literary pieces collected in the book of Psalms.

Recent scholarly discussions of the Biblical creation narrative argue that the creation account is precisely mythic. That is, far from claiming to be scientific descriptions of a historical event, the creation stories are literary reflections on the creative presence of the divine that, in the view of the biblical authors, continuously underlies the natural world. Scholars of religion use the term myth to refer to a sacred story that seeks to depict abstract religious doctrines in literary narrative. As myths, the creation narratives of Genesis have an important function throughout the Judeo-Christian scriptures. This is that of providing a reference point for human attempts to achieve order. A significant motif of the Genesis creation myth is the notion that humanity is endowed by the Creator with the task of exercising dominion over the natural world (Genesis 1:26, 28). As biblical authors reflected on the meaning of this dominion imperative, they saw the task of dominion as that of co-creation, of sharing in the creative responsibility of God for creation and of continuing an unfinished creation. The author of that portion of the book of Isaiah that exegetes call second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) particularly stresses this theme. The Genesis creation myth points primarily not to some originating event of the past, but to an unfinished task that will culminate in the future – the edenic story is a mythic description of the world made perfect through divine-human cooperation.

The creation allusions of *Absalom, Absalom!* have received insufficient scholarly attention. Though H. L. Weatherby admits that Sutpen's garden has mythic Biblical overtones, he thinks that Faulkner failed to make these overtones explicit in *Absalom, Absalom!*.

From his initial appearance in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen is associated with the Biblical theme of creation. As Quentin Compson listens to Miss Rosa Coldfield recount the Sutpen story, Sutpen "abrupts" in Quentin's imagination onto the peaceful wilderness of frontier Mississippi (Lindsey, 1991:89). The word *abrupt* has Biblical resonance: it is epiphanic. It recalls those Biblical passages in which the divine presence manifests itself to humanity (Exodus 19:18). In biblical passages describing divine epiphanies, God "abrupts" suddenly into human history through thunder, fire, smoke – in ways that break through human expectation and shatter human illusion. Significantly enough, in Quentin's imaginative reconstruction of the scene, Sutpen abrupts on the Mississippi frontier with a thunderclap.

Absalom, Absalom! parallels Sutpen's creation of a plantation with the Genesis narrative in another respect. Sutpen appears initially in Jefferson on a Sunday morning, and he returns to the town after having finished his creation of Sutpen's Hundred on another Sunday morning. As with the divine creation of Genesis, he finishes his creation in a seven-day cycle. The Genesis parallel is reinforced by the observation that Sutpen had worked to build his plantation from sunup to sundown; this echoes the "evening came and morning came" of the Genesis story (Lindsey 1991:92).

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Inverted Representations of Innocence and Creation with Faulkner

According to David W. Noble William Faulkner's angle of vision shifted radically as opposed to his fellow writers from the Lost Generation. It changed from that of the individual who considers himself a victim of society because he cannot live a life of innocence, to that of the individual who is victimized by a society that has taught him to strive for innocence (Noble, 1968: 163). Faulkner made an imaginative leap in which he was no longer to accept the image of the self-exiled individual who has chosen alienation as the most important element in his artistic universe.

The Sound and the Fury dramatically rejected the perspective of the alienated individual who withdraws from the world which has failed him. The very structure of the novel symbolizes Faulkner's radically new outlook. He is dealing with a family, not an individual, and he describes the history of the family through the eyes of an idiot, Benjy; a neurotic on the verge of suicide, Quentin; a viciously selfish storekeeper, Jason; and a troubled adolescent girl.

In this novel, Faulkner has come full circle to present the alienated individual, not as an innocent victim but as a destructive being. He suggests that society is not a complex and corrupt entity which threatens the autonomy of the individual, but a wicked environment which teaches the individual the philosophy of selfish alienation, that it is his birthright to be autonomous and innocent and, therefore, self-centered and destructive.

On the other hand, *Light in August* is an allegorical history. The symbol of the alienated man become devil – Joe Christmas – is central to the story. Inhuman theology and the human heart have become organically intertwined in a living monster who represents the South as it tragically exists. Faulkner evokes Lena Grove as a symbol of life in which the ideal must express itself in the mortification of the flesh. Denying the inevitability of human imperfection, the Southern Puritan hates Lena Grove for carrying a new life which symbolizes the continuing imperfection of humanity. "Southern society suffers from the sin of pride; seeing themselves as worldly angels, these people have become worldly devils" (*Ibidem*: 165).

The story of Joe Christmas is the center of the novel, and its structure reveals the reason he cut Joanna Burden's throat and now waits in nearby Mottstown to be captured. The circle that starts from the murder to probe his history and returns to his execution is intimately related to the history of Lena Grove's unborn child. Will her child have the same history as Joe Christmas? When Faulkner poses this possibility, we remember that we are dealing with a Christian allegory whose chief protagonist is Southern society. Will this society accept with love a child born in sin? If it does not, then it must continue to suffer alienation and death. Since the history of Joe Christmas is also one of alienation and death, we must consider him the symbolic representative of the puritanical South itself.

Faulkner defines the place of the Negro in this Puritan imagination. Unwilling to accept responsibility for their own imperfections, the whites had found a scapegoat for their fear and hatred in the Negro. The Negro, that black offspring of the devil, has defiled the Southern Garden. That is why Hines, self-appointed agent of the Lord to defend the virtue of the white race against the evil of the black, declares his daughter's seducer was a Negro. The child of sin who is therefore tainted by blackness must be punished (*Ibidem*: 169).

Joe is not only white, he thinks like a white man. He hates the Negroes who have robbed him of his right to innocence and avoids contact with them. Eventually,

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having arrived at the age when Christ died, he comes to Jefferson, Mississippi, and takes a job in the sawmill. Passing as a white, he keeps himself aloof from the town in an unused shack on Joanna Burden's land. Here, this upholder of Southern white mores, a hater of Yankee "nigger-lovers," he conceives a great revenge. The Negroes, befriended by this Yankee woman, have never turned against her, but Joe Christmas has it in his power to make a Negro violate her trust. He rapes her.

Absalom, Absalom!'s critique of Sutpen is a contribution to modern thought's dissection of the myth of innocence. As Cleanth Brooks observes, Sutpen's innocence is the key to his tragedy (Brooks 1963: 6). His downfall and that of his house are a direct result of his belief that he can create himself and his plantation *ex nihilo*. Sutpen believes this because he presupposes his innocence. Sutpen's downfall is implicit not in his presumption that he can create order out of the chaos of personal and natural existence, but in his assumption that he can do so as a "planner." Sutpen's rationalism, his confidence that one can chart and manipulate the world via human rationality, is in the final analysis a miscalculation that rests on his erroneous belief in human innocence. Sutpen's assumption that he can create himself and his world *ex nihilo* incorporates an assumption of human innocence that allows him to reify others, because it allows him to act without subjecting his motives to radical scrutiny. As Lindsey mentions, "the inverted creation myth of *Absalom, Absalom!* is central to the novel. Though the telling of the myth occupies only a limited space in the narrative, the creation myth functions as a thematic center for several probing intellectual reflections around which the narrative revolves" (Lindsey, 1991: 94).

The notion of original sin is clearly implicit in Faulkner's treatment of Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen's fall is an echo of the primordial fall of the Biblical creation accounts. The novel persistently applies the Biblical term "curse" to Sutpen and his descendants. His calculations go awry because his rationalistic and abstract plans do not recognize the tragically flawed situation in which postlapsarian human beings must achieve their humanity.

Thus, Faulkner confronts Americans who assure themselves of their innocence and of their ability to be self-reliant with the curse on humanity (*Ibidem*: 96). He does so as a warning against the tendency of those who presume themselves to be innocent and capable of self-reliance to become "tragic and pathological figure[s] of alienation" (Noble, 1968: 178).

The Sins of the Fathers Manifested in a Curse

The Deep South was settled partly by aristocrats like the Sartoris clan and partly by new men like Colonel Sutpen. Both types of planters were determined to establish a lasting social order on the land they had seized from the Indians (that is, to leave sons behind them). They had the virtue of living single-mindedly by a fixed code; but there was also an inherent guilt in their "design," their way of life; it was slavery that put a curse on the land and brought about the Civil War. After the War was lost, partly as a result of their own mad heroism they tried to restore "the design" by other methods (Hoffman, Vickery, 1951: 15).

In Faulkner, there is no hope. Though the Redeemer has come, He has left no traces. He has given us only a sense of the irremediable, and the painful memory of our lost Paradise. The Faulknerian tragedy is a tragedy of exile.

The Negroes provide a fluid setting in which the whites act. But children also appear, at many points of the legend. Young Christmas in *Light in August*, living his

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first years in a white orphanage, then in a black orphanage, and knowing hatred while he is still a child; in *The Sound and the Fury* we have the Compson children, Jason, Benjy, Quentin, Caddy; and we know from further information given by the author that his primary purpose was to describe the burial of the grandmother as seen by the children (*Ibidem*: 137). Undoubtedly it is these children, reminders of a hope not yet entirely destroyed, who save Faulkner's world from being altogether cursed.

Joanna Burden's father in *Light in August* has taught her that all Yankees have the burden of caring for the Negro because God has made this burden "the curse of every white child that was ever born and that ever will be born. None can escape it." She must help the Negroes not because they are brothers to be loved but because they are animals that God has placed within the American Eden to be cared for. Like Christmas, then, she expects the Negro to act like a beast and, at last, one has.

For Faulkner, there is no difference between Northern and Southern Puritanism. Joanna Burden, behind her facade of Christian respectability, is the same kind of moral monstrosity as Doc Hines. When she is raped, she enjoys this experience of brute sex without love. She might have been appalled had Joe been a white man but when he tries to shock her by revealing his Negro identity, she is enraptured. She, who has been taught to see Negroes "not as a people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived," has always expected this thing to turn on her. Now that it has, she is glad. For months, she takes Joe nightly as her lover or rather she repeats the ritual of her original rape, as she shouts in ecstasy, "Negro! Negro! Negro!"

It is his sin, not hers, and she descends into the depths of degradation. When the thrill of sin wanes, she must think of regulating and moralizing this relationship. She must be responsible for the Negro even to the point of so humbling herself that she will marry him. Christmas has raped her but she will uplift him. She tells Joe that he will marry her and share her responsibilities of caring for the Negro community (Noble, 1968: 171).

The racial crisis expressed in the person of Joe Christmas points to the deeper sickness of Southern society – its inability to accept imperfection. Joe Christmas is a hideous figure of alienation because he believes that he should be perfect and this birthright has been destroyed by the Negro blood within him. In this attitude, he emerges as the representative of the entire white South. The Negro blood within is imaginary as is its taint of imperfection. For Faulkner, white men and black men are brothers. But white Southerners have imagined that black men are different because they have needed to project their guilt upon this scapegoat. In hating the Negro, however, they have hated their own inadequacy, have hated themselves. In lynching the Negro, therefore, they are lynching themselves, just as when Percy Grimm kills Christmas, he will be killing himself. This is the final turn of the circle of self-devouring death.

The flight ends in Hightower's house, with Percy Grimm shooting Christmas and castrating him. It is a sterile crucifixion because Christmas is filled with hate, not love. As the blood rushes out of his white body, it turns black, as a sign of living death of this society that searches for self-punishment rather than forgiveness. There will be no resurrection and redemption; here, there is no forgiveness of sin (*Ibidem*: 175).

Faulkner discarded his view that the self-reliant, innocent individual represented an absolute good which faced martyrdom at the hands of a corrupt and complex society. He argued that an individual who defined himself as innocent and self-reliant was a tragic and pathological figure of alienation. This monstrous individual was alienated from the true meaning of life, not from society.

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Among the numerous references to the Bible in Faulkner's work which contribute to its legendary tone, there is no mention of the crossing of the desert. Such an allusion is, however, essential. The crossing of the desert lasted forty years, and these forty years of austere preparation shaped and formed the people of the Old Testament. When Moses spoke to them before they entered the land of Canaan, he gave them many recommendations, commandments and warnings, and ended by saying: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, death and evil." We must go one step beyond Faulkner, to the inevitable battle, for only struggle will deliver the exiled generation from terror and from death (Hoffman, Vickery, 1951: 138).

Concluding Remarks

The Bible is the basic text of American civilization, its influence having been identified since the colonial beginnings and consequently in Faulkner's fiction. Consequently, the novelist approaches the Biblical stories involving creation, innocence and curse in three of his most read novels: *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In light of the above, we have highlighted the Biblical imagery of curse, innocence and creation as represented against the biblical background in the American South and we have identified a variety of types/ante-types/representations in the novels under scrutiny, all these pointing to the aware or unaware biblical imbued Faulknerian fiction.

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