

Chapter IV

The symbolism in novels and short stories :

-William Faulkner's greatness as an artist is due to a great extent to what might be called his stereoscopic vision, his ability to deal with the specific and the universal simultaneously to make the real symbolic without sacrificing reality. He adopted devices like myth, symbol, various narrative techniques with a view to project his vision. Besides these devices, he frequently employs mythological allusions with a view to broaden the perspective of his novels. He also uses Biblical allusions to give depth and universality to his works. Symbolism is a technique by which he discovers, objectifies, explores, and evaluates his subject. It is a means of conveying his ideas the meanings of which remain somewhat unexpressed in simple, obvious terms. He uses it as a sharp tool, which discovers more, produces things with the most satisfying content, works with thickness and resonance, works which reverberate, works with profound meaning and truth. The technique of symbolism in the novels of Faulkner does not appear to be a secondary thing or a mechanical affair but a deep and primary operation. Most of his novels contain symbols that we can discuss. They are used with great artistic effects. They help to organize and extend his material of the novels. A Faulknerian symbol is composed of a word, or a person, thing, place, happening — anything which has a significance greater

than, or different from, its literal, obvious meaning, and can, therefore, convey some truth the writer wants to express. And in writing his novel Faulkner tends to make the whole story and the portrayal of his characters serve this end.

Faulkner's aim in his novels is not to tell a mere story, but entertain us or touch our hearts, but to force us to think and understand the deep and hidden significance of events. And this is the secret of his art of symbolism. Edmond L. Volpe offers: "Faulkner's symbols can be divided into two types: narrative symbols and thematic symbols. A narrative symbol is used to develop the individual scene or story within the novel. Honeysuckle, in Quentin's section of The Sound and the Fury, symbolizes the complex relations of Quentin and his sister, the memory of which Quentin has attempted to bury below the level of consciousness. Symbols such as this are frequently used by Faulkner to represent the unformulated needs, the unconscious drives of the characters. A thematic symbol develops and furthers the theme of the entire novel rather than that of the narrative unit, in which it occurs. In a Faulkner novel, with its montage structure and its supra-story, an incident or even a character can become a thematic symbol. In The Sound and the Fury, the image of the idiot, Benjy, holding a narcissus, serves as a thematic symbol. Against the background of the whole novel, the idiot symbolizes modern man, inarticulate in a man-centered

world without love or moral values."¹ Though these characters and scenes are presented in realistic detail and are not immediately apparent as symbols, as Faulkner widens the angle of vision, the situations and characters become symbolic. There are many symbols which Faulkner employs in his novels and short stories. And these symbols may be classified into these two categories.

In order to objectify his moral vision, Faulkner used Biblical allusions. With the help of these Biblical allusions, Faulkner gave depth and universality to his fiction. He retold the Christ narrative in various forms, as an account of guilt, vicarious suffering, and attempt at expiation. The Bible is one of the important sources of imagery. Not only has the style of the Old Testament influenced his writing a great deal, but he constantly uses names, phrases, and other bits from both the Old and New Testaments. The moral standards from which Faulkner is judging Yoknapatawpha County are those of the Bible, especially the Old Testament.

1 The titles: Faulkner borrowed his titles from the Old Testament and the New Testament. As C.E. Magny remarks "Faulkner is explicitly referring to the Bible with his title Absalom, Absalom! that is, to the Hebrew ritual of meditation upon the past."² The title Absalom, Absalom! is a thematic symbol. It refers not only to the rise and fall of the hero Thomas Sutpen but also to the "incisive history of the South. It is also a perceptive study of American individualism, and the need of each

living being to be recognized as an individual."³ "Like King David in the Biblical story, Thomas Sutpen rises through his own power to high station among men, breaks the moral law and brings suffering upon his children. In both the house of David and the house of Sutpen, retribution takes the form of violent crimes by the children -- revolt, incest, fratricide. The parallels in the stories are not extensive, but sufficient to indicate a continuity in the human condition through centuries of time. The crimes of David and Sutpen give birth to the crimes of their children; the effects of their sins extend into future generations."⁴ By contrasting the world of the American South and the world of King David and his sons in Old Testament, Faulkner emerges as a moralist who has been trying hard to find out the break down of the moral values and moral consequences. "The moral consequences of a crime extending through time become a part of the heritage of the human race."⁵ Faulkner's use of The New Testament throughout his work to broaden perspective culminates in A Fable, in which he retells the Christ story. In book after book, the Christ story, which in an early sketch he called "a fairy tale that has conquered the whole Western earth,"⁶ is utilised, often ironically, to provide a broad framework for his novels.

2. The Characters:

Faulkner's characters are instilled with strong religious feelings. This stems from the fundamentalist beliefs with which the people are acquainted from childhood. The Biblical references

and the Biblical overtones of The Sound and the Fury As I Lay Dying and Absalom, Absalom! reflect this.

Faulkner's family trees remind us of those long Biblical genealogies of the Old Testament or of those momentous sequences of names which climax, as in the beginning of the Gospel' of St. Matthew, in one unique event, the birth of the Son of God: Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; --- And Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ."⁷ The birth of Christ is an eternal event, since it had been announced from the beginning of time. In short, the birth of Christ is the insertion of History into Eternity.

A] **Male Characters** "A number of characters, for example, are thirty-three years old, like Christ, when they are killed."⁸ Benjy, in the opening section of The Sound and the Fury, is an idiot and it is he who narrates the story of the Compson family. Benjy reminds us of Benjamin of the Old Testament. He was the youngest son of Jacob and Rachael. His mother named him 'Benoni' (son of sorrow) but Jacob changed it into 'Benjamin' (Prosperity). The same parallel is in The Sound and the Fury but with a difference.

Caddy, the sister of Benjy, says "Benjamin came out of the Bible." She says this apropos of the change in his name from Maury to Benjamin at the request of Mrs. Compson. Benjy is helpless to do anything himself and is dependent upon the care of others." As

Benjamin in the Bible is taken by the brothers to Egypt as a hostage for grain, so Benjy has a pasture belonging to him sold by the family so that his brother Quentin can go to Harvard and his father will not be deprived of his whiskey."⁹ Benjy also "symbolises modern man, inarticulate in a man-centered world without love or moral values."¹⁰

Jason is another mythological character. "According to one tradition, Jason died of grief, while according to another, he was crushed to death by the poop of the ship Argo, which fell upon him as he was lying under it."¹¹ To broaden the perspective of his novels, Faulkner frequently employs mythological allusions. "The presence of such a myth like character among the complex, more realistically portrayed characters like Gavin Stevens amplifies the significance of the stories."¹² Jason, to whom Faulkner himself has said, represents all that is evil in life. "Jason," says Faulkner, "who to me represented complete evil. He is the most vicious character in my opinion I ever thought of."¹³ Jason is, as Faulkner wrote to Malcolm Cowley, the representative of the new commercial South. "At one end of the spectrum is Jesus, who preached love and died for his fellowman; at the other is his modern counterpart Jason, who hates his fellowman."¹⁴ The only thing that he values is money. At his own father's funeral, he looks at the flowers heaped on the grave and estimates that they must be worth fifty dollars. Through Jason, Faulkner presents modern man as a self-centered being in a society where commercial

values have replaced humanistic values. The life of Jason is filled with sound and fury. Jason is a complex symbol, enriched with thematic significance.

The next character is Bayard Sartoris who reminds us of the mythological character Icarus. Like Icarus in the classical Greek mythology, Bayard Sartoris is the victim of the oppressive burden of the Yoknapatwapha County legend. The opposed forces of the ante-bellum society of Yoknapatwapha County destroy or maim the descendants of the legend. Bayard Sartoris is the first in a long series of tortured victims. Anse Bundren, in As I Lay Dying, is shown as a father who shirks duty and responsibility. "He constantly denies his own will and strength while maintaining his identity as the father___as one critic has remarked, a sort of comic Zeus."¹⁵

The name of Thomas Sutpen in Absalom, Absalom ! is associated with most of the wicked and evil characters of the classical mythology and the Bible. Miss Rosacoldfield calls him "this Faustus, this demon, this Beelzebub --- who appeared suddenly one Sunday with two pistols and twenty subsidiary demons."¹⁶

B The female characters : One of the themes developed by Faulkner in his novels like Sartoris, The Sound and the Fury, As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom ! and in his stories like There was a Queen, is the separation between men and women. Faulkner sees women in the light of the traditional "eternal feminine." The

Image of the Earth Mother, which persists throughout Western literature, is strong in Faulkner's works. This is the idea that the woman is the life-giving force. This was borne out in ancient literature. — in Homer, for example — by the urge of the mother to produce sons, who had the virility necessary to carry on the life force. In Faulkner, there is the strong suggestion of the Biblical — particularly Old Testament — attitude toward women as childbearers and homemakers. Duty, devotion and patience are traditional virtues that Faulkner sees in nearly all women in his tales. One of these is Dewey Dell who is in search of her lover. Dewey Dell, in As I Lay Dying is characterized by her simplistic point of view toward life and her tremendous capacity for endurance. In As I Lay Dying Core, Addie, Dewey Dell and Mrs. Samson all have something in common, even though they have their individual differences. All the women mentioned symbolise the feminine roles traditional in human society: childbearing; cooking; carrying out religious obligations; and generally carrying the burden of morality.

Some women characters like Judith, Clytemnestra remind us of the classical mythology. "Judith is a devoutly religious woman of the ancient Jews who saved her town from conquest by entering the camp of the besieging Assyrian army and cutting off the head of its commander, Holoferness, while he slept."¹⁷ Judith in Abselem, Abselem ! is the daughter of 'The Demon, Thomas-Sutpen. Like in the classical mythology, Judith symbolises not

only endurance but also compassion and love. She sacrifices her life in order to save the life of Bon's child. She nurses Bon's child when he sickens of yellow fever, and she dies with him in the epidemic. The sustained image of Judith is the image of woman suffering." She is Electra, a figure in a legend whose acts illuminate the legend rather than her own individuality."¹⁸

Clytie, the daughter of Thomas Sutpen, is a mulatto. She reminds us of the classical mythological characters-- Clytie and Clytemnestra. Clytemnestra who is the mother of Orestes, Electra and Iphigenia, is the wife of Agamemnon. She killed Agamemnon and was herself killed along with her lover, Aegisthus. "¹⁹ When Clytie sets fire to the remnants of his mansion, destroying herself and Henry, only the Negro idiot, Jim Bond (formerly Bon) remains to mark Sutpen's dream of a dynasty."²⁰

Faulkner's characters and actions of the characters are frequently symbolic, that is, they suggest areas of universal interest; they seem to "mean" something. Malcolm Cowley in his essay, Introduction to The Portable Faulkner, states that most of the characters and incidents have a double meaning; that besides their place in the story, they also serve as symbols or metaphors with a general application. Faulkner's comments about his own works suggest that he thought of his characters as living people, not as illustration of ideas. This perhaps helps to account for the naturalness of the symbolism." It is through this

symbolism that the saga acquires significance in more than the relationship of 2 to 4 and 6 to 8 , etc. The force of the saga is so strong that it should be admitted that it acts as a limiting factor on the choice of characters."²¹

3. The four Sections of The Sound and the Fury :

Each of the four sections is dated. If they are arranged in chronological order, Quentin's (II), dated June 2, 1910 would come first , followed by Jason's (III), then Benjy's (I), and finally Dilsey's (IV); the last three are dated April 6, 7, 8, 1928 respectively. "The Sound and the Fury is not the story of Benjy, Jason, Miss Quentin, and Dilsey, on the Easter Days of 1928. It is the story of the Compson family, a story that extends from 1898 through the flight of Caddy's daughter, Quentin, from the Compson house in 1928. In Section I, Benjy's recollections present the essential details of the early childhood and adolescence of the Compson children . In the second section, Quentin's thoughts seldom touch upon these early scenes; they are centered upon the events of the summer of 1909. In the third section , Jason recalls briefly only one incident before the funeral of Mrs. Compson in 1912: the time Mrs. Compson mourned because Caddy kissed a boy. The final section is set entirely in 1928. The four sections tell the story of the Compson family."Faulkner's dating three of the four sections to correspond with the Easter season is obviously designed to evoke associations for the reader with the story of Jesus and the story

of the Resurrection, and thereby provide an ironic contrast to the loveless, dying world of the Compsons. In the final section, Dilsey's response to the Easter sermon is used by Faulkner to communicate the feeling that human compassion is what modern man has lost and what he must recover to achieve regeneration."²² The four sections are symbolic and through the Christian symbolism Faulkner was able to convey the feelings of the modern man and the modern world.

" Benjy's monologue is dated April 7, 1928, which that year was the date of Holy Saturday, the day which Christ spent in the underworld saving worthy men who had died before his dispensation. Benjy, submerged in his primitive mentality, is involved in events related to those of Holy Saturday, and again the relationship is ironic or inverted. As one example, on this traditional day of the loving christening of children, Benjy's thoughts turn to his mother's unloving act of taking away his original name because it was a name from her family and she selfishly no longer wanted him to bear it when she realized that he would never be normal. In Benjy's section he is continually associated with themes of death. But inversely to Christ in the underworld of the dead on Holy Saturday, Benjy is unable to offer any hope for life. And whereas Christ on the day dominated the underworld and its master Satan, Benjy, helpless, is led about by Luster, that significantly named attendant, whose torments for Benjy even include burning him."²³ Section I is rich in symbols

and imagery. It not only brings before us a parallel picture of Benjy and Christ but also it clusters with the leading themes of the novel. The section is a thematic symbol. "Into that world Benjy is admitted as " Benjamin the child of mine old age held hostage into Egypt" and Caddy as Eve or Little Sister Death."²⁴

"In Quentin's monologue, which bears the date of a significant Thursday, Quentin goes through events which suggest many of the events through which Christ passed on Maunday, Thursday: after lengthy thoughts of a talk with his father, Quentin is captured by a group of men and taken before a magistrate. In parallel with the major feature of Corpus Christi, which is the carrying of the bread of the Eucharist in procoession through the streets, Quentin and the little Italian girl carry bread in their long search for her home. One sample of the meaningful inversion of the parallel which appears through out the book occurs in Quentin's confrontation with his father : whereas Christ on Thursday asked His Father to take away the cup of suffering and crucifixion, Quention on Thursday is shown to have asked his father to give him at least the parental support of punishment, which his father refused to do ."²⁵ Like section I, the section II of Quentin is enriched with symbolism. It is a thematic symbol. It reflects upon the leading themes of the novel. "The symbols and recurrent phrases that run through Quentin's section both intensify the emotional impact and reinforce the meaning. Such names as Jesus, St.Francis,

Moses, Washington, and Byron not only add a richness of historical and literary allusion but convey the nature of Quentin's world."²⁶

In Jason's section, bearing a date which is that of Good Friday, 1928, Jason appears in inverse parallel to Christ in the crucifixion of that day. Jason enters upon selfish cotton speculation at the same hour which liturgy has assigned to Christ's unselfish ascent of the Cross; and at the hour of Christ's death on the Cross, the repellent Jason is sold out by his Jewish brokers, whom he vilifies after the fashion in medieval times of vilification of the Jews on Good Friday. Christ's spirit went from his body on the Cross to save worthy souls who were in Hell; Jason hurries from his commercial crucifixion to chase his niece who has said that she will go to Hell. As Jason follows her, he says that he will make her carnival lover's red necktie the latchstring to Hell."²⁷ If section I symbolises the Compson family deteriorating socially and morally, if section II symbolises "a heartfelt cry of despair, section III of Jason symbolises the self-interest, the failure of love and compassion which are the characteristics of modern man. "At one end of the spectrum is Jesus who preached love and died for his fellowman; at the other is his modern counterpart Jason, who hates his fellowman. Section III is a bitter invective against modern society, its commercialism, its humanity, its superficial social and moral codes, its devotion to mechanical contrivances. The



section represents modern man, living a life of sound and fury signifying nothing."²⁸ "The fourth section, which follows the three monologues, bears the date of Easter Sunday in 1928. On this day when Christ's tomb was found empty except for his abandoned grave clothing, the Compsons find that the bedroom of Caddy's daughter, who in more ways than one, serves sometimes in the novel as her mother's substitute, is empty except for some of her clothing left scattered about after her hurried flight forever from the Compson house."²⁹

"The Compson children — Benjy, Quentin, Jason, Caddy & her daughter — on successive days play, in a symbolic inverted way, the role of Christ, and by the end of the novel their combined lives of selfishness, frustration and defeat have appeared in telling contrast to the life of Christ."³⁰ Throughout the book, details such as the use or avoidance of colours, the ringing or silencing of bells, and innumerable phrases of the dialogue and exposition accord in tragic significance with the liturgy for Passion Week.

"So the four sections of the novel have dates related to the four major days in the sequence of Christ's Passion. And the events of the Compson family on each particular day are related to those of the same day in Christian history and liturgy."³¹

4 The Horse :

In As I Lay Dying, we have Darl's description of the horse. The description of the horse suggests its mythological

connection. In Darl's depiction, the horse appears sometimes as though with wings, flying, and seems to be unusual and mysterious. Moreover, the horse is wild and strangely energetic. Faulkner probably intends to suggest a connection with the Pegasus of Greek mythology. Pegasus was a winged horse belonging to the Muses, and was captured by Bellerophon. Riding Pegasus, Bellerophon destroyed the Chimaera, a fire breathing monster. Bellerophon then attempted to ascend to heaven astride Pegasus, but was thrown from the horse, which flew on to heaven. Later Pegasus kicked upon the fountain of Hippocrene, which was the source of inspiration to the human soul. While this parallel is not exact, it does shed some light on Jewel's relation to the horse. Jewel, as it were, Bellerophon attempting to rise to heaven. Each of the characters attempts in some way to reach his own heaven or salvation.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 35.
- 2 Claude-Edmonde Magny "Faulkner or Theological Inversion", in Robert Penn Warren, ed; Faulkner : A Collection of Critical Essays (New York : Prentice Hall, Inc. 1966), p.71.
- 3 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 184.
- 4 Ibid; P.205.
- 5 Ibid; p.210.
- 6 Ibid; p.36.
- 7 Claude-Edmonde Magny "Faulkner or Theological Inversion", in Robert Penn Warren, ed; Faulkner : A Collection of Critical Essays (New York : Prentice Hall, Inc. 1966), p.70.
- 8 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 36.
- 9 Ward L. Miner, The World of William Faulkner (New York : Grove Press Inc, 1952), p.131.
- 10 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 35.
- 11 Dr. K. N. Joshi, A Dictionary of Mythological and Biblical allusions in Literature (Bareilly:Prakash Book Depot, Bara Bazar, 1979) , P.102.

- 12 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London:Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P.36.
- 13 Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (eds.) Faulkner in the University of Virginia, 1957-58 (Virginia : 1959), P. 19.
- 14 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London:Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P.123.
- 15 Charles A. Raines, As I Lay Dying : a critical analysis in depth (New York : Barrister Publishing Co. Inc. 1966), p.14.
- 16 Hyatt Waggoner, "Past as Present: Absalom, Absalom !", in Robert Penn Warren ed.; Faulkner : a Collection of Critical Essays (New York : Prentice Hall, Inc,1966), P.177.
- 17 Jess Stein (ed.), The Random House Dictionary of the English language (New York : Random House, 1983), P.773.
- 18 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 207.
- 19 Jess Stein (ed.), The Random House Dictionary of the English language (New York : Random House, 1983),P.281.
- 20 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 208.
- 21 Ward L. Miner, The World of William Faulkner (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1952), P. 126.

- 22 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 96.
- 23 The Voice of America, Forum Lectures, The American Novel, ed; Voice of America (Washington 25, D.C. U.S.A, U.S. Information Agency), P.161.
- 24 Michael H. Cowan (ed.), Twentieth century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury (NewYork : Prentice - Hall Inc, 1968), p.47.
- 25 The Voice of America, Forum Lectures, The American Novel, ed; Voice of America (Washington 25, D.C. U.S.A., U. S. Information Agency), P.160.
- 26 Michael H. Cowan (ed.), Twentieth century Interpretations of The Sound and the Fury (NewYork : Prentice - Hall Inc, 1968), p.47.
- 27 The Voice of America, Forum Lectures, The American Novel, ed; Voice of America (Washington 25, D.C. U.S.A., U . S. Information Agency), P.160.
- 28 Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (London : Lowe & Brydone Ltd, 1964), P. 123.
- 29 The Voice of America, Forum Lectures, The American Novel, ed; Voice of America (Washington 25, D.C. U.S.A., U. S. Information Agency), P.161.
- 30 Ibid; P.161.
- 31 Ibid; P. 160.