

My god, why have
you forsaken me?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The novel *Absalom Absalom!* by William Faulkner is filled with biblical references, from the creation story to Abraham, from David and Goliath to the story of Ham. Faulkner infuses the novel with biblical language, making it impossible to ignore the book's religious undertones. Throughout the novel, one of the central characters Thomas Sutpen is likened to God through his own "plan" and the creation of his homestead, Sutpen's Hundred, which mirrors the creation story in the first chapters of Genesis. An even more striking biblical resemblance, however, is how much Sutpen's first son serves as a Christ-like figure in the book. In the Bible, God sacrifices Jesus for the good of humankind and for the future, so that people will learn from the sacrifice. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen sacrifices his racially mixed son, Charles Bon, by refusing to acknowledge their relationship, in an attempt to preserve his pure white dynasty. Faulkner's word choice repeatedly connects Jesus to Charles Bon, whose name appropriately means "good," particularly in the Christmas scene, in which Henry Sutpen convinces Bon to come home to meet his family. Unbeknownst to Henry however, his family is Bon's family as well. It cannot be an accident that Faulkner had this reunion occur on Christmas, for it's very name contains the word Christ, and the holiday celebrates His birth. This scene marks a type of birth for Bon as well; it is the first time that he is physically seen by members of his long lost family, and the first time that Sutpen sees Bon as a grown man. The entire recounting of the Christmas scene, told in joint perspective by Quentin and Shreve, is wrought with the images of body and flesh. They describe the imagined perspective of Charles Bon, saying: "but there, just behind a little, obscured a little by that alien blood – in order that he exist in the face of the man who shaped us {Henry and Charles} both out of that blind chancy darkness which

we call the future; there; there; at any moment, second, I shall penetrate by something of will -(254). Charles Bon is described as an extension of Sutpen, or created " -in the face of the man who shaped -" Bon and Henry. This phrase is alluding to the creation of humans " in the image and likeness of God" (Genesis 1 25-27). Just as God created Jesus in his image, Faulkner infers that Sutpen " shaped" Bon and Henry. The use of the words " face," and " blood," emphasizes their physicality. Charles Bon's existence is corporeal, just as Jesus' existence, although still an extension of God, is corporeal as well. Faulkner also refers to " that blind chancy darkness which we call the future," saying that like God, Sutpen created his children with a larger purpose in mind. In addition, Faulkner uses the word " flesh" to describe Bon repeatedly, such as " the living touch of that flesh warmed before he was born by the same blood -to be bequeathed by him to run hot and loud in veins and limbs after the first flesh and then his own were dead" (255). This is another creation reference, discussing how Charles Bon was " born" into a body with veins and limbs and blood. However, this is also a reference to mortality; flesh and bone are distinctly mortal characteristics that inevitably lead one to die. By focusing on words such as " flesh" when discussing Charles Bon, Faulkner is again highlighting Bon's corporeal existence, and by emphasizing his physical body he is implying that he will die. Jesus' corporal existence is a profoundly important part of His purpose. Whereas God created humans in His image, Jesus is God in actual humanly flesh and form. The Bible says " God sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him" (John 4 8-10). By placing an enormous focus on Bon's physicality as well, Faulkner is able to draw a parallel between the two. Ironically, Charles Bon is Sutpen's only legitimate son as well. Before

Ellen, Sutpen was married to a partially black Haitian woman. Once he discovered she was racially mixed he left, never legally ending that marriage. Thus, Bon is Sutpen's son in the truest form, bastardizing his other "legitimate" children. In addition to the importance of Bon's physicality, the language of the Christmas scene also suggests more than just the significance of his flesh and body. Through a discussion of the connections between Charles Bon, Henry and Judith, various language suggests that the three represent a sort of trinity, possessing many similar qualities of the Trinity in Christian theology. In the simplest sense, a trinity is a group of three closely related members, which Bon, Judith and Henry clearly are; they form a love triangle that is central to movement of the novel. Within Christianity, however, the Trinity is defined as "the union of three divine persons in one" (American Heritage Dictionary, 859). Namely, the Father, or God, the Son, or Jesus, and finally the Holy Spirit can be seen as separate entities while at the same time all existing together within one part; God has Jesus and the Holy Spirit within Him, and the Holy Spirit contains both God and Jesus. Together, Judith, Henry and Charles Bon transcend their individual existences, while at the same time maintaining their separateness, like the Trinity in Christianity. From the beginning of the novel Henry and Judith are described as having an extremely close relationship. Mr. Compson, when introducing the dynamic between the three, prefaces it by describing Henry and Judith as "that single personality with two bodies -"(73), already establishing that like the connection within a trinity, Judith and Henry exist in two separate physical bodies, but with the same spirit. It makes sense then that when Charles Bon entered into the picture, things become complete, because he is able to bring the connection full circle. Shreve describes Henry

as living in a vacuum where “ the three of them existed, lived, moved even maybe, in attitudes without flesh; himself and the friend and the sister” (256). They are able to exist individually, while at the same existing together without flesh, beyond flesh. Considering the abundance of times that Faulkner uses the word “ flesh,” within this scene, the statement that they exist without flesh is striking because of it seems contradictory to his other descriptions. Yet, this seeming contradiction exists within the Trinity as well: Jesus exists in flesh and in spirit simultaneously. Later, Shreve says that Henry breathed the thought: “ Hers and my lives are to exist within and upon yours” (260), in everything that he said to Bon. The word “ within” implies that they exist in each other, whereas the word “ upon,” implies being close together yet still separate, again highlighting this seeming contradiction. Through the descriptions of Charles Bon’s body, as well as the description of the relationship between Bon and his siblings, Charles Bon possesses the same duality as Jesus. Bon chooses to go home with Henry for only one reason: he wishes Sutpen to acknowledge him as his child. He believes “ if he will let me know just as quickly that I am his son -(255),” everything will resolve itself. Yet for Sutpen, revealing Charles Bon as his son would destroy his plan for the creation of a pure white lineage because Bon is part black. As a result, Bon gets no recognition, “ nothing happened; no shock, no hot communicated flesh that speech would have been too slow even to impede; nothing.” (256). Had he received Sutpen’s acknowledgment, even a nonverbal one through “ communicated flesh,” he would have gone away, but even a nonverbal communication would have destroyed Sutpen’s image of a perfect dynasty. In a scene between Henry and Sutpen, Sutpen insures that Henry will not allow the marriage between Charles Bon and Judith to

take place, thus forcing Sutpen to admit his relationship to Bon. He repeats “ he must not marry her, Henry” (283). Henry’s response, repeated many times as well, is “ I will – I will – I am going to” (283), can be interpreted as a dissent towards his father’s wishes. However, his comment is not a direct response to Sutpen’s statements; one does not answer the other. In addition to being interpreted as dissent, Henry’s comment “ I am going to” is also the beginning of a resolution: Henry is going to make sure that Judith does not marry Bon. Sutpen then does one more thing to make sure that Bon does not destroy his vision of the future; he tells Henry that Charles Bon is part black, knowing that to protect the usurpation of the virginity of his sister, Henry will now prevent the marriage at all costs. In making the decision to tell Henry this, Sutpen is knowingly sacrificing Bon in order to carry out his plan.

Sutpen’s lack of acknowledgement when he sees Bon refers to one of the last scenes in Jesus’ life. Jesus and his disciples are praying in the garden, and Jesus calls on God, saying “ My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Mathew 26: 39). Jesus asks to be spared from the pain that is coming. Charles Bon realizes that pain is inevitable as well; Shreve imagines that when he left home his mother tells him:” He is your father. He cast you and me aside and denied you his name. Now go and then sit down and let God finish it: pistol or knife or rack; destruction or grief or anguish: God to call the shot or turn the wheel’. Jesus, you can almost see him (238).” Yet like Jesus, Bon still hoped to be spared from the situation, by a sign from Sutpen that would relieve him. Bon believed that only a small sign was necessary, just a communication, a look, would relieve him of his position (257). The fact that Shreve uses the expression “ Jesus,” as he often does in his narrative, is particularly

significant here. It can be read as “ you can almost see him [Bon]” or “ you can almost see him [Jesus]”. Shreve’s constant use of the expression “ Jesus” adds to the Christmas scene particularly because of the repeated juxtaposition of the name “ Jesus” next to the descriptions of Charles Bon , making yet another connection between the two. In another instance, Faulkner’s reference to Bon as Jesus is unmistakable: Faulkner capitalizes the pronouns for both Sutpen and Charles Bon. “ The two of them both believing that Henry was thinking He (meaning his father) has destroyed us all, not for one moment thinking He (meaning Bon) must have known -” (267). This choice deifies both Bon and Sutpen; in literature pronouns are never capitalized unless referring to God or Jesus. In the Christmas scene, when Bon and Sutpen meet and Sutpen ignores him, Bon reflects on the meaning of this rejection, thinking “ My God, I am young, young, and I didn’t even know it; they didn’t even tell me that I was young” (257). At this moment, Charles Bon realizes the pain that will follow. His thoughts are lamenting why this is happening; he is too young to be experiencing such pain. However, at one point Shreve comments “ Jesus, he must have known it would be, “(258) not only invoking Jesus’ name again , but assuming that Bon must understand the inevitable pain.. Regardless, it is not an accident that Bon’s words began with “ my God -“. This statement invokes the scene in the bible when Jesus is on the cross, and, moments before His death He looks to the sky and says “ my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”(Mathew 27: 46). Jesus’ words are in the form of a question, yet they too are a realization of pain. Charles Bon asks why it must happen to him, because he is so young, and Jesus asks why He must be the one to be forsaken. Ultimately, both Jesus and Charles Bon were sacrificed for the

same reasons: a vision for the future. Bon was sacrificed because his existence threatened to reveal the racial impurity in the white dynasty that Sutpen built for so many years. Jesus, as well, was sacrificed so that people would remember, and things could change in the future. Interestingly, both men were aware that they were walking into their death; Jesus was given the opportunity to deny that he was the King of the Jews, and absolve himself. Charles Bon was given his opportunity as well, when Henry warned, “ Don’t pass the shadow of this post, this branch, Charles” (283)) and yet he still made the choice to continue. Charles Bon was buried by three women cut off from society, Clytie, Rosa, and Judith. Jesus as well was buried by three women: Jesus’ mother, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, Lazarus’ sister. The similarities between Charles Bon and Jesus build up slowly throughout *Absalom, Absalom!*, first through just the language, and then through parallels in scenes surrounding their deaths. The most significant parallel, however, is that they were both sacrificed for visions of the future. This becomes apparent particularly when Bon is first rejected by his father, and exclaims, though only in his thoughts “ My god I am young -” just like Jesus proclaimed “ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” At this moment, Jesus is ignored by God; he is denied acknowledgement and is not rescued from his pain, just as Bon ultimately is not rescued either.