

The religious motif and its status in the sound and the fury



William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* deals with man's relationship with time and sequence. The complexities of the book, from its variety of narrators to the order of its chapters, support Faulkner's primary experimentation with time. But *The Sound and the Fury* interweaves the time motif with other recurring ideas or elements, with a particularly strong one being Christianity. This motif is less fully developed and less impressively executed. In fact, Faulkner's novel as an exploration of man's relationship with time is weakened by the inclusion of the lesser motif of religion. The sheer volume of religious symbols and parallels is at first not clear (or simply not apparent), but it then becomes more and more obvious, and even reaches the point where it is so obvious that it borders upon the silly, if it is interpreted unironically. Of course, there is a baseline level of religiousness that is to be expected in any novel whose characters are Americans from the South in the early twentieth century. Indeed, Scriptural verses are often quoted or referred to, and a substantial portion of the fourth chapter takes place in a church. But on top of this foundation of Southern spirituality, Faulkner piles on additional nuggets of religious significance to the point where he is being blatant. The dates of the sections might require some close attention before it is realized that the novel occurs between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Even Quentin's section, eighteen years earlier, takes place on Good Friday. The strong associations attached to these most important days in the Christian calendar create an undeniable sense of allegory or parallel. Not only is the dating of the chapters suggestive of some deeper meaning, but the characters in *The Sound and The Fury* lend themselves to a good deal of speculation about religious parallels. Benjy Compson is thirty-three during the Good Friday-Easter Sunday 1928 chapters

<https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-motif-and-its-status-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

of the book. Thirty-three is the age of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion. On the other hand, the transparent strategy of giving a character the initials J. C. is also at use in the novel, with Jason Compson. There are some inherent problems with both of these characters being suggested as Christ figures. Jason Compson is, of course, the closest character to an Anti-Christ in the novel. His antipathy, bitterness, and lack of meditation and memory (as exhibited, for example, by Quentin in his chapter) paint Jason as the most one-dimensional Compson child - he is in no way a convincing Christ figure. Benjy Compson is another flawed nominee, clearly because of the fact that he is an idiot. Claims can be made for Benjy being designated the Christ figure by Faulkner as some statement about modern times and the sheer difference between the world in which Christ lived and the world of *The Sound and The Fury*. Such arguments would claim that Benjy exists in a reality which is starkly foreign to the other characters much like Christ, were he existing in modern times, would have been similarly misunderstood, his mind similarly inaccessible. But this does not explain the fact that Benjy is, simply, the most passive Compson. He exists for much of the novel in the background, reliant on visceral stimulations and with no moral conscience whatsoever. His wailings certainly comparable to Christ's suffering but only in the most superficial way - both cause discomfort. Easter Sunday also comes in the final chapter, but with no semblance of a "rebirth" for Benjy. He is just as much a peripheral annoyance as ever, and though the novel ends with a scene about him, the scene is appropriate in light of the simplicity of Benjy's mind:" Ben's...eyes were empty and blue and serene again as cornice and façade flowed smoothly once more from left to right, post and tree, window and doorway and signboard each in its ordered

<https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-motif-and-its-status-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

place.” This final sentence illuminates how Benjy is not an anomalous mind through which meaning is found – he is an anomalous mind which is important to the novel because of its absolute lack of self-reflection and its absence of orientation. While an easy statement to make would be that everybody in the story is an idiot, each with his or her own struggling relationship with life, this does not elevate Benjy to any type of super-meaningful status. He is still an idiot, although his particular struggle is unique. Also complicating to the issue of the Christ figure is the conjunction of that concept with the dates of the novel. The obviousness of Faulkner’s toyings with the Christ figure concept tease the reader into associating it with the themes of resurrection and redemption that are suggested with the events taking place on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Neither Benjy nor Jason has any type of resurrection (or symbolic crucifixion, for that matter) during the real-time of the novel. Benjy’s castration can be tenuously linked to crucifixion, but there is no resurrection in accompaniment to it. By elimination, then, the other main characters up for contention are Quentin, Caddy, Dilsey and the female Quentin. These certainly conjure interesting permutations and explanations. Quentin’s suicide and subsequent “rebirth” (in name) with the female Quentin might seem convincing. But every Compson has a nominal counterpart who has died, so this rebirth significance has been applied to each person and is more a general theme of the novel than anything which can lend Quentin any special symbolic significance. Dilsey is the most Christ-like in terms of demeanor – she is compassionate, non-judgmental, and supremely forgiving. But she is also a static character, resisting change during what to Christians (and Christ) are the tumultuous days leading to and including Easter Sunday. Caddy’s

<https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-motif-and-its-status-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

symbolic crucifixion in being cast out of the house, and her redemption in Quentin's ultimate escape on Easter Sunday, is structurally attractive to a reader who is attempting to decode the obvious religious meaning in *The Sound and The Fury*. Indeed, this is the most complete argument for any Christ character. This reading gains credence from the idea of Jason as an anti-Christ or perhaps Satan-like character with no good qualities but also no internal qualms or questioning of his behavior. It is also flawed, of course, in that the "redemption" is on such a small scale. Although Jason receives his comeuppance and Quentin receives her just freedom and money, there is little consequence to anybody else. For a Christ figure, Quentin would appear to be peculiarly self-interested. Furthermore, her redemption consisting of an escape with the man in the red tie is troubling in that Quentin is possibly living a sexually permissive lifestyle, re-treading the ground that Caddy treaded which drove her brother the male Quentin to suicide. Nevertheless, this seems the most complete argument about any existence of a Christ figure. The attractiveness of this reading is itself a problem, however, when reconsidering the presence of other conflicting signs such as Benjy's age and Jason's initials. All of these simultaneously taken into consideration create a hodgepodge of religious symbols and parallels, all at conflict with one another and none strong enough to stand alone. It is striking, then, that a novel with so many overt Christian elements and even more which are subtle and below the surface would fail to bring those elements together in some complete, ultimate connection. And while the failure to create a religious fabric with consistency throughout the book might be seen as a Modernist statement, perhaps about the inadequacy of religion to satisfy modern problems, such a reading would not account for the sheer distraction that <https://assignbuster.com/the-religious-motif-and-its-status-in-the-sound-and-the-fury/>

the religious motif instills in the reader. The religious elements of the book are clearly so blatant that they are not meant to be glossed over - Faulkner intends the reader to devote real thought to them - and the lack of any message that is greater than the sum of its individual parts is, in the end, disappointing. The most impressive feature of *The Sound and The Fury* is the complexity of its time experiment - the ordering of the chapters, the stream-of-consciousness writing, and the unique choices of narrator reward the reader with multiple close readings. The religious motif is seemingly more accessible, but the payoff is far inferior, in that there may actually be no payoff. Where the time motif is paced and structured in such a way as to propel the reader through each chapter, hungry for more, and then start over and re-read the book, the religious references and symbols in the novel exist with teases and, at times, heavy-handed half-messages, but none of them lead anywhere nearly as fulfilling. The religious motif of *The Sound and The Fury* is, then, a distraction. In a book so demanding of its reader, designed to disorient him or her at the very onset, the lack of complexity with which Faulkner constructs the religious aspect is in contrast with the prominence that he gives it. What this amounts to is a series of red herrings that culminate in a whimper, or not at all, in this book that is otherwise so affecting.