

*Original Paper*

Fake Cavaliers of Southern Women: Biblical Allusions in  
Faulkner's works—Based on *Dry September* and *The Sound and  
the Fury*

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**Abstract**

*As a native of the South, Faulkner had a deep love of this land and was also deeply influenced by this land which known as the Biblical Belt. In his novel, The Sound and the Fury and short story Dry September, Faulkner looks back at the changing history of American South and takes an insightful stock of the impact that society had on people at that time. This paper intends to find the parallel correspondence between the Bible and the texts through the deep analysis of each plot, characters and narrative structure. This paper also creatively employs the story of the rape of Dinah in the Bible to analyze the purpose and deep meaning behind men's seemingly righteous revenge for the women of his family. The writer concludes that in patriarchal society, whether in the primitive period of Dinah, or in the modern era of Minnie and Caddy, the purpose of men's fierce revenge for the contamination of female chastity was to preserve family honor and status, and as for the women's situation and sufferings were of little importance to them.*

**Keywords**

*Bible, Faulkner, the rape of Dinah, plot, character, narrative structure*

**1. Introduction**

William Faulkner (1897-1962), novelist, is the winner of the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature (awarded 1950) and one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Just as Faulkner said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "the problem of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat" (Faulkner, 2006, p. 71). What he is talking about concerns not merely the American South but the human situation in

general. Faulkner has always been regarded as an experimentalist of modern novel. Critics have paid much attention to his multiple points of view and his use of stream of consciousness to analyze his novel. When Henry James talked about Hawthorne, he said that “the flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep, that it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature, that it needs a complex social machinery to set a writer in motion” (Chase, 1957, pp. 219-220). As a boy living in Mississippi, Faulkner’s works have been termed the Yoknapatawpha saga in which he writes about the histories of a number of Southern aristocratic families. *The Sound and the Fury* and the short novel *Dry September* are one of them. *Dry September* describes a tragedy caused by racism which reflects the unfair situation of the Southern blacks and reveals a series of social problems. The novel exposes the brutal and cruel behavior of Southern racists towards black people and shows Faulkner’s subversion of the myth of the Southern Belle. Antecedent scholars mainly discuss this novel from the perspective of racism, feminism, the subversion of the Southern Belle, violence, and death to criticize old conventions which deeply rooted in the Southerners.

As Faulkner’s masterpiece, *The Sound and the Fury* shows rise and fall of the Compson family through the inner monologue of the Compson family, showing the decay of Southern values and norms. Through the insights into the spirit of the descendants of the prominent families in the American South, this novel vividly recreates the tremendous spiritual impact of the American Civil War upon the Southerners, and the psychological shock upon the Southerners during the post-war reconstruction period. According to Jessie Coffee, Faulkner quotes the Bible directly and indirectly as many as 379 times in his works. Of these, the number of references to the Old Testaments and New Testaments is 183 and 196 respectively. People can find many biblical allusions in his masterpiece, like *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Go Down, Moses*, and many excellent short stories. Among these allusions, the image of Jesus is most visible. Like Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, Isaac in *Go Down, Moses*, and Joe Christmas in *Light in August*.

The present paper mainly discusses the biblical elements in *Dry September* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Through the comparative analysis of the plot, the characters and the narrative structure of *Dry September* and the Bible, the writer finds that *Dry September* reproduces the main plot structure of the rape of Dinah, and it is its sublimated recreation. Besides, the relationship between Quentin and Caddy also shows a similarity with the relationship of Dinah and her brother. Except for this, the present also provides a deep analysis of two characters, Benjy and Caddy, finding the archetypes behind them and the deep meaning Faulkner gave them.

## 2. Faulkner and the Christian Cultural Tradition

William Faulkner “struggled much of his life for recognition as a writer, and he did eventually achieve fame as one of American’s greatest authors when he won the 1949 Noble Prize for Literature in 1950” (Anderson, 2007, p. 1). He is basically known for his novels of Yoknapatawpha county in which he

truthfully describes the customs and culture of American South. “This ‘postage stamp’ of land, of which he declared himself the ‘sole proprietor’, is both a richly particularized emblem of the American South and a universal microcosm of humanity” (Anderson, 2007, p. 1). He grew up in one of the areas and was heavily influenced by its biblical culture. “His (Faulkner) work continues to benefit from the full gamut of critical and theoretical approaches, with study of the racial dynamics of his fiction predominating” (Towner, 2010, p. 173). As a result, Faulkner’s work is rich in biblical allusions and ideas. He was extremely interested in the Bible, which he mentioned countless times and said that the Old Testament was one of his favorite books. So, it is not surprising that he made extensive use of biblical allusions in his works. His clever use of Christian stories and legends and biblical allusions greatly enhances cultural content of his works and add profound meanings to them.

The culture of the American South is diverse as well as in other parts of the United States. But one can find that it is based on Protestantism, with Calvinism at its core. It is the dominant religious force in all southern states except Louisiana, underpinning southern society, politics, culture, supporting slavery and racism, controlling people’s thoughts and lives, and dictating the rules of how people should relate to each other and behave. Therefore, the American South is known as the Bible Belt. Most of the early immigrants who travelled the vast distances to America on the Mayflower were strictly Puritans. They came here not only to escape persecution, but more importantly to pursue their religious beliefs. The puritans accepted the doctrine of predestination, original sin, total depravity, and limited atonement (or the salvation of a selected few), which theologian John Calvin had preached. “Puritans have a grim reputation as religious zealots, prudes, and killjoys. These conceptions stem from the Calvinist doctrine” (Levine, 2016, p. 15). They carried with them American Puritanism which took root in the New World and became the most enduring shaping influence in American thought and American literature. Thus, Calvinism was influential in its beginnings and later took root in the American South with the wave of immigration.

The South’s defeat in the American Civil War was a major stimulus to the rapid growth of protestant churches in the post-war South. It strongly condemned the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church and called for a radical reform of the Church, emphasizing the direct connection between man and God. Moreover, it rigidly espouses the doctrine of original sin, suppresses human desires and condemns any enjoyment or entertainment. In Calvinism, the Bible became the supreme authority for faith and life. Faulkner was born in such a Christian family. His parents were devout Christians. So, he was greatly influence by Christian tradition. When asked about his extensive use of Christian allusions and his apparent expression of Christian ideas in his writings, he replied that Christian lore was part of the background of every Christian, especially a southern country boy like himself, in which he grew up and absorbed it without realizing it, and that it was in him, which had nothing to do with how much he actually believed in it.

### 3. Biblical Allusions in *Dry September*

#### 3.1 Plot

In *Dry September*, the alleged rape of Minnie Cooper and the retaliation of the white man show a similarity between the plot of the rape of Dinah in the Bible. According to Genesis 34, Dinah, a daughter of Jacob, went out to meet a local woman, but ended up being raped, an act which escalated into a conflict between two tribes, and to the slaughter of a whole town. In both stories, women, symbols of chastity and honor of certain family and group, are depicted as being defiled by foreigners. It seems that both stories depict the heroic defense of female chastity by men with a sense of justice. In *Dry September*, Faulkner portrays the reaction of Southern men after the defilement of white women. "What the old South of the legend in its classical form was like is more or less familiar to everyone" (Cash, 1991, p. 2). They did not care about the truth. To them, the most important thing is to preserve the honor of the white community, and it was intolerable to them that the Southern lady, a symbol of Southern honor, should be defiled by a "rough", "uncivilized" and "savage" black man. So, despite the truth, the white man chooses to kill an innocent black without hesitation.

The same thing happened in Dinah. God forbade the Israelites to intermarry with foreigners, so it was the greatest shame of the family for the daughter of Israelite to be defiled by a foreigner. "In a sense, the rape of a young girl from this family is tantamount to the violation of the whole family, because it is assumed that the woman means that her family has little power or status" (Meifang, 2012, p. 195). So, like the white southerners in the *Dry September*, the rescue of their sister by violent means was used by Dinah's brothers to make a kind of political statement to show the neighboring tribes that they would not tolerate any kind of violation of their honor and rights. Their protection of women is a lie, and their real purpose is the same, to protect the honor of the family. Therefore, the plot of Faulkner's *Dry September* is relevant to the rape of Dinah in the Bible.

#### 3.2 Character

*Dry September* corresponds to the prototype character of the rape of Dinah. First, the heroine in *Dry September*, Minnie Cooper. She is taken from the prototype of Dinah. In the Southern imagination, the white lady is a part of family's treasure. "Gender, race, and class relations constituted the grid that defined southern women's objective positions in their society, constituted the elements from which they fashioned their views of themselves and their world, constituted the relations of different groups of southern women to one another" (Genovese, 1988, p. 43). They are the symbol of honor and purity. The Southern lady is more than a woman, she becomes a symbol of the South itself. "She is 'not a human being,' but 'a marble stature', beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still...the Southern lady is at the core of the region's self-definition; the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady" (Jones, 1981, p. 4). Therefore, because of this representation of white women, white man becomes a "cavalier" prompted by women's weakness and delicacy to take action against any enemy. It is the white man's duty to protect his honor by protecting that of the white

woman. Besides, in this society, women's bodies belong to men and families, and the stability of masculine subjectivity is overwhelmingly constructed and held by the chastity of women. Dinah is in a similar position to Minnie; they are both victims of a patriarchal society. In both cases, the rape is only a pretext for men to reassert their power. Men's true intentions are hidden under a fake pretense of honor.

Second, McLendon is taken from the prototype of Dinah's brother, Simeon and Levi. On the surface, they are all heroic, fearless and righteous defenders of women. In *Dry September*, in public, McLendon appears as a valiant defender and protector of the South, and he is respected by the Southerners. And his first appearance is impressive: "The screen door crashed open. A man stood in the floor, his feet apart and his heavy-set body poised easily. His white shirt was open at the throat; he wore a felt hat. His hot, bold glance swept the group (...)" (Faulkner, 2011, p. 117). He appears ambitious, valiant and "just". But beneath his imposing surface is a repressed soul.

He is a national hero and a gallant cavalier of white woman in public, but when he returns to home, he treats his meek wife without respect and affection. Similarly, Dinah's brothers didn't respect her. In the Bible, "the sons of Jacob came upon the slain, and spoiled the city, because they had defiled their sister" (Genesis 34:27). Dinah's brothers used brutal methods to revenge, but from Dinah's point of view, their slaughter of the city was no different from Shechem's rape, and neither of them had any regard for her thoughts or wishes. Third, the innocent black man Will Mayes is taken from the prototype of Shechem. There is no doubt that Shechem is guilty, and he should pay for his guilt. But his sin is far from deserving the destruction of a city and death of a city of people. In *Dry September*, Will Mayes, the black man, paid with his life for a crime that had nothing to do with him. The reason they were punished above and beyond their crimes was that they were all victims on the way to defending the family's honor and rights.

### 3.3 Narrative Structure

In terms of narrative structure, *Dry September* follows the Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy. Northrop Frye (1973) sees the evolution of literature as a cycle: comedy, which corresponds to spring, recounting the birth and love of the hero; romance, which corresponds to summer, showing the growth and triumph of the hero; tragedy, which corresponds to autumn, realizing the suffering and death of the hero; and irony, which corresponds to winter, the chaotic world that follows the death of the hero. He sees tragedy in general as an imitation of the ritual of sacrifice and goes on to analyze the narrative structure of tragedy by dividing it into different phases. The phases of tragedy move from the heroic to the ironic, the first three corresponding to the first three phases of romance, the last three to the last three of irony. The first phase of tragedy is the one in which the central character is given the greatest possible dignity in contrast to the other characters, so that we get the perspective of a stag pulled down by wolves. The sources of dignity are courage and innocence, and in this phase the hero or heroine usually is innocent (p. 219).

In *Dry September*, social customs, the men around Minnie Cooper, and even her friends were the wolves besieging her. The fact that Dinah went to the place alone to look for someone and ended up being raped is also a reflection of the hostile social environment of the time. So, their situation coincides with the first phase of the tragedy. The second phase corresponds to the youth of the romantic hero and is in one way or another a tragedy of innocence in the sense of inexperience, usually involving young people. When Minnie Cooper was young, she was pure, innocent and inexperienced. She naively thought she had all, so she squandered her charms when she was young. It is only in middle age that she feels the pain of the shackles society has placed on women. There were two major problems that existed in twentieth-century American Southern society. Firstly, the overall society was still patriarchal, where women were inferior to men and men ruled almost everything. And secondly, the pervasive racial discrimination in the South, where the blacks were considered as an inferior race with few rights, and where the whites could lynch blacks without any responsibility.

And in such a patriarchal society, even though the status of women was low, Southerners created the myth of the Southern Belle to preserve the honor which belongs to the Old South. "After the War was lost, partly as a result of their own mad heroism...they no longer had the strength to achieve more than a partial success" (Hoffman, 1960, p. 10). Southerners viewed the white women as the embodiment of chastity and virtue, and men regarded the protection of their wives' and women's virtue as the priority, especially the white aristocracy of American South. The myth of the Southern Belle, which they promoted, was on the one hand an expression of the worship of women, but on the other hand a repression and confinement of Southern women's sexuality. It was this backward southern culture that made Minnie Cooper so distorted that she invented such a rumor to draw attention to herself.

#### **4. Biblical Allusions in *The Sound and the Fury***

##### *4.1 Parallel Correspondence between the Biblical Figures and the Characters in The Sound and the Fury*

###### 4.1.1 Caddy Compson-Eve

In *The Sound and the Fury*, one can find the relationship between Caddy and Dinah. This novel also portrays a range of effects after the loss of female chastity in the family. Especially for Caddy's brother, Quentin. In *The Sound and the Fury*, as the eldest son of the noble Compson family, he plays his role as a defender of family's honor. Quentin grows up living in the Bible Belt. So, he is deeply influenced by the traditional attitudes and rigid thinking. As a representative of the last generation of the declining manorial class, Quentin had a strong southern consciousness and is proud of his family history. He imagined himself as a knight in a southern myth and he always lived in the glory of his ancestors. Time for him is past. Therefore, in front of his family and his classmates, he plays his role as a decent eldest son and an "aristocrat". And his role as a defender of his declining family's honor is his spiritual pillar and motivation of his life. He views his sister as one honor of his family. But Caddy's rebellion and her

loss of virginity continue destroying his role as a knight. So, Quentin is immersed in pain and misery. Like the brother of Dinah, Quentin also attempts to avenge for his sister and himself, but he failed in the end. So, death is Quentin's best option, a desperate attempt to protect his family's honor. Therefore, the plot of this line corresponds to the story of Dinah in the Bible. The difference lies in that Caddy is not raped. She is the brave one who is seduced or who voluntarily loses her virginity to break the myth of the Southern Belle.

There are generally three reasons to say that Caddy is taken from the prototype of Eve. Firstly, like Eve in the Bible who caused the fall of man, Caddy, from Quentin and Jason's point of view, was the woman who caused the fall of the Compson household. In the Bible, Eve was tempted by Satan to persuade her husband Adam to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge together, leading to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. And in *The Sound and the Fury*, Caddy also contributes, directly or indirectly, to the fall of Quentin and Jason. In Quentin's mind, Caddy is the embodiment of all that was good and kind, strong and gentle. So, he fancies that she stays as a dignified Southern Belle, a symbol of family honor. But her increasingly rebellious behavior continues to crush and destroy his hope, adding to the shadows inside him. Thus, with Caddy's loss of virginity, the shadows within him explode, pushing him death. As for Jason, he lost a decent job that would have been his because of Caddy's distortion. He loses all his money because of Caddy's daughter, and eventually becomes selfish, ruthless and cold. Secondly, like Eve, Caddy is eager to quest for the truth. In the Bible, despite the will of God, Eve ate the forbidden fruit and got to know what was good and what was bad. And in this novel, only Caddy dares to climb the pearl tree in the garden to see what was happening in her grandmother's funeral while her brothers did not have the courage to do so:

"Push me up, Versh." Caddy said.

"All right." Versh said.

"You the one going to get whipped. I aint."

He went and pushed Caddy up into the tree to the first climb. We watched the muddy bottom of her drawers.

Then we couldn't see her.

We could hear the tree thrashing.

"Mr Jason said if you break that tree he whip you." Versh said.

"Who in what tree." Dilsey said.

She came and looked up into the tree.

"Gaddy." Dilsey said. The branches began to shake again.

"You, Satan." Dilsey said.

"Come down from the tree." (Faulkner, 2011, p. 35)

The garden of Compson household symbolizes the Garden of Eden. Like Adam and Eve are not allowed by God to eat the forbidden fruit to know truth, children in Compson are not allowed to climb

the tree by Mr. Compson during Damddy's funeral because he wants to conceal the reality of death from the children. But because of the bravery and rebellion of Caddy and Eve, they both know the truth in the end. Faulkner did not want to create a rebellious woman but a kind, virtuous and brave one. Opposite to the view of Quentin and Jason, Faulkner regard Caddy as Eve who was the mother of human being, meant love, motherhood and bravery.

In this novel, Caddy takes on the role of mother. The children of the Compson could not get love from their neurotic whining mother. So, Caddy function as a type of mother at a very early age. For Benjy, the fool, who never won love from his own mother, Caddy takes care of Benjy and gives him love and warmth. For Quentin, Caddy was the source which could provide him with spiritual comfort. In order to comfort her neurotic brother, Quentin, Caddy gave up many things she should have possessed: her lover and her natural desire for being loved. She even allowed Quentin to kill her if only it could regain Quentin's strong sense of honor and high integrity. So, for the whole Compson family, Caddy is the embodiment virtue and goodness and the tie that bonded the family together. For Faulkner, Caddy was one of the most moving characters in this novel. Taking Eve as the archetype of Caddy, he wants to show the importance of love and bravery for the whole family. Just as we cannot simply justify whether Eve was bad or good, Caddy's complexity also leaves the readers to think about.

#### 4.1.2 Benjamin Compson-Jesus Christ

Faulkner makes extensive use of biblical allusions in the Bible, creating a series of images that resemble biblical figures, especially Jesus Christ. In *The Sound and the Fury*, the story is set during the week of the crucifixion of Jesus, which is Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. The day of Benjy's narration took place on his thirty-third birthday, the age at which Jesus Christ was crucified. Like Christ who can prophesy the future, Benjy's primary attribute was that he could sense things. When Caddy showed her rebellion to use perfume and to kiss a boy, Benjy sensed her change and reacted intensely. He forced Caddy to wash away the traces of depravity left on her body:

I went to the bathroom door.

I could hear the water

"Benjy." T.P. said downstairs.

I listened to the water.

I couldn't hear the water, and Caddy opened the door.

"Why, Benjy." She said. She looked at me and I went and she put her arms around me.

"Did you find Caddy again?" she said.

"Did you think Caddy had run away?" Caddy smelled like trees. (Faulkner, 2011, p. 32)

He is an idiot, intellectually stuck at the three-year-old stage and cannot speak, but he has strong senses. He could smell the fresh scent of the tree on Caddy's body when she was still a virgin. He knew when Caddy kissed the boy and when she lost her virginity. So, he acts as a moral guardian to his sister, doing everything he can to stop Caddy's sexual degradation. As a Christ figure, Benjy can sense the evil of



the world, but he can't change it. By witnessing the degeneration of Caddy, Faulkner wants to represent Christ's failure to save the modern world. Benjy tries to use this way to wash away Caddy's sin. He suffered as Christ did, but his sufferings were to no avail. As an idiot, just as he could not stop the fall of Caddy, so he could not stop the fall of the whole community as Jesus did. All he can do is moan, moaning for the decaying condition of this world.

## 5. Conclusion

The relationship between Christianity and Western literature has a long history and remains a very close relationship to contemporary Western literature. Christianity has traditionally been a spiritual resource for Western writers, and thus many writers have drawn their writing materials and framework from the Bible. As a member of a devout Christian family, Faulkner was deeply influenced by the Bible. Besides, Faulkner has shown his great talent in using Biblical images and plots as the archetypes of his own works. The present paper only takes two typical ones, *The Sound and the Fury* and his short story *Dry September*, into consideration. In *Dry September*, Faulkner made parallel correspondences between the story of Dinah and the story of Minnie Cooper. From these correspondences, one can not only find the Biblical archetypes of the plots, characters, but also the narrative structure. With the story of Dinah in one's mind, one can have a deeper understanding of the sufferings of Minnie Cooper. The difference between Dinah and Minnie Cooper lies in that Minnie was not raped. It is an alleged rape caused by Minnie's neurotic mind. It is more ironic than she is really raped because compared with Dinah's brother, the fierce revenge of the white is more ridiculous. In fact, their revenge is covered by racism and the mind of white supremacy.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, except for the parallel correspondences between the story of Dinah in the Bible and the story of the Compson household, Faulkner also show the parallel correspondence of the plots and figures between the Bible and *The Sound and the Fury*. In this novel, the story of the rape of Dinah can also be viewed as a miniature of the experience of Caddy and Quentin. Still, like Minnie Cooper, Caddy's virginity is not tainted by men but by the decaying society.

In conclusion, the protection of women's virginity is an excuse of men's protection of honor and their rights and privileges in patriarchal society. Except for the story of Dinah in the Bible, The Biblical images more frequently appear in this novel than in others, like the image of tree, garden, snake, water, etc. The present paper mainly focuses on the image of the idiot, Benjy, and the figure of Caddy to explore the Christian culture and meaning behind the characters.

Faulkner once said that the center of his work was always people, and he valued the portrayal of characters. He depicted the bitterness of the southern history, and in order to find the truth of human heart, he emphasized more on a symbolic approach to literature than on reality. That's why there is frequent appearance of Biblical patterns in his works and make him a talented writer.

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