

# **A Study of Faulkner's Religious Critical Thought Based on the Image of Black Women**

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**Abstract:** In the 20th century, the famous American writer William Faulkner grew up in the "Bible Belt" of the southern United States. Due to the influence of religious and cultural environment, Faulkner infiltrated a strong religious color into his works, reflecting his complex diversity of religious thoughts. As a representative of the southern Renaissance, Faulkner created numerous black female images in different periods. Through attention and characterization of the black women at the bottom of the southern society under the white rule, he reveals the fact that the southern religion and the decayed and evil old southern cultural tradition are mutually integrated and accelerate the collapse of the old south. This paper studies and interprets the artistic depiction of the special group of black women, which is the artistic expression of Faulkner's critical thoughts of southern religion and his humanitarian spirit in the southern Renaissance.

## **1. Introduction**

William Faulkner was a famous American writer in the 20th century and an outstanding representative of southern literature. In 1950, he won the Nobel Prize for literature for his "powerful and unique artistic contribution to the American novel". Faulkner, who grew up in the southern United States with a strong religious culture, integrated the ubiquitous religious elements in his series of novels of Yoknapatawpha, the representative of his highest artistic achievement. It truly reproduces the rise and decline of several noble families in southern society under the influence of religious thoughts for nearly a century, and reflects Faulkner's review and deep reflection on the history and reality of southern society as a representative of the southern Renaissance.

This paper starts with the representative black women in Faulkner's several important works of different periods, and explores the relationship between Faulkner's black female image building and his critical thoughts on southern religions. Through the artistic description of the group at the bottom of the southern society, it reveals Faulkner's criticism of the supporting role of southern religion in the formation of the decay and evil of the old south and the acceleration of its collapse.

## **2. Faulkner and the religious culture of the American south**

American religion is multifarious, distributed with regional characteristics. Mississippi and the surrounding areas where Faulkner grew up formed a unique southern religious culture due to the long-term accumulation of the Bible and Christian doctrine spirit, so that religion has a very important position in the southern society which was dubbed as the "Bible belt". Since most southerners believed in the basic doctrines of Calvinism, Calvinist theology based on original sin controlled the minds and lives of southerners. It provides southerners not only with a set of unique set of basic principles of social life and morality, but also with a unique perspective to observe the world and identify themselves. As a result, Calvinism has become a fundamental force constituting the characteristics of the southern region. It permeates all levels of the southern society and plays a decisive role in the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of the southern region.

Faulkner said in a speech, "a writer must start from his background... I spent my life, my childhood in a very small town in Mississippi that was part of my background..." (Gwynn, Frederick & Blonter, Joseph, 1959: 86) Not only did Faulkner grow up in a small southern town full of religious culture, his family was also a typical southern Christian family. The southern regions

with biblical symbols had a profound influence on Faulkner. The strong religious culture constituted his rich spiritual world, which was reflected in his literary works, making his later literary creation inseparable from religious elements. In his works, he used a large number of biblical allusions as a frame of reference to show the moral exploration of different characters, and also reflected the fate and spiritual crisis of southerners living between the revolution and tradition. Living in the religious culture of the south, Faulkner saw both the good and the evil in religion. Faulkner's inheritance and promotion, criticism and negation of various Christian ideas run through his literary works, reflecting his strong religious feelings and complex and diversified religious thoughts.

### **3. Religion and traditional culture of the old south-the origin of Faulkner's religious critical consciousness**

Southern calvinism's support for southern slavery and racism in terms of doctrines was one of the major factors contributing to the high regional characteristics of southern religions. Since the 17th century, with the development of southern plantation economy, blacks have gradually become an indispensable part of American southern society. The southern slaveholders, proceeding from their own economic interests, made every effort to maintain slavery in the decades before the civil war and strengthened their control over the black people through various methods. One of the important aspects is to seek the control of black people from the perspective of religious theology. Using the interpretation of the Bible to promote the birth of colored people is a low servant. It is cursed by God and thus defends their "white supremacy" status.

In Genesis chapter 9 of the Bible, Noah was cursed for offending his drunken father, making him a slave to his brother. According to this doctrine, in the ancient times when the patriarchal system prevailed, the black people, as descendants of Canaan, became the symbol of the original sin or the crimes committed by the ancestors, and were designated as slaves by God. Noah's curse gave a reasonable interpretation of slavery and racial discrimination in the South. For most southern whites who wish to maintain slavery and control black slaves, the doctrines of the Bible and Christian traditions have legitimized their stubborn ideas. .

In addition to giving rational excuses to the existence of slavery, the Southern religion also plays a couasive role for blacks. The love and sacrifice, tolerance and tolerance advocated in the teachings of the South have become a comforting tool for them to obey and to live their lives. In the face of difficult real life, the old teachings cannot give them tangible answers. The Almighty God cannot help them to relieve the pain in life and get rid of the predicament of life. They can only hope for the next life.

Slavery and racism under religious cloaks have brought deep suffering to southern blacks. As the owner's accessory, the slaves are arbitrarily bought and sold as animals, often subjected to the arbitrage and brutal pursuit of the slave owners. The slave slaves are used as tools for the slave owners to vent their libido, incest or multiply labor. Even after the civil war, the abolition of slavery did not enable the blacks living in the reconstruction of the South to get a real improvement in their living standards and status. On the contrary, they were placed in a "poor race" position. The southern whites reiterated the white superiority theory and publicized it. Denying the right to freedom and equality of blacks in American democracy.

The arrival of the Southern Renaissance in the 1930s caused a large number of southern writers to jump out of the tradition of beautifying the South in the past literary works, and began to examine the problems of the southern society in a sober and rational way. As the most important writer of the Southern Renaissance, Faulkner has earnestly exposed and ruthlessly criticized the problems of the southern society while loving the hometown of the South. In his York Napata Faculty novel, Faulkner not only condemned the shackles of slavery in the South, slavery and racism, but also tortured the religion's will to equate the will of the slave ruling class with God's will.

### **4. The image of black women and Faulkner's religious critical thought**

Compared with black men, southern black women suffer more. The multiple pressures they

suffered from gender, race and class forced them to be at the bottom of the southern society and become victims of the southern society. Under the advocacy of the original sin of the religious teachings of the South, many black women began to numbly accept the slavery of sin, acknowledging that they were born to be inferior to the slaves of whites. Faulkner's portrayal of these black women who are willing to be slaves emphasizes that religious interpretation has created an excuse for slave owners and racist slaves to black people, thus criticizing religion as an accomplice to slavery and racism in the South.

Absalom! Absalom! "The strong, capable, and powerful Clemente, despite being the daughter of the manor of the manor, is silently accepting her slave status. She cannot be equal to other brothers and sisters. She can only take care of herself as a steward. The complicated affairs of the Sedpan family. Similarly, as a background person, Elnola in "The Flag in the Grave" has a yellow face, suggesting that her body may have blood flowing from the Sartorius family, and she can only accept her. It is the fact that the family of Satolis is an accessory. In "Go, Moses," Molly disregarded her husband's dissatisfaction, abandoning the fire and stove that symbolizes love at home, and came to Edmunds' home without any complaints to care for Rossa, who lost her mother for half a year. For Zach Edmonds, as a manor, the arbitrariness of blacks is the privilege of the Southern slavery tradition he possesses. Molly takes Zack's behaviors as granted, all without objection. She also finds Lucas (her husband)'s dissatisfaction unreasonable. Although slavery system has been abolished for the generation of Molly and Lucas, the system has been engraved in Southerners' mind, as is seen in its influence on Southerners.

Many black women choose to tolerate their sufferings with the thought of afterlife redemption. Every scene of *El Nora* is accompanied by religious significance, which shows an extreme contrast to the surroundings. The contrast deprives *El Nora*'s desire to fight against the existed social order and accepts the obligations to tolerate tribulations and challenges as a Christian so as to seek eternity of the beyond. Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* is depicted as a devout Christian. The concept of divine love in Christianity delivered by the sermon of black church helps Dilsey cultivates thoughts of love and sacrifice as well as generosity and tolerance, making her loyally hold the post as a servant to the Compson. Her thought as a Christian imprisoned herself as a servant. She lives in pain, anxiety and desperate with the Compson family.

Faulkner expresses his suspicion about whether the omnipotent God could guide and save the black women in pain in his work. As one of typical black women in *The Sunset*, Nancy could be sacrificed at any time for the extreme terror his husband, Jesus, gives her. In the meantime, she was punished by God for his adultery with a white man. The name of his husband and God -has become a symbol, and her fear for husband reminds people of the wrath of God. Nancy is no longer holy, that is, her body has been ravaged when she trades her body with the white man. Nancy's loyalty to God makes her feel guilty. In extreme fear, she eager to get attention, sympathy and help from people around. At this point, nine-year-old Quentin seems to understand that Nancy is asking God's son, Jesus, for help so as to escape from her husband's hatred and hurt. However, as the story develops, readers come to realize that any Christianity has abandoned Nancy.

## 5. Conclusion

Although Southern religion culture defines Faulkner's life, enriches his spiritual world and deepens his love for the traditional Southern hometown, Faulkner, a representative of the Southern Renaissance, starts to face and reveal the Southern social issues encouraged by his intellectuality and social responsibility. He successfully uncovers the problems concerning economic and sexual exploitation as well as racial oppression and discrimination in his work. The image of black women brings a unique view for readers to know more about life conditions of black women lived in the South and to explore Faulkner's critical thinking on the Southern society. He devoted all his life to figure out deeper reasons about the Southern decline. As the objective group of Faulkner's topic, the miserable destiny of these women reveals that the fundamental reasons for their decline lie in both the slavery system and racism that violate humanity and the Southern religion that provides theoretical support for decadent and evil Southern cultural tradition.

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