

"Sickness unto Death" Seen in William Faulkner's "That Evening Sun"

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Faulkner's existentialist affinities have already been pointed out.¹ His methodology—his narrative style and its technique—has one fundamental aim: to comprehend experience by encountering it from within. His world is filled with anguish, anger and fear of nothingness. However, his nothingness is different from that of Sartre's, an atheistic existentialist who claims that humans can recover from the death of God or the "absurd" by creating their own values and significance. Faulkner said, "I think that no writing will be too successful without some conception of God, you can call Him by whatever name you want. I think of Jean-Paul Sartre, which was good writing in the sense of good writing but there was something lacking."(FU 161)

Faulkner sees the agony and "joie de vivre"(joy of life) against the backdrop of eternity. His characters suffer from the curse of spiritual homelessness, an isolation from moral and cosmic integrity and hence isolation from themselves since they are away from the cosmic center. In that sense I agree with George C. Bedell that Faulkner has much to share with Søren Kierkegaard, the founder of modern existentialism and an innovator in Protestant Christianity.² Though separated by time, geography and customs, Faulkner and Kierkegaard overlap much in terms of their expression of the various ways people live out

their lives in relative degrees of hope and despair. We may understand the Kierkegaardian modalities of existence by observing the fictional characters in some of Faulkner's novels. In a similar manner, much light is shed on the fundamental nature of Faulkner's characters by viewing them from the standpoint of the Kierkegaardian modalities.

According to Kierkegaard, "The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self. . . ." (SD 146) If we borrow Kierkegaard's view point, the characters in Faulkner are suffering from "The Despair which is Conscious of being Despair, as also it is conscious of being a Self wherein there is after all something Eternal, and then is either in despair at not willing to be itself, or in despair at willing to be itself." (SD 180) Or more precisely, the characters suffer from their state of being in sin. Since, according to Kierkegaard, "Sin is: before God in despair not to be oneself, or before God in despair to will to be oneself . . . that sin is despair, . . . and it is . . . [original] before God." (SD 208) Here I would like to elucidate the desperation of Quentin who is witnessing Nancy's fear in "That Evening Sun," referring to Kierkegaardian modalities and search for the reasons for Quentin's suicide.

"That Evening Sun" was written in the fall of 1930, approximately two years after *The Sound and the Fury*. Like the second chapter of the novel, it is narrated by Quentin Compson, the eldest of the Compson children, in the first person and in retrospect. Mainly it is the story of the fear of the Compson's Negro laundress, Nancy, victimized by her prostitution to white men and terrified by her obsession that she will be killed by her Negro husband. From early in the story she is desperately and even irrationally afraid of her

husband. She is so afraid of being alone in the dark that she wants to sleep in the Compson house. Her fear, which has no rational foundation, is all consuming. As Mr. Compson and the children walk Nancy to her cabin after dark, she insists, "I can feel him. I can feel him now, in this lane. He hearing us talk, every word, hid somewhere, waiting. I ain't seen him, and I ain't going to see him again but once more, with that razor in his mouth." (*PF* 396-397) The climax of the story comes when Nancy one evening entices the children to slip off to her cabin. Nancy's unreasonable terror persuades her that her husband will not kill her if the children are present. So she tries to hold their interest by telling them stories and popping corn in her fireplace. However, Mr. Compson made the children go home and Nancy is left alone in her cabin waiting for whatever will come.

Though Nancy's fear is irrational, to her it is very real. What is Nancy really afraid of? She is not just afraid of her husband. It is apparent that she still loves him. "Jesus always been good to me," Nancy said. "Whenever he had two dollars, one of them was mine." (*PF* 396) When Compson says, "But it's all right now. He's probably in Saint Louis now. Probably got another wife by now and forgot all about you." Nancy replies, "If he has, I better not find out about it," and "I'd stand there right over them, and every time he wropped her, I'd cut that arm off. I'd cut his head off and I'd slit her belly and I'd shove—..." (*PF* 397) Her fear is rooted deeper.

Here we may find some clue in Faulkner's choice of the name of Jesus for her husband. From the beginning the name caused some problem in the original publication and Faulkner changed it, but later versions returned to the original. In answer to a question, Faulkner replied that the name "was probably a deliberate intent" (*FU* 21) and

that it's a common Negro name. Faulkner has Quentin sense that the name Jesus has a double meaning :

Nancy whispered something. It was oh or no, I don't know which. Like nobody had made it, like it came from nowhere and went nowhere, until it was like Nancy was not there at all ; that I had looked so hard at her eyes on the stairs that they had got printed on my eyeballs, like the sun does when you have closed your eyes and there is no sun. "Jesus," Nancy whispered. "Jesus."

"Was it Jesus?" Caddy said. "Did he try to come into the kitchen?"

"Jesus" Nancy said. Like this :

Jeeeeeeeeeeeeeesus. Until the sound went out, like a match or a candle does.

"It's the other Jesus she means," I [Quentin] said. (PF 398)

Keeping "the other Jesus" in mind, we may assume Nancy's fear is something religious. She says it belongs to herself : She says, "I can't do nothing. Just put it off. And that don't do no good. *I reckon it belong to me.* I reckon what I going to get ain't no more than mine." (PF 408) [emphasis mine] It is inevitable.

Here we should point out that Faulkner states this Nancy is the same Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun*.³ (FU 79) Nancy in "That Evening Sun" tries to escape responsibility for her predicament several times. "It ain't none of my fault." (PF 394) "I ain't nothing but a nigger," Nancy said. (PF 398) "I just a nigger. It ain't no fault of mine." (PF 410) Nancy's moral cowardice paralyzes her with fear ; all she can do is sit in her cabin with the lamp flaring and wait defenselessly. On the contrary, Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun*, with her recognition of her own sin, "Yes, Lord," (RN 45) illiterate and humble yet quite confident, addresses herself to the problem of evil and suffering, and tries to answer Temple's anguished question. Though she herself is about to suffer the death penalty for her crime, Nancy says, "But you got to trust Him. Maybe that's your pay for the suffering." (RN 236)

Nancy assures Temple and Stevens that unconditional belief is greater than mere hope and sustains the individual with an unfaltering trust. Stevens asks Nancy, "You mean when you have salvation, you don't have hope?" Nancy answers, "You don't even need it. All you need, all you have to do, is just believe." "Believe what?" asks Stevens, and Nancy says, "Just believe." (*RN* 234) The difference between Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun* and Nancy in "That Evening Sun" is that the former admits her own sin, while Nancy in "That Evening Sun" desperately tries to escape her painful moral predicament. "I scaired of the dark," Nancy said. "I scaired for it to happen in the dark." (*PF* 409) We can state that Nancy's fear is the self-inflicted fear of her sin being exposed before Jesus. Remaining in her state of sin, she further traps herself within her moral enclosure and by despair over her sin secures herself against every assault of the good or every aspiration after it.⁴

Here we should remember that the story is not just a private glimpse of Nancy's self-inflicted fear. From being primarily Nancy's story, it becomes the narrator's story. It is an elucidation of despair of one of Faulkner's most isolated characters, Quentin Compson. Faulkner has made Quentin essentially an observer of the action, who conveys emotion and meaning largely through remembered dialogue. He needs to say very little directly, and the few comments he does make are clear indications of his awareness of Nancy's plight and fright. We find in his section of *The Sound and the Fury* the same agonized, sardonic interior monologue of his private inferno.

What is the cause of Quentin's despair? Not being able to find love from his mother and father, he turned to Caddy for love and understanding. Quentin's obsession with Caddy's virginity is symbolic

of his desire to find something meaningful in which to believe. Thus, Quentin's despair seems to be over Caddy's loss of virginity.

However, Quentin's despair is not solely over Caddy's loss of virginity. According to Kierkegaard, "Despair over the earthly or over something earthly is really despair also about the eternal and over oneself" :

Despair over the earthly or over something earthly is really despair also about the eternal and over oneself, in so far as it is despair, for this is the formula for all despair. But the despairer, as he was depicted in the foregoing, did not observe what was happening behind him, so to speak ; he thinks he is in despair over something earthly and constantly talks about what he is in despair over, and yet he is in despair about the eternal ; for the fact that he ascribes such great value to the earthly, or, to carry the thought further, that he ascribes to something earthly such great value, or that he first transforms something earthly into everything earthly, and then ascribes to the earthly such great value, is precisely to despair about the eternal." (SD 194-195)

Here we could say Quentin's despair is also over his own inability to deal with his feelings of repulsion toward Caddy's action. Kierkegaard continues :

The despairer understands that it is weakness to take the earthly so much to heart, that it is weakness to despair. But then, *instead of veering sharply away from despair to faith, humbling himself before God for his weakness, he is more deeply absorbed in despair and despairs over his weakness.* Therewith the whole point of view is inverted, he becomes now more clearly conscious of his despair, recognizing that he is in despair about the eternal, he despairs over himself that he could be weak enough to ascribe to the earthly such a great importance, which now becomes his despairing expression for the fact that he has lost the eternal and himself. (SD 195) [emphasis mine]

However, what Quentin was trying to do is to cover up for Caddy by claiming he had committed incest and then confessing it to his

father. Or, to put it still another way, he is trying to be the scapegoat for Caddy’s sin. Mr. Compson calls her premarital sexual intercourse an act of “natural human folly,”(SD 160) but in Quentin’s mind it was an unforgivable sin. Quentin has so distorted the idea of guilt and punishment as to seek damnation for his sister and himself, dramatizing his suicide as a retribution for both. This meant that in his own fatal solitude Quentin had to take her with him into the negative salvation of his own suicide and escape from time :

If it could just be a hell beyond that : the clean flame the two of us more that dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame . . . Only you and me then amid the pointing and the horror walked by the clean flame. . . . (SF 108) [italics original]

In his desperation Quentin is always conscious of God, or Jesus, “Jesus walking on Galilee,” (SF 77) “Jesus O good man Jesus O that good man.”(SF 154) He is also afraid of the Judgement Day ; “Because if it were just to hell ; if that were all of it. Finished. If things just finished themselves. Nobody else there but her and me. If we could just have done something so dreadful that they would have fled hell except us.”(SF 76)“ And I will look down and see my murmuring bones and the deep water like wind, like a roof of wind, and after a long time they cannot distinguish even bones upon the lonely and inviolate sand. Until on the Day when He says Rise only the flat-iron would come floating up.”(SF 76, 104) However, he is too much in his own despair to get in touch with the infinite. He refers to his father’s cynical statements, “That Christ was not crucified : he

was worn away by a minute clicking of little wheels,"(*SF* 74) and "all men are just accumulations dolls stuffed with sawdust swept up from the trash heaps where all previous dolls had been thrown away the sawdust flowing from what would in what side."(*SF* 159)

We could say Quentin is in the same state as Nancy in "That Evening Sun," which is that of sin. (*SD* 236) This is the case, since according to Kierkegaard, sin is potentiated despair before God, or with the conception of God :

Sin is this : before God, or with the conception of God, to be in despair at not willing to be oneself, or in despair at willing to be oneself. Thus sin is potentiated weakness or potentiated defiance : sin is the potentiated despair. The point upon which the emphasis rests is before God, or the fact that the conception of God is involved ; the factor which dialectically, ethically, religiously, makes "qualified" despair (to use a juridical term) synonymous with sin is the conception of God. (*SD* 208)

This is the case with Quentin. His despair over the loss of Caddy's virginity is actually his despair about the eternal and about himself. And in desperation, instead of veering sharply away from despair to faith, humbling himself before God for his weakness, he is more deeply absorbed in despair at not willing to be himself.

The tragedy of the despairing self with relation to itself, Kierkegaard says, is that the despairing self cannot be free from itself :

Furthermore, despair in this case is not merely passive suffering but action. For when the earthly is taken away from the self and a man despairs, it is as if despair came from without, though it comes nevertheless always from the self, indirect-directly from the self, as counter-pressure (reaction), differing in this respect from defiance, which comes directly from the self. . . . For all that, this despair is to be referred to the formula : in despair at not willing to be oneself. Just as a father disinherits a son, so the self is not willing to recognize itself after it has been so weak. In its despair it cannot forget this

weakness, it hates itself in a way, it will not humble itself in faith under its weakness in order to gain itself again ; no, in its despair it will not hear of itself, so to speak, will not know anything about itself. But there can be no question of being helped by forgetfulness, no question of slipping by the aid of forgetfulness under the determinant of selflessness, and so being a man and a Christian like other men and Christians ; no, for this the self is too much a self. As it often was the case with the father who disinherited his son that the outward fact was of little avail to him, he did not by this get free of his son, at least his thought did not ; as is often the case with the lover’s curse upon the hated one (i.e. the loved one) that it does not help much, it almost imprisons him the more—so it is in the case of the despairing self with relation to itself.” (SD 196)

Thus, Quentin is never free from his shadow, his self-consciousness of being in despair.⁵

Kierkegaard concludes that the final stage of the despair at being unwilling to be oneself (weakness) is suicide :

The introverted despairer thus lives on *horis succusivis* [successive hours], through hours which, though they are not lived for eternity, have nevertheless something to do with the eternal, being employed about the relationship of one’s self to itself—but he really gets no further than this. . . . If this introversion is absolutely maintained, *omnibus numeris absoluta* [perfect in every respect], then suicide will be the danger nearest to him. (SD 198-200)

It is clear that Quentin is responsible for his own black desperation. In his despair he cannot forget his weakness to face the reality beyond him, and hates himself, and instead of humbling himself in faith in order to regain himself, he refuses to know anything about the self he so deeply despises. Thus, he becomes more and more introverted and alone, and, as Kierkegaard points out, suicide is the only thing left to him.

If we recall that the earliest well-known version of *The Sound and the Fury* is a manuscript of 148 pages entitled “Twilight”⁶ and consider this title along with the principle image-clusters of “That

Evening Sun," sunset and darkness, and "Justice," which are all expressed by Quentin, we can see that these conflicting image-clusters refer consistently to Quentin himself. He, like Nancy, hates to see "that evening sun go down" and remains in a state of sin for not facing the reality beyond himself, being in despair of enclosing himself. He is caught in "the suspension of twilight" created by his own consciousness.⁷

Notes

N. B.—The following abbreviations have been used :

PF : *The Portable Faulkner*, ed., with an introduction and notes, by Malcolm Cowley (N. Y. : The Viking Press, 1946)

FU : *Faulkner in the University: Class Conferences at the University of Virginia 1957-1958*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, Va. : Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959)

SD : Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death* trans. Walter Lowrie (N. Y. : Doubleday & Company, 1954)

SF : William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* with an introduction by Richard Hughes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1971)

RN : William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (N. Y. : Vintage Books, 1975)

1 Hyatt H. Waggoner, *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World* (Lexington, Ky., 1959), pp. 84, 86, 109-112, 113-114, 119, 240, 251, 257, 271; Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster, *William Faulkner: A Critical Appraisal* (Norman, Okla., 1951), p. 124; Robert M. Slabey, "Joe Christmas, Faulkner's Marginal Man," *Phylon*, XXI (1960), 266-277, and "Myth and Ritual in *Light in August*," *Studies in Literature and Language*, II (1960), 328-349.

2 See George C. Bedell, *Kierkegaard and Faulkner* (Louisiana: Louisiana State Press, 1971)

3 Q. Sir, did you feel any connection between the servant Nancy in *Requiem for a Nun* and the servant Nancy in "That Evening Sun"?

A. She is the same person, actually.

4 *The Sickness unto Death*, p. 240.

5 The shadow symbol is referred to over and over again.

"my shadow leaning flat upon the water(SF 85); "my shadow" (SF 89); "Trampling my shadow's bones into the concrete with hard heels . . . I walked upon the belly of my shadow."(SF 90)

"I stood in the belly of my shadow . . . I went back to the post office, treading my shadow into pavement." (SF 94); "Then it was past. I got off and stood in my shadow"(SF 97); "The car stopped. I got off, into the middle of my shadow . . . I turned my back to it, trampling my shadow into the dust."(SF 104); "I walked upon my shadow"(SF 111) etc.

6 *William Faulkner, Biographical and Reference Guide*, Edited by Leland H. Cox (Michigan ; Gale Research Company, 1982)

There are many references of twilight in *The Sound and the Fury*, for example :

A face reproachful tearful an odour of camphor and of tears a voice weeping steadily and softly beyond the twilight door the twilight-coloured smell of honey suckle. Bringing empty trunks down the attic stairs they sounded like coffins French Lick. Found not death at the salt lick. (SF 89) [italics original]

the curtains leaning in on the twilight upon the odour of the apple tree her head against the twilight her arms behind her bead kimono-winged the voice that breathed o'er eden clothes upon the bed by the nose seen above the apple. . . . (SF 98) [italics original]

This was where I saw the river for the last time this morning about here. I could feel water beyond the twilight, smell. When it bloomed in the spring and it rained the smell was everywhere you didn't notice it so much as other times but when it rained the smell began to come into the house at twilight either it would rain more at twilight or there was something in the light itself but it always smelled strongest then until I would lie in bed thinking when will it stop when will it stop. The draught in the door smelled of water, a damp steady breath.

Sometimes I could put myself to sleep saying that over and over until after the honeysuckle got all mixed up in it the whole thing came to symbolize night and unrest I seemed to be lying neither asleep nor awake looking down a long corridor of grey half-light where all stable things had become shadowy paradoxical all I had done shadows all I had felt suffered taking visible form antic and perverse mocking without reverence inherent themselves with the denial of the

significance they should have affirmed thinking I was I was not who was not was not who. (pp. 153-154)

7 We went on, in that strange, faintly sinister *suspension of twilight* in which I [Quentin] believed that I could still see Sam Fathers back there . . . and I would have to wait until I had passed on and through and beyond *the suspension of twilight*. (William Faulkner, “Justice” in *The Portable Faulkner*, p. 20.) [emphasis mine]

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