

*The defiant nature of Jason Compson is mirrored in an Easter sermon emphasizing perverted freedom, suffering caused by evil, and the closed door of judgment.*

## THE "SOJER FACE" DEFIANCE OF JASON COMPSON

DAVID AIKEN

Lucifer, we are told, was a son of the morning, a radiant and mighty angel; yet he fell . . . and was hurled with his rebellious angels into hell. What his sin was we cannot say. Theologians consider that it was the sin of pride, the sinful thought conceived in an instant: *non serviam: I will not serve.*

*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

### I

ACCORDING TO THE COMMON INTERPRETATION OF *The Sound and the Fury*, the character of Jason Compson is based on self-love and petty materialism.<sup>1</sup> Although Jason is indeed egocentric and materialistic, his character comes into clearest focus when we perceive its origins in what Kierkegaard calls "the despair of willing . . . to be oneself."<sup>2</sup> Jason

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 40; John Lewis Longley, Jr., *The Tragic Mask: A Study of Faulkner's Heroes* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 144; Lawrence Thompson, *William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963), p. 49; Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 337, 339; Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp. 45-46; John W. Hunt, *William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965), pp. 72-73; Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 97-99.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard analyzes this condition in *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death* (trans. Walter Lowrie [Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1959], pp. 200 ff.—hereafter cited as *K*). Recently George C. Bedell, in a Kierkegaardian analysis of selected Faulkner characters, has briefly discussed Jason as "a paradigm of the aesthetic modality," emphasizing his "avarice and greed" and therefore offering still another interpretation of him as a petty materialist (*Kierkegaard and Faulkner: Modalities of Existence* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972], pp. 198, 206). I would argue, however, that Jason illustrates the despair of self-assertion and therefore belongs in the higher ethical stage.

manifests the major qualities which Kierkegaard identifies as expressions of this despair: obsession with an earthly torment, self-assertiveness, feigned indifference, stoicism, fantasies, and—most important—monumental defiance. Faulkner underscores this seldom-encountered intensity of despair by alluding not only to *Macbeth's* fifth-act soliloquy but also to the prototype of all demonic defiance: Milton's Satan. These allusions, together with the sermon—the thematic center of the second half of the novel—provide a theological explanation for Jason's despair and for the final doom of the Compsons. The sermon presents us with the norm to judge both Jason and Dilsey—the only un-despairing central character in the novel—and provides an interpretation of the major imagery depicting the conflict between these two characters in section 4. Like the novel, *Macbeth*, and *Paradise Lost*, the sermon emphasizes perverted freedom, suffering caused by evil, and the closed door of judgment.

When Jason became its head, the Compson family was already full of sound and fury. In his final, even sympathetic, attempt to characterize Jason, Faulkner writes in the Appendix:

All the money from the sale of the pasture having gone for his sister's wedding and his brother's course at Harvard, [Jason] used his own niggard savings out of his meagre wages as a storeclerk to send himself to a Memphis school where he learned to class and grade cotton, and so establish his own business with which, following his dipsomaniac father's death, he assumed the entire burden of the rotting family in the rotting house, supporting his idiot brother because of their mother, sacrificing what pleasures might have been the right and just due and even the necessity of a thirty-year-old bachelor, so that his mother's life might continue as nearly as possible to what it had been.<sup>3</sup>

But Jason's response to this family condition was a form of despair so intense that it aggravated an already strained situation to the breaking point, destroying the remains of the Compson family.

The circumstances of Jason's adult life, however difficult, are not solely responsible for shaping his nature, for what Jason becomes is largely an extreme extension of his selfish and malicious childhood character, revealed in his early business venture of making and selling kites, in which he was the self-appointed treasurer, and in his pointless destruction of Benjy's paper dolls. This childhood maliciousness, however, becomes a revengeful pattern of behavior because of the memory of a lost patrimony, a lost job, and a degraded family, a memory which becomes Jason's justification for a "code" of conduct which is consistently spiteful and malevolent, especially toward Caddy and his niece Quentin. Jason's monologue begins almost seventeen years after the birth of Quentin, during all of which time he has willed to remember the lost patrimony and the lost job. By April 6, 1928, this memory has become, in Kierkegaard's words,

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Modern Library, 1946), p. 17—cited hereafter in the text as *F*.

Jason's "earthly distress," his self-chosen "torment," and his primary source of self-justification (*K*, 204).

Even a cursory reading of the monologue discloses Jason's self-assertiveness, most obviously apparent in the frequency with which he uses the first person pronoun: "like I say," "what I say," or "I always say." In Kierkegaard's words, Jason "acknowledges no power" over himself, insistent on being his "own lord and master" (*K*, 203). His arrogance with the cotton "manipulators" in New York—"a bunch of damn eastern jews" (*F*, 209)—is less an illustration of his frustrated attempts to hoard wealth than of his refusal to acknowledge any form of external authority; he would sooner waste his money than feel that he is not absolutely self-sufficient. Nor will Jason tolerate the authority of employer over employee. To his boss's mild suggestion that he eat in town on Good Friday afternoon rather than go home for lunch, Jason replies that he will never be a slave to anybody's business unless it is his own (*F*, 228). So intense is Jason's self-assertiveness that it frequently approaches the comic, as in the casual conversation in which he opposes the popular opinion that the Yankees are going to win the 1928 Pennant (*F*, 269).

Indeed humor is one of Jason's distinguishing characteristics; but while readily condemning the comic and the contradictory in others, he fails to acknowledge the contradictions at the center of his own life. While blaming the dead and banished members of his family for his own troubles, he has spent his life persecuting the women, the innocent children, and the helpless idiot of his own household. Jason is outraged at Quentin for telling her "grandmother lies and forging her name on [her school] report" (*F*, 202), yet he tells his mother much more serious lies and forges her name on much more serious documents—not just once or twice, but monthly over a long period of years. Complaining that because of his family need he must keep a demeaning job as a store clerk to an unfair boss, Jason monthly steals the money Caddy sends for Quentin's support, a sum significantly greater than his own meagre salary. He talks as though he knows both the cause and the solution for his trouble, but proposes alternatives so outrageous that they complicate rather than alleviate the problem (*F*, 240, 268). Refusing to acknowledge these glaring self-contradictions, Jason sees himself rather as a victim of forces beyond his control, the long-suffering defender of the Compson name in a hostile world of incompetent fools, and through a defensive humor reconciles himself to the very real pain of his frantic life.

Like Jason's humor, his feint of outward indifference concerning his family pride and the actions of Quentin is also a screen behind which he hides the magnitude of his misery. Kierkegaard says that "the more despair . . . becomes a peculiar world for itself in introversion, all the more is the self alert . . . to set the outward appearance at the level of indifference, to make it as unrevealing and indifferent as possible" (*K*, 206). So central is Jason's "indifference" that Faulkner emphasized it in

the Appendix, calling Jason "logical rational contained and even a philosopher in the old stoic tradition" (*F*, 16). The description recalls Kierkegaard's statement that "if one would have a common name for this despair, one might call it Stoicism—yet without thinking only of this philosophic sect" (*K*, 202). Like the Stoics Jason perceives himself as possessing a special wisdom which elevates him above the great mass of foolish humanity, and embraces a cosmic renunciation to suffer all that he believes is accidental and external to himself.

Jason's self-assertiveness, humor, feigned indifference, and stoical resignation are all manifestations of his refusal to renounce his torment, which he has embraced so completely that even the long process of stealing Quentin's money has not lessened his sense of being wronged. In part, Jason cherishes his torment because as long as he endures it, he can, in Kierkegaard's words, continue to convince himself that he is right, that he is "the one man in the whole of existence who is the most unjustly treated" (*K*, 205). Thus his torment has become Jason's "infinite advantage over other men" and his "justification for being what he is" (*K*, 206). Rather than relinquish such advantage, he isolates himself totally, becoming "offended at the whole of existence" (*K*, 204).

Another reason Jason refuses to relinquish his torment and be comforted is that he cannot endure what Kierkegaard calls "the humiliation of having to accept help"—either human or divine. Jason's pride recoils at "the necessity of deferring to another, . . . of having to give up being oneself so long as one is seeking help" (*K*, 205). Even in approaching the sheriff for aid, Jason presents a demand and a definite course of action. Similarly, his relationship with the Memphis whore Lorraine is purely contractual according to Jason's stipulations. Nor will Jason even "hope in the possibility of help. . . . rather than seek help he would prefer to be himself—with all the tortures of hell, if so it must be" (*K*, 205). Jason rates his earthly torment even above the hope of its removal in eternity. His monologue includes reflections on a Jefferson man who, having "made a lot of money selling rotten goods to niggers," "was taken sick" with an illness that "scared the hell out of him so that when he was up again he joined the church and bought himself a Chinese missionary, five thousand dollars a year." Jason's reaction to this conversion reverses the Pascalian wager: "I often think how mad he'll be if he was to die and find out there's not any heaven, when he thinks about that five thousand a year. Like I say, he'd better go on and die now and save money" (*F*, 212). Rather than consider the possibility of losing his advantage over other men, Jason will bet not only his money but even his life against eternity. In the Appendix, Faulkner indicates the completeness of this choice: at last Jason thinks "nothing whatever of God one way or the other" (*F*, 16).

Ultimately, however, Jason chooses his torment because it gives meaning to his life. Scorning the meaninglessness of his suicide brother and alcoholic father, Jason builds his identity on his commitment to his

self-chosen misery, a commitment which leads him to defy family, town, humanity, and finally even God. Despite what Jason says, he does not know the solution to his problems because he refuses to recognize their real cause: what Kierkegaard would call Jason's despairing determination to accept his earthly distress as though it were eternal. Upon this torment Jason "directs his whole passion, which at last becomes a demonic rage": his inherited family troubles and his childhood tendencies toward selfishness and maliciousness notwithstanding, Jason's life takes its final shape because "in spite of or in defiance of the whole of existence, he wills to be himself" (*K*, 204-5).

This decision can be traced to the day of his father's funeral, when Jason, having become the last male head of the once-proud aristocratic family, experienced what he calls "feeling funny . . . kind of mad or something" (*F*, 220-1), marking the point when he began to choose his torment. Realizing that he might actually vindicate himself for his lost patrimony and lost job, Jason committed the first defiant act in his newly chosen modality of existence when he kept his bargain with Caddy by galloping the hired hack past her while holding her baby up to the carriage window. That night, having counted again the hundred dollars Caddy had given him in advance, Jason mused, "I didn't feel so bad. I says I reckon that'll show you. I reckon you'll know now that you cant beat me out of a job and get away with it" (*F*, 223). Jason's despair, then, takes the form of defiant self-assertion. But if such is his despair, such also is his pleasure.

## II

If we stop reading at the end of Jason's monologue, in which he reveals the various sides of his own character, we might see him as an ambiguous villain; for with his headaches and frustrations he is, after all, somewhat amusing. In section 4, however, Faulkner reveals the true nature of Jason's villainy. Jason is more than a bigot, a sexist, a mean-spirited materialist, an anti-semite, a criminal, and an egoist; beneath his surface lies a depth not plumbed in his own monologue. Only in the last chapter does Faulkner reveal the full truth about this radically egocentric character.

To characterize the last Compson male, Faulkner not only uses the obvious allusion to the classical argonaut Jason, but in the fourth section also adds a direct allusion to Milton's Satan and completes the parallel of Jason's relationship to Macbeth. All three allusions highlight the essentials of Jason's nature. The traditional Compson name Jason, which undergoes a final debasement when inherited by Jason IV, is obviously intended to remind us of the self-seeking ambition of Euripides' debunked argonaut, and certainly Jason's self-justifying and materialistic ambition is one of his most noticeable characteristics. However, the allusions that point to the deepest levels of his character originate not in the classical world, but in the worlds of Satan and Macbeth. These allusions, though less obvious than

those to the *Medea*, are more profound, for they identify Jason's essence with his demonic defiance.

Like Satan, Jason is motivated largely by a "sense of injured merit," persuading himself that he is innocent and that the whole world is conspiring against him. Jason is intelligent enough, as the wise old Job comments: "Aint a man in dis town kin keep up wid you fer smartness" (*F*, 267), but his intellect is completely subservient to his defiant will. Trapped within himself, he uses his reason the same way he uses everything else—to assert and please himself. This defiant monomania is a fundamental characteristic of Jason's "sanity," which is therefore ultimately a form of sickness: in Kierkegaardian terms, a sickness unto death. Because of his egocentricity, we feel that Jason, like Satan, will somehow gradually degenerate.

Like Satan's, Jason's state of mind is infernal: he is envious, vengeful, and willfully blind to anyone else's plight. Jason's memory of his lost position at the bank recalls Satan's envy of the Son, who gained the first position under God in heaven. Jason is jealous of his dead brother because Quentin benefited from the sold pasture, and he hates Caddy because her illegitimate baby ruined his job at the bank—a job he never even had, just as Satan never really had the heavenly first position from which he feels displaced. But above all Jason hates his niece, whom he perceives as the cause of all his woes and reduces to little more than an object which will pay off if he plays her right. Just as Satan vengefully determined to ruin the innocent Adam and Eve, Faulkner's Southern rebel spitefully determines to ruin his niece, another innocent victim, even though he no longer has any hope of acquiring his lost job. Jason too commits himself to an ignoble vengeance, then, more out of a "sense of injured merit" than out of materialistic ambition. So extreme is his viciousness that his very humanity is questioned by two of the people who know him best. "You never had a drop of warm blood in you," Caddy accuses him (*F*, 226), and Dilsey says, "You's a cold man, Jason, if man you is. . . . I thank de Lawd I got no heart dan dat, even ef hit is black" (*F*, 224).

Even as a young man Jason indicated the extremes to which he would go for vengeance. The day after his trick had caused Caddy to damn him for his cruelty, Jason's cold, off-handed reply was, "Sure. . . . That's all right too" (*F*, 224). Years later, Jason accepted almost with pleasure the damning expletives of the baby Compson girl, by then a desperate young woman: "You—you old goddam. . . . You damn old goddam!" (*F*, 202). On Easter, 1928, Jason at last lists God himself, along with nature, family and mankind, among his enemies. Pursuing his ruined niece that morning, Jason experiences a Satanic rage as he speeds by church after church "surrounded by tethered teams and shabby motorcars." In his isolation he imagines that even the weather will turn against him with rain, and envisions himself "slogging through the mud, hunting a team" of mules to pull his car out of the mire. "And every damn one of them will be at

church," he says aloud (*F*, 321). From the depths of his defiance he fantasizes about finding a church at last, taking a team, and then striking down its protesting owner: "'I'm Jason Compson. See if you can stop me. See if you can elect a man to office that can stop me,' . . . thinking of himself entering the courthouse with a file of soldiers and dragging the sheriff out" (*F*, 321). The omniscient narrator says that in the pursuit Jason thinks neither of his niece nor of "the arbitrary valuation of the money. Neither of them had had entity or individuality for him for ten years; together they merely symbolized the job in the bank of which he had been deprived before he ever got it" (*F*, 321). Instead he dwells upon his own torment, furiously interpreting even the clearing of the day as "another cunning stroke on the part of the foe, the fresh battle toward which he was carrying ancient wounds" (*F*, 322).

Like Satan, who started the ancient conflict, Jason locks his will into a state of defiance against God in a despairing willingness to be himself at all costs. Each time he passes a church he becomes more enraged in his defiance: "'And damn You, too. . . . See if You can stop me,' thinking of himself, his file of soldiers with the manacled sheriff in the rear, dragging Omnipotence down from His throne, if necessary; of the embattled legions of both hell and heaven through which he tore his way and put his hands at last on his fleeing niece" (*F*, 322). Like Lucifer's, Jason's *non serviam* is complete; so dear to him is his own private torment that he would not stop even at the throne of heaven to avenge himself.

Faulkner implies, however, that one does not necessarily have to be heroic to be Satanic. Sharing Satan's monumental defiance but lacking his epic stature, Jason is ultimately demonic; yet Faulkner does not make Jason a traditional Satan-like vice figure. Even though Jason looks like a caricature and shares some of the essential characteristics of the irresistible medieval tempter—his evil at times is ridiculous and grotesque, and he is quite effective in perverting the innocent he tries to ruin—in the final analysis Faulkner causes the reader to feel just the necessary amount of human sympathy for Jason to save him from being perceived as a vice figure like Iago rather than a Macbeth.

Although Jason's humanity is never ultimately disputed, however, his precise identity is essentially problematic. Jason is proud that he is not a Compson, but then neither is he a Bascomb. In fact, he has so isolated himself that he is finally identifiable only with that tiny band of human villains best illustrated by Macbeth. With his Scottish blood, Jason is in a direct line with Shakespeare's evil king: both finally become obsessed with the same despair and the same defiance to be themselves regardless of nature, man, or God. Just as Macbeth is often considered Shakespeare's least redeemable tragic hero and his most profound study of evil, Jason might be considered Faulkner's least redeemable villain and one of the finest studies of evil in modern literature.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Cargill, for one, says that "Jason Compson . . . is Faulkner's best-drawn character and perhaps the best villain in American fiction" (*Intellectual America* [New York:

Macbeth, Shakespeare's paradigmatic hero of defiance, is not an innocent protagonist who struggles with the forces of evil (as Hamlet originally does, for instance) but rather an example of one who willingly embraces evil in an act of total resignation. His destruction is entirely the result of his deeds; he stands and falls on his own moral choice. Exhibiting his freedom to the end, he becomes the knowing apostate, the radical denier who willingly chooses his own damnation. Macbeth's arch crime, therefore, is primarily egocentric perversion; his *hybris* is perverted freedom. Finally, having lost the possibility of any kind of innocence, the defiant hero resigns himself to solitary endurance. Macbeth utters his words signifying nothing from the lowest depths of a despair that affirms only itself. The heroes of defiance base their existence on a rejection of everything but self—the world, the ethical, and salvation: desperately willing to be themselves gives meaning to their existence. Ultimately, however, they destroy both themselves and others by committing acts of defiance which unleash a chain of disasters culminating in a world of sound and fury and illustrating the destructive power of evil.

Like Macbeth's, Jason's destructive powers affect others, and the unnaturalness of Macbeth's evil is reflected in the unnaturalness of Jason's. Just as Macbeth spills the blood of innocent subjects, Jason betrays his charge and defies the lawful rights of nature, not only keeping mother from daughter, but also sadistically persecuting and perverting his niece until she becomes everything he has ever accused her of being. Explaining Quentin's behavior in terms of determinism, he sees her as the demonstrable proof of Caddy's character: he thinks of Caddy as a whore; he has turned Quentin into one.

The relationship between Mrs. Compson and Jason is a complex one, but within the context of *Macbeth*, their association resembles that of Lady Macbeth and her demonic husband: the cold, self-serving Mrs. Compson in chapter 4 is reminiscent of Shakespeare's "fiendlike queen." Though not biologically sterile, Mrs. Compson is barren of the bonds of human feeling and thus no mother to her unfortunate children. She feels affinity only for Jason, her spiritual mate, whom she blindly abets in his adult crimes just as she had blindly supported his childhood stinginess and cruelty. Her literal myopia is symbolic of her utter lack of unself-centered vision. But since childhood Jason has far outgrown his mother's petty self-interest, and he uses her for his own evil designs just as he uses everyone else in his family. The comparison between Lady Macbeth and Mrs. Compson defines the limits of the mother's accountability in Jason's evil: although Mrs. Compson has always favored Jason, she finally is not responsible for his behavior; her influence on him is an inadequate explanation for his depravity.

---

Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1968], p. 375). Discussing the composition of *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner said that Jason "to me represented complete evil. He's the most vicious character in my opinion I ever thought of" (*Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. Robert A., Jelliffe [Tokyo: Kenkyusha Ltd., 1956], p. 104).

Jason's character becomes increasingly demonic after Mr. Compson's death. The remaining family collides against the personalized power of evil in Jason, who attacks goodness wherever it appears, whether in the natural, child-like vulnerability of Ben, on the one hand, or in the adult charity of Dilsey, on the other. Against Jason, Ben has no self-protection except his idiocy; but Dilsey is able not only to hold her own, but also to protect, at least for a while, the remaining innocents of the family. Eventually, however, the Compson doom will be sealed because Jason will destroy all its innocent "pretty ones."

The guilt behind the doom of the Compsons is both inherited and volitional, but by the time of April 8, 1928, the ethical innocence of inherited guilt, seen best in Ben and Quentin, is so helpless and ignored (as in Ben's case), or so questionable and deformed (as in Quentin's case) that the reader has little sense of tragic innocence. Instead we see the source of great moral evil in the persons of Jason and his mother and feel that the family deserves what it gets, that it has brought retribution upon itself. The Compsons all feel cursed in one way or another, they all see themselves as doomed, they all despair, and they all have a limited explanation for the decline of the once-proud family; but their final decay ultimately results neither from fate nor from a curse, but rather from will: the determination of the last Compson male to be his cruel, revengeful, materialistic self at all costs.

### III

For the conduct of his chief villain and the resulting collapse of the Compson household Faulkner's main explanation is theological, appearing in the Easter morning sermon in section 4. A religious confession about human depravity and its ultimate judgment by "de power en de glory," the sermon is the climactic revelation of the novel, presenting a theocentric judgment against the despairing Jason. Faulkner sets the sermon in the context of the conflict at the heart of the family's collapse: the blind Mrs. Compson and her defiant son are locked in mortal battle against their black servant, who alone in a seemingly doomed struggle patiently and painfully tries to protect the last remaining innocents from the contagion of despairing self-centeredness most pronounced in Jason. In this chapter both extremes of the fundamental conflict are revealed in their essence: Dilsey at the Easter sermon, and Jason pursuing his ruined niece, the symbol of his torment. The tone of the last section is set by the bluejays—Southern versions of Yeats' indignant desert birds—that come from nowhere, "whirling up" on blasts of the elements and "screaming into the wind" (*F*, 282). Luster associates them with hell, and certainly they seem sinister, appropriate to the continual drowning of innocence in this cold spiritual wasteland. Faulkner, like Yeats, implies some imminent revelation in this dark world. The coldness of the weather outside, of the

two Compsons as they stare at each other over breakfast, and of the decaying Compson house is contrasted with the warmth in the kitchen where Dilsey makes a fire, prepares breakfast, and sings.

As the outraged Jason storms from the house, the omniscient narrator shifts the scene to Dilsey, Frony, and Luster leading Ben to their "nigger church," where the Easter sermon embodies for Dilsey the truth of the egocentric, self-destructive Compson household and the meaning of its doom. Juxtaposed against the public, confessional language of the sermon is the language of Jason's interior confession; in both Faulkner uses the same central images, thereby indirectly commenting on one by means of the other and providing a key to the nature of the central struggle of the novel. During the sermon individual egos are temporarily obliterated in a moment of theocentric existence, and humanity transcends its natural limitations, as if only by abandoning their egocentricity do the people of sound and fury find any meaning. By contrast, Jason never transcends himself because he obtains his meaning from the fury of his own despairing self-commitment, making himself the measure of all things and thereby enacting the very conditions that the sermon condemns.

Faulkner uses imagery of sound and vision climactically in the sermon, suggesting a symbolic parallel between "Rev'un" Shegog's horn-like voice, "too big to have come from him," and the quality of his religious insight (*F*, 311-13). Although initially filled with "astonishment and disappointment," "consternation and unbelief" at Shegog's "wizened black face like a small, aged monkey" and his undersized body in "a shabby alpaca coat," the congregation gradually "forgot his insignificant appearance in the virtuosity with which he ran and poised and swooped upon the cold inflectionless wire of his voice" (*F*, 309). Shegog's ringing voice, presenting a vision of God's power against the wicked and glory for the redeemed, is the external correlative of the transcendent power within the preacher, just as the peevish, habitual whining of Mrs. Compson, who "cant see to read [the Bible] nowadays" (*F*, 316), is a correlative of the empty decadence of the Compsons. The power of Shegog's voice, the quality of his vision, and the selflessness and mysterious belief of the congregation (*F*, 311) prefigure an imminent revelation.

Faulkner stresses the revelatory significance of the sermon through his description of the events during and immediately following the service. In the midst of the experience Ben sits "rapt in his sweet blue gaze," and even Frony is impressed, saying to Dilsey as they walk back "up the sandy road with the dispersing congregation. . . . 'He sho a preacher, mon! He didn't look like much at first, but hush!'" She too realizes that he has seen "de power en de glory." Only Dilsey, however—obviously overcome by the truth of the sermon as she sits beside Ben, "bolt upright, . . . crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb"—understands the full and present significance of the preacher's vision: that the suffering and destruction of the innocent and the weak at the

hands of defiant mankind are immediately mirrored in the Compson household. "I've seed de first en de last," she says to Frony, "de beginnin, en . . . de endin" not only of all humanity as confessed in biblical religion, but also of the particular decaying household in which she is a despised but faithful servant.

The sermon acknowledges the presence of evil and demonic defiance in the world and confesses the resulting sealing of God's doom and the eschatological deliverance of those who have "de ricklickshun." Rev'un Shegog's vision of man's defiance and God's righteous judgment begins with the affirmation of the ultimately temporary nature of earthly life, passes through "de lamentation of de po mammy" for her innocent Jesus in the hands of the "boasting en de braggin" world, moves to Calvary "wid de sacred trees," and comes at last to "de widowed God" who will "shet His do' " on the defiant, destructive powers of sound and fury. This meaning is expressed through a group of images which are significantly repeated throughout the omniscient narrative of the final section: images of light and darkness, pertaining to spiritual insight, interrelate with food, martial, and blood images. With this juxtaposition Faulkner provides a norm for judging Jason's evil.

The beginning of Shegog's sermon reminds us of the Compson world: "When de long, cold . . . when de long, cold years rolls away!" Shegog prophesies the passing away of the generations, leading ultimately to a triumph for only those who have eaten "de milk en de dew" and have "de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!" Faulkner reiterates this food imagery in relation to Jason, who in his final chase after his niece is sustained neither by the food Dilsey places on the table (as Dilsey says to Luster and Ben, "Y'all come on en eat. . . Jason aint coming to dinner. . . Jason aint comin home" [*F*, 317]) nor by "de milk en de dew of de old salvation," but by "his sense of injury and impotence feeding upon its own sound . . . in the violent cumulation of his self-justification and his outrage" (*F*, 318).

Shegog's religious vision also includes a prophecy of the damnation of the wicked. In contrast to the image of the redeemed with "de ricklickshun" and "de milk en de dew of de old salvation" is a larger, more varied group of images that portrays the judgment of God against those who defy Him and willfully destroy the good and the innocent. These defiant men are depicted as soldiers: "de Roman po-lice passin" Mary's door as she holds the baby Jesus, "whilst de angels singin him to sleep," and "de sojer face" looking through Mary's door and exclaiming, "We gwine to kill! We gwine to kill! We gwine to kill yo little Jesus!" Reflecting this triple repetition, Jason, like the soldiers, is "gwine to kill" Caddy, "gwine to kill" Quentin, and "gwine to kill" Ben. Caddy is gone; Quentin, whose innocence is increasingly in question, is going; and Ben is soon to be gone. Therefore, the struggle will shortly be over, won by the defiant forces of sound and fury. Similarly, both martial images relate to Jason's fantasy of

himself leading his legions to the very throne of Omnipotence (*F*, 321–22), and further clarify the demonic nature of Jason's self-chosen existence.

These images of war contrast with images of lamb-like innocence which is mercilessly destroyed by the wicked. When Shegog describes "de little Jesus" as "like dem chillen dar" in the congregation, Dilsey knows that "chillen" also includes both Quentin and "de Lawd's chile" Ben (*F*, 333). And as Jesus's "mammy suffered de glory en de pangs" protecting her innocent, so also has Dilsey from her lowly position of authority in the Compson household tried to protect Caddy, Quentin, and Ben, saying about Ben's slow, "hopeless and prolonged" wailing on this particularly long, cold day, "Dis long time, O Jesus . . . Dis long time" (*F*, 332).

The center of the sermon is a theological interpretation of Jason's defiance. Rev'un Shegog describes Calvary "wid de sacred trees . . . de thief en de murderer" and "de weepin en de crying," reflecting the suffering, weeping, and agony that resulted from the long theft of Quentin's money and the murder of her innocence and spirit. But unlike "de thief en de murderer" on Calvary, who even at the door of death finds mercy through repentance, Jason seems determined to remain defiant to the end. Like both the thief and Macbeth, Jason dwells in a personalized universe where each acts to control his own fate; but unlike Macbeth, who dies in his despair, Jason is not known to be ultimately damned. Though Faulkner creates no final resolution of Jason's defiance, however, he does indicate its major direction: every time Jason is confronted by some warning of impending retribution—whether the condemnation of Caddy, the rebuke of Dilsey, the theft of his hoard, the refusal of the sheriff to help recover the lost money, or even his headaches—he responds with further acts of defiance. Therefore, in the context of the sermon, God does not damn Jason; Jason damns himself, showing always the greatness of his freedom. Hence Shegog's vision also includes the shut door of God's judgmental wrath for those who defy Him to the end, the "sojer" faced men like Jason, who would continue forever in their evil intent to kill the innocent and to crucify the good. Shegog's sermon culminates with "de blastin, blindin sight" of the righteous judgment of God, who "aint gwine overload heaven!" Together with "de turnt-away face of God," and "de darkness en de death everlastin upon de generations," Shegog envisions "de whelmin flood roll between" the redeemed in God and the defiant against God, between the lambs and the soldiers. The crack of doom culminates the self-destruction of the defiant; the resulting darkness and death are everlasting.

Rev'un Shegog's horn-like voice, then, becomes God's golden horn delivering judgment to the people in the painless Compson house with its "rotting portico." Faulkner reinforces the preacher's vision by depicting the doom and destruction not just as an eschatological event but also as a present process. The sermon interprets Jason's defiance, placing it in its ultimate perspective in much the same way that Shakespeare's norm of

Christian humanism provides the framework from which Macbeth is ultimately judged. We see the flood of judgment isolating Jason as he relentlessly pursues the niece whom he has perverted for so many years.

During the fruitless chase after his exploited niece Jason enacts "de boastin en de braggin" depicted in the sermon; "de blastin blindin" judgment of God is recalled by the steady southwest wind against which Jason is "shielding his face" (*F*, 323). Having boasted that he could get along without anybody, Jason now gets his chance; even the sheriff will not help him retrieve the money (*F*, 320), for Jason's despairing willingness to be himself has turned him into a desperado. In his demonic rage Jason has isolated himself from all humanity, and even nature seems to be indignant with him. Thinking of how he was "robbed of that which was to have compensated him for the lost job, which he had acquired through so much effort and risk, by the very symbol of the lost job itself, and worst of all, by a bitch of a girl," Jason sees "the opposed forces of his destiny and his will drawing swiftly together now, toward a junction that would be irrevocable" (*F*, 323). This irrevocable junction indicates both the self-destructiveness and the impotence of Jason's defiant "heroism."

Even though Jason's destructive powers seemingly affect others more than himself, he will not stop even at his own destruction in order to be himself. Before Easter day is over, he does almost commit a form of suicide by roughing up the elderly carnival cook, who comes close to splitting his assailant's aching head. Encountering "the puny fury" of the old man in "the gaudily painted pullman" car, who attacks him with "a rusty hatchet high in his hand," Jason believes the "impending disaster" he has anticipated will be violent death (*F*, 323, 326). But instead of meeting the heroic death of a Macbeth, this modern hero of defiance is hauled to his feet just in time and "propelled rapidly away" from "the old man's thin furious voice" and murderous intent (*F*, 326). In this conflict of "outrage and impotence" the images of blood and sight of the sermon are repeated (*F*, 326-7), and the electric sign bearing its enormous eye becomes a religious sign as well, a final warning of impending retribution. In Mottson Jason might, if he looked, perceive the degrading end of his Satanic fury, the futility and self-destruction of his perversion of innocence, and the absence of a recollection of any redeeming blood. In the terms of the sermon, if Jason does not keep his eye on Mottson, he will, like his brother, father, sister, and especially like his prototype Macbeth, commit his own brand of suicide in a willful defiance to be himself. Jason thinks "it'll end" in violent death, but we suspect "it'll end" in his becoming as pitifully furious as the "fatally single-purposed" old man: Jason has in some sense met himself at the end of his chase.

The encounter with the carnival cook also underscores the emptiness behind Jason's "heroic" fantasies. Kierkegaard says that the defiant "despairing self is constantly building nothing but castles in the air, it fights only in the air," because "at bottom of it all there is nothing." Such a character, then, is "a king without a country, he rules really over nothing"

(*K*, 203). In contrast to Macbeth, who ruled and fought heroically in the real world of men and swords, Jason shows his "heroism" in his fantasies of victoriously assaulting the farmer whose team of mules he would steal, or of leading a file of soldiers to the throne of Omnipotence to capture his desperate niece. Jason's favorite fantasy, the "vain dream which kept him tossing and sweating on nights two and three and even four years after the event" was of suddenly "springing on [Quentin] out of the dark, before she had spent all the money, and murder[ing] her before she had time to open her mouth" (*F*, 21). Finally, then, Jason is revealed as being subject to midnight fits of raging impotence which remind us somewhat of Satan's frenzy and "furious gestures" expressing "passions foul" when he first enters Eden and sees Adam and Eve. As with the degenerating Satan, Jason's rages and fantasies increase as his actual recourse decreases: only in the world of fantasy does Jason enjoy the vision of complete control and of making himself into a totally self-sufficient character. Such is the world of those who make evil their good.

Unlike Macbeth, who struggles against superior forces, Jason expresses his demonic brand of low heroism not only in fantasies but also by consistently attacking only those weaker than he. In the last episode of section 4, Faulkner shows Jason resuming his life of defiance after the unsuccessful chase, directing his destructive energies now against Luster and Ben, the one remaining Compson innocent since Quentin's escape. Having driven away two Compson women—mother and daughter—the knowing defier finally wreaks his fury on only a child and an idiot. The significance of this last scene is that Jason is not keeping his eye on Mottson, but rather on his own willful intention to exist utterly alone. Though his reasons for defiance vary and though he knows how it will end, the defiance is constant. His "sojer face" will continue to be turned against others as he exploits and destroys the weaker members of his household. Like Satan, he will lead his legions anywhere to justify his sense of injury; and as he despairingly wills to be himself, all his tomorrows will be committed to the ancient forces of defiance against man, nature, and God.

The Appendix indicates the continuity of Jason's modality of existence. Although the older Jason seems outwardly more tranquil, his despair continues, having become passive rather than active. Kierkegaard contends that even in the "passive sufferer, we have the same formula: in despair at willing to be oneself" (*K*, 203). Perhaps Jason finds in the accumulation of wealth a method to ease the torment that he will not give up. In any case, Faulkner neither suggests the possibility of Jason's change through repentance nor gives any indication that Jason abandons his torment or that his character becomes qualitatively different. Indeed, his final laugh is despairing (*F*, 13) and his last words are hateful and gleefully full of vengeance (*F*, 14). Jason, therefore, continues his despairing life "in Jefferson where life lived too with all its incomprehensible passion and turmoil and grief and fury and despair" (*F*, 16).

Even though the Easter morning sermon ostensibly deals with the

question of what one must do to be saved from the despair and doom of the world of sound and fury, its real question is what one must do to earn damnation. Faulkner's answer is the character of Jason Compson, who defies God for self; and this conflict between self and God becomes one of the central conflicts of the novel. Jason's doom is the direct result of his willful determination to be himself in the face of all opposition. Ultimately, therefore, the contrast between Dilsey and Jason is the contrast between theocentric and egocentric existence, between one who is rooted in the eternal and the infinite and one who is centered on the worldly and the finite, between one who sees "de power en de glory" and one who sees only his own sense of injury. Significantly, the tone of each changes after the sermon: Dilsey becomes quieter and more noticeably eternity-centered, whereas Jason, like Satan and Macbeth, increases his defiance to a demonic and destructive rage, becoming ever more desperate in his determination to be himself.

The sermon, then, is the key to understanding both the conflict of the novel and its resolution, based on the concepts of guilt, defiance, and self-destruction. Regarding Jason, the sermon both strengthens and completes the parallels between one of Faulkner's greatest villains and his two demonic paradigms. Even though it is an Easter sermon, it is not primarily about love and resurrection, but about the degeneration of man and its resultant judgment. The subject of both the novel and the sermon is the seeming hopelessness of the human situation, largely because of the evil defiance of demonic men who will to be themselves above all else, and the resulting crack of God's judgmental doom upon a world dominated by the forces of evil. Mr. Compson's designation of man as "the degenerate ape" (*F*, 218) may be Faulkner's own. The marvel is that the monkey-faced preacher transcends his fundamental condition when he becomes an instrument of divine power, just as the cow-faced Dilsey transcends her oppressive human limitations in her commitment to the infinite. *The Sound and the Fury*, then, is not only Faulkner's picture of the Compson family and of the "hero" of defiance but also an image of his understanding of the human situation, an understanding which is essentially Christian. To say that the norm in *The Sound and the Fury* is basically religious is not to say that Faulkner is being evangelical in the way, for instance, that Flannery O'Connor sometimes is, any more than Shakespeare was being evangelical in *Macbeth* because his norm was Christian humanism; but the structure of Faulkner's imagination in *The Sound and the Fury* rests broadly upon biblical beliefs in the reality of evil and the frailty of human effort to overcome it.

The genius of Southern literature is that its writers have turned the unique experience of the South into artistic presentations of universal human predicaments; and at the heart of its vision lies Southern religion. "Remember," said Faulkner,

the writer must write out of his background. He must write out of what he knows and the Christian legend is part of any Christian's background, especially the background of a country boy, a Southern country boy. My life was passed, my childhood, in a very small Mississippi town, and that was a part of my background. I grew up with that. I assimilated that, took that in without even knowing it. It's just there. It has nothing to do with how much of it I might believe or disbelieve—it's just there.<sup>5</sup>

Faulkner's use of the sermon as symbolic norm is an illustration of the artistic potential of that assimilation.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Faulkner in the University*, ed. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (New York: Random House, Inc., 1965), p. 86.