

A Study of Religious Fanatics in William Faulkner's *Light in August*: Simon McEachern

by
Yoshifumi NISHIOKA*

Abstract

In William Faulkner's *Light in August*, Doc Hines, Simon McEachern, Joanna Burden and Gail Hightower are obsessed with their fanatic religious beliefs. Faulkner depicts in the novel the fanaticism of these figures as a mirror of what is central to the Southern culture. Their behavior, of course, is extreme in their enthusiastic and even violent promotion of their religion, but it seems to represent what is central and hidden in the society they belong to. In this paper McEachern's personality and behavior is to be scrutinized with the aid of Max Weber's theory of Protestant ethic, Erich Fromm's theory of sadism, and Martin Buber's theory of "I-Thou" and "I-It" relationships.

Key Words: Calvinism, fanaticism, sadism

1

In William Faulkner's *Light in August*, Simon McEachern is a member of the Presbyterian Church and identifies himself as a Calvinist, who lives his life only to glorify God and does this by acting as an instrument of God. Faulkner, however, describes him and his way of life in a rather negative light. Indeed, the main reason behind Joe Christmas's hatred for Christianity is the merciless discipline and severe religious education received at the hands of his foster father Simon McEachern and is possibly his realization of McEachern's hypocrisy.

The main purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the personality of McEachern and his

* Professor, American Literature

Calvinistic way of life and its adverse influence on Joe's way of thinking and way of life.

2

In *Light in August*, Faulkner depicts McEachern's personality in negative terms. His eyes are "cold," (133)¹ "ruthless, cold," (141) and his stare is "cold and intent." (133) Upon the first meeting with McEachern, Joe Christmas "did not look at the man because of his eyes." (133) McEachern's voice is "harsh" (155); "It was not human, personal, at all. It was just cold, implacable, like written or printed words." (139) His face is "as firm as carved stone," (141) and his hair and beard "both had a hard, vigorous quality." (132)

The gist of his personality is clearly stated by Faulkner when McEachern is identified as a "ruthless man who had never known either pity or doubt." (143)

3

One of the characteristics of McEachern is his Calvinistic ethics, and, as a Calvinist, McEachern's religious education and discipline are pitiless and without compromise. The following episode of one Sunday clearly shows how austere and inhumane his religious education of his adopted son Joe Christmas is.²

McEachern chastises the eight-year-old Joe for disobedience, when the boy fails to memorize the Presbyterian catechism as he was told to do.

McEachern says, "You have not tried to learn it." But Joe replies, "I did try." McEachern orders that he "try again." He tells the boy, "I'll give you another hour." In one hour to the minute, McEachern asks, "Do you know it now?" and Joe answers, "No." McEachern takes Joe to the stable and there he beats him with a whip: "McEachern began to strike methodically, with slow and deliberate force, still without heat or anger." (140) "He struck ten times, then he stopped." (140) He commands, "Take the book" and hands the boy the catechism. The boy takes it. Another hour passes and McEachern asks, "Do you know it now?" Joe doesn't answer, standing there "rigid, erect, holding the open pamphlet before his face." (141) McEachern, taking "the book from between his hands," (141) orders him, "Repeat your catechism." The boy doesn't utter a word. Then McEachern takes up the strap and strikes Joe ten times. Then he orders

again, "Take the book" and puts it in the boy's hands. Exactly one hour later, McEachern asks, "Have you learned it?" "The boy did not answer, did not move. When McEachern approached he saw that the boy was not looking at the page at all, that his eyes were quite fixed and quite blank. When he put his hand on the book he found that the boy was clinging to it as if it were a rope or a post. When McEachern took the book forcibly from his hands, the boy fell at full length to the floor and did not move again." (142)

Several hours later Joe regains consciousness in his own bed and finds his foster father at the bedside. When McEachern notices that Joe is awake, he takes Joe out of the bed and makes him kneel down.

"McEachern began to pray. He prayed for a long time, his voice droning, soporific, monotonous. He asked that he be forgiven for trespass against the Sabbath and for lifting his hand against a child, an orphan, who was dear to God. He asked that the child's stubborn heart be softened and that the sin of disobedience be forgiven him also, through the advocacy of the man whom he had flouted and disobeyed, requesting that Almighty be as magnanimous as himself, and by and through and because of conscious grace." (143) This long prayer over, McEachern takes the catechism from the table and once again orders the boy, "Take the book."

4

As Max Weber points out in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,³ the tenet of Calvinism regards hard work in this world as proof of their having gained a place in heaven, because it is through work that these advocates of the doctrines of predestination will know whether they are among the elect or the damned.⁴ That is why McEachern, a Calvinist, orders Joe to work, so that he might learn its importance in his salvation: "the two virtues are work and the fear of God." (135) From a Calvinistic point of view, laziness is the most unforgivable vice.⁵ McEachern stresses that Joe must "abhor idleness and vanity" (134) and teaches him that "the two abominations are sloth and idle thinking." (135) "Nor neither more work than will be good for him" (134) and "the work within your strength that will keep you out of mischief," (135) spoken by McEachern, reflect one of the typical Calvinistic ethics: through work one glorifies God, and any time spent other than on work, particularly on amusement, ought to be avoided. This, of course, robs Joe of his freedom to choose his own way in life, and he naturally feels that

“his own flesh as well as all space was still a cage.” (151)

Joe, thus, feels that his youth is being corrupted, as long as he is living with his foster father. Under McEachern’s iron rule, Joe has little chance of learning to respond to life naturally and of accepting life as he finds it.⁶ “When he went to bed that night his mind was made up to run away. He felt like an eagle: hard, sufficient, potent, remorseless, strong.” (150) This proves that McEachern’s Calvinistic education has failed to provide Joe with guidance, with the kind of life suitable for a young man such as Joe.

Even when McEachern gives Joe a calf, this, too, is a part of his religious education of the boy. He does not intend that Joe should find joy or happiness in possessing his own calf: “I gave her to you. To teach you the responsibility of possessing, owning, ownership. The responsibility of the owner to that which he owns under God’s sufferance. To teach you foresight and aggrandisement.” (153) Of course, Joe learned nothing of the kind.

5

Despite McEachern’s severe religious education and discipline, Joe does not grow up to be the person his foster father wishes him to be. His education works in an adverse way, and Joe never becomes a person who fears God and abhors idleness and vanity. As a boy of seventeen, a sexually matured Joe becomes involved in a relationship with a local prostitute named Bobby. Joe begins to love her, and their intimate and secret relationship continues. Joe’s secret love affair, however, is uncovered when McEachern has discovered that the heifer is missing and that there is a new suit hidden in the loft. The truth is that Joe has bought the suit by selling the cow, but he tells his foster father a lie about this. McEachern, however, sees his story for what it is and remarks, lamenting, “You have revealed every other sin of which you are capable: sloth, and ingratitude, and irreverence and blasphemy. And now I have taken you in the remaining two: lying and lechery.” (154)

Calvinists are very strict in regards to sexuality, so much so that McEachern never forgives his adopted son’s “lechery.” Nevertheless, it is not as a foster father, but as an “instrument of God,” that as the Calvinist he sees himself, that he can not forgive Joe’s indiscretion. So when he discovers Joe slipping away from the house at night to go to a local dance with Bobby, he trails them. Again, his pursuit is not as a father, but as an instrument of God.

A Study of Religious Fanatics in William Faulkner's *Light in August*: Simon McEachern

As McEachern watched him from the window, he felt something of that pure and impersonal outrage which a judge must feel were he to see a man on trial for his life lean and spit on the bailiff's sleeve. (189)

...in that same pure and impersonal outrage, as if he believed so that he would be guided by some greater and purer outrage.... (189)

...he believed that he had been guided and were now being propelled by some militant Michael Himself.... (190)

So when he shouts at Bobby, "Away, Jezebel!" and "Away, harlot!" (191) this is spoken as an instrument of God, and most likely, nothing personal is intended. Both Joe and Bobby, of course, take this terrible insult by McEachern as a personal affront and not as warning from God's agent. That is why Joe can't forgive McEachern and swings a chair at his head. Even upon his death, McEachern fails to realize this gap of recognition with Joe as to his role in the boy's life. Until his death, this staunch Calvinist never doubts for a moment that he is an agent of God.

6

Another characteristic of McEachern, other than his Calvinistic beliefs, that is shown in his relationship with Joe, is, in Martin Buber's terminology, his "I-It" relationship.

Martin Buber classifies human relationships into two types: the "I-Thou" relationship and the "I-It" relationship.⁷ Buber regards an "I-Thou" relationship as the ideal, as seen in the relationship between man ("I") and God ("Thou") and, therefore, is seldom realized. Although there are some rare instances of an "I-Thou" relationship even in human relationships, it will quickly fall back to an "I-It" relationship. All human relationships, as Buber interprets them, are basically that of an "I-It." However, in this paper, the definition of these key words is slightly modified, and the "I-Thou" relationship is considered to be possible, for example, between good friends, while the "I-It" relationship is regarded as one in which the "I" manipulates the other for his or her own benefit by regarding the other as an "It," that is, a thing, and not as a "Thou," or a fellow human being.

McEachern's "I-It" relationship can be observed in the following episode. McEachern decides

to adopt Joe Christmas, an orphan, as his son, on recommendation of the matron of the orphanage where Joe is a ward. On meeting McEachern for the first time, the five-year-old Joe feels rather uncomfortable: "He could feel the man looking at him though, with a stare cold and intent and yet not deliberately harsh. It was the same stare with which he might have examined a horse or a second hand plow, convinced beforehand that he would see flaws, convinced beforehand that he would buy." (133)

McEachern is seeing Joe as an object, and not as a little boy. His relationship with Joe is obviously an "I-It" relationship. That is, although he thinks himself a devout Christian, he regards Joe as a commodity, rather than as a fellow human being, dear to God.

7

The third characteristic of McEachern is his "sadism," which is of great importance in understanding the depravity of his heart. Erich Fromm, in his *Escape from Freedom*, mentions that "sadism" is one of the "mechanisms of escape, which result from the insecurity of the isolated individual."⁸ As to the essence of the sadistic drive, Fromm comments as follows:

All the different forms of sadism which we can observe go back to one essential impulse, namely, to have complete mastery over another person, to make of him a helpless object of our will, to become the absolute ruler over him, to become his God, to do with him as one pleases.⁹

McEachern's severe Calvinistic religious education of Joe, especially his use of violence to enforce it, can be regarded as an act of sadism.

McEachern uses violence to "educate" Joe not merely for the teaching of catechism on Sundays, but for other purposes and in other situations. "When he reached home he would be whipped. But not for what he might have or might not have done during his absence. When he reached home he would receive the same whipping though he had committed no sin as he would receive if McEachern had seen him commit it." (146)

Even when Joe is seventeen, McEachern still uses violence against him "educationally." Detecting Joe's lie about selling the heifer he gave to his stepson, McEachern strikes Joe with his fist. Joe takes the first two blows obediently, but never allows his foster father to give him

another, saying, "Dont you hit me again." Finding Joe and his girlfriend Bobby at a local dance, McEachern tries to strike him on the face, but he fails as Joe ducks away.

McEachern, as a Calvinist, wants to justify his constant and habitual use of violence as a proper method to teach Joe Christian values, but the truth is, this is the work of a sadist, and the following passages indicate as such.

Perhaps he [Joe] was thinking then how he and the man [McEachern] could always count upon one another, depend upon one another.... (149)

The man, the hard, just, ruthless man, merely depended on him [Joe] to act in a certain way and to receive the as certain reward or punishment.... (157)

We can interpret the implication of McEachern's dependence on Joe, though ambiguous in these passages, according to Fromm's psychological theory of sadism. Fromm, in the following passage, explains one of the conspicuous traits of a sadistic person:

There is one factor in the relationship of the sadistic person to the object of his sadism which is often neglected and therefore deserves especial emphasis here: his dependence on the object of his sadism.

While the masochistic person's dependence is obvious, our expectation with regard to the sadistic person is just the reverse: he seems so strong and domineering, and the object of his sadism so weak and submissive, that it is difficult to think of the strong one as being dependent on the one over whom he rules. And yet close analysis shows that this is true. The sadist needs the person over whom he rules, he needs him very badly, since his own feeling of strength is rooted in the fact that he is the master over someone. This dependence may be entirely unconscious.¹⁰

This dependence of the sadist on the object of his sadism, then, mirrors McEachern's relationship with Joe. Though McEachern believes himself to be carrying out his obligation as a Calvinist foster father, his habitual use of violence against Joe as a means of religious education is nothing but sadistic.¹¹

Nevertheless, what benefit is there for him in abusing and debasing Joe? The answer must be that by doing so, he gains confidence in himself, in his beliefs and in his life as a Calvinist.

According to Fromm's theory of sadism, a sadist unconsciously suffers from anxiety, a feeling of insecurity, lack of self-identity, and he finds no satisfaction in his life. This theory holds good in the case of McEachern. Subconsciously, he may doubt his Calvinistic beliefs and Calvinistic way of life, and to wipe away this doubt, he punishes Joe for his disobedience and his sin. The punishment of Joe could help him to drive away any doubt about his religious convictions. To put it another way, he uses Joe, regarding him as a transgressor against God, for justification for his sadism that actually derives from his anxiety. Superficially, McEachern seems to have full of confidence in his religious beliefs and his way of life as a Calvinist. But his treatment of Joe betrays his inner weakness and his lack of conviction in his Calvinistic beliefs: the punishment of Joe, then, is his way of reinforcing the weak base of his religious convictions.

8

The relationship between McEachern and his wife is basically the same as that between McEachern and Joe. First of all, as the head of his Puritan family, McEachern is a strict husband. Furthermore, in his strictness, he never acknowledges the otherness of his wife. It is an "I-It" relationship, and his relationship with his wife is characterized by sadism as well.

Faulkner depicts McEachern as a "rugged and vigorous husband," (138) a "vigorous and ruthless husband" (138) and a "ruthless and bigoted man." (155) On the other hand, Mrs. McEachern is depicted as "a small woman, entering timidly, a little hunched, with a beaten face." (138) The story goes on to describe her as a woman who "looked fifteen years older than the rugged and vigorous husband," (138) and "as though instead of having been subtly slain and corrupted by the ruthless and bigoted man into something beyond his intending and her knowing, she had been hammered stubbornly thinner and thinner like some passive and dully malleable metal, into an attenuation of dumb hopes and frustrated desires now faint and pale as dead ashes." (155)

Through this characterization of Mr. and Mrs. McEachern, we can surmise that their relationship is an "I-It" relationship, with the husband lording over the wife. How helplessly Mrs. McEachern is under the control and direction of her dictatorial husband can be easily detected from the following passage: "...as if whatever she saw or heard, she saw and heard through a more immediate manshape or manvoice, as if she were the medium and the vigorous and

ruthless husband the control." (138)

Her timidity under the stern hand of her husband is witnessed in various scenes. When McEachern punishes Joe in Joe's room, Mrs. McEachern "did not quite enter the room. She just came within the door and stood there for a moment...with something queer about her eyes...." (138) When McEachern continues his punishment of Joe in the barn, "Mrs McEachern came to the back door of the house. But she did not speak. She just stood there, looking at the stable.... Then she went back into the house." (141) Last of all, there is this: "Through the crib window Mrs McEachern came into view, emerging from the house.... Then she appeared again in the window... and reentered the house without looking toward the stable." (141-2) As a timid person, she cannot confront her tormentor— McEachern.

McEachern's disregard of his wife is conspicuous on many occasions. One time when she speaks to her husband in the room, he ignores her: "He may have heard her. But he neither looked up nor spoke." (138) So she leaves the room diffidently. Another time, when McEachern and Joe are in the room, she refers to McEachern as "Pa," but neither of them "so much as looked at her. They might not have heard, she might not have spoken, at all." (139)

From these scenes, one can tell that McEachern has no love for his wife and never treats her as his beloved, but as an object, as something without of its own, as an "It."

Only once does Mrs. McEachern come out of her shell of timidity and tell a lie to her husband to protect Joe from his punishment, but he sees through her immediately and to her lie reacts in the following way: "'You are a clumsier liar than even he,' the man said. His voice came, measured, harsh, without heat, up the cramped stair to where Joe lay in bed.... 'Kneel down. Kneel down. KNEEL DOWN, WOMAN. Ask grace and pardon of God: not of me.'" (155)

Here we see that McEachern, as an agent of God, is playing the role of a judge over his wife. We don't sense any love for his wife in this episode, nor pity. He controls her in every aspect of her life as a Calvinist husband and as a sadist.

9

Simon McEachern leads a religious life. As is characteristic of a Calvinist, he regards himself as an "instrument" of God and is confident that he is serving God as His agent. This confidence mirrors his relationship with his wife and Joe. However, as his relationship with them becomes

an “I-It” relationship based on sadism, we find, with the aid of Fromm’s theory of psychology, that subconsciously, he lacks confidence in himself and in his Calvinistic way of life. To “serve the expiation which he had set himself for the morning” (144) McEachern went to a church that is not Presbyterian, which clearly shows his lack of confidence in his beliefs, as well as his hypocrisy.

William Faulkner analyzes, through Simon McEachern in *Light in August*, a typical example of a fanatic Calvinist and shows us that he is rather an unchristian-Christian, whose influence on his stepson Joe leads to his rejecting the very Christian tenets that McEachern has earnestly preached.

Notes

1. William Faulkner *Light in August*. New York: Vintage Book, 1972.
All subsequent page references to this novel are from this edition.
2. Ernst Troeltsch states that traditionally, family worship, which included catechetical instruction, was conducted by the father of the Puritan family on Sundays, and that is the situation we find in this book. See Ernst Troeltsch. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Vol. II*. trans. Olive Wyon. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. p. 679.
3. Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. trans. Talcott Parsons. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978.
4. Shigeaki Shi’ina criticizes Max Weber’s theory, as in total error. See Shi’ina Shigeaki. *Protestantism and Capitalism: A Religio-historic Criticism of the Weber Thesis*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1996. (This work is written in Japanese.)
5. Troeltsch. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Vol. II*, p. 611.
6. Edmond L. Volpe. *A Reader’s Guide to William Faulkner*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1974. p. 165.
7. Martin Buber. *I and Thou*. trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970.
8. Erich Fromm. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon Books, 1969. p. 161.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 178–9.
10. *Ibid.* pp. 166–7.
11. Hyatt Waggoner, in his interpretation of Joe’s behavior, says, “Psychologists might describe his character as ‘sado-masochistic.’” See Hyatt H. Waggoner. *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966. p. 105.

Bibliography

Adams, Richard P. *Faulkner: Myth and Motion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973. pp. 87–8.

A Study of Religious Fanatics in William Faulkner's *Light in August*: Simon McEachern

- Barth, J. Robert ed. *Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972. p. 28, p. 40, p. 70, pp. 121-2, pp. 124-6, pp. 128, p. 132, p. 135, p. 138, p. 139.
- Bedell, George C. *Kierkegaard and Faulkner: Modalities of Existence*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972. pp. 52-3, p. 61.
- Berland, Alwyn. *Light in August: A Study in Black and White*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. p. 59.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976. p. 48, p. 62, pp. 64-5, p. 68.
- Broughton, Panthea Reid. *William Faulkner: The Abstract and the Actual*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976. p. 71, pp. 94-6, p. 98, p. 104, pp. 134-5, pp. 153-5.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.
- Fowler, Doreen and Ann J. Abadie eds. *Faulkner and Humor: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1984*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986. p. 50, pp. 52-3, p. 61, p. 88, p. 90, p. 148, pp. 152-4.
- . *New Directions in Faulkner Studies: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1983*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984. p. 85.
- Fromm, Erich. *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Avon Books, 1969. Chapter 5.
- Guerard, Albert J. *The Triumph of the Novel—Dickens, Dostoevsky, Faulkner*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982. 43, 58, 309.
- Hoffman, Frederick J. *William Faulkner*. New Haven: College & University Press, 1966. p. 70.
- Kenney, Arthur F. *Faulkner's Narrative Poetics Style As Vision*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978. p. 29, p. 31, p. 78, p. 82, p. 87, pp. 113-7.
- Levins, Lynn Gartrell. *Faulkner's Heroic Design: The Yoknapatawpha Novels*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1976. p. 71.
- Miner, Ward L. *The World of William Faulkner*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963. p. 143.
- O'Connor, William Van. *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner*. New York: Gordian Press, 1972. pp. 73-5.
- Ohashi, Kenzaburo and Iyoyuki Ono. comp. Thomas L. McHaney ed. *Faulkner Studies in Japan*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985. p. 128, pp. 136-7, p. 140.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *Faulkner and the Novelistic Imagination*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985. p. 15, pp. 94-6, p. 102, p. 159.
- Reed, Joseph W., Jr. *Faulkner's Narrative*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. p. 114, pp. 119-20, pp. 130-1.
- Ruppersburg, Hugh. *Reading Faulkner: Light in August (Glossary and Commentary)*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Shi'ina, Shigeaki. *Protestantism and Capitalism: A Religio-historic Criticism of the Weber Thesis*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1996. (written in Japanese)
- Sykes, John. *The Romance of Innocence and the Myth of History: Faulkner's Religious Critique of Southern Culture*. (Dissertation Series Number 7) pp. 65-70.
- Troeltsch, Ernst. *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Vol. II*. trans. Olive Wyon. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.
- Vickery, Olga W. *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964. pp. 70-1, p. 75, p. 81, pp. 246-6, p. 291.

Yoshifumi NISHIOKA

- Volpe, Edmond L. *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1974. pp. 164–5.
- Waggoner, Hyatt H. *William Faulkner: From Jefferson to the World*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966. pp. 104–7.
- Watkins, Floyd C. *The Flesh and the Word: Eliot, Hemingway, Faulkner*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966. p. 211.
- Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. trans. Talcott Parsons. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1978.
- Williamson, Joel. *William Faulkner and Southern History*. New York; Oxford University Press. p. 266, p. 381, p. 394, pp. 407–9, p. 428.
- Wilson, Charles Reagan. "William Faulkner and the Southern Religious Culture," *Faulkner and Religion: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1989*, eds. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. p. 35.