Jesus of Jefferson

Black Liberation Theology and the Tripartite Christ in Faulkner’s *That Evening Sun*

When H.L Mencken, editor of *American Mercury*, first received the typescript of “That Evening Sun Go Down.” from William Faulkner, he was reluctant to print the story. He expressed his concerns in a letter to the author:

> This is a capitol story and I certainly hope to use it, but it leaves me with doubts about two points. One has to do with the name of Nancy’s husband. I see no reason why he should be called Jesus—it is, in fact, a very rare name among Negroes … Don’t you think the story would be just as effective if it were changed to a more plausible name?

(qtd. in Manglaviti 651)

With this, Mencken goes on record as the first to miss the point of “That Evening Sun,” as the short story would ultimately be titled. Numerous critics, scholars, and readers followed, failing again and again to understand the story’s significance as Southern Literature’s most revelatory portrait of the black faith by a white writer. Granted, the story is uncertain, mysterious; four versions exist, and only three have been studied in detail. It is no surprise that discovering a proper cipher for the work has been an incremental process, one that has taken us from Jim Crow to the Jubilee and from *The Sound and the Fury* to the Delta Blues. Each of these scholarly approaches gives us a piece of the story’s puzzle. But none pairs a sound framework to discuss the relationship between Nancy and her husband with a plausible explanation for Faulkner’s well-documented insistence that this latter character be called Jesus. I believe that the rubric
for “That Evening Sun” can be found in the work of James H. Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology. This theology and its tripartite conception of Christ drive the story of the Compsons’ relief servant and her murderous husband, Jesus. While Jesus of Jefferson is both an acknowledgment and an adulteration of Black Christology, Nancy is a solemn warning to African-American believers: Embrace your powerful spirit; do not be consumed by your white oppressors. And do not, do not forsake your blackness, for the wages of doing so are death.

Before we move on to the specifics of Faulkner’s revelation, I want to briefly discuss the history and mechanics of the Black Liberation Theology he unveils in this story. In the preface of the book, We Have Been Believers, theologian James H. Evans states, “the faith of African Americans has been tempered in the fire of oppression and galvanized by the quest for freedom” (Evans xi). African Americans did not choose Christianity; it was forced upon them in the same way that every facet of their humiliating, American existence was forced upon them. How could these slave families, barely surviving in a surrogate white society keep their humanity intact? Social activist and thinker Albert Cleage, states in The Black Messiah that the Black Church is essential to the black struggle for freedom because “From somewhere we [African Americans] had to have some kind of escape. From somewhere we had to find the strength to get through another week” (Cleage 109). So, out of repression, rose the pragmatic Black Faith, and the Black Church with the mandate to support, inspire, and sustain its oppressed membership. Cone begins his scholarship at this point in the Black Church’s history, tracing the development of Black America’s unifying spirit, a spirit composed of an outrage toward unjust social conditions and a need to transcend those conditions. Black
Theology is not concerned with theoretical concepts or debates. You will hear Black theologians discussing neither the cubic measurements of the City of God nor the hierarchy of heaven’s angels. These are white questions with equally white answers, according to Cone, and simply have no use to an oppressed people far too busy with everyday survival.

But if the Black Church functions merely as an egalitarian escape, then what source(s) do Black Christians consider morally authoritative? As with most systems of Christianity, ultimate authority resides not in the leaders of the church but in the supreme being of God and His word present in the Bible. The majority of Christian denominations understand God as a Holy Trinity, but the black concept of Christ also exists in three parts. Cone’s forth book, *God of the Oppressed* (published in 1975), introduces the Black Jesus as tripartite. Cone divides the Black Christ into three epochs: Christ’s *was-ness*, *is-ness*, and *will-be-ness*. We will discuss each of these in detail later on, but for now it is important to know that the sum of these divisions equals a Jesus who is and was black, according to Cone. This claim is “derived primarily from Jesus’ past identity, his present activity, and his future coming” (Cone 133). Much has been written on the subject of Jesus as a black man, but for our purposes it is enough to say that, when Cone uses the term “black” to describe Jesus, he is not implying that Christ was of African descent. No, the term “black” here represents Jesus Christ’s own struggles as a Jew under Roman occupation and as a caring God who feels compassion for those in bondage.

In “That Evening Sun,” a resurrected Quentin Compson confirms Jesus of Jefferson’s blackness, his *was-ness*. Quentin describes Jesus as a short black man with a “razor scar on his black face like a piece of dirty string” (Faulkner 290). Jesus’ rough
exterior betrays the nature of his character; here he is a criminal, a razor-wielding bum who often threatens violence. But Jesus is not entirely bad. Nancy says, “Jesus has always been good to me . . . whenever he had two dollars one was mine” (294). While Jesus is with his wife, he instills in her a sense of community, sharing with her his worldly possessions. Jesus helps provide a place for Nancy in the same way the Black Church provides a haven for believers. Jesus doesn’t speak much in this story, but when he does, his rhetoric is filled with the anger one might expect from the severely marginalized. While sitting in the Compsons’ kitchen, Jesus says, “White man can hang around my kitchen . . . When white man want to come in my house, I ain’t got no house” (292). His rage over white interactions with himself and Nancy actually serves to warn her of the dangers white society presents. But Nancy does little to stay connected to her Jesus. She actually denies him, saying “Whyn’t you go on to work . . . you want Mr. Jason to catch you hanging around this kitchen, talking that way before these children” (292). Jesus is an adulteration of both the white and Black concepts of Christ, but he is also a human being. The scar on his face and his emotional speech provide documentation for his was-ness. The Jesus of Jefferson has suffered.

Regarding the is-ness of Jesus Christ, Cone states “The Crucified One is also the Risen Lord . . . the historical Jesus, in his liberating words and deeds for the poor, was God’s way of breaking into human history” (Cone 120). Cone also writes “Jesus was going to be there with an answer for their [African Americans’] troubled minds” (123). After he “quits” Nancy, Jesus brings no comfort to her, only fear (Faulkner 293). Keep in mind that Nancy is no pushover. Here’s a woman that criticizes white children, refuses their father’s orders, and even berates a white john in public over money she’s owed. But
once Jesus vanishes, Nancy crumbles. She chants Jesus’ name in a slow, long prayer: “Jeeeeeccccceeesus, until the sound went out like a match or a candle does” (296). But evoking the name of the Lord provides no rest for Nancy’s soul, as we would expect. When prayer fails, Nancy clings to the white Compsons, wanting to spend each night in the safety of the children’s room. She tells the children “‘Go and ask your maw to let me stay here tonight’ … I won’t need no pallet. We can play some more”’ (299). But Jesus haunts the children of the story as well. The combination of his name and skin color plants confusion among the Compson progeny, especially in Jason who cannot reconcile Jesus’ name and status with his family’s religious tradition. Since Jesus is a “nigger,” Jason asks Dilsey if she is a “nigger” too (297). This exchange gives us insight into white misreading of the Black Faith; white society cannot fathom a dualistic image of Christ. If Jesus is black, then he is no longer Jesus. The Jesus of Jefferson is not a present day comforter; he is Nancy’s misunderstood nemesis.

Cone explains the will-be-ness of Christ as “The Risen One . . . who is coming to fully consummate the liberation already happening in our present” (Cone 126). For Cone and Black Christians in Faulkner’s South, Jesus is an end-time liberator who will return to free the oppressed and judge their oppressors. The Jesus of Jefferson however is a murderer hiding in a ditch, a razor clinched between his teeth. Nancy tells Mr. Jason that she knows Jesus is coming back to kill her because she has received a “sign,” a hog bone, “with blood meat still on it,” (307). Of course, Nancy’s Jesus is not a comforter or a source of inspiration, and Faulkner has us question Nancy’s understanding of her own religion. Would the bloody bone of a pig be a sign of Jesus’ return? No, such a prop would be more likely to appear in a voodoo retreat than a Black church. Nancy’s fear
stems from her misunderstanding of Jesus. The image of the ditch as a waiting place for Jesus is also contradictory to the tenets of Black Theology. Jesus Christ is not dead, buried in the ground or conspiring in hell. He is a living God, biding time in heaven until Judgment Day. Nancy sees the ditch as her greatest obstacle. Nancy tells a story to the children in an attempt to keep them at her house: “And so this here Queen come walking up to the ditch and say, if I can just past this here ditch was what she say” (302). Nancy doesn’t want to be with Jesus in the ditch, in hell; she wants to become a part of white society where she feels safe from Jesus’ anger. The fact that Nancy compares herself to a queen illustrates her drive for white wealth and individuality. The Jesus of Jefferson is an end time liberator, but it is unclear whom he will liberate and how.

Does Jesus murder Nancy at the story’s end? In his essay, “That Evening Sun: A Skein of Uncertainties,” Laurence Perrine identifies this as the story’s “overwhelming question” (Perrine 295). He contends that a scholar’s answer depends on how he or she interprets Nancy’s mental state. If Nancy is hysterical because she has imagined Jesus’ return, then she survives. But, if she knows Jesus is back and plans to harm her, she is killed. The word “know” signifies a conviction, a conviction strong enough to persuade critics that Nancy can predict her own fate even though she chose not to predict Jesus’ exit from her life (296). Though I believe that Jesus does enact a final revenge on his wife, I think that this is not the question we should be asking. A better question: Is Nancy still black? Throughout the story, she draws away from her blackness, becomes whiter, and becomes more afraid of Jesus, more afraid of her death. As the bride of Christ, Nancy should be confident in her salvation and Jesus’ triumphant return, but she often blames blackness for her troubled existence. She tells Jason that she is “hellborn” and chides
herself several times for being just “a nigger” (298). We see her fail at what Faulkner considers “black” endeavors, such as singing and storytelling, both very important in the Black Church. It follows then that if Nancy is unable to sing the praises of the Black Jesus then she is also unable to decipher the meaning of her existence.

Some critics bring Nancy’s very ethnic identity into question. In his article, “Faulkner’s Nancy as ‘Tragic Mulatto’,” Robert Slabey asserts that Faulkner uses Nancy’s mixed race to express the truth of oppression and segregation. Slabey states “though Nancy identifies herself as ‘a nigger’ three times and makes ‘sounds that Negroes make,’ the only color references are to her brown hands” (409). He concludes that for Jason (and other whites) race is determined by a “recognizable hue, but for Nancy it is more of a moral and social category that means one is doomed and denied individuality and responsibility” (409). Notice the diction. Though Black Liberation theologians would recognize blackness as a social category, they would not agree that blackness is in any way a comment on morality. Nancy has made a key error in logic if she thinks that her blackness determines her goodness or her reward in the afterlife.

“Responsibility” is a privilege both Nancy and Jesus flee from throughout the story. And “Individuality” is a trait that, as Nancy discovers, can have tragic consequences. Whether or not she is of mixed racial origin, Nancy is an orphan at the story’s end. She sits alone in her cabin in front of the fire. Her long moans bleed out in the night. She is completely separated from both the white and black worlds, and from salvation.

While an understanding of the Black Faith can give us a key to the truth inside this story, it cannot unlock every door. Faulknerian chronology tells us that Quentin, our narrator, is three years dead when this story is told. His resurrection is still puzzling.
Perhaps Faulkner intended to juxtapose a newly risen Quentin with the Black Jesus. We can’t be sure. Nancy’s attempted suicide and her unborn child are still unexplained as well. The purpose of this paper is not to offer a unifying theory for “That Evening Sun,” but rather to better explain the character of Jesus and his relationship to Faulkner’s South. One could argue that the Black Jesus in this story is too far removed from the Christian tradition. But for me the similarities between the Jesus of Jefferson and the Black Jesus of Nazareth are too great in number and degree to ignore.

The true genius of “That Evening Sun,” is Faulkner’s ability to outline and explore the tenets of Black Theology years before African American theologians would have the opportunity themselves. I think it is clear that the Jesus of Jefferson fulfills the three epochs of Black Christology: Christ’s was-ness, is-ness, and will-be-ness. But it is also important to acknowledge that the character’s doing so in an adulterated manner illustrates a Black Faith misunderstood along with the effects of oppression on morality. As I mentioned above, Faulkner wanted the character of Nancy’s husband to be named Jesus. Even though he agreed to Mencken’s revisions, the writer made sure that subsequent printings of the story in various collections included the name Jesus, and not Jubah (Manglaviti 653-4). The story simply does not work otherwise. Without the story’s strong connection to the Black Faith and the Black Christ, the reader is given a fuzzy picture of Nancy’s dilemma and her fading blackness. Nancy moves toward the white world because she believes her color is inferior. Her drive to be free is anything but rare in Black America, but she fears the Black Church and the Black Jesus, the two things that could give her the support and liberation she desperately needs. Perhaps ambiguity is the
story’s greatest statement: the Black experience is so unlike anything a white American writer could ever conceive of that any attempt to truly understand it is futile.

And the mystery continues.
Works Cited


