

Salvation for Temple Drake: A Study of William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun**

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In William Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun*, which was begun in 1933 and published on 27 September 1951, the author took up again the character of Temple Drake, which he had first introduced in *Sanctuary* nineteen years earlier. Faulkner explained, "I began to think what would be the future of that girl? And then I thought, What could a marriage come to that was founded on the vanity of a weak man? . . . And suddenly that seemed to me dramatic and worthwhile" (FU 96).

With Temple, the obvious problem is whether she is saved or not for the extraordinary self-sacrifice of Nancy. One of the most distinguished Faulkner scholars, Noel Polk, in his critical study, *Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun* (1981), says *Requiem for a Nun* is, "a powerful and complex novel, perhaps the darkest and least hopeful of all of Faulkner's work."¹⁾ Denying the former rigidified critical response to the novel that "*Requiem* was Faulkner's 'solution' to the outrage of his earlier, more powerful books: Nancy Mannigoe was his martyred saint; Gavin Stevens was his 'voice'; Temple Stevens was damned lucky,"²⁾ Polk argues in his book that Nancy's sacrifice is totally meaningless:

Nancy's murder of Temple's baby is the most savage and reprehensible act of violence in all of William Faulkner's fiction; that it is totally without justification; that it is the act of a madwoman and not of a saint; that Nancy's and Stevens's stated motives are not necessarily their real ones; that Stevens is not at all out to 'save' Temple but rather to crucify her; and that Temple rather than Nancy is at the moral center of the novel.³⁾

However, in studying Faulkner's concept of faith, Polk's argument does not seem to be accepted. Though, as far as I know, no one has mentioned this, Faulkner's concept of faith and sacrifice owes much to Jeremy Taylor, a seventeenth-century Anglican bishop and writer, whose *Holy Living and Dying* is one of Faulkner's favorite books. Faulkner went so far as to take it along when he was hospitalized.⁴⁾ Hence, with my reference to Jeremy

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1) Noel Polk, *Faulkner's Requiem for a Nun: A Critical Study* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. xiii.

2) *Ibid.*, p. xi.

3) *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

4) According to Joseph L. Blotner in *Faulkner: A Biography* (New York, 1974), Faulkner was never an active member of a church community, except for reading the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and Jeremy Taylor:

On some evenings after dinner Faulkner would take down a volume from the shelf—perhaps Dickens or Cervantes—and read aloud to Tommy and Estelle and Dot, like a Victorian paterfamilias. The books were always old favorites. "I suppose I have about fifty that I read," he said. "I go in and out like you go into a room to meet old friends, to open the book in the middle and read for a little while. . . ." He would enlist Erskine's help as well as Tullos' in building up a second library. He asked him for a baker's dozen of Modern Library "Giants," including a complete *Homer* and *Don Quixote*, a three-volume Gibbon, Boswell's *Johnson*, and the poems of Keats, Shelley, and Donne. He also asked for *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, *Les Misérable* and *Moby-Dick*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. When the books came, he was disappointed