“I Have Sinned in That I Have
Betrayed the Innocent Blood”:
Quentin’s Recognition
of His Guilt

by Margaret D. Bauer

Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,
The kiss that ate my flesh . . .
—James Wright, “Saint Judas”

The three scenes replayed after Quentin Compson is knocked unconscious by Gerald Bland have each been suggested as the climax of the second section of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Because all three scenes involve Quentin’s discovery of Caddy’s sexual relationship with Dalton Ames, it is generally agreed that the reason for Quentin’s suicide at the end of his section is related to his sister’s loss of virginity. Most critics draw their theories about Quentin’s motivations from one of the first two scenes played out while Quentin is unconscious: the scene with Caddy at the branch when Quentin proposes either incest or a double suicide, and the confrontation between Quentin and Dalton on the bridge. Theories vary, however, regarding what exactly it is about Caddy’s relationship with Dalton that is so devastating to Quentin: there are those who believe it is Caddy’s lost virginity, the symbol of their family’s honor; some think it is losing Caddy to another man; others argue that it is Quentin’s fear of forgetting his grief over Caddy’s actions; and still others reason that it is the discovery of his own impotence and the impotence of the codes he lives by. This essay will not discount these theories, but, rather, add another, first proposing that it is the third scene in this flashback, Quentin’s last extended memory of himself and Caddy before his suicide, which is the climactic moment of the section. This recollection is particularly agonizing to Quentin because it reminds him of his own culpability regarding Caddy’s destruction. Once this memory surfaces, Quentin can no longer escape the fact that for him his sister gave up a *chance*, however slight it may have been, of leading a “normal” life: concerned about her brother, Caddy did not go after her lover to stop him from leaving, the consequence of which was promiscuity, which led to pregnancy and a hurried, deceptive marriage to a man Quentin finds repugnant. Quentin’s inability to live any longer with this guilt, then, can be seen as another reason for his suicide. Given that its disclosure comes so close to his jump off the bridge, I propose here that it may very well be the deciding reason.

This reading not only confirms Quentin’s recognition of his betrayal of the sister whose love for him is unqualified; it also provides a further explanation of the novel’s Easter weekend structure. Quentin’s suicide at the end of the Maundy Thursday of the novel is reminiscent of the death of Judas, who also betrayed one who loved unconditionally and then, “when he saw that he was condemned, repented . . . and went and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:3,5). Therefore, this reading leads to a view of Caddy—more so than Benjy, Quentin, or Miss Quentin—as the Christ figure of the novel. Because of his age at the time of three of the four sections of the novel (thirty-three), blonde hair, blue-eyes, and innocence, Benjy has often been viewed as the novel’s Christ figure. As will be further remarked upon in this paper’s conclusion, at least one reader, James Dean Young, sees parallels between Quentin and Christ. More convincing than either of these are the arguments for Miss Quentin as Christ-like in her role in the novel. She is the character who has the capacity for redeeming the Compsons, if they would only have made up for their treatment of Caddy by treating her better; she is also the one who is “tortured” on Good Friday (by Jason) and “resurrected”—or at least she escapes—on Easter Sunday. The case I will make for Caddy as a Christ figure is, I believe, even more convincing than the case for Miss Quentin in that not only is Caddy’s fate Christ-like, but so is, to a greater extent than Miss Quentin’s, her character. Her selfless love and sacrificed life are particularly illuminated in the memories of her older brother in his section of the novel. Of course, regardless of which character is viewed as the novel’s Christ figure, there is no promise of salvation in the end. Benjy is, after all, still a tormented imbecile the last we see him in the novel and, according to the novel’s appendix, is eventually sent to the state asylum in Jackson. Quentin’s death is followed by no promise of a better life for those he leaves behind, and we are not told what kind of life Miss Quentin lived after her escape/resurrection. Caddy’s fate on and following the novel’s