

CHRIST-EVOKING FIGURES

American literature is full of characters who evoke Jesus Christ to a limited extent because (1) they are redeemers; (2) they are crucified; or (3) they are moral exemplars who sacrifice themselves for others. Also there are false redeemers who are actually the opposite of Christ.

REASONS FOR SUCH FIGURES

1. The great majority of American readers consider themselves Christians and hence are likely to recognize such a reference.
2. Common familiarity with its themes and symbolism makes Christianity a useful ideology to evoke for comparison to or expression of the authors' own visions.
3. Comparison or contrast with divinity is moral analysis, sets a very high standard of conduct, illuminates character, increases realism, reveals complexity and generates ironies.
4. Evoking divinity irradiates, deepens and expands vision to include the spiritual dimension of human nature.
5. Christ is the avatar of God most likely to be an "objective correlative" of transcendence for most American readers.
6. Christ is the incarnation of faith, love, self-sacrifice, peace, light, and Truth.

Such figures are not necessarily evidence that the author is a believing Christian, as in the cases of Poe, Melville, Stephen Crane, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, Arthur Miller and Thomas Pynchon. Though a Marxist atheist, Miller makes his hero John Proctor in *The Crucible* an exemplar of self-sacrifice on principle in the American tradition of evoking Christ. Frequently, critics and teachers who recognize that a character evokes Christ will simply equate the character with Christ as if the author is preaching a religion, using the term "Christ figure." The term *Christ-evoking* figure avoids the mistake of implying that a character is divine rather than human--identical to or equal to Christ.

Among the false redeemers are Poe's foolish Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado"; Hawthorne's Parson Hooper in "The Minister's Black Veil"; Melville's Plotinus Plinlimmon in *Pierre* and various others including "the lamb-like man" in *The Confidence-Man*; Fitzgerald's Gatsby; West's Miss Lonelyhearts; Faulkner's Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and Joe Christmas in *Light in August*; Porter's corrupt revolutionary leader Braggioni in "Flowering Judas"; O'Connor's shrunken mock-Christ mummy in *Wise Blood*; and the atheist Pynchon's suicidal homosexual Gottfried, a mock-Christ riding the apocalyptic Rocket to doom in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Among the savior figures comparable to Christ are the Indian messiah who transcends race in *Black Elk Speaks*, Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy" and his fair ladies, the Victorian angels who save or try to save their men—Faith, Elizabeth, Georgiana, Beatrice, Phoebe, Priscilla, Hilda. Pearl is a redeemer of her mother Hester Prynne, both good and evil, evoking both Christ and Satan until she is transformed. Ishmael is saved by developing aspects of himself embodied in Bulkington, Pip, Queequeg and Moby-Dick. Yes, in Melville even the whale is a Christ-evoking figure. His Bartleby tests the Christianity of his employer as a surrogate of Christ, Captain Benito Cereno is a savior of Captain Delano, *Pierre* is the tragedy of a Christ-evoking artist and *Billy Budd* is an exegesis of the myth of Jesus. In "Song of Myself" and otherwise, Walt Whitman defined himself as embodying the cosmic All and cast *himself* as a Christ-evoking figure, then he lived up to that role as a battlefield nurse during the Civil War.

Natty Bumppo as an old man in Cooper's *The Prairie* is a Christlike "good shepherd" to the pioneers and Jim the slave is an ironic "black Christ" in *Huckleberry Finn*. In Crane's "The Open Boat" Billie the oiler exhausts himself rowing and drowns in saving his companions. In *The Red Badge of Courage* Jim

Conklin is self-sacrificial but dies an obscure death without redemption in a Naturalist universe, both compared and contrasted to Christ. Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove* and May Bartram in "The Beast in the Jungle" by Henry James are in the ongoing Victorian tradition of Hawthorne, female saviors and essentially innocent victims who sacrifice themselves. Emily Dickinson repeatedly evokes Christ, explicitly in poems 193, 432, 456, 502, 549, 766. Vanamee the mystic shepherd poet in *The Octopus* by Frank Norris is an obvious example. The carpenter in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is a self-sacrificial exemplar to young George Willard. Tom Outland is Christ-evoking in *The Professor's House* by Cather. Faulkner's most well known examples are Sam Fathers and Ike McCaslin in *The Bear*, Benjy and Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, Cash in *As I Lay Dying* and the corporal in *A Fable*.

One of the purest examples of a Christ-evoking figure after Jim and Billy Budd is old Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, who carries his mast up a hill at the end like he is bearing a cross. His Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Fitzgerald's Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night* are two more examples. The real Jesus Christ is off stage in Hemingway's story "Today Is Friday," in which the Roman soldier who impaled him with his spear while he hung on the cross expresses admiration for his courage and stamina—his Spirit. Jim Casey (J.C.), the self-sacrificial preacher who dies in *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck, is an inspiration to workers. The peacock is a traditional Christ symbol in "The Displaced Person" by O'Connor. Her human examples include Mr. Guizac in that story, the tattooed man in "Parker's Back," and the dimwit child in *The Violent Bear It Away*.

Katherine Anne Porter's "He" dramatizes the abuse of a boy retarded like Benjy who is comparable to Christ in being a test of the professed Christianity of his parents, just as Bartleby tests the Christianity of his boss. In her story "Rope" the liberated woman is self-sacrificial, rises from the death of love and redeems her marriage on "the third day" by forgiving her husband. In "That Tree" the tree alludes to the Cross of Jesus, disregarded by the lazy bohemian poet who goes to Mexico to loaf under a tree all day and write bad poetry. In "The Circus" the black servant girl Dicey overcomes her resentment, remembers she is a Christian and forgives and comforts the frightened white child Miranda. In "Holiday" the lamb revived by Miranda evokes Christ, as does "The Fig Tree." In Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* the soldier Adam gives his life to save Miranda. In her *Ship of Fools* the woodcarver who drowns saving a dog is Christ-evoking, as is the dying faith healer who embodies true religious faith in modern society.

Caroline Gordon exalts as Christ-evoking the white boy burned at the stake by Indians in "The Captive," Susan Allard the battlefield nurse and model of charity in *None Shall Look Back*, Cassy Outlaw the frontier wife of Rion who dies because she tries to help her neighbor and the Cherokee "peace chief" called The Carpenter in *Green Centuries*, Catherine the betrayed wife in *The Women on the Porch* whose repentant husband kisses her foot, Kevin Reardon the visionary Catholic who is the means of salvation for the child Lucy Lewis after she steals his crucifix and Mr. MacDonough the Holy Roller pastor who gets bitten by a snake in *The Strange Children*, Vera Claiborne the betrayed agrarian wife of the sick intellectual in *The Malefactors*, and Heracles in *The Glory of Hera*, a pagan hero who prefigures Christ.

The dying pregnant Marian in *All the Little Live Things* by Wallace Stegner incarnates ideals of Christ, St. Francis, and Lao Tsu. In Alice Walker's "To Hell with Dying" the often-reborn old Mr. Sweet Little saves the soul of the black young woman who almost loses it among intellectual whites in the City. The mysterious transient Sylvie in *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson is an unusual example. Another is Owen in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving. Most recent are both the boy in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and the mysterious stranger at the end of the road who suffers the little children to come unto him after an Apocalypse.

In contrast to literature, American popular culture has often exploited Christ-evoking figures merely for dramatic pathos and irony, empty of divinity or religious content. Since the 1960s the crucifixion posture has been used so often as an easy symbolic climax in movies it got reduced to a cliché--as in *The Graduate*, *The Magnificent Seven*, and *The Omega Man*.

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