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Race, Identity and Social Transgression in William Faulkner's *Light in August*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores themes of race, religion, and alienation in the American South. A technique often employed by Faulkner in this novel and others involves the use of indirection and circumlocution. Faulkner frequently blurs the line between the narrator's voice and a character's inner thoughts a technique called free indirect discourse. Faulkner was actually seeking out the nature of man. Light in August is longer and looser than these, and more conventionally told in third-person omniscient narration. William Faulkner's writing is faultless. It rings beautifully, no matter if written about happiness, despair or interior darkness. Light in August: a novel about race, gender, and alienation set during the 1930s in the Deep South. Faulkner's impressive prose here delineates a society that is rife not only with racism but also misogyny.

Keywords: violation, race, gender, nature, religious, fanaticism and alienation

INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner's *Light in August*, for nearly all the characters in this novel are drawn from the ranks of the plain people and most of them exhibit a Puritan ethic. They are in tension with nature, and some have even been deformed and perverted in a struggle against it. The theme of man strained away from nature, however, is only one of several significant Faulknerian themes to be found in *Light in August*. Because it is a mature novel, these themes receive full development and yet are thoroughly embedded in the fictional structure. The reader does not encounter them as abstractions. They have their full dramatic weight as rendering of characters in action. There is therefore good reason for choosing such a masterpiece as the first of the novels to explore in some depth. But *Light in August* also provides examples of the typical difficulties that many people experience in reading Faulkner.

One of the most characteristic is that of finding a principle of unity. No novel of Faulkner's exhibits more brilliant writing or abounds in a greater number of memorable individual scenes, and no reader would fail to respond to most of them. According to Daniel Joseph Singal, "Faulkner's literary style gradually developed from 19th century Victorian to modernist, with Light in August more firmly grounded in the tradition of the latter. The novel is characteristic of the modernist fascination with polarities light and dark, good and evil the burden of history on the present, and the splintering of personal identity" (Singal 357–360) .There is, for example, the very touching scene at the orphanage in which a young girl named Alice, who is departing for the home of her new foster parents, wakes the sleepy child Joe Christmas to tell him good-bye. She has mothered the little boy and now she weeps. "He didn't know that she was crying because he did not know that grown people cried, and by the time he learned that, memory had forgotten her. He went back into sleep while still suffering her, and the next morning she was gone. Vanished, no trace of her left, not even a garment, the very bed in which she had slept already occupied by a new boy" (William Faulkner,119) Lena Grove, a pregnant teenager, has made her way to Mississippi in search of her baby's father

There is the scene in which the boy Joe Christmas and his foster father McEachern face each other, both of them silent and obstinate, over the Presbyterian catechism. There is the scene in which Joe as an adolescent confesses, shyly but almost proudly, to Bobbie the waitress-prostitute, his belief that he has some Negro blood. There are the several scenes in which Joe faces Joanna Burden, among them the one in which she tells Joe about her father showed her, a four-year-old child, the secret graves off her grandfather and her brother. There is the equally wonderful scene-but so different in tone-in which the grim and damned woman, clutching the old cap-and-ball pistol, demands that Joe kneels down with her and prays. "Diane Roberts and David R. Jarraway view Faulkner's use of Southern gothic genre tropes, such as the dilapidated plantation house and the focus on mystery and horror, as self-conscious modernist commentary on man's warped relationship with the past and the impossibility of determining true identity"(Robert. 37) It contrasts stark tragedy with hopeful perseverance in the face of mortality.

There are the quietly charged scenes in which Byron sits opposite the Reverend Gail Hightower in Hightower's little cottage and tells him about Lena and her plight, and later calmly makes the terrible proposal that Hightower that if he will only say that Joe Christmas spent the night

of the murder with only say that Joe Christmas spent the night of the murder with him at his house: "Folks would believe you. They would believe that, anyway" (William Faulkner,119). The most emotionally engaging issue the novel explores is the obsession with race that persisted in the rural south in 1932.

There is the account of Percy Grimm running lightly and surely with the automatic in his hand and suddenly discovering what it is that he wants. These are only a few of the tremendously moving and exciting scenes to be found in the novel. The difficulty has never been that such individual segments of the narration lacked vividness and power. The difficulty has always come with the attempt to relate the various episodes so as to show a coherent pattern of meaning. Critics as generally sympathetic as Conrad Aiken and George Marion O'Donnell find the novel a failure because of lack of unity. This is the basic complaint of Richard Rovere in his introduction to the Modern Library edition.

As for typical misreading, two in particular seem to recur. Since either can affect the meaning of this novel, it may be well to dispose of them at the outset. The first has to do with Joe Christmas' alleged Negro blood. Most commentators refer to his mixed blood and several call him a mulatto technically, one-half Negro), though Joe easily passes as white. But what is the evidence for Joe's mixed blood? Two special passages seem to have fostered this supposition. The first is Joe's flaunting of his alleged Negro blood – as when he tries to shock the white prostitute by telling her that he is a Negro. The second is the hypothesis put forward by Gavin Stevens as he tries to account for the events that occur just before Joe's death. Stevens sees Joe's last actions as involving a clash between his white blood and his black blood: the "black blood drove him first to the Negro cabin. And then the white blood drove him out of there, as it was the black blood which snatched up the pistol and the white blood which would not let him fire it" (William Faulkner,393). Because many readers are disposed to consider Stevens Faulkner's mouthpiece in the novel, his comments about Joe's Negro blood may seem endowed with special authority. But Faulkner says specifically in the interviews he gave at the University of Virginia that the scholarly and somewhat romantic Stevens are not his mouthpiece. Stevens, who evidently has no more facts than we have is merely spinning a theory.

What do we really know about Joe's ancestry? The fanatical old Doc Hines is quite certain that his daughter, Joe's mother, is lying when she tells him that her lover is a Mexican. But that conviction is part and parcel of his fanaticism. He 'knows' that the man is a Negro just as he knows many other things-by a special revelation that short-circuits any need for evidence. It is true that Mrs. Hines admits that after her husband's trial for this murder of Joe's father, "the circus owner come back and said how the man really was a part nigger instead of Mexican, like Eupheus said all the time he was… But she adds, a sentence or two later, "it was just that circus man that said he was a nigger and maybe he never knew for certain" (William Faulkner,330) Faulkner's greatest work, a bitter epic of violence and despair resolves itself on a note of love and longing.

Is Mrs. Hines here allowing hope to warp her judgment? Or was the circus owner, in admitting that Joe's father was part Negro, simply humoring the idée-fixe of the old monomaniac? At any rate, we are never given any firm proof that Joe Christmas possesses Negro blood, for the sufficient reason that Joe would have become what he became whether he had an infusion of Negro blood or not. The pressures that mold him into an Ishmael have, as Faulkner knows, nothing to do with biology as such. The decisive factor is the attitude that the world takes toward Joe and the attitude that he takes-toward other men and toward himself.

Faulkner has made this point very powerfully in a number of scenes. There are those in the orphanage in which old Hines as janitor watches the child Joe and broods over him in malignant hate, silently gloating when the children begin to call Joe 'niggger.' The author tells us that the child, with "more vocabulary, might have thought That is why I am different from the others: because he is watching me all the time" (William Faulkner,121). Faulkner shows us a world where social codes are rigid, inflexible, immutable, unspoken.

There is the scene in which the child follows a Negro workman around, fascinated by him, "until at last the nigger said, 'What you watching me for, boy?' and he says, 'I am a nigger,' and the nigger says, 'You are worse than that. You don't know what you are. And more than that, you will never know. You'll live and you'll die and you won't never know" (William Faulkner,336) Faulkner explores themes of identity, particularly racial identity.

Or there is the scene in which Joe is talking with Joanna Burden. To her question whether he has any idea who his parents were, he tells her only that "one of them was part nigger." It is significant that he says "one of them," not "my father" as he might have done had he even as much information as Old Hines believed that he had. When Joanna asks him how knows that, he 'didn't answer for some time. Then he said: 'I don't know it" (William Faulkner, 222) The light in August is the fire at the Burden house, but also the cleansing from tragedy and violence that paves the way for the new life.

The Negro workman's reply touches the matter of real importance. Joe does not know what he is. Throughout his life, he lashes out at both the white community and the Negro community. But the warping of his mind and spirit-Faulkner has been at great pains in this book to show just

how it has been done-is the result of the way in which he has been reared from infancy. The biological matter is quite irrelevant. "The narrative is not structured in any particular order, as it is often interrupted by lengthy flashbacks and constantly shifts from one character to another. This lack of organization and narrative continuity was viewed negatively by some critics" (Millgate, 10) William Faulkner's Light in August chronicles the life and death of Joe Christmas, a man of ambiguous racial ancestry.

The second misreading that recurs in comments on *Light in August* is less important but betrays a bias worth noting. Many readers assume that Joe Christmas is lynched at the end of the novel. Joe is killed by Percy Grimm when, during his trial, he breaks away and tries to escape. Percy sees him enter Hightower's house; finds him in the kitchen armed with a pistol. Barricaded behind an overturned table, and shoots him five times with his automatic. Then with a knife picked up in the kitchen he emasculates Christmas.

Grimm is unaided. Three men who had been deputized to prevent disorders and who had joined' to the chase followed Grimm into the house, but they evidently do not participate in the violence, and when they see what Grimm is doing, one of them cries put and begins to vomit. "The plot is also divided into dual currents, one focusing on Lena Grove and the other on Joe Christmas, a technique that Faulkner continued to use in other works" (Yamaguchi , 166). It belongs to the Southern Gothic and modernist literary genres.

A lynching is defined as the concerted action by private individuals who execute summary punishment outside the forms of the law. Can a lynching be carried out by one person? The jurists who framed the proposed federal statute on the subject evidently slid not think so. Christmas is murdered. not lynched, and even the charge of murder would seem to be obviated insofar as Grimm was a properly deputized officer, attempting to apprehend a fugitive from justice who turns out to be armed. Grimm could have claimed (doubtless later he must have claimed) that he had to fire first, since he had every reason to believe that this desperate map. Did not mean to be taken. What gives away Grimm's storm trooper mentality is what he says to the dying man and his act of mutilation. "As in his other novels, Faulkner employs elements of oral storytelling, allowing different characters to lend voice to the narrative in their own distinct Southern idiom" (Anderson ,11). It reveals the great American author at the height of his powers

Something more than a mere quibble about a term is involved. If we use the word "lynching" loosely and carelessly, we shall be in danger of missing the relation of Joe Christmas to the community he has defied, and more importantly, that of Percy Grimm to the community he claims to represent. There is, in fact, every reason to think that Grimm's whole conscious motivation is to ensure that the good name of the town not be marred by a lynching-even though the community itself is not apprehensive of a lynching. The Commander of the American Legion post to whom Grimm appeals does not think that a special force is needed to preserve order and frowns upon vigilante tactics, even in a good cause. Even if force were needed he tells Grimm. "We would all have to act as civilians. I couldn't use the Post like that" (William Faulkner, 396). American literature that encapsulates the complexities of identity, race, and the human experience.

And the sheriff is just as emphatic in opposing Grimm's idea. There has been no hint of trouble and he can't have fifteen or twenty people milling around the square with pistols in their pants . But Grimm's utter seriousness and complete dedication to the concept of order prevails against these counsels. Obviously, the sheriff does not know what Grimm's real motivation is; but then, Grimm does not himself know what it is until, with his blood up, his pistol ready, fired by the excitement of the chase, he faces Joe Christmas across the overturned table. I shall have something to say later in this chapter about Grimm's relationship to Joe and to the community. But Grimm's action does not commit the community, and although it involves the community powerfully it does so only in a very special way.

The community demands special consideration at this point, I for the community is the powerful though invisible force that quietly exerts itself in so much of Faulkner's work. It is the circumambient atmosphere, the essential ether of Faulkner's fiction. But for many a reader, the community is indeed invisible and quite imperceptible: it exerts no pressure on him at all-and lacking any awareness of this force, he may miss the meaning of the work. Such readers find *Light in August* quite baffling simply because they are unaware of the force of community that pervades it and thus miss the clue to its central structure.

Yet a little reflection will show that nearly all the characters in *Light in August* bear a special relation to the community. They are outcasts-they are pariahs, defiant exiles, withdrawn quietists, or simply strangers. Miss Burden, the daughter of carpetbagger intruders, has lived for years within what can be described only as a kind of cultural cyst. The community has tried its best to expel the Reverend Mr. Hightower, though having failed in the attempt it has finally accorded him a sort of grudging acceptance. Joe Christmas is, of course, Ishmael himself, actively defying the community. Even Byron Bunch fits into this pattern of alienation. Byron, with his methodical earnestness and his countrified asceticism, is regarded as a kind of eccentric-a character. For "seven years he had been a minor mystery to the town" (William Faulkner, 369) It is a literary masterpiece that delves deep into the

complexities of human nature. Novel shows hostile and narrow-minded communities as they are, but also explain the roots of them.

CONCLUSION

Faulkner's impressive prose here delineates a society that is rife not only with racism but also misogyny. As Faulkner weaves together the stories of these three characters, he explores the devastating effects of racism and religious fanaticism. Some of the dominant ideas in the novel involve man's isolation, man's relationship to the community, and man's inhumanity to man. Faulkner explores themes of race, identity, and isolation in the American South. It concerns violence, bigotry, and racial identity, but it also explores the more hopeful theme of endurance.

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