

“An Older Light Than Ours”: Faulkner’s Reflections on Race and Racism in *Light in August*

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Abstract: This article¹ examines William Faulkner’s reflections on race and racism in *Light in August*, by focusing on the crucial role that consciousness and psychology play in the novel for the construction of characters and their view of reality and of themselves. *Light in August* does not reproduce the South’s pervading racism as experienced by Faulkner, but undertakes a close dissection of a collective racialized imaginary. In order to support this argument, the analysis focuses on three different aspects: First, the narrative strategy of alternating subjective perspectives that explores the consensus-building dynamics, which condition perception and cognition as much as they generate prejudice and racism. Second, the community’s conception of race as an existential condition of insurmountable ontological difference appears to be intimately wedded to common concepts of gender. This conception is radicalized through a Protestant spirit of guilt and punishment as existential imperatives. Finally, the article analyzes Joe Christmas as a psychotic character by examining the process of his narrative construction and analyzing the extent to which his dubious racial identity and existential dilemma are presented as the result of racist discourse and not of “incompatibilities of blood.”

Light in August does not begin with the key to its pit-black center, but with its bright margin, its luminous frame. The book that was to be entitled “Dark House” does not open with the story of Joe Christmas, that ungraspable vortex forcing us to look closer while frustrating our desire to

1 A longer version of this article will also appear in *Black, White, and In-Between*:

see and understand. Instead, it opens with the story of hope, courage, and faith around Lena Grove, a character rendered with the mythical aura of nature's elemental wisdom. A wisdom, which the reader wishes would shed some of its bounteous light upon the abyss of uncertainty, life-consuming doubt, and denial marking the fate of the novel's enigmatic protagonist. If Joe Christmas² seems to elude epistemological ground, as Donald Kartiganer believes, this is firstly because Faulkner himself did not know exactly how to account for this "shadowy figure, in whom a strange union of forces represents the impossibility of his existence in verbal form" (Kartiganer 12). However, the fact that Faulkner preferred for his finished novel the luminous title instead of the dark one of his work in progress, seems to bespeak more than his possible desire to stress the book's ambiguously optimistic ending. It rather denotes the author's appreciation of his novel as a kind of elaborate X-ray of the Southern way of thinking and feeling about race in general and miscegenation in particular.

It is not the goal of this analysis to ascertain the rate of Faulkner's own racism, but to explore, independently of the author's beliefs or intentions, the novel's highly complex and paradoxical stance towards the issues of race and racism. Heinz Ickstadt regards *Light in August* as offering "the most radical exploration in American literature of race as a figment of white consciousness" (242). This essay shares the same line of interpretation.

One of its aims is to demonstrate that *Light in August*'s fragmentariness and lack of organic unity may occur on the narrative level, but, as already perceived by Ickstadt (239-47) and André Bleikasten (275-351), by no means on the symbolic one. Here, Faulkner operates within the same dichotomous structure as the Jefferson community's racialized imaginary, a symbolic universe of genderized and racialized analogies. The crucial difference between the artist Faulkner and his fictional community is that he challenges the validity of the patriarchal symbolic order. His fiction even proposes a reversal of values from the masculine principle equated with the Protestant ethos into the "soft" virtues identified with feminine principles.

Reconsidering Race in American Culture, a student-compiled anthology of seminar papers forthcoming later in 2008. For more information on this project, please refer to the *aspeers* webpage at <http://www.aspeers.com/republication>.

2 Alfred Kazin appropriately labeled him "the most solitary character in American fiction" (Bleikasten 314).

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Faulkner’s fictional universe gives an insight into the multifarious complexity of reality as experienced and perceived from the various perspectives of the characters inhabiting it. The novel’s form and content express how knowledge is subject to each individual’s psychological, social, and cultural conditioning; dimensions Faulkner explores in order to come as close as possible to the ever elusive “truth” of human existence. For, as Jehlen observes, “the problem for Faulkner is not that the world is only as we perceive it but that we may not be able to perceive it as it is” (Jehlen 2).

This essay explores *Light in August* with regard to those conceptions of race, which led to the postbellum Southern racial anxieties so forcefully reproduced in Faulkner’s novel. The analysis is divided into three parts, each one of them consisting of two sub-chapters, which address two different aspects of one of the three main issues of this work.

The first part (1.1, 1.2) addresses the issue of Faulkner’s narrative strategy. It retraces the constitutive patterns of alternating subjective perspectives and probes into the mechanisms of consensus-building dynamics which condition perception and cognition as much as they generate prejudice and racism. Through the analysis of Lena Grove in the first sub-chapter, and Joe Christmas in the second one, the contrast between the two is evidenced at the narrative level and also at the level of their respective symbolic dimensions.

The second part (2.1, 2.2) deals with the Jefferson community. It establishes the importance of the philosophical concepts of Self and Other in order to explain the community’s sanctimony and their members’ compulsive need to draw the line of ontological difference between whites and blacks. It analyzes the extent to which their conception of race is intimately tied to common concepts of gender and how it is radicalized through a Protestant mentality of guilt and punishment as existential imperatives.

The third part (3.1, 3.2) concentrates on Joe Christmas as a psychotic character. It scrutinizes the process of his narrative construction and evaluates the extent to which his dubious racial identity and existential dilemma are presented as the result of racist discourse and not of “incompatibilities of blood.” The second sub-chapter focuses on the roots of his psychosis and examines the way in which the character’s psychopathology is nurtured through the introjection of the set of racialized reifications of good and evil, which constitute the symbolic order of his hostile environment.

BRIEF PLOT OVERVIEW

In its major plot line, *Light in August* tells the story of Joe Christmas, a man who looks white, but believes that he is black. One day, he appears at one of the sawing mills in the town of Jefferson looking for a job. During the two and a half years he stays in town, he remains a stranger for everybody, including his fellow workers. Only much later do we learn through long flashbacks about the character. He is the bastard child of Milly Hines and a man who is rumored to be Mexican. Milly's father, a fanatical racist, kills the man, lets his daughter die in childbirth as punishment for her carnal sin, and abandons the baby in front of an orphanage on Christmas Eve. When he is five years old, Joe Christmas is adopted by the farmer McEachern, a Puritan fundamentalist who tries to beat into the boy the principles of the Protestant work ethic together with the teachings of the Presbyterian catechism. At seventeen, Christmas begins a romantic affair with a prostitute and knocks his adoptive father down (killing him) when the latter tries to interfere. Christmas runs away from home and keeps running for thirteen years from one place to another, unable to decide to which side of the color line he belongs, until the day he arrives in Jefferson and begins a desperate sexual affair with the spinster Joanna Burden. After presumably murdering her (it is never clearly confirmed by the narrator, and it remains until the end nothing more than a very plausible speculation). He is hunted down and, on the mere rumor of his blackness, killed and castrated by Percy Grimm, a fanatical believer in white order and supremacy.

In a second plot line, the novel narrates the story of Lena Grove, who arrives in Jefferson where she believes that she will find Lucas Burch, the father of her child. The people she asks for help on her way to Jefferson lead her to Byron Bunch instead. Bunch takes care of young and pregnant Lena and falls in love with her. Lena's and Christmas's story only intersect insofar that she arrives in the town the day after Christmas has run away from the scene of the murder. Lena also gives birth in the same hut where Christmas and Lucas Burch had lived before, and one day after Christmas is lynched. Lena's story frames that of Joe Christmas and, at the same time, as Ickstadt points out, "is its counterpoint" (Ickstadt 242). In fact, the ten days she stays in Jefferson constitute the narrative present tense of the novel. In the end, Byron Bunch, Lena Grove, and the

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newborn are on the road together on their way to Tennessee and the narration suggests that they will stay together.

1.1 WHAT THE READER KNOWS—THE PLAY OF RECOGNITION AND ALIENATION OF CHARACTER: LENA, THE FAMILIAR STRANGER

Light in August is a novel about marginal characters trying to find their place within, or their way through, a closed community held together by the dominant ideology of Protestant values and the pervading rural spirit of tacit assumptions on race and gender. The first two chapters introduce the arrival of two radically-opposite characters in Jefferson. Besides being strangers in town, Lena Grove and Joe Christmas both share the existential status of orphanage. Aside from these two aspects, the two figures occupy the very opposite extremes of a path. On pregnant Lena’s side, it is suffused with the warm light of the August sun, while on Christmas’s side, it seems eternally shrouded in the mists of a cold and windy night. Textual evidence has revealed that it took Faulkner some deliberation³ until he decided that Lena’s story should be the one to begin the novel, and as it stands now, this opening achieves an eloquent contrast to the entrance of Christmas into the plot in the second chapter.

Beginning with the way in which these two characters are introduced, the aspects of perception and cognition are of crucial importance throughout the novel. The present chapter tries to demonstrate how Lena is given shape through her direct evocation by the narrator’s voice and also by the other characters’ view of her. My intention is to illustrate how these two approaches complement each other and lead to a rendering of this figure. This rendering accounts for her recognizability but stands in direct opposition to the way in which the figure of Joe Christmas develops its contours.

In his study on Faulkner, *The Ink of Melancholy*, Bleikasten establishes the analogy between Lena Grove and the Spartan princess of Greek mythology Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda. This reference is further legitimated by

3 “At different times the novel seems to have begun with each of the other narrative strands: with Hightower’s biography (now chapter III) and with Christmas’s capture (now chapter XV)” (Bleikasten 391).

another comment Faulkner made during an interview with reference to the character Lena:

In August in Mississippi there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there's a lambence, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times. It might have fauns and satyrs and the gods and that's all that title meant, it was just to me a pleasant evocative title because it reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization. Maybe the connection was with Lena Grove, who had something of that pagan quality, of being able to assume everything . . . And that was all that meant, just that luminous lambent quality of an older light than ours. (qtd. in Bleikasten 278-79)

Lena Grove's character has a symbolic function, which might best be expressed as the reification of man's ancient projections on the feminine. Beyond the rich intertextual associations Lena procures, her description is evocative of the aesthetic dimension commonly ascribed to the feminine. In terms of beauty, Faulkner's aesthetic achievement lies in carefully avoiding concrete descriptions of any particular physical attribute. Nothing is said about Lena's specific features, her single traits, eyes, hair, or skin color (that she is white in the broadest sense is evinced in the fact that throughout her journey she encounters no racial discrimination). The reader also receives no information about what voice timbre Faulkner had in mind, let alone what odorous associations she might have evoked in the author. There is nothing sensuous about this character; the universality of Lena's depiction keeps her out of physical reach and yet draws her close to each individual imagination. Since her beauty is captured in the most abstract terms, she seems to hover in a realm of archetypal fantasies. However, her overt muse-like qualities go hand in hand with her very earthliness: the reader knows that she is young, that she is pregnant, and that she is poor.

The furthest Faulkner goes in expressing her beauty in common terms, although with one of his distinctive compounded adjectives, is by saying that she is "pleasantfaced" (Faulkner 11). Besides that, Lena's beauty might better be defined in terms of grace in its broadest sense. Her behavior, her actions, and her very presence make the use of the term inevitable. When Lena looks, then it is with "a single glance allembicing, swift, innocent and profound" (Faulkner 7);

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when she eats, it is with “tranquil and hearty decorum” (23), when facing Mrs. Armstid’s dour skepticism, her “face is calm as stone, but not hard. Its doggedness has a soft quality, an inwardlighted quality of tranquil and calm unreason and detachment” (18). Besides her serene candidness, much of her appeal is linked to associations of earth, fertility, and natural laws elicited by the sight of her advanced pregnancy: “she went out of sight up the road: swollen, slow, deliberate, unhurried and tireless as augmenting afternoon itself” (Faulkner 10), and “she sits quite still, hearing and feeling the implacable and immemorial earth, but without fear or alarm” (29). Also, the portrayal of her pregnancy is not devoid of heroic connotations: “She is waging a mild battle with that providential caution of the old earth of and with and by which she lives. This time she conquers. She rises” (27).

In view of the way this character and her behavior is described throughout the novel, there is no doubt that Simone de Beauvoir’s critique of our conceptions of the feminine in exclusive terms of immanence (as opposed to the masculine principle of transcendence) do perfectly apply to this Faulknerian inspiration. Drawing on the famous French feminist, Lena Lindhoff explains masculine projections on the feminine as follows:

In this situation, says Beauvoir, *man* “dreams” of a middle thing between both [nature and human being], which would be as self-sufficient and without resistance as a nature thing, while at the same time being a consciousness. This being he “finds” in the woman, and from then on, he puts everything into anchoring his dream in reality. (5-6)⁴

In fact, Lena’s ability to “assume everything” (cf. Faulkner’s above musings on this character) combined with the serene authority with which, towards the end of the story, she handles Byron Bunch’s devoted and pertinacious wooing, sets her in a passive role, which she takes on with a mixture of royal and cherubic grace. There is no question about it, she is Faulkner’s blissful muse as much as she is *Light in August*’s radiant presence. However she is more than an allegorical figure, since aside from bringing with her “a luminosity older than our Christian civilization” (cf. Bleikasten above), she also elicits the author’s and the reader’s admiration for her specific human qualities. Modesty, equanimity, faithfulness,

4 Translated by the author from the German original.

courage, endurance, and kindness speak through every one of her actions, thoughts, general demeanor, and disposition throughout her few but significant appearances in the first and last chapters of the novel.

As to the extent to which the narrative allows the reader to grasp and approach this character, from the novel's first opening lines it gives us immediate access to Lena's inner voice. We know what she thinks: "Lena thinks 'I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece,' Thinking *although I have not been quite a month on the road I am already in Mississippi, further from home than I have ever been before*" (Faulkner 3, spacing and italics sic). With the use of the participle and the words in italics, Faulkner tries to convey the sense of a substratum of thinking which is not as articulate within the character's mind as it appears in printed form.

What follows is a laconically-condensed account of her humble rural origins—the loss of both her parents at the age of twelve and how she went to live with her oldest brother and his family, and the motive for her journey, her decision to leave the house and go in search of the father of her child, Lucas Burch, who had promised to marry her. From the beginning the reader knows a fair amount about Lena, and this information is delivered firsthand through a stream of consciousness technique and the retelling of her story through an omniscient narrator. The narrator also reports the thoughts and reactions she provokes in the men and women she encounters on her way to Jefferson.

Armstid is the second persona to enter the narrative present of the novel when he picks Lena up with his mule-hauled wagon and gives her a ride. His behavior toward Lena is exemplary of the typical middle-aged male farmer of the rural Mississippi region and of his modest social standing. He behaves like a man who thinks that he has seen enough to know what he is seeing without having to look closer:⁵ "Apparently Armstid has never once looked full at her. Yet he has already seen that she wears no wedding ring" (Faulkner 12). Having gauged her situation after listening to her story, the reader is given access into Armstid's thoughts (conscious and subconscious level) and judgments based on life experience and clear-cut gender categories:

5 "Habituation (akin in this context to an optical effect: persistence of vision) tends to obscure whatever it fixes" (Snead 86).

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From the corner of his eye he watches her profile, thinking *I don’t know what Martha’s going to say* thinking, “I reckon womenfolks are likely to be good without being very kind. Men, know, might. But it’s only a bad woman herself that is likely to be kind to another woman that needs the kindness” thinking *Yes I do. I know exactly what Martha is going to say.* (Faulkner 13)

Interestingly, from the moment he catches sight of her sitting in the ditch beside the road, waiting for the wagon to pass, and during the ride, Lena is only perceived through Armstid’s male gaze. Faulkner then changes the narrative perspective; suddenly we do not know anymore what Lena thinks. Now she is only “*apparently* watching the slow road between the ears of the mules, the distance *perhaps* roadcarved and definite” (Faulkner 13, my italics). Faulkner wants to reproduce the effect Lena has on those who regard themselves as an integral part of the known community and for whom she is first of all a stranger. Inside the farmer’s old creaking wagon, she is suddenly and momentarily estranged into “the woman”: “The woman moves at once . . . The woman is preparing to descend . . . The woman sits back” (Faulkner 13-14). Varner, the monosyllabic farmer who finally brings her to Jefferson, also sketches an instantaneous picture of Lena’s situation based on life experience. Neither him, nor Armstid, nor his wife, nor the other men to whom Lena guilelessly tells her story and her purpose to find Lucas Burch—“with that patient and transparent recapitulation of a lying child” (Faulkner 25)—partake of her candid illusions that Burch will be waiting for her with open arms.

Faulkner is very explicit in making the point that these people are united by distrust: “The squatting men along the wall look at her still and placid face and they think as Armstid thought and as Varner thinks” (Faulkner 26). As much for the reader, as for the characters within the novel, Lena remains a perfectly recognizable figure on a symbolic level, “archaic figure of the Great Mother” (Ickstadt 247), as well as on the narrative one: a young, naïve, and pregnant woman, victim of man’s irresponsibility. Common gender categories and other criteria for defining, structuring, and classifying people according to appearance and behavior seem easily applicable to Lena but become ineffective with the arrival of Joe Christmas in the second chapter.

1.2 UNWRITTEN PARCHMENT: THE DIALOGICAL DYNAMICS OF CONSENSUS-BUILDING

While the reader's approach to Lena is direct and unmediated, our first acquaintance with the other newcomer in Jefferson is heavily filtered by another figure's perspective: a man who has been renting a room in a boarding house for seven years and has thus remained foreign to the town himself. This man's character is revealed by the way he sorts, evaluates, and judges his own knowledge or the information he receives from others. With his discrete empirical wisdom, his rural diffidence, and heart-in-the-right-place ways, Byron Bunch certainly is *Light in August's* sole unequivocal male carrier of sympathy. His memory of the events provide our first approach to the novel's mysterious character. From the second to the fourth chapter, it is through Bunch's account that the reader learns about what he and the town know about Joe Christmas, the foreigner who suddenly appeared one day at the planning mill with his impenetrable, rootless air about him, "as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home" (Faulkner 31).

Joe Christmas⁶ remains an enigma to his fellow workers until the day Lucas Burch, another newcomer, appears, who, in order to erase his trace and evade the responsibility of fatherhood, presents himself as Joe Brown. Once again, it is through a third person's narration that the reader learns a bit more about Joe Christmas, i.e. what Byron Bunch and the men at the planning mill find out about him through the second newcomer. However, the unsolicited information supplied to the men by the handsome and backboneless "Joe Brown" only adds to Christmas's mysterious aura of a man about whose activities everybody knows—the bootlegging business he had secretly been carrying out—but whose identity remains as shadowy as his night-time business is illegal.

The reader is allowed to approach Christmas only gradually. During the first chapters, the text denies us direct insight into his thoughts as much as Christmas denies his fellow workers any information about his person. Contrary to his garrulous and constantly-jesting companion, Christmas never talks. With his unmistakable cigarette at the corner of his mouth, his still face frozen in an

6 Whose name, as Krister Friday cleverly points out, "suggests an event more than an ontology" (43).

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expression of “cold and quiet contempt” (Faulkner 34), for Bunch and the other men, he remains an indefinable and unclassifiable identity within the community’s limited epistemological horizon. For the readers too, throughout chapters two and four, Christmas is foremost an unintelligible surface, an exterior appearance—“the flesh a level dead parchment color” (Faulkner 34)—accompanied by the rumors about his doings.

Light in August’s key narrative form is the mimetic enactment of the community’s foremost consensus-generating vehicle: oral communication. In large part, the novel is written in dialogue, and Byron Bunch is in many ways the novel’s self-reflexive representative of the performative nature of consensus-building, especially when it is based on rumor, gossip, and small-town prejudice:

Byron listened quietly, thinking to himself how people everywhere are about the same, but that it did seem that in a small town, where evil is harder to accomplish, where opportunities for privacy are scarcer, that people can invent more of it in other people’s names. Because that was all it required: that idea, that single idle word blown from mind to mind. (Faulkner 71)

What Byron knows about Hightower’s history is information that has been supplied to him by others. Byron refers to a secondhand report of what Joe Brown/Lucas Burch assured in front of the sheriff in order to save his own neck. It is in this particularly unreliable context that Christmas is labeled “part nigger” (89) for the first time in the plot.

Suddenly aware that he is being suspected of the murder of Joanna Burden, Brown/Burch plays the rhetorical ace of race identity, or like Byron says: “It’s like he knew he had them then. Like nothing they could believe he had done would be as bad as what he could tell that somebody else had done” (Faulkner 98). A clear qualitative distinction is made between the murdering of a white woman by a white man and the same crime perpetrated by a black man, as it is expressed in the sheriff’s warning: “‘You better be careful what you are saying, if it is a white man you are talking about,’ the marshal says. ‘I don’t care if he is a murderer or not’” (Faulkner 98). This statement reveals the community’s Jim Crow mentality, under which it is as much a crime to be a murderer as it is to slander a white man of having “black blood.”

In other words, finally the “level dead parchment color” of unintelligibility has found its signifier: “‘A nigger,’ the marshal said. ‘I always thought there was

something funny about that fellow” (Faulkner 99). The mute stranger, the foreigner, the other who resisted signification because nobody could “read” him is the perfect target for negatively connoted categories, those upon which WASP identity, as any other identity, builds itself through exclusion. After Brown/Burch’s calculated confession, Christmas’s cold hostility and antisocial behavior are interpreted simply as signs of his inherent blackness, which within Jefferson’s racist symbolic order, for the sake of the people’s epistemological safety, represents the apex of human Otherness. What until now had been a feeling of discomfort in the townspeople due to their inability to decipher the foreigner’s identity, turns into the complacent confirmation of common racist assumptions the moment in which Otherness appears as analogous to abject inferiority, in this case, *vis-à-vis* a black man’s allegedly-proven criminal nature.

Up to this point, Faulkner has managed to conjure through form (the mediated narrative perspective) and content (what the town’s people know or believe to know) the irritating, tension-building uncertainty surrounding Joe Christmas’s identity. Now the marginality of this character acquires its (de)legitimizing label: “nigger,” the stigma of the pariah inside the community.⁷ Faulkner allows us to witness the consensus-building dynamics through which society, as James A. Snead points out, “turns arbitrary codes of dominance into ‘fact’” (Snead 85). These arbitrary codes of dominance, as will be shown in 2.1, are organized in conceptual polarities of Self and Other, constitutive of the community’s cultural heritage. This heritage’s roots, further analyzed in 2.2, are ultimately to be found in the grim postulates of Protestant culture.

2.1 “SOMEONE TO CRUCIFY”: JEFFERSON’S COLLECTIVE VOICE OF HATRED AND SANCTIMONY

Light in August dramatizes the white community’s urge to draw the line of ontological difference between its white members and its blacks. Since the alienation and separation is best legitimized by defining the other as “evil,” i.e. the antithesis of the white community’s “good” self, nothing is more welcome than the opportunity to prove the allegedly-inherent inferiority and abjectness of

⁷ This phrase is indebted to the title of Cleanth Brooks’s study of *Light in August* “The Community and the Pariah” (Brooks 47).

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blacks by making a black individual responsible for a crime. Joanna Burden’s murder supposedly at the hands of a “nigger” turns into a collective ritual of reassurance as to the insurmountable difference between Them and Us.

The ancestral implacable hatred is revived by this crime that takes place at the old Burden mansion, a site that has been the town’s constant reminder of the old horrors of the War of Secession and the ensuing ever-present fears of miscegenation. In chapter two, Faulkner gives a foretaste of the meaning of the event when he describes the town’s feelings toward the place where three generations earlier, during reconstruction, an ex-confederate colonel had killed the Yankee grandfather and the half-brother of the recent victim:

But it still lingers about her [Joanna Burden] and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatening, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread. But it is there: the descendants of both in their relationship to one another’s ghosts, with between them the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear. (Faulkner 47)

Jeffrey Folks points out that “[n]early everyone in Yoknapatawpha is burdened by the past and often, more specifically, by what Canetti refers to as ‘the resentment of the dead’” (321). In fact, this fear is the most pervading agent of the atmosphere that the town breathes, and it takes an outsider, one of the town’s marginal but likable eccentrics, to articulate this awareness. Once again, Byron Bunch seems to act as the author’s mouthpiece when he says:

A man will talk about how he’d like to escape from living folks. But it’s the dead folks that do him the damage. It’s the dead ones that lay quiet in one place and dont try to hold him, that he cant escape from. (Faulkner 75)

What Canetti and Bunch try to express with the metaphor of the dead infesting the living’s consciousness comes very close to what Homi Bhabha calls “the authenticating ‘inward’ time of tradition” (Bhabha 149). This refers to the much-observed tendency of closed collective identities to subsume complex, heterogeneous, and particular social and cultural phenomena under common discursive categories in order to perpetuate the identity-constituting illusion of historical continuity within traditional cognitive patterns.

One of many examples for this collective behavior is at the beginning of chapter thirteen: The townspeople gather in front of the fire consuming the old Burden mansion and around the dead body of Joanna Burden, and they “believed aloud that it was an anonymous negro crime committed not by a negro but by Negro . . . knew, believed, and hoped that she had been ravished too: at least once before her throat was cut and at least once afterward” (Faulkner 288). This is one of *Light in August*’s crucial passages; here the author tries to capture the all-too-human moral weakness and mediocrity of the morbid crowd, who almost relish the lurid incident that has given them the opportunity to forget, for a while, themselves and their own guilt by bearing witness to the outrage of a murder hopefully committed by one of those to be kept at bay. In this sense, the sheriff’s surprise is only natural, when the report of the man who found the semi-beheaded body points at a white suspect and not a black one. The sheriff also wants the perpetrator to fit into his pre-conceived categories.

We encounter an omniscient narrative voice that uses no adjectives to qualify the people’s behavior, but nevertheless expresses more than what the people “believ[e] aloud.” It expresses what they would not admit, that they “knew, believed and hoped” that the victim had been sexually abused. Further, while he avoids the overt use of epithets, Faulkner’s choice of verb goes beyond mere description—“some of them with pistols already in their pockets began to canvass about for someone to *crucify*” (Faulkner 289, my italics)—as does his choice of metaphor when he describes the emotional effect the event has: “[S]he [Joanna Burden in death] had supplied them at last with an emotional barbecue, a Roman holiday almost” (289). We learn that the people’s anger and morbid fascination arises not from the murder as such, but from the fact that the victim, a Yankee advocate of the Negro cause, about whom rumors of “queer relations” (46) with blacks abounded, had always been a living insult to the racist community of Jefferson, who therefore “would never forgive her and let her be dead in peace and quiet” (289).

Faulkner is by no means subtle in representing the community’s emotional response to this incident, which serves as a valve for all the repressed desires and unacknowledged frustrations of a people burdened by a Protestant fixation on the evilness of all sensuality, on sin and punishment as existential imperatives. His representation of the middle-class women rushing to the scene, eager for shock and sensation, is forcefully incisive:

And the women came too, the idle ones in bright and sometimes hurried garments, with secret and passionate and glittering looks and with secret frustrated breasts (who have ever loved death better than peace) to print with a myriad small hard heels to the constant murmur *Who did it? Who did it?* periods such as perhaps *Is he still free? Ah. Is he? Is he?* (289)

The parenthetical commentary sums up what is hidden beneath the community’s exalted sanctimony: a life-negating disposition built on the repressive dicta of Protestant religion. The following segment explores the crucial role that Protestant mentality plays in the constitution of the depicted South’s racialized imaginary and the fostering of violent responses against the order-disrupting Other.

2.2 GENEALOGIES OF GUILT: THE FETTERS OF THE WRITTEN WORD

The novel that was to be entitled “Dark House” was finally supplied with a more luminous name. Nevertheless, some of its characters remained in the dark. Gail Hightower, Jefferson’s defrocked minister, is the man who grew up among the ghosts of his family’s past and who, in his youth, entered the seminary, not to bring his fellow men the light of God’s wisdom, but in order to never have to step out into the world of the living. From his sedentary isolation, only interrupted to buy the most basic provisions at the local store, and, during the last seven years, by Byron Bunch’s weekly visits, he contemplates the doings of the town’s men and women as if they were alien creatures: “It is as though he were listening [to Byron’s accounts of recent events in town] to the doings of people of a different race” (Faulkner 81).

His confinement from the turmoil of life and detachment from the community enables him to reflect on the mentality of those he forsook, less with the piety of a clergyman and more with the critical eye of the outcast. The passage in which he sits at the window in his studio, listening to the singing voices of the church congregation floating through the eventide, gives a good example of how Faulkner blends the omniscient narrator’s voice with the voice or thoughts of one of his characters. There is no clear line between the omniscient narrator’s cogitations and the thoughts of Gail Hightower. Rather it

is as if both merge into one single meditation on the harsh, life-negating nature of Protestant faith. The music is described as having a

quality stern and implacable, deliberate and without passion so much as immolation, pleading, asking, for not love, not life, forbidding it to others, demanding in sonorous tones death as though death were the boon, like all protestant music. (Faulkner 367)

On the next page, this sort of indirect interior monologue goes on to say:

Pleasure, ecstasy, they cannot seem to bear: their escape from it is in violence, in drinking and fighting and praying; catastrophe too, the violence identical and apparently inescapable *And so why should not their religion drive them to crucifixion of themselves and one another?* he thinks. (368)

The darkness into which Hightower has shut himself off is that of somebody who has given up the present and chosen to live in attendance of death. But from the marginality of his confinement, he is capable of more insight into the “collective neurosis” (Bleikasten 323) of Puritan culture than any other character. A culture that is extremely severe, because of the exceptionally high amount of repression it requires from its members. Through the minister’s meditation, the polarities of good and evil and some of their equivalences as conceived by the Puritan ethos become fully apparent. Thus, pleasure and ecstasy appear as forbidden aspects of existence—love, life, and passion are less valuable than death and sacrifice. The excessive repression of the “sinful” aspects of human nature, which are identified with carnality, result in the accumulation of vital energies, which find release in “violence, in drinking and fighting and praying” and in the impulse to “crucify” whoever may provoke righteous anger.

Light in August offers a vision of Protestant culture, which is inextricably wedded to the counter-side of the virtues it fosters—an emphasis on the sinful condition of humankind and therefore, the imperative of thrift and discipline in order to stay away from evil. Byron ponders, “it looks like a fellow is bound to get into mischief soon as he quits working” (Faulkner 55). This goes hand-in-hand with a pronounced tendency towards punishment, violence, and penance. Life is not to be enjoyed but to be suffered. For Calvin Burden, whose name could not be more telling, to teach his children the catechism means to “beat the loving God into the four of you as long as I can raise my arm” (Faulkner 243).

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Further, the novel establishes the axis of Protestantism as white, Nordic, male, masculine, harsh, and logical, as opposed to the paradigm of Catholicism, which shelters the qualifying concepts of dark, Latin, feminine, gentle, and mystical:

Burden . . . began to read to the child in Spanish from the book which he had brought with him from California, interspersing the fine, sonorous flowing of mysticism in a foreign tongue with harsh, extemporized dissertations composed half of the bleak and bloodless logic which he remembered from his father on interminable New England Sundays, and half of immediate hellfire and brimstone of which any country Methodist circuit rider would have been proud. The two of them would be alone in the room: the tall, gaunt, Nordic man, and the small, dark, vivid child who had inherited his mother's build and coloring, like people of two different races. (Faulkner 242)⁸

The polarities are as clear as the hierarchies: the feminine gentleness of Catholic mysticism, reified in dark-skinned people of Latin origin (another example is Juana, Calvin's daughter-in-law and the mother of his grandson, who is and looks Spanish), is subjugated to the "bleak and bloodless logic" of the male Protestant principle of guilt and punishment. When Calvin sees his grandson for the first time, he laments his dark looks and explains the physical appearance of non-whites as an anomaly betraying their sinful nature: "Damn, lowbuilt black folks: lowbuilt because of the weight of the wrath of God, black because of the sin of human bondage staining their blood and flesh" (Faulkner 247).

The "black race" is exclusively considered in relation to the "white race," which does not exist in its own right, but as a reminder of (white) man's doom on earth. It is in the light of this social Darwinist/theological discourse on race that we understand Joanna Burden's psychological burden. She carries it with her like a cross of guilt and shame since age four—the day when her father explained to her the murdering of her grandfather and her half-brother at the hands of the ex-confederate Colonel Sartoris as the inevitable outcome of God's will:

God put [the curse] on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed

8 Note the eloquent contrasts of prosody: "interspersing the fine, sonorous flowing of mysticism in a foreign tongue with harsh, extemporized dissertations composed half of the bleak and bloodless logic."

and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom
and curse for its sins. (Faulkner 252)

Finally, one of Faulkner's most interesting strategies to express his characters' obsessive frame of mind, their fixation on an immutable set of religious, cultural, and racial convictions, i.e. the idea of a South arrested in the past, is the image of stasis and clairvoyance. This motive is conveyed in those scenes in which three different characters act in a state of "holy" inspiration. The fanatical racist Eupheus Hines, the Protestant fundamentalist McEachern, and the young white supremacist Percy Grimm embody in its most radical expression the prototype of male Protestant whiteness, and share a blind faith in their moral and ontological superiority over the Other. The following three passages show striking similarities in the illustration of dramatic moments in which we find each of these protagonists acting in the name of the holy word and the community.

The night when the farmer McEachern, Joe Christmas's adoptive father, discovers that his eighteen-year-old son is having a private night life, he hurries to the stable to get his horse (which is appropriately white) in order to follow the car that picked up his son. He proceeds "in that same pure and impersonal outrage, as if he believed so that he would be guided by some greater and purer outrage" (Faulkner 202). McEachern only knows the direction the vehicle took, but not its stopping place, so that his ride seems guided by an external agent, "that slow and ponderous gallop . . . as if in that cold and implacable and undeviating conviction of both omnipotence and clairvoyance, of which they both [man and beast] partook, known destination and speed were not necessary" (Faulkner 203). When he enters the location where a dance is taking place (and where he is going to die at the hands of his son), and finds his son with his lover, McEachern "very likely . . . seemed to himself . . . the actual representative of the wrathful and retributive Throne" (Faulkner 204).

His state of mind strongly resembles that of Joe Christmas's odious grandfather Eupheus Hines, as he remembers having experienced it in the rainy night in which he went on his horse after his daughter, who was running away from home with her purportedly mixed-blood lover. Speaking of himself in the third person, he expresses the idea of an external, superior power guiding his actions. "[I]t wasn't any possible way that he could have known which road they

had taken. But he did. He found them like he had known all the time just where they would be” (Faulkner 376).

Finally, this same motive of clairvoyance and unworldly certainty at the moment of carrying out retributive, order-re-establishing and violent action is repeated through the character of Percy Grimm. In his chase after the fugitive Joe Christmas, he “seemed to be served by certitude, the blind and untroubled faith in the rightness and infallibility of his actions” (Faulkner 459); “as if the Player who moved him for pawn likewise found him breath” (Faulkner 462). The metaphor of the “Player” guiding Grimm’s actions is used three times during the pursuit sequence and a fourth time when it introduces the controversial castration scene. It represents once again the idea with which an avenging character, in this case a young captain in the State National Guard, justifies his actions, namely the carrying out of God’s will.

These examples demonstrate that all three of these characters have a strong sense of themselves as legitimate and infallible guardians of white Christian order acting in the name of the community. Their identification with a higher law, which is ultimately the written law of the Bible, is so strong, their feeling of superiority so abiding, that they carry out their action without the slightest trace of self-doubt. Identifying the rightful with the “white race,” the invisibility of Christmas’s purported blackness triggers in the community all the anxiety related to the imaginary threat of “mongrel breed” through miscegenation. His passing for white constitutes what Ickstadt defines as “the ultimate danger, the invisible enemy that potentially undermines all oppositions and calls the very principles of order-making into doubt” (Ickstadt 242).

As to Joe Christmas himself, he has been imbued as much with the same racist discourse as the representatives of the white community, and even more. What accounts for his insufferable isolation from those he wants to be part of, is of course not the quality of the blood running through his veins, but his own belief in his inferiority.

9 One of the common racist terms that circulated in the Jim Crow South at the turn of the century, “articulated most vividly by the Reverend John Durham” (Sundquist 83).

3.1 BEING JOE CHRISTMAS: ENTERING THE PSYCHOTIC'S VOID

Perhaps the Negro is not yet capable of more than second-class citizenship. His tragedy may be that so far he is competent for equality only in the ratio of his white blood . . . The Negro is not yet capable of, or refuses to accept, the responsibilities of equality. So we, the white man, must take him in hand and teach him that responsibility. (Faulkner qtd. in Gwynn and Blotner 210)

This section reads Joe Christmas's character as complicating Faulkner's own racism: a racism that seems unequivocal when we confront distressing assertions like the one quoted above.¹⁰

Chapter five gives the reader the first unmediated access to the protagonist. Appropriately, this first advance takes place in the darkness of the night and involves the representation of physical violence, which Christmas uses to silence the drunken Joe Brown. But Christmas himself remains enigmatic; Faulkner gives only glimpses of what he is thinking, and these fragmentary insights shed less light on his identity than they express his consuming unrest and a feeling of existential abandonment: "He could see it like a printed sentence, fullborn and already dead *God loves me too* like the faded and weathered letters on a last year's billboard *God loves me too*" (Faulkner 105). Poetically, this lonesomeness is extended to a cosmic dimension:

Overhead the slow constellations wheeled, the stars of which he had been aware for thirty years and not one of which had any name to him or meant anything at all by shape or brightness or position. (Faulkner 106)

As the fleeting fading letters he is able to read, but in whose message he is not able to believe, so is Christmas able to see the stars above him, but he is incapable of recognizing their patterns, "constellations," meaningful structures that might guide his steps on earth and give him orientation. To Christmas the word "God" is as empty a concept as the mute heavens that harbor no illusions, no blessings, and no promises for him.

10 Jehlen uses this passage to underpin her argument about *Light in August's* insurmountable racism (85).

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In fact, this fifth chapter is a kind of *in medias res* into the protagonist’s disturbed inner life, the paragraphs functioning as randomly intermittent snapshots of light into the darkness of his psyche. Christmas lives in a world of photo-contrasts where the sudden refulgence of light, as that of a flash bulb of an old camera, kindles the scenery of his soul only to reveal its darkness. The flare-up of a match in the darkness of the silent cabin, the trajectory of its flame vanishing in midair, and, once again, his eyes following the twinkling flight of a cigarette butt through the invisibility of the night (Faulkner 104-05), express the character’s wish to see and understand, as well as his capacity to do so only in random, instantaneous, incoherent glimpses.

Notwithstanding all his restless wanderings, Christmas is a passive character driven by his uncontrollable affects and destructive impulses: “*Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something*” (Faulkner 104). At this point, the reader is able to interpret this, Christmas’s presentiment, as an anticipation of the already-mentioned murder. Christmas knows that he got angry and hit Joanna Burden “because she started praying over [him]” (Faulkner 105). But he does not go further than that. He cannot transcend his own bitter history because his only conceivable existential horizon is to be one of those he feels he has no right to be. Thus, tragically, his dilemma constitutes his innermost self.

When, during his nightly wanderings through Jefferson, he passes the houses of white people and sees them sitting peacefully on their porches, he thinks: “That’s all I wanted . . . That don’t seem like a whole lot to ask” (Faulkner 115). On the contrary, when he walks through Freedman Town, he experiences an almost physical revulsion that makes him run away from the place and also, so the narration intimates, from himself: “Then he found himself. Without his being aware the street had begun to slope and before he knew it he was in Freedman Town, surrounded by the summer smell and the summer voices of invisible negroes” (Faulkner 114).

Jehlen reads Christmas’s passing through Freedman Town as a perfectly legitimate example of the novel’s representation of racial character as a “matter of physiology, and only secondarily [as] psychological and cultural” (90). And in fact, as Snead points out, evoking bodily smell, the narrator even wants “to replace the visual signifier of race that Joe Christmas has now made defunct” (83) by an olfactory signal. This implies exudation, i.e. something that comes from within, and it denotes essentiality more than the inherently-superficial visual

code. Thus, if we guilelessly follow the narrator's seeming judgment and share his view that Joe Christmas has effectively "found himself" we are actually stepping, *malgré nous*, into the trap of racist complicity with the narrator.¹¹

However, the narrative perspective in this crucial passage may not be a neutral narrative voice. The following fragment strongly suggests a shift from an unreliable omniscient perspective to the subjective one of Christmas:

On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured. It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female. He began to run, glaring, his teeth glaring, his inbreath cold on his dry teeth and lips, toward the next street lamp . . . He turned into it [a parallel street] running . . . his heart hammering, and into the higher street. He stopped there, panting, glaring, his heart thudding as if it could not or would not yet believe that the air now was the cold hard air of white people. (Faulkner 115)

Once again, racial analogies and equivalences are being established, and the affinity of blackness with female principles of sultriness, softness, fecundity, and sexuality are opposed to the "cold hard air of white people." However, the almost-hallucinatory emotional intensity expressed through the imaginative use of composite adjectives like "fecundmellow" or "primogenitive," together with the description of Christmas's sudden fit of anxiety and his accelerated heartbeat, convey the idea of a narrator adopting the character's subjective point of view. In this particular case, subjectivity occurs in the mind of a psychotic character. Thus, the racism that hits the reader in this passage does not derive firsthand from the narrator's discourse on race but originates in the character's visceral reaction to a series of sensorial impressions which the narrator describes.

Undoubtedly, Christmas's reactions are physiological, "panting, glaring, his heart thudding," but they are a response not to a given concrete reality, but to his imaginary, his own personal associations. After all, the "Negroes" remain invisible to him; he is not witnessing sexual activity nor a black woman in the throes of delivery. All that Christmas perceives is "the summer smell and the

11 See also Snead: "Faulkner gives us the choice to be racists in a very cunning way: do we passively accept the truth of the narrator's judgment and thereby ourselves join the town's consensus?" (83)

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summer voices of invisible negroes. They seemed to enclose him like bodiless voices murmuring talking laughing in a language not his” (Faulkner 114).¹²

Irrespective of whether it is possible to ascertain in this passage which sensorial stimulus reaches him first, a complex synaesthesia of audible, olfactory, visual, and even tactile elements is responsible for Christmas’s sudden panic attack, and is conjured through the idea of the physical palpability of blackness:

As from the bottom of a thick black pit he saw himself enclosed . . . as if the black life, the black breathing had compounded the substance of breath so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself must become fluid and accrete slowly from particle to particle, of and with the now ponderable night inseparable and one. (Faulkner 114)

Christmas is frightened to death. Faulkner did not incur the stylistic inconsistency of bluntly naming his emotional state, but obviously preferred to illustrate and recreate it, reproduce it metaphorically, mimetically, and symbolically. The imagery he employs is as visceral as only the universal language of fear can be. When “his blood [begins] again, talking and talking,” the metaphor is not expressing Christmas’s innate affinity with the “black race” but his inner trepidation: “He walked fast, in time to *it*” (Faulkner 116, my italics). His pace is dictated by the pumping of his heart, the horror of encountering a part of himself in those he rejects. When he divines the presence of a group of black people in the darkness of the road “before he could have seen or heard them,” it is not because he is in possession of an obscure black instinct for recognizing his own kind, but because he thinks it very likely to suddenly stumble in the darkness upon a black person whose dark skin blends with the night and who represents to him the terrible void of his own identity, “the original quarry, abyss itself” (Faulkner 116).

In this fifth chapter, Faulkner builds up tension through the description of the erratic, compulsive behavior of a character who does not know himself—or why he feels apprehension, hostility, and maddening unrest. After nearly charging with a razor at a small group of blacks standing peacefully on the road,

12 As to the smell, drawing on Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics*, Snead pertinently points out that, notwithstanding common assumptions, “olfactory signals are as apt to be abused by socioeconomic ‘marking’ (presumably, they designated a ‘natural difference’) as any other sort” (Snead 83).

he thinks: “What the hell is the matter with me?” (Faulkner 118). The heavens remain mute for Christmas; the privilege of knowing is solely reserved for the reader.

The preceding pages have tried to demonstrate that the narrative voice, which according to Jehlen’s reading is overtly racist, has actually reduced its commenting agency to a minimum, discretely retiring to a background from where it reproduces the interior life of the protagonist and gives account of his compulsive actions. As will be shown in the following section, the novel’s ensuing chapters shed an explanatory light on a psyche conditioned less by racial origin than by affective memory.

3.2 EXISTENTIAL ORPHANAGE—BRANDED WITH THE STIGMA OF DOOM

He didn’t know what he was . . . which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in—not to know what he is and to know that he will never know. (Faulkner qtd. in Sundquist 64)

Faulkner’s remark on the loneliest of his fictional characters exemplifies his “view that a man cannot know who he is unless he can first identify himself racially” (Jehlen 84). The emphasis is not on who but on what, as if a clear racial category were essential to the constitution of subject identity. In other words, this racist “what” implies that the constitution of subjects is based on an immanent, “natural” condition, and that as long as subjects do not know what race they are, they will not be able to develop a healthy ego capable of self-enhancing self-assertion, i.e. transcendence, in whatever modest proportions.

Indeed, *Light in August*’s characters and narrative voice overtly wield this “logic” of race as an impermeable essence and reified difference, an ontological absolute: “[S]he secedes from the woman race and species and spends the balance of her life trying to get joined up with the man race” (Faulkner 15), “listening to the doings of people of a different race” (81), “like people of two different races” (242), “as if they belonged to a different race, species” (341).

This logic pervaded the Old South of the Jim Crow era as much as it suffuses the collective discourse represented in Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha. It is given the authoritative stamp by district attorney Gavin Steven, Jefferson’s

much-respected cob-pipe-smoking savant, who in his “silly last speech” (Jehlen 91) explains Christmas’s existential dilemma in terms of an hematological aporia:

Because 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. And it was the white blood . . . Then I believe that the white blood . . . It was the black blood which swept him by his own desire . . . And then the black blood failed him again, as it must have in crises all his life. (Faulkner 449)

This is a judgment of circumstances against which, least of all, Christmas himself could have raised any objection in his defense. The racial doctrine of insurmountable difference had been indelibly branded into his infant soul. The difference between him and the great majority of other “real” black children is that he learns brutally that he is a “nigger” before they do. Children whose first emotional certainty is that they are some mother’s son before they are confronted with the racism of social reality. But Christmas’s identity is negatively connoted from the start, his naked soul beleaguered by the enemy from the very beginning.¹³

Chapter six begins a seven-chapter-long flashback, which finally sheds light on the protagonist whose identity for the reader had remained an enigma throughout the previous pages. Faulkner unlocks the gates to those first memories that constitute Christmas’s unconscious archive of a forgotten but ever-present imaginary; an imaginary that pulses with every heartbeat like an old inflamed wound under the surface of his inarticulate confusion:

Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders. Knows remembers believes a corridor in a big long garbled cold echoing building of dark red brick sootbleakened by more chimneys than its own, set in a grassless cinderstrewnpacked compound surrounded by smoking factory purlieus and enclosed by a ten foot steel-and-wire fence like a penitentiary or a zoo, where in random erratic surges, with sparrowlike childtrebling, orphans in identical and uniform blue

13 To undertake a psychological, if not psychoanalytical interpretation of the character is by no means an arbitrary approach; the text itself cries out for it. André Bleikasten and Philip Weinstein have responded to it with readings that do not neglect this vital perspective which supplies weighty arguments against the possible assessment of *Light in August* as a primarily-racist text. Cf. also Jenkins.

denim in and out of remembering but in knowing constant as the bleak walls, the bleak windows where in rain soot from the yearly adjoining chimneys streaked like black tears. (Faulkner 119)

What follows after this powerful impressionist rendering of what constitutes Christmas's first nebulous reminiscences about his early childhood in the hostile enclosure of the orphanage, is the account of his traumatic experience with his first ersatz mother, the orphanage's dietitian. Christmas "knows remembers believes" the orphanage as a forlorn and terrifying place, but his memory is mostly affective; the actual incidents which add up to the affective charge that informs his adult psyche are reconstructed for the reader in detailed coherence, but remain forever in the twilight of Christmas's unconscious: they have "passed from the surface of [his] thinking" (Faulkner 176).¹⁴ However, the narrative makes clear that the humiliating experience of aggressive rejection, which the little orphan suffers at the hands of the only woman who vaguely represented nurture and shelter to him, marks him for the rest of his life. The crucial scene contains all the elements that psychologically inform and explain Christmas's future deranged relations to women, sex, race, and himself.

The dietitian's pink toothpaste, which he associates with the young owner's "fullbodied, smooth, pink-white" (Faulkner 120) appearance, can be regarded as an artificial libidinal compensation for maternal breastfeeding that Christmas was denied after his birth. Behind a cloth curtain, squatting in the womb-like seclusion of what appears to be the dietitian's improvised closet, "among delicate shoes and suspended soft womangarments" (120), he listens, without understanding, to the hurried sounds of the woman and the man making love furtively. The excess of toothpaste makes him vomit and he is discovered by the outraged dietician who turns from the pleasing appearance that he associated with the gratification of eating into a hysterical grimace of hostility: "You little rat! . . . Spying on me! You little nigger bastard!" (Faulkner 122).

As Bleikasten observes, "[h]enceforth womanhood, food, and sexuality will be joined with his racial obsession in a single knot of fear, shame, guilt, and resentment" (291). Moreover, the manner in which the child gives himself away

14 I do not share Bleikasten's view that the experience with the dietitian is "the first scene to emerge distinctly in Christmas's memory" (Bleikasten 291). Precisely because he is not able to reconstruct them distinctively, these early experiences inform his affective system and surface violently and destructively beyond his control throughout his adult life.

—“He said to himself with complete and passive surrender: ‘Well, here I am.’”—from the “rife, pinkwomansmelling obscurity behind the curtain” (Faulkner 122), can be read as the symbolical re-enactment of his disastrous birth. Christmas metaphorically vomits himself into existence. His “passive surrender” leaves him at the mercy of those who hate him. First at the hands of a grandfather, who let his daughter die in childbirth and who regards him as the “devil’s crop” (Faulkner 379), the product of “womansinning and bitchery” (Faulkner 128), and then at the hands of a hysterical woman obsessed with the absurd idea that a five-year-old will tell her colleagues about her sexual affairs.

By plunging into the protagonist’s origins, the narrative perspective opens up new epistemological ground. Contrary to what the dominant narrative voice suggests throughout the novel, the text now invites us to look at Christmas’s tragedy not as one residing in the alleged incompatibility of white and black blood (district attorney Gavin Stevens’s authoritative explanation), but in psychological trauma. Drawing on Lacan’s theory of subject formation, Weinstein argues that Joe Christmas’s development of the Self was tragically arrested in the imaginary phase of the Me, which “is a composite of the introjected gaze and words of others, that ineradicable portion of identity that is laid down prior to entry into the Symbolic” (104).¹⁵

In fact, besides the incident with the dietitian, during his early childhood at the orphanage, Christmas’s vulnerable Me is subject to the introjection not only of hostile verbal designation but also of the unflagging hateful gaze of his grandfather Eupheus Hines, the man who took the job of a janitor at the orphanage in order to stay close to the child, “to watch him and hate him” (Faulkner 127). More than Joe Christmas’s slightly foreign looks—his “parchmentcolored face” (Faulkner 123)—it is his still, evasive, shadow-like behavior, the consequence of Hines’s paralyzing gaze,¹⁶ which accounts for the other children regarding him as strange and different, and provokes them to pin

15 And he goes on: “Phonic and visual residues are introjected from the time of infancy, and these fuse into unconscious networks of signification. Fueled by Imaginary identification, consumed with boundary transgressions, locked into polarized antagonisms, the me radiates that sense of self that is involuntary, inaccessible to conscious change, helplessly responsive to the desire of others” (Weinstein 104).

16 “There is nothing metaphysical or theological about Faulknerian predestination: it is all a matter of evil utterances and evil eyes, of human, all too human predictions and previsions” (Bleikasten 320).

him down to a familiar, negatively-connoted category of Otherness by calling him “nigger.”

The passive internalization or introjection of his black Otherness is complete and indelible. By the time he is adopted by the McEacherns, the possibility for him to learn and assume a white and “positive” identity is irretrievably lost. Hence, his unyielding resistance against learning the Bible, which his adoptive father Simon McEachern—whose name, when we think of the apostle Simon Zealotes, may not have been arbitrarily chosen¹⁷—tries to beat into him with all the unflinching conviction of his Presbyterian Calvinism. Christmas’s rebellion against the written word can be understood as a last desperate attempt, born out of impotence, of holding on to a subject position. His obstinate negation can be regarded in terms of that “‘negativity’ [which] is the energy that comes from subjective consciousness’ refusal to align itself wholly within any one of the conflicting social roles proffered to it” (Weinstein 101).

However, Christmas’s tragedy persists in that his negativity also extends to the negation of love and affection that others, women in particular, try to give him. It is less the effect of conscious rebellion but the product of deep self-hatred. On the one hand, he rejects the Evangelical catechism, Calvinist morals, and work ethic his adoptive father tries to imbue him with; on the other, he spurns his adoptive mother and despises the love she offers him in form of complicity against the ruling father.

McEachern’s house is not a home to the protagonist but a rather hostile desert where the structurally-asymmetrical battle takes place between the granite-like hardness of the father, the ruler, the embodiment of the law, and the slave-like weakness and submissiveness of the mother. Christmas identifies with the father in terms of gender and prefers the physical punishment he receives from him with deadly regularity to his mother’s awkward efforts to gain his trust and affection by giving him extra money and meals behind the back of her dictatorial husband. Since early childhood he has learned that he can depend on punishment but not on maternal nurture and affection, and therefore he has developed a

17 Simon Zealotes, also known as Simon the Zealot, is one of the less-known among the apostles of Jesus. In later tradition, he was associated with the brutally-suppressed Jewish revolt against the Romans and his name has commonly become synonymous with fervent proselytism.

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profound mistrust of women and their nurturing function: “The lack of pre-Oedipal nourishment scars [him] irreparably” (Weinstein 103).

After committing parricide, Christmas runs away and confines himself to an impossible existence outside of the symbolic order of white patriarchy. Impossible because through lessons of punishment and guilt during his childhood and adolescence, he has been subject to a thorough internalization of those racist values which are indissolubly linked precisely to that male-centered, hierarchically-structured symbolic order from which he tries to escape. Passing from one side of the color line to the other during his thirteen-year-long run along “thousand savage and lonely streets” (Faulkner 220), his desperado existence mirrors his soul’s incessant struggle between two sets of analogies. One that reifies under the paradigm of whiteness the concepts of maleness, coldness, the hardness of Protestant tradition, the mind and the written word, order, light, and purity; while the other equates blackness with femininity, heat, softness, the body, sexuality, chaos, sin, filth, and darkness.

Christmas is unable to identify with either of these constructions. Trapped in this absurd but inevitable frustration, he never manages to develop a sense of self, which transcends the Me-phase of introjection responsible for the unconscious constellation of the imaginary. Faulkner does not allow his protagonist to transcend his passive responsiveness to this set of reified categories which ultimately own him. Negation, the only way in which he is able to manifest his subjectivity, ultimately leads him to murder and to end his life as a victim of the patriarchal symbolic order. This symbolic order castrates him first linguistically—truncating the development of a self-asserting I—and finally physically, through Percy Grimm, white supremacy’s zealous guardian.

Joe Christmas’s existential orphanage is the tragic outcome of his lifelong inability to assert himself as an autonomous subject beyond racial assignation. He shares this inability with many of his contemporaries, but what sets him apart from them and from any other self-conscious mulatto, is his utter lack of self-acceptance resulting from a biography completely devoid of maternal warmth. Faulkner devotes six chapters (six to eleven) to the rendering of his protagonist’s affective and conscious memory. Together with the narration of the dreadful circumstances of his birth and first years of life through Doc Hines and his wife’s account of events (chapter sixteen), the novel offers a perfect case study of severe psychological trauma and its fatal consequences.

CONCLUSION

Light in August's textual representation of the South is Faulkner's vision of its collective imaginary, a realm pervaded by obsessions with racial fantasies structuring a binary system of signification. The novel achieves its psychological approach to its social referent through a dialectical narrative mode, alternating between the subjective perspective of different single characters or the anonymous collective voice of the community and that of an unreliable omniscient narrator—unreliable because the narrator's epistemological authority is compromised by reflecting in its own commenting gestures, the discursive habits of the very community whose ideological precepts it critically questions.

Written largely in dialogue, the novel demonstrates how rumor, gossip, and speculation are the community's major vehicles of consensus-building, and how race and racism are the result of their rhetorical dynamics. Faulkner's narrative strategy of subjective points of view and indirect interior monologues offers the reader a radical exploration of the South's racist mentality—a critical evaluation of a society whose collective fears and repressed desires are brought to the light by way of confronting its members with the unknown, which is incarnated in a character who resists signification, since “he never acted like either a nigger or a white man” (Faulkner 350).

Thus, the narrative voice's ambivalence forces us into an active position where we must choose between the two explanations the novel offers for the protagonist's (self-)destructive behavior. If we follow the text's explicit criteria for evaluating human behavior, we then perpetuate the validity of those reified gender and race categories informing the novel's dominant discourse—as it is summed up in District Attorney Gavin Stevens' authoritative speech about the irreconcilability of black and white blood. If, on the contrary, instead of relying on the community's discursive practices, which the narration so transparently recreates, we draw our own conclusions from the forceful rendering of the protagonist's psychological history, then we break free from Jefferson's suffocating logic of ontological differences and from the circular reasoning leading to Joe Christmas's doom.

The detailed account of his terrible trajectory—from his atrocious birth and early infancy at the mercy of a deranged and vicious racist on through the years under the yoke of a callous religious fundamentalist—dramatizes how the brutal

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enforcement of the written word—or “the semantic certainty of the letter that kills” (Ickstadt 247)—can affect the psyche of an individual when it is not counterbalanced by the soothing agency of life-enhancing, “feminine” attributes. In this sense, the novel establishes a severe critique of Protestant culture’s life-negating rigidity and belligerent antagonism against everything sensual. It points at the fatal consequences of its repressive morals: self-righteous individual or collective violence, “crucifixion,” endorsed by sanctimony. It conspicuously identifies the negative sides of the Protestant ethos with masculine principles, and locates true existential blessing in the three theological virtues of hope, faith, and love, which it overtly identifies with feminine principles.

Light in August is symbolically and narratively structured on polarities. The concepts of Self and Other constitute the very ground of an epistemological horizon in which the ideas of masculine and feminine, body and mind, instinct and intellect, are positioned as mutually exclusive, and the construction of whiteness and blackness as antagonistic as Good and Evil. What the novel denounces is not binary reification as such, but rather the devaluation and vilification of those qualities and attributes it subsumes under the paradigm of the feminine. Christmas’s tragedy consists of his inability to assimilate these attributes as positive elements constitutive of his self. His impotence reflects the community’s insistence on the irreconcilable antagonism of racial and gender differences and its fear from miscegenation as a phenomenon disruptive of the social and cultural order. By raising masculinity and whiteness as normative categories of symbolical equivalence over femininity and blackness, this anxiety results in the crushing of the potential vitality of hybrid and complex identities.

Radiant Lena Grove is Faulkner’s masculine projection of the feminine and his response to the grim male-centeredness of this symbolic order. Her presence in *Light in August* is justified as the antithesis to Christmas’s fate and character. The sub-plot around her intersects with Christmas’s plotline for the sake of contrast between their different symbolic functions. While he stands as the incarnation of fear and (self)denial—the South’s racial anxieties—she embodies faith in and affirmation of life. With her unshakable hope and disarming candor, she is the antithesis to Protestant culture’s dehumanized logic of the sinfulness of everything carnal, and, concomitantly, to Christmas’s desperate condition of shame and resentment. Irradiating completeness and self-repose, the naturalness with which she embraces her advanced pregnancy against all odds and gives birth,

literally on the ashes of the Burden mansion, represents the life-generating, “feminine,” “fecundmellow” principle of a wisdom, which is “older than our Christian civilization” (cf. Faulkner qtd. in Bleikasten above). The lambent August light she sheds from the narrative’s luminous frame into the sinister darkness of its central events is not that of cultural, political, religious, or scientific discourse, and thus it remains unrecognized by the characters in the novel. To grasp its “pagan” wisdom is a privilege reserved for the reader, who is conscious of the constructedness of his or her own racialized imaginary.

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