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‘Light in August’: Alienation, Violence and Permanence in Faulkner’s South

William Faulkner’s *Light in August* is a story rich in typically Southern themes told in a new literary style. Faulkner’s literary consciousness had its roots in the storytelling tradition of the Old South and yet expressed a 20th century sensibility. *Light in August* stands as one of Faulkner’s greatest achievements because it evokes the impact of history on the present, a common theme in his fiction, and examines the duality of human nature. Faulkner’s great genius lay in his ability to blend a Modernist style of writing with a natural feel for Southern storytelling. The result, as with *Light in August*, was a new kind of fable that addresses both history and the unresolved present. This is Faulkner’s legacy; to seek a resolution between the past and present, to try and make sense of the way things are by recreating the way things were. A New Criticism perspective reveals that Joe Christmas’ alienation and anger embodies the venality of the Old South’s race-based oppression. On the other hand, Lena Grove is forward-looking, representing the regenerative life force, the permanence of the natural world and hope for the future.

Light in August is told in dual storylines following these two primary characters. Through these protagonists, Faulkner explores through Joe the burden of race and class in the South, and the simple grace and dignity of common people, symbolized in Lena. Lena and Joe are both inheritors of this past, a past that Joe cannot escape and which Lena rises above by remaining true to her own identity. They are disenfranchised individuals in a world that

the bounds of accepted society. Joe, an orphan who believes he is part black, tries to find his identity in a persistently racist society. Lena and Joe are misfits, lost wanderers in a violent land. Their quests are lost causes, lost like the war that destroyed the South and left it an angry and vengeful place, unwilling to accept or forgive except on its own narrow terms. Its past is repeated in Joe. It is redeemed through Lena.

In 1957, Faulkner was asked about the inspiration for the title *Light in August*. He answered that the idea had come from a casual comment made by his wife about the peculiar quality of the mid-August light in Mississippi. “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” (Millgate, 8). There is a classical element to *Light in August*. Lena and Joe are lost in their own *Odysseys*, seeking a home that has been denied to them. Unlike Ulysses, there is no Ithacan homecoming for Joe. The land, to which Lena belongs, helps her toward her destination.

In *William Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist*, Daniel Singal writes that Faulkner’s interpretive impulse took over as he set down to write what would become *Light in August*. The book’s initial title, *Dark House*, was a metaphorical reference to the stately mansions from the past. “Though the exact meaning of the phrase was probably still unclear to him, it was indisputably true that large, decaying antebellum homes held a special resonance within his imagination, symbolizing not only the glory of the mythical Old South but also something

hideous and hidden, a forbidden secret lurking just beyond reach in the region's past" (Singal, 168). It is this hidden past that lay across Lena and Joe's path like a shadow. Joe Christmas is a powerful interpretation of this sinister past. As a baby, he was abandoned on the steps of an orphanage and later persecuted by Doc Hines, his grandfather, who insists that he be called "nigger," a reference that led Joe to believe he was part black and which sets the tone for his struggle to find meaning and his place in the world. Joe's life is marked by violence. The world does not want him, and he responds in kind, in anger and defiance. His relationship with civil rights activist Joanne Burden reflects the contradictions in his life. Having fallen in love with her, Joe comes to hate Joanne and murders her, an ultimate act of rejection. His anger flares up when he hears Joanne praying. "She ought not to have started praying over me'He began to curse her. He stood beneath the dark window, cursing her with slow and calculated obscenity" (Faulkner, 86).

Faulkner, who experienced considerable rejection in his own life, was interested in this theme. Joe's desire for love and acceptance goes hand-in-hand with his anger and frustration at having been rejected from the very beginning. In Joe, Faulkner gives us a victim with no place in the world around him, a sufferer driven to find salvation through pain and suffering. "With no other resources, with no man or god to offer him support, Joe's redemption never comes. His exclusion from society is further sustained by his self-excluding character, and his isolation painfully extends from inside out. Christmas's self hatred makes him unbearable to himself, and, consequently, he lives ' a life of perpetual dislocation'" (Bell, 121). Joe is an

alienated

anti-hero who lashes out at the world as he seeks some form of acceptance.

Christmas moves back and forth between his white and black alter egos, the alternate sides of his conflicted self. He plays both sides of the racial coin but in so doing he pays a heavy price, finding no firm identity of his own. He tries to turn the situation to his advantage, but at the same time he resents having to do so. As such, he can find no sense of completeness. It is reminiscent of Gethsemane, and of Christ expressing fear, anger and frustration over the mystery that underscores his fate. " Like Christ, Christmas is doomed to failure, since the degree of wholeness he seeks is not attainable on this earth. Nevertheless, Joe remains committed to his ideal identity, ' fiercely defying all attempts to define himself by reduction to less than his awareness of himself'" (Singal, 171).

Joe's death comes as the fulfillment of a tortured journey that could only have one ending. Knowing his death is inevitable, he surrenders at last to the limitations of his circumstances, putting up little resistance when Hightower comes for him. " He (Christmas) merely struck him (Hightower) with the pistol and ran on and crouched behind that table and defied the black blood for the last time, as he had been defying it for thirty years. He crouched behind that overturned table and let them shoot him to death" (Faulkner, 449). This violent conclusion to Joe's life is an important resolution in *Light in August*. For Faulkner, violence was the South's inheritance, the blood price it had to pay for a guilty past and for the region's stubborn insistence on reliving its past. Joe symbolizes what happens when the bill comes due,

when violence must be paid for with violence. Joe pays for his past with his life, much as the South had to pay with blood for the crime of slavery.

Lena Grove exists at the opposite end of the story from Joe Christmas. Her character, like her story, is marked by an almost serene, quiet dignity that stands in stark contrast to the chaotic and violent narrative of Joe's failed search for identity. Lena has no such trouble with identity. She is a poor, white woman carrying an illegitimate child, searching for her lover across a dangerous and unwelcoming landscape. But she is quietly resolute, firm in purpose and conviction. She comes from people who embody a simple kind of honor that transcends violence. As such, Lena represents something deep and permanent in the story. In *Faulkner and the Natural World*, Lawrence Buell explains that, for him, Lena is the embodiment of the life force itself, something that cannot be destroyed or altered by prejudice or violence. Lena simply is; she stands for something that has always been and always will be. Buell writes " For years, the initial phase of this novel had organized itself in my mind overwhelmingly around the figure of Lena Grove moving quietly across a more or less undifferentiated landscape in all her innocent sincerity: a figure synthesized from several stereotypes (earth mother, Madonna, Southern poor white) into what felt like a luminous and memorable symbolic image with a soft romantic glow" (Kartiganer and Abadie, 1).

Lena moves across a Southern landscape to which she and her kind are endemic, a part of the natural world. Despite the social stigma of her condition, it is inconsequential to her or her mission. As a simple country woman Lena is practical, an individual unconcerned with abstractions or easily diverted by superficialities. In fact, she barely notices the change in

locale as she travels, as if mere points on a map and the names of states do not truly matter. “ My, my. A body does get around. Here we aint been coming from Alabama but two months, and now it’s already Tennessee” (Faulkner, 26). Ultimately, what matters most to Lena is the life of the unborn child she carries, whose welfare can best be served by finding the father, Lucas Burch. Her journey carries her a long way and she meets many people. But she remains undeterred and resolutely herself. Lena, by comparison to Joe Christmas, reflects the resiliency of the natural world. Donald Kartiganer quotes Alfred Kazin, who identifies in Lena and Joe the oppositional nature of *Light in August*. “ Contrasting Lena with Christmas in terms of ‘ the natural and the urban,’ and building toward the larger conflict between ‘ life and anti-life, between the spirit of birth and the murderous abstractions and obsessions which drive most of the characters,’ Kazin asserts that ‘ Lena’s world, Lena’s patience set the ideal behind the book – that world of the permanent and the natural’” (Kartiganer, vii). Where Joe is unsettling and disturbing (though sympathetic), Lena is reassuring and nurturing, an easy and quiet heroine in a changeable and emotionally charged world.

Lena can also be seen as uneducated, unintelligent, a woman wandering aimlessly without guidance or true purpose other than a vague idea that she must somehow find her baby’s father. But Lena is not aimless or purposeless. She is thoroughly purposeful, as though being drawn along by an overpowering natural instinct to bring the baby to its father. She suffers, but she accepts it and absorbs it, understanding on an instinctive level that it is simply part of living. She is a considerably stronger person than Joe

Christmas. She cannot conceal the fact that she is pregnant, whereas Joe could easily pass himself off as white in order to avoid conflict. Faulkner commends the common people of the South, who take pity on Lena's circumstances. "The road

she sets out on is 'peopled with kind and nameless faces and voices' who reach out and help her, because the man who is responsible for her has abandoned her" (Kartiganer and Abadie, 113).

Despite having been abandoned, she is determined to maintain the natural order, which she knows instinctively must be preserved. To Lena, it is right and proper that women should be reliant on men, whose role it is to provide and care for the family. However, Lena's remarkable journey and the courage it reflects contradict the notion that she needs someone to take care of her and her child. One is convinced that the determined Lena could quite easily care for herself and her child without the help of Lucas Burch, or any other man. Here we find the introduction of a revolutionary social concept, one that was out of step with early 20th-century America; the idea that a woman can be every bit as strong and self-reliant as a man. This is Lena's role in the story, to be a symbol of the life force, that which survives and passes on the ability to survive in spite of conflict and against all odds.

Light in August is both a storytelling epic and a remarkable achievement in literary invention. It uses powerful imagery and bold ideas to create an entirely new kind of Southern literature. Light in August is rooted in the distant past but tries to make sense of that past in a new form of literary expression. Joe Christmas represents the pain and uncertainty of alienation, of living without identity in a place where identity is everything. Lena Grove

is Faulkner's symbol of Nature, of the life force that survives misfortune and conflict. Lena's purpose is to conserve, to keep things the way they are, and always have been, because she knows instinctively that it has to be that way. As a story, *Light in August* mirrors the painful split identity that characterizes the South, a region that still had not found its identity in Faulkner's time.

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