

The effect of joanna burden's masculinity on the jefferson community



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Although most men and women recognize how traditional gender roles dictate their actions in hopes of being accepted into society, very few can claim that they have been completely exiled from their community because they appear too “masculine” or vice-versa. In *Light in August*, the people of Jefferson are presented as a single antagonist in which they solely exist to oppose any unwanted change within the community. Joanna Burden is first introduced with feminine traits typical of a traditional female character; one that exists to serve the needs and wants of their male counterpart. As Joanna begins to develop a relationship with Joe Christmas, it is revealed that she also has an uncanny ability to embody masculine traits. However, the fact that Burden can neither be classified as a man nor woman challenges the town's dislike towards gender fluidity. Joanna Burden's blurred separation of masculinity and femininity is the most decisive factor in the Jefferson community's collective decision to reject her from society.

Because of the townspeople's need to uphold its traditional Southern values, the community of Jefferson becomes its own character that outcasts anyone who is deemed undesirable or incapable of conforming to their ideals. During this time, the mere idea of homosexuality is not accepted, forcing some characters into isolation from society since their sexual orientations are continuously questioned. Although Joanna Burden has resided in Jefferson throughout her entire life, she is “still a stranger...about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relation with negroes in the town and out of it” (Faulkner 46). This exemplifies the community's abnormal tendency to form a single, unified opinion as opposed to the variance of opinions expected from a large population. The citizens of Jefferson exile and ignore Joanna

because of her transgression from societal norms, which subconsciously influences her personality. The community's dislike towards actions that contrast their conservative ideologies, such as pregnancy out of wedlock, is a factor proving the townsfolk within Jefferson as incapable of forming individual moral beliefs. Lena's brother is representative of this underlying issue when he " remarked her changing shape...[and] called her a whore" (Faulkner 6). His opinion on Lena's pregnancy both aligns with and conforms to Southern society's expectations of the imperative to be married. The Jefferson community develops into one entity that exists to serve as the town's metaphorical moral compass. Any character that veers from their collective opinion or attempts to change Jefferson's conservative agenda is shunned until the individual fades into oblivion.

Before Faulkner further develops Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas's relationship during its first phase, Miss Burden is originally represented as a stereotypical figure of white Southern femininity. In Jefferson, white women are expected to uphold the Southern tradition without any inclination to change or question it, all the while forcing themselves into the cookie-cutter image of the domestic housewife. Joanna constantly prepares meals for Joe, but never sits down to eat with him, instead she stands " in one of her apparently endless succession of clean calico house dresses and sometimes a cloth sunbonnet like a countrywoman" (Faulkner 233). Strict gender roles place Joanna Burden in a seemingly immovable idea of how white females should be physically portrayed in a society that emphasizes importance of social hierarchies. In this case, she is a symbol of the Southern community's attempt at exploiting her existence to benefit the opposite gender. Miss

Burden temporarily comes to terms with her femininity when she considers bearing a child; another traditional role of women where they are expected to live in servitude as a caretaker. For Joanna, the idea of pregnancy gives her a sense of power: " She talked about it impersonally at first, discussing children. It was some time before [Joe] discovered...she was discussing it as a possibility, a practical thought" (Faulkner 264-265). Pregnancy gives her a feminine sexuality that is not obtained through sexual acts, but instead motherhood - one of the most important contributions a woman is expected to make in Southern society, or more specifically, the Jefferson community. Any deviation from these beliefs gives the townsfolk a reason to punish the unorthodox individual and exile them from the community.

Although Joanna Burden does embody some feminine traits, her unconventional masculinity is what causes her to become an outcast after she is deemed a threat to the Southern social order. Instead of a typical heterosexual relationship that is both common and expected in Jefferson, Joanna takes on a position of masculine authority, challenging the traditional female archetype. When Joe Christmas first meets Joanna, he describes her having masculine traits: " There was no feminine vacillation...It was as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either, and for which they struggled on principle alone" (Faulkner 235). A female character with the ability to alter their persona in order to resemble that of the opposite gender, such as Miss Burden, quickly becomes a danger to the male population of Jefferson; Joe and Joanna's relationship comes into question when their sexual relations can be interpreted as homosexual sex, a taboo act within the Jefferson community. Another implication of Joanna's

gender fluidity is exemplified when she morphs into the more dominant “male” figure in the relationship, while Joe becomes her submissive counterpart. Christmas suddenly realizes that he is being forced into the position of what Joanna Burden should be – a woman: “‘My God,’ he thought, ‘it was like I was the woman and she was the man” (Faulkner 235). This threatens the very moral principles that the Jefferson community prides itself on, where the man and woman should adhere to their God-given roles in society. Joanna challenges the traditionally black-and-white binary of man vs. woman in a culture that is highly intolerant of mixtures of any variation whether it may be gender, race, or sexual behavior.

Because Miss Burden has feminine and masculine aspects, she is neither a man nor woman, but instead, a combination of both. Her embodiment of femininity and masculinity is not originally outwardly shown through her actions and personality, but is eventually inscribed permanently on her body. During the third phase of Joanna's relationship with Joe, she is depicted as having a “face of a spinster: prominently boned, long, a little thin, almost manlike: in contrast to it her plump body was more richly and softly animal than ever” (Faulkner 266). The juxtaposition of the two descriptions exemplifies the physical duality that she now represents; although her weight gain can be paralleled to pregnancy or femininity, her body still rejects the gender implication. Faulkner also blurs the divide between the two genders by referencing pregnancy in a skewed, unorthodox manner because of both Joanna's familial history and her dramatized menopause. Burden reveals the moment when she realized that her future would be forever doomed: “...the white babies were struggling, even before they drew

breath, to escape from the shadow...flung out like their arms were flung out, as if they were nailed to the cross" (Faulkner 253). The depictions of crucifying white babies and the violence against infants is not representative of her inability to have a child with Joe, which is an effect of the end of her child-bearing age, but foreshadows Joanna's violent death that occurs in order to remedy the unwanted change within the Jefferson community.

In *Light in August*, Joanna Burden's inability to fit into the man vs. woman binary constitutes a threat to the conservative Southern order, which ultimately leads to the Jefferson townspeople's decision to shun her from the community. Normally, one would expect communities to be a place of progress and change, but the lack of varying opinions in the novel shows how a place where no one is willing to form their own views can be detrimental to societal growth. In the modern world, communities that are not open to change are still very prevalent, many of these stemming from more religious and highly conservative regions. Anyone who is not a cisgender individual or unwilling to comply with traditional gender roles, risk experiencing violent backlash from their communities. Without supporting those who are different or educating the ignorant, equality can never be a possibility, and for some, Joanna Burden's fictional death may become a reality.