

The effect of bobbie allen and joe christmas's alienation



Joe Christmas is a walking contradiction in the Southern society in which he resides. Throughout *Light in August*, central character Joe Christmas experiences many factors that contribute to his inability to form substantial relationships with other characters. Joe's childhood in the orphanage and living with the McEachern's has negative psychological effects on his interpersonal skills; however, Joe's relationship with Bobbie is the most detrimental factor to his ability to form bonds with familial figures. Prior to meeting Bobbie, Joe develops an unstable relationship with Mr. McEachern; his strict enforcement of rules forces Joe to remain docile despite his attempts to rebel. As Bobbie and Joe's relationship develops, Bobbie's attentiveness blinds Joe, leading him to defy Mr. and Mrs. McEachern. Although Joe betrays those who care for him to satisfy Bobbie, Joe's singular attempt at forming a significant bond backfires, leaving detrimental effects in its wake. Joe Christmas's influential relationship with Bobbie Allen is the critical period which represents his inability to connect with familial figures. Because of Joe Christmas's family history, or lack thereof, his unorthodox behavior towards relationships is in conflict with traditional, Southern ideas about family, leading Joe to isolate himself from family and society. Throughout *Light in August*, family lineage plays a significant role in the lives of the characters. Born an illegitimate child and placed in an orphanage, family history is not in the forefront of Joe's mind; nevertheless, Joe's subconscious plagues him with his lack of knowledge about his biological family. However, family is not limited to biological relations. Without knowledge of his biological family, Joe has the ability to form bonds with those closely associated with him, such as Mr. and Mrs. McEachern.

Despite Joe's desire to rebel and break away from Mr. McEachern's religious traditions, Joe's virginal character is upheld until he encounters his first love, Bobbie Allen. In the beginning of his fragile relationship, Bobbie steals Joe's innocence, which becomes the turning point in his relationship with Mr. McEachern. Despite Joe following Mr. McEachern's rules, he faces McEachern's wrath knowing " he would receive the same whipping though he had committed no sin as he would receive if McEachern had seen him commit it" (Faulkner 156). Although harsh, the consistency of Mr. McEachern's punishments for Joe's disobedience exemplifies how Joe and Mr. McEachern builds their relationship on dependency, in which Joe is cognizant of the fact that disobedience leads to consequences. Joe's trust of Mr. McEachern is the blueprint to a relationship with a fatherly figure, however, the threshold of a new relationship interrupts the small progress made between the two men. Bobbie Allen, a local waitress, introduces Joe into a life of sin, despite Joe pursuing the relationship. In the short period in which Joe met Bobbie, she takes advantage of Joe's vulnerability, from " the first time he had ever seen a naked woman," to " two weeks later [when] he had begun to smoke [...] and he drank too" (Faulkner 195, 199). Through Bobbie's introduction of sin and pleasure, Joe becomes more inclined to disregard Mr. McEachern's rules in order to satisfy her. Faulkner capitalizes on the scene in which Bobbie takes Joe's virginity, setting the precedent for Joe's behavior in subsequent rebellious events. Joe meets Bobbie at a time in which his relationship with Mr. McEachern was dependable and trustworthy; however, Bobbie provokes rebellion within Joe, a stark contrast from the boy he was prior. Bobbie encourages Joe's lecherous behavior which evolves into his betrayal of Mr. and Mrs. McEachern.

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Although Bobbie seldom asks Joe for gifts, Joe's desire to satisfy Bobbie results in his betrayal of Mr. and Mrs. McEachern. As a reward of good behavior, Mr. McEachern gives Joe a heifer of his own; however, Joe sells the heifer in order to buy a suit for the dance with Bobbie. In response, Mr. McEachern acknowledges the sins Joe is capable of committing: "sloth, and ingratitude, and irreverence and blasphemy," forcing him to recognize that "the child whom he adopted twelve years ago was [now] a man" (Faulkner 164). Although inevitable, Bobbie's seniority to Joe accelerates a clash of personalities between the two dominant male figures. In efforts to differentiate himself from Bobbie's other lovers, Joe disregards his other relationships to impress Bobbie; his infatuation with Bobbie generates an immense change in his behavior, leading him to deceive the one woman who genuinely loves him, Mrs. McEachern. As a young man in Southern society, money is one thing Joe needs and does not have, "thus he began to steal" (Faulkner 191). Joe, young and easily impressionable, "did not even know he was paying with money for pleasure," however; he frequently buys gifts for Bobbie such as "a stale fly-specked box of candy" (Faulkner 191). From the time in which Joe is adopted, Mrs. McEachern wants Joe to love her, the same way Joe desires Bobbie's love. In both relationships, love is forced onto an individual that has no desire to be loved. In this way, Joe and Bobbie are representative of each other. Without a mutual understanding of love, Joe cannot form significant bonds with either Mrs. McEachern or Bobbie. Unbeknownst to Joe, his relationship reflects the only example of love available to him, his adoptive parents. Mr. and Mrs. McEachern's poor example of a bond, in conjunction with Bobbie Allen results in Joe's inability to connect with other characters throughout the book.

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Because Joe values his relationship with Bobbie highly Joe will go to extreme lengths to fortify his relationship with Bobbie, hurting Mr. and Mrs. McEachern in the process. In Joe's eyes, his relationship with Bobbie is worth attacking his only father figure, Mr. McEachern. At the point in which Mr. McEachern finds out that Joe is at a dance with a woman, he decides that he must end the sinful relationship between Bobbie and Joe. However, when Mr. McEachern publicly condemns the relationship, shouting " away, harlot," at the frightened Bobbie, Joe, in a " furious and dreamlike exaltation of a martyr [...] swung at his head" (Faulkner 204-205). With the " shattered chair clutched in his hand," Joe " looking down at his adoptive father" then fled the scene without any remorse for his actions (Faulkner 205). Joe killing Mr. McEachern in order to stay with Bobbie is a pivotal moment in *Light in August*. At this point in his parasitic relationship with Bobbie, Joe is completely corrupted by the older, more mature woman. Joe goes as far as killing Mr. McEachern to stay with Bobbie, exemplifying his willingness to abandon morals for a genuine connection. However, if placed in the same situation, Joe's altruistic act would not be reciprocated by Bobbie. Bobbie takes advantage of Joe's young age and inexperience for her own personal gain by sucking all life and morality from him. Blinded by love, Joe acts irrationally and without remorse, representing his complete disregard of the Southern value of family. Joe's refusal to accept love from Mrs. McEachern disintegrated what little relationship they had left. Joe capitalizes on Mrs. McEachern's fragile emotions to destroy their bond. In a rush to reach Bobbie after the dance, Joe runs into Mrs. McEachern at their household, shouting " get away, old woman" (Faulkner 208). Joe's desire to break Mrs. McEachern works, when she responds " as though she were a phantom, obeying the

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command sent back by the absent master” (Faulkner 209). Seen as the heart of the home in Southern society, Joe effectively dismantles the McEachern household in breaking Mrs. McEachern. At this point, Joe destroys any possibility of reconciliation. Joe intentionally demolishes bonds with his relationship with Bobbie; however, his efforts backfire when Bobbie rejects his marriage proposal.

Rather than riding into happily ever after with Bobbie, Joe’s efforts to form a substantial relationship fails when Bobbie Allen declines his marriage proposal. Joe goes to extremes in order to pacify Bobbie, however, when asked to marry him, Bobbie’s rejection shocks Joe leading him to think: “ why, I committed murder for her. I even stole for her” (Faulkner 217). With Bobbie’s rejection, Joe finally becomes cognizant of his deleterious actions “ as if he had just heard of it, thought of it, been told that he had done it” (Faulkner 217). Joe’s misguided beliefs about relationships leads him into a dead-end when Bobbie rejects him, in which he has now isolated himself from familial figures. Joe’s indoctrinated beliefs of marriage being one of the utmost important factors of acceptance into Southern society plagues him. However, Bobbie’s deep, programmed beliefs of race within the South prevails over her minuscule feelings for Joe when she declines his proposal. Joe is rejected in his one attempt to create a family, resulting in a conditioned mistrust towards any form of relationship.

In *Light in August*, Bobbie circumscribes Joe Christmas’s ability to form bonds of significance. Relationships often have the effect of isolating the parties involved from family, friends, etc. However, Joe Christmas takes love to the extreme by attacking his adoptive father. Unbeknownst by the parties

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involved, a relationship can become parasitic and all-consuming, resulting detrimental effects on emotional stability. In traditional Southern society in which family is placed above all except God, a relationship is seen as a distraction to a loved one. Today, relationships divide families frequently. Differing opinions, beliefs, or simply dislike of the significant other result in complete isolation or shunning of family members. Although exiling family may seem like the only option, shunning family members only results in further division and less trust in the familial relationships. Despite triumphs made in regards to equality since the 1930s, trends today still follow that of Joe Christmas's experiences in *Light in August*.