

Race and gender in light in august



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

William Faulkner came from an American South background and in his time, wrote a number of novels that featured themes of patriarchal power and struggles caused by race. Joe Christmas plays an unusual role in *Light in August* – in him, Faulkner creates a central character with very few redeeming characteristics. Instead, Christmas is misogynistic, cruel and more than that, a murderer. This essay will examine how Faulkner treats race, sex and gender in *Light in August*, whether it was merely representative of the time of publication or a deeper criticism aimed at American society of the 1920s and prior. It will also look at the causes for Joe Christmas being such a malevolent man, such as his upbringing and the people around him.

To provide some historical context, Faulkner wrote *Light in August* in 1932, during “the Southern Renaissance of 1925-39” (Wittenberg, 1995, p. 148). This was a time, several decades before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, in which institutionalised racism was very prevalent, particularly in the South. An example of society’s acceptance of racism and the viewing of black Americans as sub-human can be seen that, around the country, people were “uninterested in compelling southern school desegregation” (Klarman, 2004, p. 27), long after the Emancipation of the Slaves in 1863 (NARA). Just as African Americans were marginalised members of society, so too were women – they were expected to be obedient homemakers and little more (Tames, 1997, p. 46). Nevertheless, there are powerful characters on all ends of the spectrum in *Light in August* – whilst he does not accept his “black blood” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 181), it is suggested Joe Christmas takes the life of a number of white people such as Simon McEachern and certainly

murders Joanna Burden for “praying over” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 45) him. This demonstrates Christmas’ non-conformity to a societal expectation that he should be meek and obedient. Among the female characters, Lena Grove and the “masculine” (Clarke, 1989, p. 403) Joanna Burden stand out as women who have overcome the patriarchal hierarchy of the day.

There is an order of subservience in the novel that covers both race and gender - white men such as Joe Brown are held in higher regard than black men, despite the fact Brown is frequently “drunk down town” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 25), a gossip and quick to sell out Joe Christmas, supposedly a friend, as soon as money is mentioned - bringing race into the matter as well, “accuse the white man and let the nigger go free” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 41). Women are definitely beneath men in the hierarchy, weakness and naivety are just a couple of the intrinsic character flaws given to them by Faulkner. Nevertheless, Deborah Clarke points out that the women of *Light in August* are connected in way the men are not, communicating in “a language unknown to” (Clarke, 1989, p. 399) them. This shows that there is a distinct difference between Christmas’ impressions of women and Faulkner’s own feelings towards them.

Further down in the rankings again are black men and women. In fact, despite the novel having the theme of race running throughout, there is “not a single significant character who is identifiably African American” (Wittenberg, 1995, p. 146). This does not necessarily demonstrate contempt for African Americans from Faulkner, who chooses instead to focus on the struggles of Christmas, a mixed race man who is “neither black nor white” (Godden, 1980, p. 240). Rather, as Wittenberg writes, Faulkner finds race to

<https://assignbuster.com/race-and-gender-in-light-in-august/>

be a “ linguistic and social construct” (Wittenberg, 1995, p. 146) instead of something that can be broken down to simply black and white – they are too closely intertwined within Christmas yet he seemingly rejects both parts of his identity , instead filled with self-loathing – Thus, in Christmas, Faulkner creates a character that can represent both sides of race relations, without the need for an explicitly named black character.

To highlight just how bad racism was at the time, especially in Faulkner’s fictional Yoknapatawpha County, the townsfolk who come to investigate the fire at Joanna Burden’s house “ believed, and hoped” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 117) that she had been raped prior to her murder. They also choose to believe that it was a crime committed by “ Negro” rather than “ a negro” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 117). This shows that they want their inherent hatred of African Americans to be justified, inventing scenarios purely because Burden is ostracised for her “ excessive sexuality” (Clarke, 1989, p. 404) involving black men. It also demonstrates a categorisation of black Americans as a whole, dehumanised mass rather than individuals with free will and thought – they are acting on the impulsion of their “ black blood” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 181). In the same line, Faulkner brings up the dichotomy of the United States, divided amongst the “ Yankees” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 117) of the north and the people of the south. To the “ casual Yankees” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 117) that live in Jefferson, Burden is seen as having caused her own death whereas someone from above the Mason-Dixon line may have seen her as the victim of a senseless crime. It is interesting that the most likely culprit in the minds of the townspeople is a black person when the actual culprit, Joe Christmas, is “ neither black nor white” (Godden, 1980, p. 240). This

confirms that both Christmas and Burden are isolated based on their perceived affiliation with other races, no matter how factual the basis.

As an example of Joe Christmas' distrust and disdain for women from an early age, Miss Atkins, the racist dietician who frequently refers to Christmas as a " little nigger bastard" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 52), is described as young and stupid, ascribing the " attributes of an adult" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 52), to Christmas when he is only five years old and she believes she has caught him spying. It can be seen that both Faulkner and Christmas consider this to be true as this is all conveyed to the audience through an objective narrator, able to describe both the " fury and terror" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 52) of the dietician and the " astonishment, shock, outrage" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 53) of the young Christmas when recalling the event. Whilst being unloved and abused as a child does not automatically translate into the terrible human being Christmas grows into, it can be seen that the interactions with Miss Atkins, in an orphanage in which he had never " waited three days to be punished" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 53) certainly did not help his chances of being a balanced adult.

Even though many of the women in Light in August are seen as feeble and unknowingly controlling, Byron Bunch is nevertheless " unmanned" (Clarke, 1989, p. 401) by Lena merely talking to him, he is " already in love" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 25) from the first conversation. This shows that not all Faulkner's women are powerless. This is further confirmed when considering Lena's previous interactions with men: Amstrid, who we meet in the first chapter – he think he knows " exactly what Martha [his wife] is going to say" (Faulkner, 1932, p. 8) when in fact, he becomes the subject of an attack

aimed at all men, “ You men[...]You durn men” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 10), again showing an unspoken connection many female characters in the novel have with each other. Faulkner also establishes the “ motif of a foreign language” (Clarke, 1989, p. 409) in discourse between Joe Brown and Joe Christmas, who acts as if he “ spoke a different language” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 19) from the one Brown knew. Just as there is a divide between black and white, there is another between male and female.

The separate halves of the novel truly converge in Chapter 19 of Light in August in Christmas’ death at the hand of Percy Grimm. Grimm highlights that Christmas will now leave “ white women alone” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 187), the mention of race suggesting that Christmas is viewed as black, it is unacceptable for his crimes to have been committed by a white man, there must be separation. This is further confirmed in the imagery of Christmas being castrated after his death, the phrase “ black blood” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 187) is again used with negative connotations. The fact that it was “ pent” and “ like a released breath” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 187) suggests it was a relief for Christmas – in death, he can finally admit his true African American identity that he strove to avoid all his life. The “ bloody butcher knife” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 187) also feminises Christmas, a man who has detested women all his life – Clarke says the blood is also representative of “ menstruation” (Clarke, 1989, p. 412) . The scene rises and falls through brutal peaks of “ rushing blood” (Spenko, 1982, p. 254), troughs of calm contemplation and “ peaceful valleys” before climaxing in an “ unbelievable crescendo” beyond the “ realm of hearing” (Faulkner, 1932, p. 187). This all serves to grip the reader and signifies the ups and downs that run

throughout the novel, experienced by both men and women, regardless of their race.

In conclusion, race and gender in *Light in August* are both treated equally – it is inconsequential what race or gender a person is, Faulkner will give them both positive and negative attributes. As Deborah Clarke puts it, there is an “uneasy relationship” (Clarke, 1989, p. 413) between both sexes and races – whilst they are entangled with each other, it does not necessarily mean that there will be a connection between two people who share a gender or race. Joe Christmas chooses to disassociate himself from his supposed African American ancestry, preferring to continue to pass as a white man but it does not save him in the end from the retribution of the white Percy Grimm. As previously mentioned, there are no significant identifiably black characters but the passing comments in the narration suggest they are peaceful and hard-working. Thus, Christmas’ depiction as a partial representative of African Americans does not negatively affect the reader’s view of the black citizens of Yoknapatawpha.

When it comes to gender, Lena Grove is not a weak woman as McEachern’s wife is, she stays strong and hopeful in the face of her problems, the antithesis of the work shy, careless and disloyal Joe Brown. In this regard, Brown is also the opposite of Byron Bunch, mistaken for Brown’s alter ego, Lucas Burch, who is faithful and diligent. Therefore it can be seen there are strong, non-conformist characters from both races and both genders. Finally, in *Light in August*, William Faulkner shows that there is no inherent problem that stems from being black or white, male or female – you are moulded by your own life choices, your upbringing and the environment you find yourself

<https://assignbuster.com/race-and-gender-in-light-in-august/>

in – a progressive moral for a novel written in the midst of an era of legalised racism and sexism.

Bibliography:

Clarke, D. (1989). Gender, Race, and Language in Light in August. *American Literature* Vol. 61, No. 3, 398-413. Faulkner, W. (1932). *Light in August*. New York City: Smith & Haas.

Godden, R. (1980). Call Me Nigger!: Race and Speech in Faulkner's "Light in August". *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 235-248.

Klarman, M. J. (2004). *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

NARA. (n. d.). Featured Document: The Emancipation Proclamation. Retrieved January 2017, from Archives. gov: https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/

Spenko, J. L. (1982). The Death of Joe Christmas and the Power of Words. *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 252-268.

Tames, R. (1997). *The Way We Lived*. London: Reader's Digest Association.

Wittenberg, J. B. (1995). Race in Light in August: Wordsymbols and Obverse Reflections. In P. M. Weinstein, *The Cambridge Companion to William Faulkner* (pp. 146-167). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.