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The Search for Self-Identity in William Faulkner's Light in August

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The Search for Self-identity in

William Faulkner's LIGHT IN AUGUST

(TITLE)

BY

Joyce Lock

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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William Faulkner's Light in August tells the story of two men who live isolated from the rest of humanity, each in a one-inhabitant world of his own. Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower cannot relate to the rest of society because neither man has established his self-identity. Society says choose--black or white, saved or damned, past or present--but neither man knows which group he belongs to, and so relegates himself to a no-man's land outside society. Christmas and Hightower try to join the human race, but Hightower is reluctant to give up the anonymous safety of his private world for the vicissitudes of the real one. It is Christmas who actively seeks to discover and take his place in the world of other men, no matter what his cost in suffering.

The black or white dilemma, one of the impossible choices that forces Joe Christmas outside society, follows him from birth to death. Neither the character himself nor the reader ever knows if Christmas has Negro blood or not.¹ His mother, Milly Hines, was white; his father, a brown, nameless carnival worker, was, he said Mexican,

¹John L. Longley, Jr., "Joe Christmas: The Hero in the Modern World," in William Faulkner: Three Decades of Criticism, ed. by Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), pp. 269-70.

old Doc Hines said Negro. Joe himself first begins to wonder if he has black blood as a five-year-old child in a white Memphis orphanage. At Doc Hines' subtle urging the other children taunt Joe with cries of "nigger, nigger." After that he keeps apart from the other children, standing quiet and alone, suddenly cut off from a group he had not thought about not belonging to.¹

When the child finds himself cut off from one group, he turns to the opposite group, following the Negro groundskeeper around the yard as he worked.

'How come you are a nigger?' and the nigger said, 'Who told you I am a nigger, you little white trash bastard?' and he says, 'I aint a nigger,' and the nigger says, 'You are worse than that. You dont know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know...dont nobody but God know what you is.'²

The harshest word for Joe in the black man's "white trash bastard" must have been "white." That label was the mark of his rejection by the second group that he had tacitly sought acceptance in. The Negro also raises the spectre that haunts Joe for the rest of his life--only God knows what he is, where he belongs. And for Joe Christmas, God wasn't talking.

After Joe left the orphanage with his adoptive father McEachern the black or white problem faded into the background for a time. But it rose to the surface again

¹William Faulkner, Light in August (New York: The Modern Library, 1932), pp. 328-35.

²Ibid., p. 336.

at the sudden, violent end of his affair with the waitress-prostitute Bobbie Allen. He had told her once "'I think I got some nigger blood in me. I dont know. I believe I have.'" Her only reply then was "'You're lying. I dont believe it.'"¹

As long as things were going smoothly for them, Bobbie thought no more about his confession. In a moment of crisis, however, and in order to save her own skin, she screamed out curses at the "nigger" whose fight with McEachern would cause her trouble with the law. "Suddenly conscious of her white blood, Bobbie had no compunctions about abandoning a 'nigger' whom she had mistaken for a white man nor about watching that 'nigger' beaten senseless by her friends."²

This violent denial of Joe's white blood marks the beginning of fifteen years of the same kind of scene. He slept with nameless, faceless white prostitutes, paying them when he had the money, telling them he was a Negro and being cursed by the madame or beaten by other patrons when he did not. The curses and blows at least gave him identity; he was black, they were white. Then in the North his confession no longer worked. This time he delivered the blows--against a white woman who had in effect denied his black blood. For a period after this he fought with any Negro

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 147.

²Clga W. Vickery, The Novels of William Faulkner (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), p. 71.

who called him white, he shunned white people, he lived with "a woman who resembled an ebony carving," always trying now "to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being."¹

The whole fifteen years of running, from one town to another, South to North to South again, was a kind of search that one critic characterizes as a "flight toward himself, which he cannot reach, and away from hatred of himself, which he cannot escape."²

At the end of fifteen years of flight Joe begins another relationship with a woman which brings the black or white dilemma even more sharply into focus for him. Joanna Burden, the white woman who becomes his mistress, treats him as if his own personality were of no account. In her sexual transports she calls him not by his name but merely "Negro."³

After so many difficult years of trying to decide whether he is white or Negro, Joanna's facile label makes subconscious ripples. "He began to be afraid. He could not have said of what. But he began to see himself as from a distance, like a man being sucked down into a bottomless morass."⁴

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 196-97.

²Alfred Kazin, "The Stillness of Light in August," in William Faulkner: Three Decades, p. 252.

³Ibid.

⁴Faulkner, Light in August, p. 227.

Then suddenly he knew what he was afraid of. In her plans for his future Joanna was asking him to do what he had tried but could not do: identify himself definitely as a Negro.¹ "'But a nigger college, a nigger lawyer,' his voice said. 'Tell them,' she said. 'Tell niggers that I am a nigger too?'"² The years of running, of trying to choose, had bought him no absolution. The black-white either-or was still demanded of him and still he had no answer.

To further complicate Christmas' problem of self-identity, another either-or question which he could not answer was demanded of him. His Calvinist adoptive father McEachern tried to force him to declare himself of the elect, absolutely not of the damned.³ Joe's constant refusals to espouse McEachern's rigid Calvinism were not so much an adolescent defiance of parental authority as his denial of an identity--saved--that an outside force sought to impose on him.

The night McEachern catches Joe and Bobbie at the dance Joe does declare himself absolutely of one group--the damned. After crashing a chair over McEachern's head Joe flees, thinking he has at last reached some kind of truth

¹Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1964), p. 171.

²Faulkner, Light in August, p. 242.

³Walter Brylowski, Faulkner's Olympian Laugh (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), pp. 104-5.

about himself. He rode from the scene

...exulting perhaps at that moment as Faustus had, of having put behind now at once and for all the Shalt Not, of being free at last of honor and law. In the motion the sweet sharp sweat of the horse blew, sulphuric; the invisible wind flew past. He cried aloud, "I have done it [killed McEachern]! I have done it! I told them I would."¹

Even if his soul belongs to the devil, at least it does belong, is a part of something, he thinks. But fifteen years later another Calvinist tries to make him declare himself saved. Joanna Burden, his finally reformed mistress, demands, "'Kneel with me....You wont even need to speak to Him yourself. Just kneel....'"² And so the seesaw starts again--saved, damned. Joanna will not allow him to keep the identity he thought he had bought with the crashing chair.

Even his very name conspires to rob Joe Christmas of any kind of identity. His "christening" was more parlor game than formal conferring of the word with which a person will mark his identity. When the infant was discovered on the doorstep on Christmas Eve the orphanage staff, happy with eggnog and whisky, decided

'We'll name him Christmas...What Christmas. Christmas what....Look what Santa Claus brought us and left on the doorstep, Uncle Doc!...Old Doc Hines said, 'His name is Joseph....And then they laughed again, holiering, 'It is so in the Book! Christmas, the son of Joe. Joe, the son of Joe...to Joe Christmas,' they said.'³

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 180.

²Ibid., p. 245.

³Ibid., p. 337.

The name "Christmas" also underlines the alienation from society Joe felt all his life. Christ, because of his heavenly father, was apart, different from the rest of mankind, even though he lived among men. Joe, because of the uncertain blood of his father, was separated from the rest of society. Then too there was only one Christ; it was as though by mockingly being given the name that could belong only to one "man," society was denying Joe's very existence.

Still the name was a word to wrap himself in and even as a child any shred of self-identity was precious. When McEachern left the orphanage with him he said,

"I will change that nameFrom now on his name will be McEachern...."The child was not listening. He was not bothered. He did not especially care, any more than if the man had said the day was hot when it was not hot. He didn't even bother to say to himself My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas.¹

"His name is Christmas.' 'Is he a foreigner?'

'Did you ever hear of a white man named Christmas?' 'I never heard of nobody a-tall named it.'" "Foreigner" at best, "nobody a-tall" at worst is what Joe Christmas is all his life. Faulkner repeatedly emphasizes Joe's alienation, both as adult and child. He is always somehow different from everyone else or strangely out of place in his environment. He is "definitely rootless,...as though no square of earth was his home," he wears city clothes to the mill,

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 126-27.

the expression on his "contemptuously still" face baffles and outrages the mill workers.¹

Nature finds him as much a "foreigner" as man does. Not one star that had wheeled over his head for thirty years "had any name to him or meant anything at all by shape or brightness or position." Hiding for a week after Joanna's murder in the woods of "his native earth," he remained a "foreigner to the very immutable laws which earth must obey."²

The first view the reader has of Joe Christmas as a child puts him in the "nobody a-tall" category almost. He is a small, silent five-year-old child, likened to the ubiquitous sparrow that one ceases to notice when he is with the other children, and to a shadow when he is alone. For almost a year he had been slipping unnoticed, "quiet as a shadow," into the dietitian's room for a surreptitious feast of peppermint toothpaste. He is "still silent as a shadow on his bare feet" when he hides behind the curtain to escape the woman and her lover.³ The very fact that the child had been undetected for so long re-enforces the image of his "non-being."

Child and adult, Joe Christmas tries to "be somebody" by fitting himself into a group--black or white, saved or damned--but he does not succeed in defining himself

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 27-29.

²Ibid., pp. 92;295.

³Ibid., pp. 104-5.

in these terms. "He didn't know what he was....His only salvation in order to live with himself was to repudiate mankind, to live outside the human race."¹ And for fifteen lonely years that is just what Joe Christmas forced himself to do.

Unlike Christmas, Gail Hightower, a man equally outside the human race, was content to be where he was. Every time life demanded a choice of him, not black or white or saved or damned, but past or present, he chose--eagerly and without hesitation--the past. Christmas wanted to know who he was, and so find peace by resolving his dilemma; Hightower wanted only the peace that comes with oblivion.

As a child, Hightower resembled Christmas in that phantom, shadow-like quality that set him apart from others. He was an only child, frail, often ill, isolated from others his own age. The only childhood companions ever mentioned are his father, fifty years old when Gail was born, his mother, who was an invalid for almost twenty years, and an old Negro maid who thrived on stories of the past.

Gail felt himself separated even from these few contacts with the present, with reality. His invalid mother was merely a figure that lay ill upstairs in bed; he looked upon his father as foreign to himself, almost an intruder.²

¹Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., Faulkner in the University (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 118.

²William Van O'Connor, The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner (New York: Gordian Press, Inc., 1968), p. 79.

The only person in his limited world who brought him any happiness at all, made any contact with him, was the old Negro servant who wove the magic tales of the heroic grandfather for him.

Already at eight years of age Gail Hightower was looking back, choosing the past, rather than the present. He listened to the old woman's tale of daredevil Confederate bravado again and again, finding the adventure and excitement in the past that his real world lacked. "Tell again about Grandpa. How many Yankees did he kill?" And when he listened now it was without terror. It was not even triumph; it was pride."¹

The only real contact he makes with his father occurs in a sense in the past too. The gruff giant that is too formidable to approach face to face can be reached in his private world in the attic. He could steal into "the attic and open the trunk and take out the coat and touch the blue patch...and wonder if his father had killed the man from whose blue coat the patch came...." His mother is there in the attic too, as a "real" person for the child. When he opened the trunk "he was almost overpowered by the evocation of his dead mother's hands which lingered among the folds of the coat."²

Later in his life Gail Hightower turned to the

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 409-12.

²Ibid.

seminary to find the "peace" that would shut out the reality he had scarcely experienced as a child and let him go on living in the past. Each time he has an unpleasant brush with reality he retreats further and further into his grandfather's legend. He falls in love with a minister's daughter, then suddenly discovers love is not as grand and beautiful as he had believed.

'So this is love. I see. I was wrong about it too,' thinking as he had thought before and would think again as every other man had thought: how false the most profound book turns out to be when applied to life.¹

The politics of the seminary is another jolt of reality that sends him further into the safety of the past. He had innocently believed that the head of the seminary would send him to Jefferson if he only explained why he wanted to go there, that his grandfather had died there during a foolhardy-gallant raid on a chicken coop and he needed to spend his life in the place the grandfather had lost his. But merely saying he wanted to go to Jefferson would not work; the woman "outlined to him a campaign of abasement and plotting" that would gain the desired call. "'Yes, I see. I see now. That's how they do such, gain such. That's the rule. I see now.'"² Reality was an even more frightening place for him with that revelation. Safety was with his grandfather in the past and to that haven he

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 421.

²Ibid., pp. 421-22.

retreated when he arrived in Jefferson.

During most of his years in Jefferson Hightower was completely out of contact with the real world of the present. His wife was no longer a real person to him; she had been useful in helping him get to Jefferson, and now she was no longer needed. In her loneliness and hurt she turned to other men and finally met her death in a Memphis hotel, registered with a man under a fictitious name.

This blow of reality had little effect on Hightower in his dream world. He still looked out over, past, his shocked and scandalized congregation and preached the sermons that had more galloping hooves and rebel yells than theology in them. When his parishioners demanded his resignation, he refused. He invited and welcomed their persecution and forced them to boycott his wild, mad sermons so he would be even further isolated from their real world. His final Sunday as their minister was a secret moment of triumph for him--one photographer caught the "mad expression of satanic glee" that he thought hidden by the book held before his face.¹

Hightower sought and welcomed his isolation from the rest of the community as well as from his wife and parishioners. He did not leave Jefferson, as he was expected to do. He used the travel money he had been given to buy a small house and hire a Negro woman, "a high brown," to cook

¹Volpe, A Reader's Guide, pp. 157-58.

and clean for him. Bigoted whites immediately made trouble for him, but he refused to fire her. When the community frightened her into quitting, Hightower hired a Negro man to take her place. Two days later Hightower was found tied to a tree outside of town, beaten unconscious by the Ku Klux Klan.¹ Hightower must have secretly rejoiced at the beating just as he had at his dismissal from the church. The world had done everything it could to him; all that was left was to leave him alone, exactly what he wanted. His isolation was complete.

Faulkner uses Hightower's preferences in poetry and music to give additional emphasis to his isolation from mankind. Hightower likens reading Tennyson to "listening in a cathedral to a eunuch chanting in a language he does not even need to not understand." The music he hears coming from the church on summer evenings has "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...."²

But neither Hightower nor Christmas stays isolated forever. Contact with the rest of society begins for Joe Christmas with his brutal murder of Joanna Burden. He runs again after the murder, a parallel to the fifteen years of

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 61-62.

²Ibid., pp. 321-22.

futile running after self-identity, but this running is destined to end differently.

After Joanna's murder, Christmas appears one night in a country Negro church and "utters his final violent repudiation of the concepts--religion and race--"that have denied him a place in society.¹ But Joe Christmas is still trying to find his place among men. In his terrible need to belong somewhere, anywhere, he pushes his unanswerable questions to the back of his mind and determines to play the role Southern white society expects of him.

His "friend" Brown and Doc Hines have convinced Jefferson that Joe is a "nigger murderer," so that is what he will be. One of the first things he does in fleeing the white posse is to exchange shoes with a Negro. This stratagem confuses the pursuing bloodhounds, but it also symbolizes Joe's "putting on Negrohood."

He paused there only long enough to lace up the brogans: the black shoes, the shoes smelling of Negro.... Looking down at the harsh, crude, clumsy shapelessness of them, he said "Kah" through his teeth. It seemed to him that he could see himself being hunted by white men at last into the black abyss which had been waiting, trying for thirty years to drown him and into which now and at last he had actually entered, bearing now upon his ankles the definite and ineradicable gage of its upward moving.²

Having accepted the role of Negro, even though he still does not know, never can know, if that is what he

¹Volpe, A Reader's Guide, p. 172.

²Faulkner, Light in August, p. 289.

really is, Joe turns back toward white society to act out his part, regardless of the consequences. He goes to the scene of his capture on a wagon driven by a Negro youth,

...with planted on the dashboard before him the shoes, the black shoes smelling of Negro: that mark on his ankles the gage definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves.¹

The shoes "planted before him" are almost a prompting device to remind him what role he must play. Wandering around the streets of the town he sometimes forgets that he has become a "nigger murderer." "'He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was what made the folks so mad,'" explains a baffled spectator. Then Joe remembers what he "is."

"And so Halliday (he was excited, thinking about that thousand dollars [reward for Joe's capture], and he had already hit the nigger a couple of times in the face, and the nigger acting like a nigger for the first time and taking it, not saying anything: just bleeding sullen and quiet....)"²

The condition of being a Negro is not all Joe must accept in his return to humanity. He must come to terms with "the limitations of one of the most human and communal inventions: time."³ Early one morning during his last week of flight he had waited near a farmhouse until the men left for the field. His intention had been to harshly demand food of the lone woman, but suddenly "the name of the day

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 279.

²Ibid., pp. 306-7.

³Longley, "Joe Christmas," p. 272.

of the week seemed more important than the food....He heard his mouth saying quietly: 'Can you tell me what day this is?' I just want to know what day this is!...He said, 'Thank you,' quietly as the door banged."¹

His next step in his return to humanity "involves a basic human need and social ritual."² On several occasions he had violently rejected food, smashing the offered dishes against the wall or flinging out a curt refusal. Now in a daze he seeks out food and asks for it.

He was sitting at a table....Then there was food before him, appearing suddenly between long, limber black hands fleeing too in the act of setting down the dishes. It seemed to him that he could hear without hearing them walls of terror and distress... with the sound of chewing and swallowing. 'It was a cabin that time,' he thought. 'And they were afraid. Of their brother afraid.'³

The "love feast" scene with his "brothers" over, Joe reaches out to touch again those whom he wishes to call "brother"--all men, not just the black brothers he had shared a meal with. Pursued by Grimm he runs to Hightower's house, toward some kind of contact, although no one can ever know exactly what Christmas hoped for from the defrocked minister. Trapped by Grimm in Hightower's house, Joe makes his final gesture of human reconciliation.⁴ Instead of killing Grimm, which he could have easily done, Joe crouched

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 306-7.

²Longley, "Joe Christmas," pp. 272-73.

³Faulkner, Light in August, p. 293.

⁴Longley, "Joe Christmas," p. 273.

behind the overturned kitchen table and waited for his last contact with mankind--a horrible, brutal death.

Even though he must have known contact would be fatal to himself, Joe had actively sought that contact. Hightower, however, drags his feet when Byron Bunch tries to make him re-enter the human race. He first becomes uneasy and evasive when Byron tells him about helping Lena Grove, fearing that Byron's involvement will somehow spill over onto him. "I still cannot see what you have to worry about.... It is not your fault....You did what you could. All any stranger could be expected to do."¹

His uneasiness increases as Byron tells about the "nigger murderer." The present is closing in on him, taking away the safety of the past. Hightower begins to sweat, afraid of what will happen. Then it comes. Byron asks him to help by giving Joe an alibi for the night of the murder.

"Oh," Hightower says, in his shrill, high voice. Though he has not moved, though the knuckles of the hands which grip the chair are taut and white, there begins to emerge from beneath his clothing a slow and repressed quivering...."It's not because I can't, don't dare to,...it's because I won't! I won't!"²

But Byron gives Hightower no chance to say "I won't" when he asks him to deliver Lena's baby. This figurative and literal contact with life has a marked effect on Hightower. After successfully delivering the child he stands amazed

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 71.

²Ibid., pp. 340-42.

at his own accomplishment. Suddenly life seems not so terrible as he had thought; things that he had not wanted to do before give him pleasure now. "'I ought to feel worse than I do' he thinks. But he has to admit that he does not. There goes through him a glow, a wave, a surge of something almost hot, almost triumphant." The surge of triumph moves him away from his ordinary routine, pushing him into a new, though temporary, life style. "He moves like a man with a purpose now, who for twenty-five years has been doing nothing at all....Neither is the book which he chooses now the Tennyson: this time he also chooses food for a man...Henry IV."¹

That evening Hightower is still in contact with the present, and even, for once, is thinking of the future.

"That child I delivered. I have no namesake. But I have known then before this to be named by a grateful mother for the doctor who officiated."²

In the after-glow of his triumphant contact with life, Hightower's earlier vehement "I wont" to Byron becomes a tacit "I will try." In his scene with Christmas and Grimm, he shows himself, "despite his many weaknesses," to be "capable of nobility of motive and action."³ Even after being struck down by Christmas and in the face of the "shameless savageness" of the pursuers, Hightower tries to tell the lie that will prevent a brutal killing. "'Hen!

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 325.

²Ibid., p. 356.

³O'Connor, Tangled Fire, p. 810.

he cried. 'Listen to me. He was here that night. He was with me the night of the murder. I swear to God--!'"¹

But the brutal killing of Joe Christmas cannot be stopped; it is the climax of the ritual that makes it possible for Christmas to find a place in society, first as Negro, then scapegoat, and finally as man. The physical movement of the ritual begins when Joe realizes that the years of running on his lonely road away from society have taken him nowhere, were all purposeless, futile movement:

It had been a paved street, where going should be fast. It had made a circle and he is still inside of it. Though during the last seven days he has had no paved street, yet he has travelled farther than in all the thirty years before. And yet he is still inside the circle.²

By accepting the label "nigger murderer" Joe stops trying to run away from the past that would never let him know whether he was black or white, saved or damned. He now moved inside the "circle" of society, interacting with the other members of the group. "Damned Negroes" are to be hunted and slain by the "elect white" in this society. Joe Christmas obediently sets out to be hunted and slain, in accordance with a ritual pattern.

The wild, strangely emotionless chase scene between Percy Grimm and Christmas takes on the aspect of a purposeful ritual movement. Christmas had allowed himself to be captured in the first place, knowing what his fate would

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 405-6.

²Ibid., p. 296.

be as a Negro killer of a white woman. Then suddenly, "in the midst of a throng of people thick as on Fair Day," Joe breaks away from the sheriff to begin his part of the performance for the waiting audience. Grimm immediately pulls away from the other pursuers and the two men become partners in a wild ritualistic pursuit-dance. "Wheeled on," "swept," "springing to earth," "stopped in the act of crouching from the leap," "whirled and turned and sprang back," "plunge downward," "leap up," all describe their "dance" movements.¹

During the course of the pursuit-dance Grimm becomes more than just another bigoted young white man out to kill a "nigger." One would expect him to be described in terms of "full of hate" or "revenge seeking." But Grimm is portrayed as having transcended human emotion--"Faulkner insists on the righteousness of Grimm," even elevating him to the status of an ordained ritual official.² When he speaks, his voice is "like that of a young priest," "there was nothing vengeful about him either, no fury, no outrage," "his face had that serene, unearthly luminousness of angels in church windows."³

The change in Percy Grimm from an ordinary man to something more than that is paralleled by a similar change in Christmas. Grimm has become the priest and Christmas

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 401-5.

²O'Connor, Tangled Fire, p. 82.

³Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 404-6.

has become "a ritual pollution in the community" which the priest must exorcise.¹

The entire white community's reaction to Joe is very similar to various scapegoat rituals practiced by the Ancient Greeks. In some communities the traditional choice for the victim was usually a person who would have been put to death for one reason or another anyway. Scapegoats in all communities were the object of curses, blows, and inhumanly cruel treatment, in the hope that all the "bad"--disease, famine, etc.--would be transferred from the community to the victim. Many victims were also cut off from their communities for a time before their deaths to make sure they alone would bear the "bad" and not contaminate anyone else. Intertwined with the idea of a human as scapegoat was the belief in many areas, similar to the Christian belief, that the victim was also god-like.²

In Christmas' final scene Faulkner emphasizes Joe's god-like status. When Grimm, now become a "priest," sees the "god" he is to slay in the ritual, Joe has "his hands close together," and they "glint once like the flash of a heliograph," evoking the image of a pagan (or Christian) god making a last supplication to a heavenly deity. The image becomes even stronger when Faulkner describes Christmas

¹Longley, "Joe Christmas," p. 268.

²James George Frazer, The Golden Bough (12 vol.; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1935), VI, 227-54.

as "running up the hall, his raised and manacled hands full of glare and glitter like lightning bolts so that he resembles a vengeful and furious god pronouncing a doom." The "bright and glittering" hands are described again, this time "resting upon the upper edge of the table," "evoking a scene in which the sacrificial god is placed on the altar before his slaying."¹

At this point Joe Christmas has found only a measure of self-identity. He has progressed from the role of "nigger murderer" to that of scapegoat-god. His actual execution completes his identity and makes him simply--man.

...when they saw what Grimm was doing one of the men gave a choked cry and stumbled back into the wall and began to vomit. Then Grimm too sprang back, flinging behind him the bloody butcher knife. "Now you'll leave white women alone, even in hell," he said. But the man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there, with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unthoughtful and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon himself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the men seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and over.²

Christmas finally has transcended "his sufferings qua Negro [and scapegoat] to emerge not as Negro but as man--man beyond complexion and ethnic consideration."³

¹Faulkner, Light in August, pp. 404-6.

²Ibid., pp. 406-7.

³Robert Penn Warren, "Faulkner: The South, the Negro, and Time," in Faulkner: Twentieth Century Views, ed. by Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), p. 263.

Joe's humanity has at last been recognized absolutely, both by himself and his fellows. The blood, symbol of his and all men's suffering, indelibly prints his face, peaceful at last because he has learned once and for all what "I am" means, on men's memories and they will never

...lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant.¹

At the same time Joe Christmas was achieving self-identity and "soaring forever into the memory of mankind," Gail Hightower was retreating from self-identity, sinking into his dream world of the past. Structurally Faulkner makes Hightower's scene of self-confrontation almost identical to that of Christmas. The image of motion and running that symbolized Joe's life-long search for self-identity is paralleled by the image of Hightower as a vehicle, moving through the roads of his memory. He sees the truth about himself in some things--his hiding in the seminary, his responsibility for his wife's shame and death.

Then "thinking begins to slow. It slows like a wheel beginning to run in sand, the axle, the vehicle, the power which propels it not yet aware." He still faces the truth about himself, but "sweat begins to pour from him, springing out like blood." Motion continues; he knows

¹Faulkner, Light in August, p. 467.

"...that for fifty years I have not even been clay. I have been a single instant of darkness in which a horse galloped and a gun crashed."¹

Then, unlike Christmas who bears the utmost agony with an expression of peace, Hightower can stand no more of the suffering truth brings. Movement toward self-identity stops for him; "the wheel, released...freed now of burden, vehicle, axle, all" spins idly in the sands of oblivion.

The next sensation Hightower experiences in his "death" scene resembles the rushing, rising blood of Joe Christmas.

Then it seems to him that some ultimate dammed flood within him breaks and rushes away. He seems to watch it, feeling himself losing contact with earth, lighter and lighter, emptying and floating.²

"'I am dying,' he thinks." And he is right. Gail Hightower does die, but not the kind of physical death Joe Christmas suffered. The moment was right for him to choose, for the first time in his existence, the present instead of the past. But he cannot, will not, do it.

They rush past, forwardleaning in the saddles, with brandished arms, beneath whipping ribbons from slanted and eager lances; with tumult and soundless yelling they sweep past like a tide.³

The last view we have of Gail Hightower is of him leaning

¹Paulkner, Light in August, pp. 430.

²Ibid., p. 431.

³Ibid., pp. 431-32.

forward in the window, straining after the "dying thunder of hooves" that marks the phantom grandfather's wake.

His choice of the past rather than the present offers a further parallel to Joe Christmas' death scene. Literally Percy Grimm emasculated Joe Christmas with the bloody butcher knife; the vision of the grandfather's daring raid "is a kind of madness which has emasculated and destroyed" Hightower.¹ It was his total involvement with his wild dream that drove his lonely wife first into a shell and finally to other men.

The lightness of the literally dead body of Christmas and the figuratively dead one of Hightower is similar too. But Joe "rose" powerfully in a never-to-be-forgotten rocket-burst, an appropriate image for a man who had triumphantly lost his life to find it. However, Hightower feels "his body empty and lighter than a forgotten leaf and even more trivial than flotsam lying spent and still."² The image is fitting for a man who only had a memory, would never be one.

Both Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower are men in search of themselves. Neither man fits into the world of other men, one because he does not know who or what he is in terms of black or white, saved or damned, the other

¹Walter J. Slatoff, Quest for Failure: A Study of William Faulkner (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), p. 193.

²Faulkner, Light in August, p. 431.

because he hides in the sterile glory of the past. Both men do come to some conclusion about who they are, Christmas because he actively sought to know, Hightower because he was pushed into the real world. In the end Christmas does make contact with society, not in terms of black or white or saved or damned, but simply as man, even though he must lose his life to do so. Hightower is the one who finally retreats, physical life ironically intact, to the death-in-life of isolation.

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