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"I am this one walking beside me": Laing's Theory of Ontological Insecurity in Faulkner's Light in August

Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of two characters, Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, in William Faulkner's *Light in August* . The characters are analyzed through R.D. Laing's concept of ontological insecurity. In the search for the roots of ontological insecurity, special attention is given to the childhood years of these characters, and to the race-related trauma originating in that period. The aim is to show that both these characters exhibit schizoid personality traits as a consequence of that trauma, and also as a result of the society they live in. Namely, Joe and Joanna never work through their initial trauma because it is actually reinforced by their society.

Key words: *William Faulkner, Light in August, R. D. Laing, o ntological i nsecurity*

I am not I.

I am this one

walking beside me whom I do not see,

whom at times I manage to visit,

and whom at other times I forget;

who remains calm and silent while I talk,

and forgives, gently, when I hate,

who walks where I am not,

who will remain standing when I die. Juan Ramón Jiménez

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An articulate critic of the South, Lillian Smith in her *Killers of the Dream* presents southern culture as a rigid society that controls its citizens through ruthless socialization. Drawing primarily from her own experience, she describes southern culture as “dissonant,” demanding that southerners simultaneously embrace contradictory ideas without seeing them as contradictory:

I learned that it is possible to be a Christian and a white southerner simultaneously; to be a gentlewoman and an arrogant callous creature in the same moment; to pray at night and ride a Jim Crow car the next morning and to feel comfortable in doing both. I learned to believe in freedom, to glow when the word democracy is used, and to practice slavery from morning to night. I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one’s mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality. (Killers of the Dream 20)

As Smith repeatedly emphasizes, the South’s segregated system reflects the segregated southern mind: “ *Minds broken in two* . Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split in a thousand pieces” (*Killers of the Dream* 31, emphasis added). It is this broken, divided mind of the southerners on which I want to focus in my analysis of Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden, two of the characters in William Faulkner’s *Light in August,* by adapting writings of the Scottish psychiatrist Ronald David Laing.

In *The Divided Self* , his first book, Ronald David Laing provides us with an account of persons who do not experience their own beings as real and alive, as “differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that [their] identity and autonomy are never in question” (41). Rather, they feel “more unreal than real, more dead than alive … so that [their] identity and autonomy are always in question” (*The Divided Self* 42). Laing believes that schizoid behavior arises from an individual’s need to acquire a false persona. Although he admits that all humans have the capacity to present this type of “mask,” Laing believes that the “mask” the schizoid/schizophrenic wear is not merely a social convenience, but also crucial to surviving in a world which they see as a threat. The person keeps their ”true self” concealed, but the more they do this, the more compulsive this fake presentation of themselves becomes. This can lead to a complete disintegration of the personality. Laing argues that this existential split is utilized as a basic defense against the world which is experienced as threatening. This split is a strategy of living

despite the pervasive anxiety of “primary ontological insecurity” (*The Divided Self* 39). It is precisely this ontological insecurity, as defined by R. D. Laing, that I will adapt in an attempt to illustrate the roots of ontological insecurity in Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden.

We meet Joanna Burden through her encounter and subsequent cohabitation with Joe Christmas. Unmarried and a “lover of negroes” (Faulkner 22), Joanna is a double threat to the values of the white patriarchy. A[1] traitor of both her gender and her race, she lives alone, far outside her town, as a stranger, condemned to loneliness:

She has lived in the house since she was born, yet she is still a stranger, a foreigner whose people moved in from the North during Reconstruction. A Yankee, a lover of negroes, about whom in the town there is still talk of queer relations with negroes in the town and out of it, despite the fact that it is now sixty years since her grandfather and her brother were killed on the square by an exslaveowner over a question of negro votes in a state election. But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the town had reason (or thought that they had) to hate and dread. But it is there: the descendants of both in their relationship to one another ghosts, with between them the phantom of the old spilled blood and the old horror and anger and fear. (Faulkner 22)

Joanna suffers because of her pro-Negro activities, but primarily because of patriarchal values and beliefs. As the passage above says, even though it has been sixty years since her ancestors were killed because of their pro-Negro undertakings, the threat still lingers around her house, and around Joanna herself. Joanna indeed works as an agent of progress for the black community, she is an advisor and a benefactor to several black schools and colleges, but the question is, would this society allow her to be anything else, considering her family history? In a community governed by the inherited values, in which the present is always overshadowed by the past, could she be anything else but a much hated Yankee? In addition, Joanna is a spinster, with no living male relatives, in other words socially irrelevant. Marginalized both physically and socially, she is, furthermore, suspected of “queer relations with negroes” (Faulkner 22) , connecting thus her two major sins: deviant sexuality and refusal to conform to racial norms, both of which she must be

punished for. The punishment for her queer behavior, "cultural maladjustment, and political deviation" (Showalter 203-04), comes in the form of, allegedly, yet another Negro, Joe Christmas. Joanna is tied not only by the past that does not allow her to define herself as anything else but as a Yankee descendant, but tied also by patriarchal culture in which a woman's identity is linked exclusively to wifehood and motherhood. These restrictions result in Joanna's inability to define herself as a person, which manifests itself in the impossibility of a defined gender. Joanna acts both as a man and as a woman, and her behavior is described as "cold and calm," while at nights she writhes "in the wild throes of nymphomania" (Faulkner 106). She is split between her day and night, her masculine and feminine personalities, between her false and true self. And just as it is the case with Joe Christmas, as will be shown, so Joanna's inner conflict has its origins in her early childhood.

The origins of her conflict occurred when she was four, when her father took her to the graveyard of her grandfather and her half-brother to explain her curse of the white race:

> *'Remember this. Your grandfather and brother are lying there, murdered not by one white man but by the curse which God put on a whole race before your grandfather or your brother or me or you were even thought of. A race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race's doom and curse for its sins. Remember that. His doom and his curse. Forever and ever. Mine. Your mother's. Yours, even though you are a child. The curse of every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born. None can escape it.' (Faulkner 103)*

This patriarchal charge marks Joanna forever. Terrified by her father's speech, thereafter she sees Negros as a ghost-like "black shadow in the shape of a cross" (Faulkner 104), a shadow in which she must live as well. This vision paralyzes her, and leaves her incapable of developing her natural womanhood, because all her energies have to be put into the rescue of this imagined Negro. Burdened by patriarchal duty, this woman becomes absorbed into her family inheritance and the persona of her father, so much so that her own personality splits, and her life becomes a labor for a "dozen Negro schools and colleges through the South" (Faulkner 96). This labor is necessary for her own redemption, because, as instructed by her father, she "must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, [she] must raise the shadow with [her]. But [she] can never lift it to [her] level" (Faulkner 104).

Thenceforth, Joanna becomes in Laing's words "the individual [who] experiences himself as a man who is only saving himself from drowning by the most constant, strenuous, desperate activity" (*The Divided Self* 44). Laing is here talking about a form of ontological anxiety which he calls engulfment.

Engulfment, one of the three forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person, is described as a dread of being absorbed by the other. It is

felt as a risk in being understood (thus grasped, comprehended), in being loved, or even simply in being seen. To be hated may be feared for other reasons, but to be hated as such is often less disturbing than to be destroyed, as it is felt, through being engulfed by love. In this the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything or, indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity. (The Divided Self 44)

This syndrome is best illustrated in a non-fictional character, David. He was eighteen and a student of philosophy when he first came to Laing for psychiatric counseling. David was an only child, and his mother had died when he was ten. Although his father saw no reason for David seeing a psychiatrist, David first visited Laing on the advice of one of his tutors who was worried by David's unusual mannerism, and by the fact that his "whole manner was entirely artificial [and] his speech was made up largely of quotations" (*The Divided Self* 70). David's father, on the other hand, regarded his son as absolutely normal, and attributed his eccentricities to his adolescence. According to him, David had always been a good child, very devoted to his mother, and had, since her death, done everything to help his father – including doing the housework, and buying and cooking the food. This role came naturally to David since, by his own account, he had been playing one role or other all of his life. As a boy, he had been what his mother wanted him to be, and after her death, it was no easier for him to be himself. Laing notes that David "had grown up taking entirely for granted that what he called his 'self' and his 'personality' were two quite separate things" (*The Divided Self* 71). He assumed that everyone else operated in this way, and this assumption made it easy for him to be whatever his mother wanted him to be since all his actions belonged to the part he was playing, in other words, to his "false self." His "true self," on the other

hand, was never revealed, and it seemed that he wanted to maintain the split between his "own self," which only he knew, and his "personality," what his mother wanted him to be, as completely as possible. However, this organization of his subjectivity was now threatened in two ways.

The first was the risk of being spontaneous, which did not bother him too much, but in his opinion to be spontaneous meant putting oneself at other people's mercy. The second threat was more real and was beginning to disrupt his whole method of living. Namely, throughout his life, David had always played parts in front of the mirror, but had always avoided becoming caught up in the parts he was playing. This, in other words, meant that he was never spontaneous. The parts he played in front of the mirror were always women parts, and he would dress up in his mother's clothes and would rehearse female parts from the great tragedies. However, at some point, he found he could not stop himself from playing the part of a woman. David caught himself walking, talking, and thinking like a woman. This part was beginning to engulf or take over his own self for, as David himself explained, he found that he was driven to dress up and act as a woman. As Laing explains, his current persona, "this 'schizophrenic' role of a young eccentric boy in a cloak, was the only refuge he knew from being entirely engulfed by the woman who was inside him, and always seemed to be coming out of him" (*The Divided Self* 73).

Much of what has been said about David can also be applied to Joanna Burden. Neither Laing nor David's father ever did see David's "true self" (the question, indeed, is had David himself ever seen it?), just as we never see Joanna's "true self." From the very beginning of their relationship, Joe describes her as a double personality: "It was as though there were two people: the one whom he saw now and then by day and looked at while they spoke to one another with speech that told nothing at all since it didn't try to and didn't intend to; the other with whom he lay at night and didn't even see, speak to, at all" (Faulkner 96). Joanna's day personality is a masculine personality, with her voice "calm, a little deep, quite cold" (Faulkner 95), just like the voice of Joe's adoptive father, Mr. McEahern. Joanna is described as a man, moreover as a businessman, who sends replies to business and religious trustees and travels for purposes related to her work. Joe sees her as "calm, coldfaced … combined priest and banker" (Faulkner 105), the person of the "mantrained muscles and the mantrained habit of thinking" (Faulkner 97) . Even after they have started their sexual relationship, Joanna still does not show any femininity, for her surrender is "hard, untearful

and unselfpitying and almost manlike" with no "feminine vacillation, no coyness of obvious desire and intention to succumb at last" (Faulkner 97). It is an encounter of two men, either in the kitchen, where Joanna leaves food for Joe, or in bed, where the two "struggle." During this phase, Joanna never talks to Joe, because, as Laing explains, "the schizoid individual fears a real live dialectical relationship with real live people" (*The Divided Self* 77). The schizoid can only relate to their own phantasies or imagos. Hence Joanna's commitment to the Negroes, their education, and well-being. Similarly, Joanna accepts Joe as her lover and leaves food for him, but she adheres to the code of honor which forbids a black man to eat with a white person or a black man to sit in the presence of a white woman, before she is even aware that Joe is allegedly a "part nigger" (Faulkner 104). In other words, Joanna starts a relationship with Joe, but not as with a living person, but as with a thing, an object first of her phantasy, and later of her mission, which Faulkner refers to as second and third phase, respectively, of their relationship.

The so-called second phase begins with Joanna's telling of her family history, and it is during this stage that her feminine side starts to appear. Joe Christmas observes that she is "trying to be a woman and she don't know how" (Faulkner 99). Her feminine personality, hidden behind the mask of masculinity, seeks its way out. And it does find it, even if not completely, and even if not for a long period of time. Her voice becomes "almost gentle" (Faulkner 104), she exhibits stereotypical feminine traits such as jealousy, intrigue, and whining. But we still cannot be certain that this feminine personality is indeed Joanna's "true self" because the whole situation seems to Joe as if it has been invented by Joanna "for the purpose of playing it out like a play" (Faulkner 106). Joanna casts Joe as black rapist, climbing in a window, and entering her bedroom like a "thief, a robber," and herself as a virgin, whose virginity is despoiled by a Negro lover "each time anew" (Faulkner 96). By day, she is still the mannish figure sitting at her desk writing letters, but by night Joanna is "wild then, in the close, breathing halfdark without walls, with her wild hair, each strand of which would seem to come alive like octopus tentacles, and her wild hands and her breathing: "Negro! Negro! Negro!" (Faulkner 106). Like Medusa, Joanna seems to have the power to render men to stone, in other words, impotent, and we read that Joe begins to be afraid, though he is not sure of what, and feels like "being sucked down into a bottomless morass" (Faulkner 106). The "bottomless morass," the "sewer" into which he had been pushed by Joanna, only takes place during the night,

under the jurisdiction of the moon. Joe is trapped in a "woman's muck" (Faulkner 98) by the moon cycles of Joanna's irrationality. On the other hand, it is worth noting here that, according to Freud, displaying the genitals, which Medusa's head represents, is "familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce that same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself" (273). Thus, Joanna becomes Medusa by night, but this is just another persona of her "true self." It is her self that, like Perseus, wears Medusa's head, for it is afraid of being 'castrated,' of being robbed of its masculine persona, because it represents "safety for the true self" (*The Divided Self* 75). We are never shown Joanna's true self but only the "two creatures that struggled in the one body" (Faulkner 106), the body which now begins to gain weight, entering the third phase of Joe and Joanna's relationship.

As she gains weight, her body appears more feminine than before, and this further draws out her feminine personality. Joanna wants a baby, and even believes she is pregnant, for pregnancy would mean that she has finally defined her gender. Pregnancy would give her a feminine sexuality that has nothing to do with the uncontrollable urges that come upon her at night. However, her changed appearance, "prominently boned, long, a little thin, almost manlike: in contrast to it her plump body was more richly and softly animal than ever" (Faulkner 108), merely echoes Joanna's psychological state, that is "two creatures that struggled in one body" (Faulkner 106), since she is not pregnant, but menopausal. We are not told when Joanna realizes this fact, but in her final encounter with Joe, she is neither masculine nor feminine; she is just old. Her voice now is "still, monotonous, sexless," and she is "not any good anymore" (Faulkner 113). She is not a woman nor has she ever been one, for she does not have a husband or children, and now she can never have any. She is not a man, either. She is useless. What else can she do but die? However, unlike Joe, who, as we shall see, chooses to give in and die, Joanna does not have that opportunity. On the contrary, she wishes to kill Joe in the end because he refuses to kneel and pray with her, but she instead ends up murdered. Joanna fails to kill Joe, just as she fails to define her gender. She is found mutilated, with her head facing one side, her body the other, symbolizing her lifelong inner conflict, which is not resolved even in her death. She dies, as Faulkner tells us, "sexless" (Faulkner 114). Worse, her death does not affect anyone until it is said that she was killed by a Negro. She as a person does not mean a thing, nor does her death mean anything, until it becomes a political

issue, for Joe Christmas is never prosecuted as a murderer, but as a Negro murderer of a white woman. What one man created, the other completed. Joanna's father created her divided personality with an account of the past, with an account of his father's "doom and his curse" (Faulkner 103). Joe continues, even widens, this division of Joanna's personality, and pushes her into a road of no return, first into complete madness, then into death. Her behavior in the final scene closely resembles that of Mr. McEachern's, and one cannot escape the notion that Joe murders Joanna physically while having McEachern in his mind's eye. All of her life, Joanna was but a shadow of one man. Even in her death, she is nothing more but a shadow of yet another man.

Joanna Burden and Joe Christmas share not just the name but also social marginality and a less obvious common psychic feature. They are both obsessed with the concept of race, to be more precise, with the Negro: Joe with the Negro blood, allegedly, running though his veins, Joanna with the shadow of the Negro. The Negro is the Other in this community, and the Other is always perceived as an object of conflict. To internalize the Other means to internalize the conflict, and, indeed, both Joe and Joanna carry a conflict inside themselves. For Joe, it is the lack of racial identity. Haunted by this conflict, Joe chooses not to succumb to the social role(s) prescribed for him, not to "settle for either of the ready-made identity patterns urged upon him by Southern society" (Bleikasten 83). This fundamentally racist society offers two identities, and two identities only, white or black, and Joe can and must belong only to one of the groups. The problem is that Joe refuses to choose. This, however, cannot be, for in this society one must be either / or. Refusing to succumb, Joe puts himself in an untenable position which Laing identifies as a root of madness.

Namely, a person's sense of identity is related to their position, to the amount and quality of life-space they feel they have. The quantity and quality of a person's existentia[2] l position is governed by their original sense of place, the space they give themselves and the space they are given by others in their interpersonal relationships. In discussing these ideas, Laing distinguishes between a tenable and an untenable existential position. If a person is given genuine confirmation by others, then their position in the nexus of others will be tenable. But if their identity is discontinued, invalidated or negated over a period of time, they may be put into a false and, ultimately, untenable position therein. An untenable position is one "from which it is impossible to leave and in which is impossible to stay" (*Self and Other s* 26). The untenability of Joe's position reflects itself

in the fact that Joe adopts the norms and values of his society, but these same norms must exclude him, for they are all white norms. To quote Andre Bleikasten again: “Race hatred was instilled in him by his grandfather; *McEachern* , his foster father, taught him the harsh virtues of white Protestant virility and a solid contempt for women. Their teaching has made him what he is: a racist, a sexist, and a Puritan. Mentally and emotionally, he is indeed a white Southern male” (84). At the same time, Joe, a white southern male, develops doubts about his race, doubts that are the source of his untenable position.

The doubts Joe develops have their origins in his childhood, in the judgmental gaze of his grandfather, old Doc Hines, and the children’s voices in the orphanage calling him a “nigger” (Faulkner 155). These factors contribute to the central traumatic event of his orphanage years, when he sneaks into a dietician’s room to steal some of her toothpaste. The dietician enters the room with a young doctor, and they engage in sex. Hidden behind the curtain, Joe suddenly vomits from eating too much of the toothpaste and is discovered. Wrongly assuming that Joe understood the sexual act, the dietician tries to bribe Joe from telling what he has witnessed. But he does not understand, and instead, shocked, waits for three days for his punishment, which comes in the form of *McEachern* , his adoptive father. What makes this scene even more traumatic for Joe are the dietician’s cruel words: “You little nigger bastard!” (Faulkner 52). Both the dietician and Doc Hines interpret the children calling Joe a “nigger” as a veritable social sign of his background. The dietician uses this to remove him from the orphanage by convincing the matron that Joe is black, and Doc Hines, seeing himself as an instrument of God, believes that God has spoken to him through the mouth of the children:

> *The Lord told Old Doc Hines what to do and Old Doc Hines done it. Then the Lord said to Old Doc Hines, ‘You watch, now. Watch My will a-working.’ And Old Doc Hines watched and heard the mouths of little children, of God’s own fatherless and motherless, putting His words and knowledge into their mouths even when they couldn’t know it since they were without sin yet, even the girl ones without sin and bitchery yet: Nigger! Nigger! in the innocent mouths of little children. (Faulkner 154-55)*

Since both Doc Hines and the dietician, his "surrogate" parents, believe he is a "nigger," it is no wonder Joe develops doubts about his race, doubts that will haunt him for the rest of his life. This haunting begins with the so-called toothpaste episode in Miss Atkins's room, thus connecting a woman and a Negro forever. "Womanshenegro" (Faulkner 66), Faulkner's neologism connects gender, sex, and race, and represents supreme horror for Joe.

Joe's rebellion against the "womanshenegro," against his fear of women and blackness, explodes when he tries to lose his virginity with a young black girl:

At once he was overcome by a terrible haste. There was something in him trying to get out, like when he had used to think of toothpaste. But he could not move at once, standing there, smelling the woman, smelling the negro all at once; enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste, driven, having to wait until she spoke: a guiding sound that was no particular word and completely unaware. Then it seemed to him that he could see her – something, prone, abject; her eyes perhaps. Leaning, he seemed to look down into a black well and at the bottom saw two glints like reflection of dead stars. He was moving, because his foot touched her. Then it touched her again because he kicked her. He kicked her hard, kicking into and through a choked wail of surprise and fear. She began to scream, he jerking her up, clutching her by the arm, hitting at her with wide, wild blows, striking at the voice perhaps, feeling her flesh anyway, enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste. (Faulkner 66)

The sexual game immediately reminds Joe of the night in Miss Atkins's room, and he finds himself once again enclosed by the smell of a woman, the smell of a Negro, the smell of a sin. Joe looks into her "prone" and "abject" eyes, into a deep "black well" and sees "two glints," two little sparks of life, of a soul in a creature that he (with his friends) is treating as an object. Since women, moreover black women, represent a threat for Joe, he must treat this girl as an object; in Laing's words, he must depersonalize her, turn her into a stone, a mere thing in order to retain his own subjectivity:

The people in focus here both tend to feel themselves as more or less depersonalized and tend to depersonalize others; they are constantly afraid of being depersonalized by others. The act of turning him into a thing is, for him, actually petrifying. In the face of being treated as an 'it', his own subjectivity drains away from him like blood from the face.... The risk consists in this: if one

experiences the other as a free agent, one is open to the possibility of experiencing oneself as an object of his experience and thereby of feeling one's own subjectivity drained away. One is threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other, without any life for oneself, without any being for oneself. In terms of such anxiety, the very act of experiencing the other as a person is felt as virtually suicidal. (The Divided Self 47, emphasis in the original)

Yet, it is Joe who is petrified here because he sees life at the bottom of her eyes. But more disturbing is the fact that these "two glints" are in fact a reflection of his own gaze. Joe is looking into his own eyes, into the depth of his own soul; the "womanshenegro" is in fact "himself in female form" (Porter 98). Hence the rage – for his hate, fear, and shock are unbearable, but they have finally found a target: a woman. Conveniently enough, it is a target of which both his fathers would approve, because "ideological, racial and sexual purity are the principal values" (Rueckert 84) for both Doc Hines and *McEachern* . And just as Joanna spends her life trying to fulfill her father's legacy, so Joe never breaks the principal values of his fathers: he always must feel as a white man. Any deviation from this standard triggers violence in him, directed either toward his own body, making him feel "sick" (Faulkner 77), or to others, usually women, or both, as is the case with a prostitute in the North. He spends the night with her, but since he does not have money to pay her, he tells her he is a Negro, expecting to be yelled at by her or beaten by the patron of the house. But the prostitute does not seem to be upset:

[S]he said, 'What about it? You look all right. You ought to seen the shine I turned out just before your turn came.' She was looking at him. She was quite still now. 'Say, what do you think this dump is, anyhow? The Ritz hotel?' Then she quit talking. She was watching his face and she began to move backward slowly before him, staring at him, her face draining, her mouth open to scream. Then she did scream. It took two policemen to subdue him. (Faulkner 92)

Joe cannot stand the fact that there are white women who are willing to "take a man with a black skin" (Faulkner 92) because he cannot accept the idea that race does not matter. To accept it would mean to disavow his upbringing. But on the other hand, to say that race is of crucial importance, only brings him back to his untenable position of having to choose. And Joe cannot choose. He

cannot choose without lying to himself, without disowning a part of himself, without becoming an automaton, “without personal autonomy of action, an it without subjectivity (*The Divided Self* 48, emphasis in the original). The untenability of his situation has but one solution: revolt.

However, his revolt, as much as it is directed against the norms of his two fathers, norms of the South, is also directed against himself because these norms are his own. Deep inside, he cannot stand any discrepancy with the values he has been brought up into, and Faulkner never misses a chance to remind us of that. So, even when Joe lives with the Negroes and tries to accept “some black blood” in himself, tries to “breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes,” both his body and his soul reject this idea, “his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial” (Faulkner 93). Despite his struggle with and against his identity, Joe is unable to convince himself that he is anything but a white man. Nevertheless, the burden of the accusation, of just one word, “nigger”, is too heavy. Joe is a living ambivalence, a personality split between his two, equally untenable, identities. Deep inside he feels the southern norms as his own, but at the same time, he rejects them for to fully accept them, would mean to reject himself. A part of him accepts these standards, and despises himself and his own background. Another part understands how utterly senseless these norms are, how limiting they are, and, from time to time, he feels able to accept himself as he is. But there is no peace for him, because there is no way to reconcile these two parts. Unable to come to terms with himself, he manipulates his society by telling white people that he is black “in order to fight them” (Faulkner 93), and by fighting Negroes who call him white. Joe refuses to belong in either of the groups, because he sees how fragile their foundations are, as John T. Matthews explains:

The irony of the 1920s South was that never had racial differentiation been more flimsy and voluntary, yet never had the consequences been so absolute and deadly. To “be” a negro meant that you possessed as little as the fabled single drop of black blood (itself only a figure of speech, of course, since racial “blood” is as much a physiological fiction as “race” itself), and that you were known in the community as black (could there be a more naked tautology than that?). (165-66)

Joe Christmas understands that the only way he can escape his inner conflict is to escape the idea of race itself. So he separates both from the white and black communities, but at the same time,

operates and belongs to both. As Joanna Burden operates as both a man and a woman, so Joe operates as both a white man and a black man. He is both and neither, and thus represents a threat to his society, as one of the townsmen undertakes to explain: "He never acted like either a nigger or a white man. That was it. That was what made the folks so mad" (Faulkner 141). As a "white nigger" he is a danger to the social structure, and must, therefore, be killed. Moreover, he must be castrated, for he is accused, not so much of being a murderer, as of being a "nigger" who murdered and "contaminated" a white lady. Faulkner aptly sums it up in the marshal's warning to Brown, Joe's roommate, when Brown informs the people that Joe is a black man: "'You better be careful what you are saying, if it is a white man you are talking about,' the marshal says. 'I don't care if he is a murderer or not'" (Faulkner 42).

In the end, Joe is killed because this violence hungry society decides that he is a "nigger." In a constant attempt to break the social norms, to break the closed circle of the South ruled by the idea of race, Joe has accomplished nothing but only repeats the dynamics of this world: "But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo" (Faulkner 137). He understands now that his attempt has been futile, and that the only way to break through this circle is to accept his place within it. So, in the end, he accepts his faith, "sitting with planted on the dashboard before him the shoes, the black shoes smelling of negro: that mark on his ankles the gauge definite and ineradicable of the black tide creeping up his legs, moving from his feet upward as death moves" (Faulkner 137). In the end, he gives in and accepts the only thing that is true for him. He does not know what he is. He "will never know" (Faulkner 155). His attempt to form his identity outside race has been his way of dealing with the conflict, but an unsuccessful one. For it will not be accepted by society. One must be categorized. If one is not categorized, if he stands out, he must be "evil" and must be dealt with. In the end, Joe is, indeed, dealt with, and more importantly, is categorized. He is killed and castrated for slaying Joanna Burden. To be more precise, he is killed and castrated because he is a Negro who slew a white woman. And he is finally put into a group. In the end, that is all that matters in this deeply divided society.

Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden are hardly typical representatives of the South. However, as much as these characters in *Light in August* tell about the "truths of the heart" (Faulkner "Banquet

Speech”), through their story Faulkner also portrays the truths of the South. And if indeed the South was a “form of cultural schizophrenia” (*How am I to Be Heard* 87) as Smith describes it, what better way to present this but through two existentially split characters? After all, as Robert Pen Warren stated: “The individual is an embodiment of external circumstances, so that a personal story is a social story” (qtd. in Cronin and Siegel 38).

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[1] Throughout the article, I use the term "Negro" to refer to a person having origins in any of the black racial groups since, as Thadious Davis explains: "Faulkner … never knew or wrote about 'black' people.... He wrote about 'the Negro', the white man's own creation" (Davis 2).

[2] "Position is here used in an existential sense rather than as economic or social-class position or position in some other hierarchical system" (*Self and Others* 108).

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